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REVITALIZING AND ENRICHING ELT
RESEARCH AND PRACTICES:
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

December 7-8, 2018

Duangtawan Hotel, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Organized by

Language Institute, Thammasat University

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Analysis of the Comments' Replies on the Online Travel Agency Website *Expedia*

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Abstract

Globalization has seen the burgeoning of Online Travel Agency (OTA) websites that manage accommodation bookings for hotels worldwide. Based on Panseeta and Todd's framework (2014), this research study examined word choices and common language expressions employed by Bangkok 5-star hotels in responses to guests' reviews on *Expedia*. Anthony's (2018) software *AntConc 3.5.7* was used to analyze words and concordance of the corpus. Findings revealed generic pattern of replies as shown in frequently used words, phrases, and language expressions by which hotels addressed the comments of their customers. The greater use of words and expressions relating to the involved dimension of language indicated that hotels mainly focused on building interpersonal relationships with their guests. The study also provides implications on the use of language and its influences on perceptions of both former and potential customers in managing electronic word of mouth.

Keywords: Expedia; Online Customer Service; Online Hotel Booking; Replies-to-Comments

1.Introduction

Over the years, the internet has revolutionized the way firms market their products, corresponding to changing behaviors of today's consumers. Information search for both goods and services to guide consumer decision-making is increasingly conducted via digital channels. Communication among the consumers over the internet also has become common practice. These behaviors and practices are observed among worldwide consumers as well in tourism and hospitality service firms. For instance, travelers rely on the internet to search for information to meet their needs as they engage in decision-making processes (Cetin & Dincer, 2014). Shared experiences of past customers may influence prospective customers' pre-purchase evaluations of services rendered by providers. The same influence may be expected whether information is shared through face-to-face communications or on cyberspace channels through electronic-word of mouth (eWOM). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has been recently admitted as one of the most significant resources of information transmission and plays an important role in consumer purchasing decision (Jalilvand, Esfahani, & Samiei, 2011). Reviews of past experiences by travelers with tourism service firms provide other travelers helpful information to make informed decisions. From a similar vein of argument, responses of firms to customers' reviews may influence travelers' purchase intentions and decisions. Responses to reviews, especially to the negative ones, can communicate the level of care and concerns that the firms have for their customers. Therefore, many tourism service firms such as luxury hotels exclusively assign social media staff to respond to guests' reviews. The efficiency of the hotel staffs in replying to guests' comments has effect on perceived service quality and customer relationship (Panseeta & Todd, 2014). As a result, tourism service providers should regard effective management of online information as a critical marketing task.

2. Literature Review

Word of mouth (WOM) may be defined as communication between consumers that is independent of commercial influence about a product or company (Litvin et al., 2008). Traditional WOM passes along information via oral communication from person to person. However, the internet technology has changed the way consumers communicate. The rapid growth in online communication allows the new form of WOM to emerge. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to all informal communication via online platforms whereby consumers share information and opinions relating to their experience with the products and corresponding sellers (Litvin et al., 2008).

The influence of traditional WOM on consumer decision-making and purchase intention has long been established in consumer behavior research. More attention thus is given to eWOM and its effects on consumers. Research in this area found that compared to traditional WOM and advertisement, eWOM has more effect on purchase intention (Tseng, Kuo, & Chen, 2014). In terms of marketing, eWOM provides more cost effective means of promoting services, including those in the hospitality industry (Litvin et al., 2008). Given the intangible nature of services, consumers rely on pre-purchase information from various sources to evaluate service quality before making a purchase decision. Online guests' reviews of hotels, for instance, provide useful information for travelers in the trip planning process and helping to guide their accommodation choices (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). The importance of hotel's online reviews is further emphasized when significant relationship was found between online reviews and financial performance. Hotels that pay genuine attention to online guests' reviews by providing timely and lengthy customized responses are able to enhance their future financial performance. Whereas, less meaningful responses can lower future financial performance (Xie, So, & Wang, 2017). Park and Allen (2013) stated that even hotels under the same brand can have totally different response rates and patterns, so hotel's staffs should be more prepared to respond to online reviews because they will become an important source of information for the guests. Therefore, how hotels respond to guests' reviews and comments may influence consumers' perceptions and can be crucial to their financial success. Especially, negative reviews of past customers can lead to negative perceptions of prospective customers about service quality and in turn, may deter purchase intentions.

Appropriate response to negative reviews due to customer dissatisfaction can contribute to successful service recovery effort and should be strategically implemented. Ho (2017) studied how hotel management responded to negative online reviews. According to the language used in the responses (i.e., response genre), commonly used strategy comprising of three obligatory moves were identified: *acknowledging problem, expressing feeling, and thanking reviewer*.

In Thailand, Panseeta and Todd (2014) examined 100 hotels' responses to negative reviews using a Swales' notion of move analysis (Swales, 1990). They found five generic moves with two to four steps throughout their data. This enterprise, however, may examine only a limited volume of data providing a snapshot view of the hotels' responses. Lexical choices and language expressions used in these responses may determine the effectiveness of communication and messages. Put another way, language used in communication, if carefully tailored, can convey desirable messages and guide perceptions (e.g., image) as intended by the sender, so they are also worth examining.

Overall, past research focused on how hotel management responded to negative guests' reviews (a form of eWOM) with the understanding that appropriate response strategy is required for

effective service recovery. Proper responses, particularly how the message is conveyed, are as important and can reinforce or change consumer perceptions and guide them in a desirable direction. However, no specific attention has been given to the language used in these responses in terms of word choices and expressions. Therefore, the goal of this study is to identify (a) frequently used words and (b) common language expressions employed by 5-star hotels in online communication with their guests, presented as responses to guests' reviews. To accomplish the study's goal, the researchers focused on 5-star hotels in Bangkok, Thailand as the study's sample and their responses to guests' reviews on *Expedia*. Findings of the study will have also implications for English language pedagogy for hotel industry courses offered in various higher education institutions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Source

The study aims to investigate frequently used words and common language expressions found in the responses to guests' reviews on *Expedia*. *Expedia*, an online travel agency (OTA) website, was chosen for three important reasons. First, as one of the top three booking channels, *Expedia* makes the highest income for hotels in Thailand (TTR Weekly, 2018). Second, *Expedia* provides ratings based on verified reviews from travelers (room cleanliness, service and staff, room comfort and hotel condition). In other words, *Expedia* brings a source of reviews that the travelers can trust (Technosys, 2015). Third, *Expedia* provides the opportunity for both travelers and hotel representatives to respond to each other. These reasons make *Expedia* different from other OTA websites, which makes it a worthwhile OTA to investigate.

3.2 Data and Data Analysis

To maintain the focus of the study, only responses from 5-star hotels in Bangkok were considered. The city of Bangkok was chosen because it was named one of the top tourism destinations for two consecutive years by Mastercard's Annual Travel Index in celebration of World Tourism Day 2017. Both positive and negative reviews were recognized. Responses to the reviews by 41 hotels were collected during high season period from November 2017 to April 2018. Hotel responses to guests' reviews were downloaded directly from *Expedia*. The corpus is composed of 73,706 word tokens and 2,375 word types.

The analysis followed these steps. First, the corpus was examined for words with high absolute frequencies. To identify the specific words that characterize the corpus (or the keywords), the researchers compared the words with high absolute frequencies against a comparator corpus. Relative frequencies were then calculated by comparing absolute frequencies against the frequencies in the British National Corpus or the BNC (see Aston & Burnard, 1998 for a succinct description of the BNC) using the statistical measure log-likelihood (LL). Following Carreon and Todd's (2013) framework, the keywords with LL value of at least 100 are iteratively categorized into five themes: (1) words relating to hotel services and facilities, (2) words relating to hotel staffs, (3) words relating to hotel guests and guests' experiences, (4) words relating to language production (Bieber et al., 2003), and (5) words relating to location.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The word choices used in Bangkok 5-star hotels' responses to guests' reviews on *Expedia*

The first stage was to conduct a basic word frequency count to give absolute frequencies of words on the hotels' responses. Table 1 shows the five most frequently used words.

Table1. Five most frequently used words in Bangkok 5-star hotels' responses to guests' reviews on *Expedia*

No.	Top 5 Words	Absolute Frequency	Examples
1	to	3636	<i>to</i> provide; <i>to</i> learn; <i>to</i> read; <i>to</i> know; <i>to</i> see you again; <i>to</i> welcome back; look forward <i>to</i> ; <i>to</i> our hotel; <i>to</i> our beautiful resort; <i>to</i> us; <i>to</i> Shangri-La; <i>to</i> your comment
2	you	3607	thank <i>you</i> for; see <i>you</i> soon; <i>you</i> had a wonderful time; pleasure to have <i>you</i>
3	your	2874	<i>your</i> feedback; <i>your</i> recent experience; <i>your</i> stay; <i>your</i> reviews; <i>your</i> return
4	the	2231	<i>the</i> Anantara; <i>the</i> Conrad; <i>the</i> Sukhothai; <i>the</i> legendary service; <i>the</i> inconveniences; in <i>the</i> future; <i>the</i> problem; <i>the</i> opportunity; <i>the</i> pleasure
5	for	2202	thanks <i>for</i> choosing; thanks <i>for</i> your patronage; thanks <i>for</i> sharing; thanks <i>for</i> your return visit; thanks <i>for</i> your time; thanks <i>for</i> staying with us

First of all, the high frequency of *to* reflects its common use in English as being followed by an infinitive to express use or purpose (e.g. *to* provide; *to* learn; *to* read; *to* see you again). It is commonly found in phrasal verbs (e.g. look forward *to* seeing you) and is used in order to express movement toward a place related to the hotel (e.g. *to* our hotel; *to* our beautiful resort; *to* Shangri-la). The second most frequently used word was *you* which is as a pronoun referring to the guests (e.g. *you* had a wonderful time; pleasure to have *you*) and used in a language expression (e.g. thank *you*; see *you*). Next, the high frequency use of *your* is as a possessive adjective showing belonging to or associated with the experienced guests (e.g. *your* feedback; *your* recent experience; *your* stay; *your* reviews). A detailed discussion of the pronoun *you* and possessive adjective *your* is provided below. Fourth, the frequency of the article *the* is used as a definite article for denoting specific names (e.g. *the* Anantara; *the* Conrad; *the* Sukhothai) and it is used in sentences or clauses to define or identify a particular thing related to the hotel services and hospitality (e.g. *the* inconveniences; *the* problem; *the* pleasure). The article *the* is also used to mention time (e.g. in *the* future). Last but not least, the high frequency use of *for* reflects the common use of language expression in saying thank you (e.g. thanks *for* choosing; thanks *for* sharing; thanks *for* your time).

Carreon and Svetanant (2017) argued that “while these findings shed some light on the data under investigation, stronger conclusions cannot be drawn since absolute frequencies reflect

general language use but not the specific linguistic features of a text” (p.644). Table 2 shows the top 30 keywords or about 14.56 % of all the keywords with LL values of at least 100, with their frequencies, LL values, categories and examples, where f is the absolute frequency and LL is the log-likelihood.

Table 2 Top 30 keywords with the highest log-likelihood values

No.	Keywords	f	LL	Category (Words relating to...)	Examples
1	your	2874	14151.42	involved production	<i>your</i> feedback; <i>your</i> stay
2	thank	1488	12643.57	involved production	<i>Thank</i> you very much; <i>thank</i> you for
3	Bangkok	836	10331.95	location	Conrad <i>Bangkok</i> ; Dusit Thani <i>Bangkok</i>
4	dear	1107	9518.8	involved production	<i>Dear</i> Guest; <i>Dear</i> Chris; <i>Dear</i> Valued Guest
5	you	3607	9503.54	involved production	Thank <i>you</i> for; Thank <i>you</i>
6	regards	814	8750.63	involved production	Best <i>regards</i> ; Warm <i>regards</i> ; Kind <i>regards</i>
7	stay	1040	7761.6	informational conveyed	a pleasant <i>stay</i> ; <i>stay</i> with us
8	feedback	601	6328.72	hotel services and facilities	your <i>feedback</i> ; great <i>feedback</i>
9	we	2137	5612.5	involved production	<i>We</i> look forward to; <i>We</i> are very happy
10	welcoming	422	4482.67	involved production	look forward to <i>welcoming</i> you back
11	guest	496	4461.44	hotel guests and guests' experiences	the <i>guest</i> experience; <i>guest</i> feedback
12	manager	699	4434.75	hotel staff	Executive Assistant <i>Manager</i> ; General <i>Manager</i>
13	forward	699	4354.81	involved production	look <i>forward</i> to welcoming you back
14	our	1151	4296.58	information conveyed	<i>our</i> service; <i>our</i> staffs
15	Hotel	616	3999.49	location	The Athenee <i>Hotel</i> ; Sukosol Bangkok <i>Hotel</i>
16	us	945	3435.2	involved production	give <i>us</i> a rating; give <i>us</i> a review
17	choosing	370	3303.85	involved production	Thank you for <i>choosing</i>
18	review	481	3024.52	hotel services and facilities	write a <i>review</i> ; this <i>review</i>
19	banyan	216	2752.09	location	at <i>Banyan</i> Tree Bangkok

No.	Keywords	f	LL	Category (Words relating to...)	Examples
20	experience	525	2597.79	information conveyed	good <i>experience</i> ; recent <i>experience</i>
21	look	642	2531.83	information conveyed	<i>look</i> forward to
22	soon	502	2530.25	involved production	back again <i>soon</i> ; welcome you again <i>soon</i>
23	future	513	2471.73	information conveyed	a <i>future</i> visit; near <i>future</i>
24	sharing	310	2444.77	involved production	thank you for <i>sharing</i>
25	welcome	365	2418.27	involved production	<i>welcome</i> you back again
26	back	799	2393.63	involved production	welcome you <i>back</i> again
27	for	2202	2182.41	information conveyed	apologize <i>for</i> any inconvenience
28	again	621	2182.35	involved production	service you back <i>again</i> ; once <i>again</i>
29	sincerely	240	2162.66	involved production	<i>Sincerely</i> , Caroline; <i>Sincerely</i> , Kaiser
30	hope	422	2132.27	involved production	we <i>hope</i> to welcome

The words in Table 2 reflects the specific characteristic feature of the corpus. To understand further what these words meant, the top 30 keywords were iteratively categorized into themes using the concordance of each of these keywords as guide. Table 3 presents the keyword categories and their respective percentages.

Table 3 Keyword categories and percentages

Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
1. Words relating to hotel services and facilities	18	8.70
2. Words relating to hotel staff	38	18.36
3. Words relating to hotel guests and guests' experiences	3	1.45
4. Words relating to language production (Bieber et al., 2003)	119	57.49
5. Words relating to location	29	14.01
TOTAL	207	100.00

The most frequently found keywords in the order of decreasing frequency are words relating to language production (N= 119; 57.49%), words relating to hotel staff (N=38; 18.36%), words relating to location (N=29; 14.01%), words relating to hotel services and facilities (N=18; 8.70%), and words relating to hotel guests and guests' experiences (N=3; 1.45%).

The top words relating to language production (f=119; 57.49%) include *your* (f=2874; LL=14151.42), *thank* (f=1488; LL=12643.57), *dear* (f=1107; LL=9518.8), *you* (f=3607; LL=9503.54), *regards* (f=814; LL=8750.63). *Dear* is used in salutations of hotels' responses to guests' reviews (e.g. *Dear Customer*). *Thanks* is used to start a letter with a positive note (e.g. *Thank you for...*). *Regards* is commonly used as a **complimentary close**, then followed by the **signature** of the sender. The second theme reflects the hotel staffs showing names of staffs that perform services for guests, the positions of hotels' staffs and also the words in expression to show the feelings and reactions of the hotels' staffs. The third theme reflects the location by addressing the specific name of the location and the hotels. The fourth theme reflects the hotels services and facilities provided from the hotels and the last theme reflects the hotel guests and guests' experiences which addressed the experienced guests showing their encountering services and facilities in the hotel.

Overall, it can be said that the 5-star hotels examined in this research were concerned mainly on using positive language to communicate with their customers. Using positive language may function in two ways. On the one hand, it serves as words of welcome and warmth for the customers. On the other hand, when a customer is complaining about a hotel's services and facilities, it may serve as pacifying note so readers (customers) will calm down. While this move is welcomed by guests, it may be temporary, since future guests may be interested if the complaints have been addressed or not.

4.2 The language expressions used in Bangkok 5-star hotels' responses to guests' reviews on *Expedia*

In terms of language expressions used in responses by hotels, the top five most frequently used expressions are formed with the words *your*, *thank*, *dear*, *you* and *regards*. While most of these were already discussed above, some space will still be allotted for them to give more examples, especially when they are used as language expressions. The words are related to the 'involved production' dimension of language use. According to Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998), the involved production dimension is related to "a primarily interactive or affective purpose for the expression of feelings and concerns and with little or no informational focus such as the use of second person pronouns, wh-questions, emphatics, amplifiers and sentences relatives" (p. 150). Table 4 presents the keywords categorized according to language production (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998).

Table 4 Involved versus Informational production of language

No.	Keyword	f	LL	Function of language	Examples
1	<i>your</i>	2874	14151.42	involved	<i>your</i> feedback; <i>your</i> stay
2	<i>thank</i>	1488	12643.57	involved	<i>Thank</i> you very much; <i>thank</i> you for
3	<i>dear</i>	1107	9518.8	involved	<i>Dear</i> Guest; <i>Dear</i> Chris; <i>Dear</i> Valued Guest
4	<i>you</i>	3607	9503.54	involved	Thank <i>you</i> for; Thank <i>you</i>

No.	Keyword	f	LL	Function of language	Examples
5	regards	814	8750.63	involved	Best regards ; Warm regards ; Kind regards
6	stay	1040	7761.6	informational	a pleasant stay ; stay with us
7	we	2137	5612.5	involved	We look forward to; We are very happy
8	welcoming	422	4482.67	involved	look forward to welcoming you back
9	forward	699	4354.81	involved	look forward to welcoming you back
10	our	1151	4296.58	involved	our service; our staffs
11	us	945	3435.2	involved	give us a rating; give us a review
12	choosing	370	3303.85	involved	Thank you for choosing
13	experience	525	2597.79	informational	good experience ; recent experience
14	look	642	2531.83	informational	look forward to
15	soon	502	2530.25	involved	back again soon ; welcome you again soon
16	future	513	2471.73	informational	a future visit; near future
17	sharing	310	2444.77	involved	thank you for sharing
18	welcome	365	2418.27	involved	welcome you back again
19	back	799	2393.63	involved	welcome you back again
20	for	2202	2182.41	informational	apologize for any inconvenience

First, the word *you* and *thank* are used together to form the language expression *Thank you*. This expression is used to express appreciation and gratitude to the guests for sharing either their positive or negative experiences from staying in the hotels. Examples include *thank you for sharing your feedback*, *thank you for sharing your review*, *thank you for your great review*, *thank you for your stay*, *thank you for your recent visit*, and *thank you for staying at + Hotel name*.

Second, the word *dear* is used in tandem with a guest name or words that refer to guests to form a salutation expression in the beginning of the responses. This type of expression is purposed to greet the guests and to show respect by addressing a customer by his/her name. Examples include *Dear Dongmin (Dear + guest's name)*, *Dear Guest* and *Dear Valued Guest*. Third, the word *regards* forms the expression in the complimentary close of the responses. Examples include *Best Regards*; *Best Regards, Mark O'Sullivan General Manager*; *Warm Regards*; *Warm Regards, Ben Perera Resident Manager*; and *With best regards from Bangkok, Patrick Bolt General Manager*. These expressions are the most common phrases in the hotels responses to the feedback of the customers to show respect and care. No matter how good or bad of the received comments, making guests feel respected or valued as a person are indispensable among hotels' responses.

It is also interesting to investigate the production of language. Table 4 shows the 20 keywords relating language production and categorized as involved or informational production (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998). Involved production is related to the words that show expressions of feelings and interest with little or no informational focus such as the use of second person pronouns, possessive pronouns, and amplifier. On the other hand, informational production refers to the expressions with the main goal of providing information such as the use of nouns and prepositions in responses. The most common word relating to the informational production of language include *stay* (f=1040; LL=7761.6), *experience* (f=525; LL=2597.79), *look* (f=642; LL=2531.83), *future* (f=513; LL=2471.73), *for* (f=2202; LL=2182.41). Table 4 above presents the keywords used for involved and informational dimension of language.

Of all these words relating to language production, the pronoun *you* and the possessive adjective *your* are quite interesting to discuss a bit since they can be used by the hotels to directly synthetically personalize (see Fairclough, 2001) guests using cliché expressions (e.g. Thank you for choosing...; *Your* feedback is ...). Fairclough argued that using these words has "a compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual (p.52).

Overall, the findings show that hotels used involved production of language rather than informational production of language in replying to the guests' comments. In order to make and keep strong friendship in the field of hospitality, hotel staffs tend to reply to the guests' comments by using words in involved production of language and these words are used to enhance interpersonal relationship between the guests and the hotels which are the key path to an ongoing relationship (Park and Allen, 2013).

5. Conclusion

The goal of this research study was to examine word choices and the common language expressions used in the hotels' responses to guests' reviews. While this study focused only on 5-star hotels in Bangkok and one OTA website *Expedia*, findings still reveal an interesting trend for the language used in communication by hotels with their guests. More words and language expressions relating to the involved dimension of language indicates that the hotels mainly focused on building interpersonal relationships with their guests at the expense of addressing their needs and complaints. Future research studies should examine and compare between negative and positive comments from hotels' customers and how hotels respond differently to these comments. An implication from this study is in its application to teaching English for Specific Purposes courses (e.g. English for Hotel and Hospitality Industry) where students are taught to employ both the involved and informational dimensions of language to

address guests' reviews or comments. Despite its limitations, we hope that this paper contributed another perspective in understanding replies to hotel guests' feedback using corpus-based approach.

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