Original Paper

A Study on Consumers' Negative Online Reviews and Merchants' Responses Discourse Strategies Based on Rapport Management Theory

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Abstract

Online shopping is an important consumption channel, and customers can express reviews about products on the platform. Negative reviews can inform merchants about defects of products and services, providing references for other consumers. Negative reviews and responses reflect merchants' and customers' adjustments to interpersonal relationships. Based on Spencer-Oatey's rapport management theory, this paper collects 400 negative consumer reviews and corresponding merchant responses from Tripadvisor. Then the writer conducts data statistics and case analysis on the corpus, aiming to obtain the proportions of strategies for complaints and responses and to analyze rapport management tendencies of communicators. Research shows that consumers mainly adopt rapport-challenge orientation, and the most commonly used complaint strategies are "explicit complaint", "expression of annoyance or disapproval" and "below the level of reproach". Most merchants take rapport-enhancement orientation and rapport-maintenance orientation. They frequently employ strategies of "expressing emotion", "apologizing", "committing and acting" etc. This paper intends to provide references for establishing harmonious interpersonal relationships and favorable business environment.

1. Introduction

With the popularization of the Internet and the rapid development of e-commerce, online shopping provides customers with richer choices and saves customers' time and energy. Therefore, it is favored and welcomed by people. Global e-commerce sales are expected to exceed $6.3 trillion by 2024, and this figure is expected to reach new heights in the coming years (https://www.statista.com). Because consumers can't see, touch and try the actual goods when shopping online, they often get more information about commodity by browsing other consumers' reviews. Podium, a user review management company, has shown that 83% of consumers say they read online reviews before purchasing, and 93% say that online reviews have greatly influenced their purchase decision.

When the review involves specific details, negative reviews are more convincing than positive one and have more influence on consumption intention (Arndt, 1967; Maheswaran et al., 1990). Weber (2017) argues that negative reviews hinder product promotion and create occupational stress on employees, diminishing their enthusiasm for work. Negative review is closely related to product quality and business reputation, which will reduce potential consumers' desire to buy to a certain extent. Timely, clear and useful business responses to negative reviews help to alleviate consumers' anger and gain their understanding. Response quality is important to stabilize customers and promote actual purchase (Jin, 2015).

Faced with low-quality products or services, consumers apply various complaining strategies to express dissatisfaction. In order to calm consumers' anger and establish a beneficial reputation of enterprises, merchants generally adopt different response strategies. This paper aims to solve the following two questions: (1) What are the types of consumers' negative reviews? (2) What are the rapport management tendencies and discourse strategies of merchants and consumers? By conducting this research, the writer intends to enrich the research on negative reviews in the field of interpersonal pragmatics. It can also provide suggestions for merchants to effectively respond to negative reviews, which helps to promote harmonious relationships between buyers and sellers.

2. Complaint and Rapport Management Theory (RMT)

Complaining occurs in people's daily communication, reflecting their psychological needs such as expressing dissatisfaction, gaining attention, shirking responsibility etc. Negative consumer reviews belong to business complaint, in which consumers or stakeholders express dissatisfaction of enterprises, arousing people's attention to misbehaviors of enterprises (Einwiller, 2015). Listener's response reflects people's adjustment to friendly, distorted, tense and conflicting interpersonal relationships. Here is an introduction to complaint and rapport management theory.

2.1 Overview of Complaint

The writer has read a lot of literature on negative consumers' reviews on CNKI, Google Scholar, Web of Science etc. In the field of linguistics, negative reviews are always included in the study of complaint by scholars. According to the definition of Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), complaint appears when the speaker expects something favorable to happen, but the listener fails to meet the speaker's expectation. Complaining strategies are divided into five categories with successively increasing severity of offense: below the level of reproach, expression of annoyance or disapproval, explicit complaint, condemn and question, immediate threat (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987). Scholars at home and abroad have mainly studied complaining speech acts, cross-cultural characteristics, complaining responses etc.

In terms of complaining speech acts, Vasquez (2011) points out that pragmatic researchers use the method of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to study it, while ethnography mainly interprets naturally occurring dialogues in interaction. Deveci (2015) finds that students adopt speech acts like explanation, request, questioning, justification to complain their low assignment marks. Puksi (2016) applies examples to illustrate speech acts adopted by customers in complaints, such as sarcasm, threat, criticism etc.

In terms of cross-cultural characteristics, Jahandideh (2014) finds that Arabs and Chinese have different motivations and tendencies in complaining because of various degrees of social embeddedness and group closeness. Marpurdianto (2022) draws that both Indonesian and American netizens employ abbreviations, uppercase and informal language to complain, while Indonesian adopt code-switching more frequently. Madon and Singh (2023) point out that Japanese on Tripadvisor tend to give simple messages of irritation without further details, while Malaysian disclose reasons in detail.

In terms of complaint response, Berger (2014) points out that complaint response can build electronic word-of-mouth to achieve the purposes of impression management, emotion regulation and interpersonal contact. Zhang and Vasquez (2014) find that hotel's responses to complaints are highly formulaic and conventional, with gratitude and apology as the main strategies. Stevens et al. (2018) put forward the 3T framework for companies to effectively reply to negative reviews, including timeliness, transparency and trust. Cenni (2021) concludes that Dutch and English business responses are modest and neutral, while Italian responses are positive and complex.

Interviews, questionnaires and experiments are the main methods to study complaint, and many scholars have paid attention to various speech acts co-occurring with complaint. Cross-cultural features of complaints are also the focus of research. Consumer complaints are characterized by different cultural backgrounds and language conventions. Therefore, enterprises should consider the cultural differences of consumers and response their complaints in a targeted manner. Many scholars also studies complaints and corporate word-of-mouth, proposing more appropriate response frameworks to enhance companies' credibility.

Most of the current studies select individual cases for qualitative analysis. As a result, they have a narrow scope of research objects and lack sufficient data support. Researchers focus on macro consumer reviews and pay little attention to responses, so there are few comprehensive studies on complaints and responses. In view of this, a large number of negative reviews and responses from more than 40 stores are collected in the research, including hotels and restaurants. The writer first annotates and counts the strategies of complaints and responses, then carries out a qualitative analysis according to theoretical basis, so the results are scientific and convincing to a certain extent.

2.2 Rapport Management Theory

Interpersonal relationships in online contexts have received extensive attention from interpersonal pragmatics, with face, identity, and politeness as main research topics (Ran & Huang, 2019). Spencer-Oatey (2008), a professor of applied linguistics, proposes Rapport Management Theory (RMT), which pays more attention to people's role as a member of society. RMT includes face management, the management of social rights and obligations, and the management of interactional goals. These factors triggered by communicators can promote, maintain or threaten interpersonal harmony to varying degrees.

Face includes quality face and identity face. The former means that communicator as an individual, hopes his personal qualities such as intelligence, ability, appearance and self-esteem are positively evaluated by others; the latter means that communicator as a member of a society, expects his social role or identity to be respected and supported by others (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Social rights and obligations involve equity rights and association rights. Equality rights mean that communicators want to be treated equally and fairly, and not be exploited, oppressed, or ordered by others. Equality rights involve two aspects, namely "cost-benefit" and "autonomy-imposition". Association rights mean that people are entitled to participate in communication in social activities, receiving attention and establishing interpersonal relations. Interactional goals are psychological expectations that people try to achieve through communication.

Spencer-Oatey (2008) points out that rapport management tendency is the most important factor affecting interpersonal harmony. Rapport-enhancement orientation refers to people's application of euphemistic, polite and friendly expressions to improve harmonious interpersonal relationship. Rapport-maintenance orientation denotes that the speaker hopes to maintain the current state with the listener. Rapport-challenge orientation refers to the speaker's application of offensive, impolite or even insulting expressions to destroy interpersonal relationships. Rapport-neglect orientation means that the communicator pays attention to himself and ignores the listener.

RMT has been used by many scholars in the research of doctor-patient conversation (Campbell, 2005), business talks (Johari & Ali, 2015), conflict discourse (Miao & Du; 2015) etc. Campbell (2005) finds that doctors tend to use unrecorded speech strategies as a preface of adverse condition to take care of patients' mental endurance. Johari and Ali (2015) believe that the combination of humor, small talk and

sign language is conducive to creating an active and cordial environment in business conference. Miao Ning and Du Bingyan (2015) analyze the features, realization methods and pragmatic mechanisms of conflict discourse.

Harmony is a universal value pursued by human beings. Whether it can be realized is affected by various factors such as communicative psychology, cultural differences and communicative purposes. According to different social roles and communicational needs, people apply diverse words and gestures to build trust and rapport. RMT is applicable to discourse analysis in various contexts, especially conflict and offensive dialogues. This corpus covers complaints and responses, reflecting buyers' and sellers' adjustments to interpersonal relationships in conflict contexts, so RMT has a strong explanatory power and applicability to the research. The writer adopts RMT to interpret communicators' rapport management tendencies and channels to enrich the application of it.

3. Negative Reviews and Rapport Management

Tripadvisor is a world's leading travel community with 42 million monthly visitors, including more than 535 million reviews on restaurants, hotels, attractions etc. It provides important references for consumers' online shopping. This study selects 400 negative reviews and corresponding merchants' responses of hotels and restaurants from "poor" and "terrible" review pages of it. The time span of the sample is from 2022 to 2024. After deleting ambiguous and garbled texts, a small corpus of more than 30,000 words is established. The research objects are real and reliable with a certain degree of representativeness.

Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) classification has been slightly adjusted and increased to make it more consistent with the features of the corpus. Text annotation software UAM corpus tool 3.3 is applied to label and count the corpus. The consumers' complaint strategies and their proportions are shown as follows:

Table 1. The Proportions and Examples of Consumers' Complaint Strategies

Complaint strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Below the level of reproach	86	9.07%	The room wasn't ready until after 5 pm.
Expression of annoyance or disapproval	339	35.76%	We just felt the service of hotel was not worth the money paid.
Explicit complaint	388	40.93%	I'm disappointed and thoroughly annoyed with the entire process.
Condemn and question	27	2.85%	Pictures completely deceive the consumer, so it's unethical.
Immediate threat	24	2.53%	If I can't get my deposit, I'll report to

			management department.
Give suggestions	62	6.54%	Pay attention to your room furnishings and repair them.
Claim compensation	3	0.32%	The manager please reply to my email and pay my loss.

In online context lacking face-to-face communication, customers usually adopt direct complaints for poor quality service or enterprises' misconducts. It helps them to attract the attention of merchants and alert other consumers. Their complaints show a clear tendency to destroy interpersonal relationships, and Table 1 shows the complaining strategies they used. The most common complaint strategies are "explicit complaint (40.93%)", "expression of annoyance or disapproval (35.76%)" and "below the level of reproach (9.07%)". The Strategies of "immediate threat (2.53%)" and "claim compensation (0.32%)" are the least frequently used, probably because people are willing to follow basic social principles and avoid taking conflicts to extremes. Here we just choose three strategies to explain specifically, and other strategies will be presented in further analysis.

When they take "condemn and question" to complain, they are actually asking for a clear explanation from the merchant. Therefore, the interactivity of the conversation and the degree of threat to merchant's face are increased. For example, "Isn't that the most important ingredient for this dish?" Here, the customer questions why there are no fermented black beans in the dish. He actually suspects restaurant owner's professionalism, implying that the restaurant owner or the chef is ignorant or cutting corners in work. The interrogative tone clearly demands a response and undermines the owner's face need.

When they take the strategy of "below the level of reproach", the complaints are dominated by declarative sentences to just describe unfair and unreasonable treatment that they have experienced. For example, "The sink is in the bedroom and is a long shallow trough". The tone of it is relatively moderate, so it can not cause great threat to merchants' face. It reflects that consumers have low willingness to complain, which is not conducive to making merchants reflect on and correct their misconducts or poor service.

Consumers use the strategy of "giving suggestions" not only to merchants but also to other consumers. In this case, imperative and conditional sentences are used extensively. For example, "Go to the Marriott instead." and "If you want dim sum, go to Nan Xiang Xiao Long Bao.", provide suggestions and risk-perception information for other consumers. It reflects people's tendency to conduct association rights with other customers. According to RMT, behavior of sharing feelings and opinions about things is a manifestation of "interactional involvement" and "affective involvement".

The above are specific case analyses of three strategies of "condemning and questioning", "below the level of reproach" and "giving advice" because these strategies are relatively high and have certain

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language characteristics. In the following, based on rapport management theory, the writer will interpret the threat of consumers to the quality face and identity face of merchants as well as the violation of consumers' equality and association rights by merchants. The purpose is to explain the discourse characteristics of interpersonal regulation between buyers and sellers.

3.1 Threat to Quality Face

(1) Horrible, horrible place. This is the worst place ever. Do not go there. They're rude and unethical and they are also crooks and thieves, so be very careful and do not go there.!!!!!

(2) Liars and thieves run this place. Location great but the imbeciles that call themselves concierge and hotel manager are a disgrace…… disgusting lack of competence and ethics here.

Here the consumer utilizes a range of offensive expressions to degrade the merchant's moralities and identities, which greatly damages the merchant's quality face. In example (1), the consumer employs "horrible" twice and the highest expression "the worst" to evaluate the merchant's service; Then "rude" and "unethical" are applied to demean the merchant's impolite behavior. Furthermore, the more offensive and derogatory terms "crooks", "thieves", "liars" and "imbeciles" are adopted to describe merchants' identity. These expressions imply that the merchants cheat the consumer or steal his belongings and have poor work ability. Finally, the consumer adds "disgrace, lack of competence and ethics" to condemn the hotel's inefficient and unethical work style again. A series of offensive expressions degrade the image of the merchant, which causes severe threat to his quality face.

The above negative reviews indicate that consumers have adopted a very obvious rapport-challenge tendency. Many consumers repeatedly adopt exclamation marks and interrogative sentences to show their annoyance in reviews as in example (1), which are more eye-catching and direct in emotion expression. For example, negative reviews like "What a disappointment!!!!!!" and "Are you kidding me?" indicate that consumers think the services provided by merchants are unsatisfactory and ridiculous. The interrogative and exclamatory tone give merchants a strong psychological deterrent, which is an "explicit complaint" about their service.

3.2 Threat to Identity Face

(3) This is not a five star property. Every doorway along the hall is dinged……The service on check in was lousy. They should just give up calling themselves a Marriott.

(4) The public areas of the hotel are unkempt and dirty. The lobby generally looks like a cheap residential hotel rather than a fine hotel. The Front Desk is a pigsty.

Negative review attacks the identity face of the store owner, that is, the merchant's social role or status. The consumer applies "not a five-star hotel" and "lousy" to comment the hotel's seemingly fake identity and poor service in example (3), questioning the mismatch between its five-star reputation and low services. Then she gives a suggestion "Give up calling themselves a Marriott" to merchant. Marriott Hotels are famous for the pursuit of excellence, but here the consumer implies that the hotel doesn't live up to its excellent reputation. The consumer applies "unkempt and dirty" in example (4),

indicating the poor hygiene of the hotel. Then he satirizes the hotel's social role with "cheap residential hotel" and "pigsty", implying that it plays the social role of a terrible place to live rather than a fine hotel. The identity face of the hotel owner is threatened by these offensive expressions.

3.3 Threat to Equality Rights

(5) Sadly <u>the most horrific</u> experience. We were told that sitting in the lobby is <u>prohibited</u>. The manager called the police on us for <u>trespassing</u>. I was <u>terrified, confused</u>, and felt <u>unbelievably unfairly.</u> We are all <u>people of colour</u>. However, the white customers were treated with such care and respect.

(6) We recently booked a "deluxe king bed". Upon arrival, we are informed that the room we booked was not available, so they <u>took the liberty of</u> moving us to a room with two queens.

Example (5) shows that the merchant damages consumer's equality rights because he shows a discriminant attitude toward people of color and treats them unequally. Consumers use "the most horrific" to comment the experience. The expressions "prohibit", "trespassing", "people of color" indicate that the staff treats consumers impolitely and unfairly because of their skin color, causing them unable to exercise the right to stay in the lobby. Consumers have paid money for services, but the merchant does not provide the same services to them as white customers. The merchant's behavior involves the issue of the "cost-benefit" in equality rights, which means that the customer's losses and gains are balanced under the principle of reciprocity. Thus, customer's self-esteem and interests are threatened to some degree, causing them to complain.

The phrase "took the liberty of" in example (6) shows that the merchant changes the consumer to a different and inappropriate room without permission. The merchant's behavior involves the principle of "autonomy-imposition" in equality rights, which means that people have a reasonable degree of autonomy or control over others. Here the consumer loses control over his booked rooms, so his equality rights are seriously threatened.

3.4 Threat to Association Rights

(7) <u>Terrible</u> service ! The real issue is that the housekeeping team seems to either <u>not exist</u> or just to <u>not care</u>. If you follow up on either you end up getting sent to <u>nonresponsive</u> housekeeping team.

(8) My experience at the hotel was <u>extremely poor</u>. The receptionist clocked off and <u>went home</u> and left us with a phone number for the manager <u>who didn't answer</u>……

Expressions such as "not exist", "not care", "nonresponsive", "didn't answer" etc. in example (7) prove that the staff take an evasive and ignoring attitude towards the consumer and do not take the initiative to provide services. Therefore, the consumer loses the right to participate in interpersonal communication, so he can't effectively talk with the hotel staff to solve problems. The merchants' behavior destroys customers' association rights and damages interpersonal harmony.

The consumer describes the service with "terrible" and "extremely poor" in the above two examples. The expression of "intensifiers + negative adjectives" is very commonly used in "explicit complaint". Consumers frequently use negative adjectives such as "unacceptable, horrible, hellacious, awful,

disgusting, infuriating, terrible, unfriendly etc." to evaluate the overall service of merchants. These words are often paired with adverbs such as "absolutely, truly, definitely, thoroughly, totally etc." to emphasize vehemence and certainty of complaint. When expressing their feelings of dissatisfaction, adjective like "annoyed, disappointed, infuriated, dissatisfied, frustrated, disgusted" are frequently employed.

4. Merchant Responses and Rapport Management

Merchants adopt rich discourse strategies in their responses to consumers' negative reviews, and different strategies result from certain rapport management orientations. The writer marks merchants' various response strategies and includes them into the corresponding rapport management tendencies. Table 2 shows the rapport management tendencies and discourse strategies of merchants.

Table 2. Merchants' Rapport Management Tendencies and Discourse Strategies

Rapport management tendency	Strategy	Frequency	Proportion
Rapport-enhancement orientation	Express emotions	258	36.65%
	Apologize	124	17.61%
	Commitment and action	118	16.76%
	Invite next visit	37	5.26%
Rapport-maintenance orientation	Explain	110	15.62%
	Offer advice	22	3.22%
Rapport-challenge orientation	Refute and question	21	2.94%
Rapport-neglect orientation	Emphasize service quality	6	0.77%
	Reply irrelevant content	4	0.57%

Table 2 shows merchants' rapport management tendencies and the proportions of their response strategies. The extent to which companies' responses satisfy or threaten consumers' face, equality, and social rights reflects their management of interpersonal relationships. Most merchants adopt rapport-enhancement orientation, which is mainly influenced by the communicative purpose of establishing favorable brand images and promoting products. The most commonly used discourse strategies of merchants are "expressing emotions (36.35%)", "apologizing (17.61%)", "committing and acting (16.76%)" etc. A small number of merchants adopt rapport-maintenance orientation by using "explaining (15.62%)" and "offering advice(3.22%)". Influenced by the communicative purpose of repairing interpersonal relationships between buyers and sellers and establishing a good impression, there are few cases of rapport-challenge orientation and rapport-neglect orientation. Therefore, the proportions of their corresponding strategies are also low. The following is a detailed analysis of rapport management tendencies and discourse strategies of merchants.

4.1 Rapport-Enhancement Orientation

(9) Consumer: This is <u>the worst</u> hotel I've ever stayed in. The table is broken and the shower doesn't work. <u>Don't stay here</u> if you would like to rest !

Merchant: <u>Hello xxx</u>, <u>thank you for being our valued guest</u>. We sincerely <u>apologize</u> for the issues. We <u>regret</u> the problems with the table and shower. <u>Our team is working on repairs</u> to prevent similar incidents in the future. If you have any questions, <u>please contact us by email</u>.

Example (9) is a typical case of rapport-enhancement orientation. Merchant firstly uses "dear or hello+ name" to make a kind and friendly greeting, which brings the psychological distance between the two parties closer. Secondly, "thank you" and "valued guest" are employed by the merchant to show appreciation and praise to customers. It greatly satisfies customers' face needs of being respected, cared for and appreciated, helping to calm consumers' anger and ease tense interpersonal relationships.

Then, merchant generally applies "apologize, disheartened, glad, regret" to express the feelings of apology, sympathy or sadness to consumers' experience. It is a good way to stimulate empathy effect and makes consumers feel that the merchant is standing in their shoes. Apologizing is an important strategy employed by merchants. Expression like "apologize", "sorry" or "pardon me for" often co-occur with adverbs such as "truly, sincerely, genuinely, deeply, terribly" to reinforcing the sincere tone of the apology.

Based on rapport-enhancement orientation, most merchants' takes the strategy of "commitment and action" such as "Our team is working on repairs." It shows that they take steps to improve service quality to maintain the consumer's equality rights. The sentence "Please contact us by email" denotes that the merchant provides a channel for consumers to communicate with him, which protects consumers' association rights. Merchants also usually use the strategy of "inviting next visit" in the end of response such as "We do hope you will revisit us.", aiming to show their sincerity and friendliness to win over customers.

4.2 Rapport-Challenge Orientation

(10) Consumer: Everything tastes salty and the delivery time is late, so I wouldn't recommend this restaurant.

Merchant: What sort of <u>idiot</u> orders "Salt & Pepper Chicken" and then complains it has salt in it. Our delivery record shows it was <u>NOT late</u> and it was <u>NOT cold</u>, a <u>fake review</u> and <u>derogatory</u> too. <u>Take your foul mouth and business somewhere else</u>.

The response strategy "refuting and questioning (2.94%)" indicates merchant's rapport-challenge orientation. When consumers make exaggerated, malicious or false comments, damaging the reputation or interests of the seller, he will take countermeasures.

Example (10) obviously indicates merchant's rapport-challenge orientation. In the face of buyers' complaints about the taste of food and delivery time, he uses the word "idiot" to belittle the intelligence of consumer, degrading the quality face of consumers. He further applies capitalized expression "NOT

late" and "NOT cold" to clearly refute buyer's review, justifying his products and services. Then "fake" and "derogatory" are applied to disprove customer's opinion, implying that the customer is lying. Here the strategy of "refuting and questioning" undermine customer's identity face. The merchant even violently expresses his anger by very provocative and impolite expression "Taking your foul mouth and business somewhere else.", indicating his unwelcoming and disgusting attitude towards the customer.

When the merchant has a rapport-challenge orientation, he often uses the expression "You were unaware..." and "Let me correct you" to suggest that the customer is at fault and shifts the blame onto the customer. Expressions like "This is not the case" and "This is not our hotel" are very common to deny customer reviews. Some merchants even use threatening expression "Take care!" in response to warn customers. All of these greatly damage interpersonal relationships, reduce trust, and are not conducive to business marketing.

4.3 Rapport-Maintenance Orientation

(11) Consumer: Not worth the hype. This is a <u>flavorless</u> and <u>disappointing</u> dim sum.

Merchant: We will tell to our chefs…… <u>but to show you more information.</u> Dim sum is a type of Cantonese cuisine. Cantonese cuisine is known for preserving the original flavors of food and generally tastes mild, fresh and natural.

(12) Consumer: The wontons in my soup <u>did not contain pork</u>. I believe it was their shrimp and fish dumpling.

Merchant: To clarify, <u>the wontons are always pork & shrimp.</u> It's a classic recipe that existed for hundreds of years, a<u>nd we don't plan on changing that</u>.

Under rapport-maintenance orientation, merchants rarely use words with strong emotions or offensive features. They only state the facts to indicate that their product or service is appropriate, and there is no strong willingness to admit mistake and take responsibility. "Explaining (15.62%)" and "offering advice (3.22%)" are common strategies for maintaining interpersonal relationship.

In example (11), in the face of the customer's complaint about the weak taste of the dessert, the merchant applies "But to show you more information." to explain the characteristics of Cantonese dim sum. This neutral attitude not only cleverly advertises the features of the commodity, but also maintains the current state of each other.

In example (12), customers complains that his wontons contains fish and shrimp instead of pork. The seller first applies a frame marker "to clarify" to show the ingredients of the meal and its long history. Then, he employs "we don't plan on changing that." to show that he sticks to his business ideas. Rapport-maintenance orientation seems to reflect the equal and respectful status of both buyers and sellers, rather than the full responsibility of the seller.

4.4 Rapport-neglect Orientation

(13) Customer: The room was<u> beyond depressing, </u>so was moved to the only other room available. It was small and depressing, with no mini fridge or desk.

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Merchant: The 72 hotel rooms at The Los Angeles Athletic Club have been completely renovated since your visit. Downtown LA has also changed a lot and now the most popular restaurants and bars are right across the street from LAAC.

Under the rapport-neglect orientation, common strategies are "emphasizing service quality (0.77%)" like "To provide customers with good service is our consistent pursuit". Merchants also take the strategy of "providing irrelevant content (0.57%)". In example (13), consumer expresses frustration over the shortage of room equipment, but the merchant just emphasizes the environment around the hotel. The customer's problem cannot be solved practically, making the customer feel that the merchant is indifferent and does not care about him. Merchant's neglectful attitude reduces customers' trust in business and it is also easy to form conflicts. Although the rapport-neglect orientation and rapport-challenge orientation are different in discourse strategies, their pragmatic results are very similar.

5. Problems and Optimization Strategies

The research shows that negative consumers' reviews and merchants' responses can satisfy consumers' needs to express their demands and merchants' goals to establish company credibility to a certain extent, but there is still room for improvement in their discourse strategies and tendencies. In view of this, the problems exposed in reviews and responses are summarized and optimization suggestions are given.

From the consumers' perspective, some consumers describe merchants' poor service in a long length in reviews, which is too macro and complex. Therefore, it is not conducive to expressing consumers' demands and key information. Moreover, some consumers adopt words with numerous meanings and there are spelling and grammatical errors in their negative reviews, making their complaints logically confusing and difficult to understand, which hinders the interpretation of their reviews by merchants. In view of this, it is recommended that consumers apply itemized enumeration methods as well as concise and clear words to express demands and highlight the key points of the content. Secondly, consumers should also pay attention to the logic of reviews and adopt transitional words and proper grammar in it, making their review more concise and organized. These strategies attempt to provide references for consumers to effectively express their demands and protect their rights.

From the merchants' perspective, there are serious homogeneity, too direct tone and lack of solutions in their responses, which can easily intensify conflicts between buyers and sellers and damage the corporate image. Based on the goals of promoting products and establishing favourable business environment, merchants should adopt the rapport-enhancement tendency and rapport- maintenance tendency more frequently.

On the premise that consumers do not have malicious intent or false evaluations, first of all, merchants' responses should reflect a certain degree of humanistic care by applying friendly and cordial greetings and wishes to leave a good impression on consumers. Secondly, merchants should utilize more

euphemistic and polite words to explain the situation and propose practical solutions based on consumers' problems. In terms of sentence structure, it is recommended to reduce the application of interrogative and imperative sentences because their questioning and commanding tone is strong, which is not conducive to appeasing consumers' dissatisfaction.

Formal, positive and varied expressions should be widely used to show that the merchants care about and value consumers. Making customers feel that they are respected and cared for is a necessary way to reduce the unpleasantness caused by conflicts. In addition, merchants need to avoid a large number of homogeneous and templated responses, applying more medium-value and high-value modal words such as "will, must, need, etc." to express firm determination to improve service quality. Enhancing the timeliness of responses and proposing practical solutions are also crucial. The suggestions are based on the service attitude and response strategies of merchants, aiming to ease the interpersonal relationship between buyers and sellers and build a harmonious business environment.

6. Conclusion

Customers' reviews of goods and services is an important driving force to induce other consumers' desire to buy. The merchants' responses to consumers' negative reviews are beneficial to clarify misunderstandings and demonstrate good service attitude, which play an important role in repairing interpersonal relationships and attracting customers. Based on rapport management theory, this paper studies consumers' negative reviews and merchants' responses.

Research shows that customers tend to use strategies that challenge interpersonal harmony to express dissatisfaction, which is mainly because merchant's behavior undermines their quality face, identity face, equity rights and association rights etc. A large number of merchants take rapport-enhancement orientation and rapport-maintenance orientation. This is partly decided by the communication goal of reducing consumers' dissatisfaction, enhancing interpersonal harmony and merchandising. Theoretically, the research intends to enhance the explanatory power of the rapport management theory. It is also conducive to enriching the research on negative reviews from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics. The practical value of this study is to provide E-commerce operators and customers with more appropriate strategies to complaint and response. However, there are some shortcomings in this paper. The research samples are relatively homogeneous because they are mainly from Tripadvisor, so the research results are not widely applicable. Corpus labeling relies on specific contexts and is somewhat subjective. In further research, the writer will conduct more reasonable corpus sampling and annotate with colleagues to improve the scientific nature of the study.

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