IS IT WORTH RESPONDING? THE EFFECT OF DIFFERENT RESPONSE STRATEGIES ON THE ATTITUDE TOWARD THE REVIEWED HOTEL.

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ABSTRACT

Complaint management literature suggests that corporate response to consumer grievance is an important issue. But within practice the corporate act of hotels responding to (negative) online reviews remains modest. Thus, we tested experimentally the significance of review response as well as the perception and impact-of different response strategies to online hotel reviews. Attribution theory provides the theoretical basis toward employing a 2 (response voice) x 2 (respondent position) x 2 (source identification) x 1 (control group) experimental design. Our results indicate that the worst strategy for a hotel is not responding to a negative online review. In addition, readers of online reviews who attribute the content of the response to external motivations are more likely to improve their attitude towards the hotel. This external attribution and, by extension, level of attitude toward the reviewed hotel could be leveraged by the response-voice and the relative respondent position.

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Complaint management literature suggests that corporate response to consumer grievance is an important issue. But within practice the corporate act of hotels responding to (negative) online reviews remains modest. Thus, we tested experimentally the significance of review response as well as the perception and impact-of different response strategies to online hotel reviews. Attribution theory provides the theoretical basis toward employing a 2 (response voice) x 2 (respondent position) x 2 (source identification) x 1 (control group) experimental design. Our results indicate that the worst strategy for a hotel is not responding to a negative online review. In addition, readers of online reviews who attribute the content of the response to external motivations are more likely to improve their attitude towards the hotel. This external attribution and, by extension, level of attitude toward the reviewed hotel could be leveraged by the response-voice and the relative respondent position.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The Internet has extended consumers' possibilities for gathering information about products and services of which online reviews serve as a valuable source (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Lee et al., 2008) This is particularly true of the hospitality and tourism industries wherein products and services are intangible and perishable (Gardini, 2009; Jeacle and Carter, 2011, Gretzel et al., 2007). Hospitality and tourism related reviews account for approximately 28% of the 53 million recorded reviews on general review sites such as Yelp.com (Yelp, 2014) and dedicated tourism information and booking websites feature millions of reviews, globally (emarketer, 2013). In addition to consumer utility, online comments serve to present valuable information to hotels, and their employees, as they seek to gather insight into customers' experiences (Park and Kim, 2008). Many hospitality managers are now facing the question if, and how, to answer these online comments (Park and Allen, 2013). The majority of literature on complaint management indicates that responding to complaints is not only useful but also necessary (Hansen et al., 2010; Strauss and Hill, 2001). The appropriate handling of a complaint leads to higher levels of satisfaction and, subsequently, customer loyalty (Niefind and Wiegran, 2010; Bunk, 1993). However, although findings within the complaint management literature, the frequency of responses to online consumer grievances remains low. Research indicates that only 4% of negative online reviews are responded-to by hotel operators suggesting that many operators do not know how to respond, or are afraid of responding, to online reviews (Nadel, 2013; Lee and Song, 2010).

Few academic studies have investigated the effects of responding to online reviews: Evidence from internet blog research (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011), customer complaint pages (Lee and Song, 2010), consumer generated homepages (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013) and complaints by e-mail (Strauss and Hill, 2001) as well as content and case study analysis (Burton and Khammash, 2010; Park and Allen, 2013) of consumer complaint portals suggests that corporate responses may affect the perception of a company or the products. Thus, we add to this growing body of research by examining factors that influence the perception and impact of different response strategies to online hotel reviews. The theoretical foundations of this research are drawn from attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Curren and Folkes, 1987) and hypotheses tested within an online, experimental framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our framework first considers the effect on likeability of a hotel following hotel response to a negative review. Our research also seeks to discover any differences in the effect of the

response if written in a different tone of voice and whether, or not, the respondent's position and the identification of the respondent alters these effects?

Responding to Reviews

The few existing studies on the question of whether, or not, to respond to a consumer's review have proven indecisive. One stream of literature suggests that corporate participation in WOM communication processes leads to skepticism toward the company and serves to amplify negative effects rather than mitigate them (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Dellarocas, 2006). Such corporate activity can appear to lack credibility and be construed as self-serving (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013), as well as intrusive and inappropriate in a consumer-dominant domain (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011). Contrary to these findings, Breitsohl et al. (2010) undertake that corporate complaint responses should induce higher credibility compared to a non-response. Responses from an reliable source are therefore perceived as more reliable and increase the trustworthiness of the review. Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) point out that, under special circumstances, corporate responses create a more positive attitude toward the reviewed business, e.g., if the corporate response is presented within a market-induced platform rather than a consumer-induced platform. If the hotel is directly addressed in the review and the reviewer demands a response (Vásquez, 2011; van Noort and Willemsen, 2011), corporate response from the hotel might lead to a more positive attitude. Similarly, public relations literature advocates for responses and interaction with stakeholders, such as consumers (Kelleher, 2009). Two-way communication through the review platform can increase confidence, satisfaction, and commitment and improve the quality of the relationship with the customer (Saffer et al., 2013). We therefore suggest that hotel responses to general claims within an online review generate a more positive evaluation of the responding hotel.

> **H1:** Compared to the review only, a review with a response from the hotel will result in a more positive attitude towards the hotel.

Voice of the Response

We suggest that the reaction to the response depends on several factors: one possible factor is the choice of the response style. Studies in the area of defensive and accommodative responses (Lee and Song, 2010), proactive and reactive responses (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011) and specific and generic responses (Wei, et al., 2012) clearly illustrate the importance of response style. Our study complements these findings by proposing that the voice used in the response affects consumers' evaluation of the responding company. Similarly to the theoretical foundation for explaining attitude towards the reviewed objects (Laczniak et al., 2001; Sen and Lermann 2007), we base our assumptions on attribution theory (Heider 1958; Curren and Folkes 1987; Mizerski et al., 1979). Attribution theory suggests that people attribute information either internally to the source of information or externally to factors which are related to the information. In relation to our study, if readers make the attribution that the response is based on product related (= external) reasons, they will perceive the response to be legitimate and believable. If consumers attribute internally, they assume that the source had other/communicator related (= internal) reasons for providing that kind of information. As a result they tend to devaluate the information. In other words, the reader's attributions regarding the respondent's motivations on writing the response will influence the effect on the attitude towards the hotel. We expect that the response's voice will determine whether consumers internally or externally attribute the information.

The distinction between human voice and corporate voice has been developed within organizational communication literature. Human voice is described as *"…an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization's publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics."*

(Kelleher, 2009, p. 177). It is seen as non-persuasive and invites the audience to a dialogue. In contrast, a corporate voice is perceived as profit-driven and persuasive (Levine et al., 2009). Corporate voice denotes communicating in a conventional corporate language (publicly referred to as typical marketing language or advertising slogans). Corporate voice also typically emphasizes commercial interests. While human voice signals understanding and willingness for dialogue, corporate voice is more of a one-way message to the receiver (Kelleher and Miller, 2006). By using human voice, one-to-one communication is imitated, which makes the company voice more personal (Kuhn, 2005) and authentic for the reader. Studies from the blogging domain confirm that a human voice lends significant contribution toward effective communication on the Internet (Kelleher, 2009; Yang et al., 2010). Conversely, corporate voice is viewed with more suspicion and scepticism. Based on our assumptions from attribution theory, we propose that if human voice is employed this will lead to external attribution as the reader assumes that the hotel wishes to engage in dialogue and offer feedback. The use of corporate voice, however, is more likely to favor internal attribution as the response appears more predetermined or manufactured. Hence, by adopting human voice, attitudes toward the hotel should be more favorable, whereas the reader is more likely to doubt the hotel response when corporate voice is employed.

H2: The attitude toward the hotel will be more favorable if the response is written in human voice compared to corporate voice.

The Respondent and Identification

Another factor that serves to influence whether a reader attributes internally or externally is the relative position, within the company, that the responder holds. Particularly for small and medium-sized service companies, it seems prudent to designate customer complaint responses to upper management so as to give customers a clear signal that their complaint has been taken seriously (Scheuer, 2011). Thus, if the response is provided by a senior management position, or the company owner, this may serve to increase external attribution and, subsequently, lead to a more favorable attitude toward the hotel. This effect might even be reinforced by the use of human voice. It is expected that a response by hotel management, expressed in human voice, will lead to the most positive evaluation of the hotel. Corporate voice responses from less senior staff members, however, are expected to lack external attribution as they appear artificial and mandated. Thus we propose the following hypotheses:

H3: Reading an response to an online review written by the company owner (top management) will result in a more favorable attitude toward the hotel compared to reading a response written by a staff member.

H4: The effect of voice will interact with the respondent position. The most favorable attitude toward the hotel will occur in the condition of a manager or owner answering in human voice while the least favorable attitude will occur in the condition of a staff member answering in corporate voice**.**

As our theoretical framework assumes that response voice and respondent position have an impact on attitudes, we also test whether this attitudinal effect is mediated via the level of external attribution. Thus, we expect an indirect effect from response voice and respondent position on attitude toward the hotel. Finally, if readers could explicitly identify the hotel respondent it may serve to change their attribution. As such, we investigate, firstly, whether a reasonable number of readers can identify the hotel respondent and if that changes attribution and, by extension, the effects on the attitude toward the hotel.

H5: The effect of response voice and respondent position on attitude toward the hotel will be mediated via the external attribution.

RQ1: Do readers explicitly remember the respondent and, if so, is there a difference within the priory described effects?

STUDY

To investigate the proposed hypotheses a 2 (voice: human voice vs. corporate voice) by 2 (respondent position: manager vs. staff) between-subjects and by 2 (identification: non-identified vs. identified) quasi-experimental factor was employed. To investigate H1 an additional control group, whom were only shown the plain review, were added.

Method

Design: The participants of the experimental groups received a review, which contained few positive as well as mostly negative elements about a fictitious hotel in Austria. Different responses from the hotel were provided, per group, while the control group received only the review without a response. In the answer groups, the hotel responded to the negative elements of the review and thanked reviewers for the positive elements. Corporate voice was manipulated by including a more marketing, report-like or formal language. Human voice featured more emotional language and emphasized that the concerns of the consumer were understood. To select the review text and hotel response we carried out two pretests. For generating the text of the review, we formulated and tested four hotel reviews, which were taken in a similar form from genuine review sites. This study identified the review, which was perceived by the test subjects as negative but helpful and led to the lowest booking probability. In the second pretest we generated four pairs of human and corporate voice responses. We then asked participants to rate one of these eight responses. The two responses with the largest disparity in rating score and the strongest distinction between human and corporate voice were chosen for the final study. A manipulation check was implemented to analyze whether human or corporate voice was perceived (Kelleher and Miller, 2006; van Noort and Willemsen, 2011). The level of perceived human voice was measured by six items, which were adopted from Kelleher and Miller (2006). The 7-point Likert-scale (m=4.59, α=.74) included items such as: "The hotel is open to dialogue"; "The hotel addresses criticism with a direct, but uncritical manner" and "The hotel treats the customers as humans". The analyses showed a significant difference between the two groups ($PERCVOICE_{human}$=4.82, $PERCVOICE_{corporate}$=4.27, t(339)=4.849, p=.000).

The respondent position was manipulated by adding a signature either of a manager, or the front desk staff. We asked whether the participants could remember who responded to the review, and coded correct identifications. This test revealed that 56% of the participants could explicitly identify the hotel respondent. No significant differences in the distribution for the four response groups were found. Thus, following RQ1 we integrated identification as a quasi-experimental factor in the analyses.

Measures: Attitude towards the hotel (AH) was measured with three items (m=3.40, α=.87) utilizing a 7-point Likert scale (Purnawirawan et al., 2012). The external attribution was measured by three items (m=4.95, α=.64) adapted from Laczniak et al. (2001) and Sen and Lerman (2007).

Procedure: Participants were invited via the SoSci Panel (Leiner 2012). After an introduction and initial questioning about holiday behavior, participants received the review with the respective hotel response. Immediately following exposure to the review respondents were asked about their attitudes as well as the attribution, followed by demographic questions.

Sample: Incomplete questionnaires, non-meaningful-answers, super-fast respondents (screen out criteria fastest 10%) as well as responses from participants who do not book hotels at all

or for recreational activity, were excluded from the sample. After this screening process, a final sample of 315 in the experimental groups and 66 in the control group remained.

Results

H1 proposes that if a review includes a response from the hotel it will lead to a more favorable attitude towards the hotel. To test this hypothesis a one factorial ANOVA comparing the five treatment groups (2 (voice) x 2 (respondent) + control group) was performed. In support for H1, contrast analyses revealed that attitude toward the hotel was significantly higher if a response was provided ($AH_{response}$=3.56, $AH_{noresponse}$=2.67, $t(111.37)$=5.733, p=.00).

H2, H3 and H4 propose that attitude toward the hotel is related to the voice of the hotel response and the respondent position. To test the proposed hypotheses a 2x2x2 ANOVA was conducted with response voice, respondent position and identification as factors. Table 1 summarizes the results of the ANOVA analyses showing main effects and the anticipated interaction effect. In rejection of H2 and H3 we did not observe any significant main effects. As expected, the voice interacts with respondent position. We suggested that the use of human voice by the manager would lead to the highest results (see H4 and Figure 1). However, the results do not support H4. In fact, it was exactly the opposite. Firstly, if written in a human voice the respondents position in the organization does not seem important. Secondly, regarding the corporate voice groups, results show a significant difference. Interestingly, the direction of the effect was opposite to the proposed direction. Figure 1 details this interaction effect. Answers written in corporate voice from staff lead to a more favorable attitude toward the hotel, compared to corporate voice written by management ($AH_{Manager}$=3.95, AH_{Staff}=3.24, $F(1,307)$=19.307, p=.001). Thus, H4 is rejected by our data in the assumed direction. The results do, however, demonstrate that the voice of communication, in conjunction with the respondent position, leads to differences in reader perception. Regarding RQ1 we did not find a significant effect of explicit identification of the respondent.

H5 proposes that the effect of the voice, the respondent position and whether the respondent was identified on the attitude towards the hotel is mediated by external attribution. We performed a bootstrap analysis as proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008), Hayes (2013) and following Zhao et al. (2010). This analysis firstly checks whether the independent variables and possible moderators influence possible mediators and then whether these mediators affect the dependent exogenous variables. The following table depicts the regression model using the PROCESS macro, Model 12, 10,000 bootstraps (Hayes 2013).

The mediation model shows that we have direct and indirect effects of voice, respondent position and respondent identification on attitude toward the hotel. The interaction effect of voice and respondent position has a direct and indirect significant effect. Thus, our mediation analysis confirms H5. Regarding RQ1 we observed for identification a three-way interaction with voice and respondent position that was fully indirect. Figure 2 details the effects of the levels of voice, respondent position and identification on external attribution. These findings reveal that if the respondent is not explicitly recognized, the staff member receives a stronger external attribution. Performing an additional ANOVA to calculate contrasts, the results show that the response in corporate voice, written by the staff member but unidentified by the readers, leads to rather high external attribution, while the external attribution of the manager is rather low. Conversely, identification of the respondent leads to generally lower levels of external attribution with the exception of corporate voice used by the manager. Furthermore, this three-way interaction is significant if the respondent position is hotel management and the response is written in corporate voice. ($EA_{nonidentified}$=4.31, $EA_{identified}$=5.32, $F(77)$=15.619, p=.00). Conditional analyses (Table 3) indicate that two conditions of non-identification of a manager's response and non-identification of a staff response lead to significant indirect

effects. Thus, considering RQ1 we can summarize that in the case of non-identification, the human voice of the manager was more externally attributed and, therefore, positively influenced the attitude toward the hotel. Conversely, human voice from a staff member leads to a decrease in external attribution and, subsequently, to lower positive attitude toward the hotel. We did not observe indirect effects for the case that the respondents identified the source.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATONS

Our study contributes toward answering whether the response voice and respondent position have an effect on consumer attitudes. Our results show that the worst strategy for a hotel is to not respond at all. In the case of non-response, the attitude toward the hotel was significantly more negative than in cases where the reviews included a response from the hotel. However, contrary to suggestions from public relations literature that suggest a more human voice should result in more favorable attitudes, our experimental results show that corporate voice from staff members actually creates even more favorable attitudes. One possible explanation for these results might be found in cultural differences in communication styles. The cited literature refers exclusively to the Anglo-American world, while this study was conducted in German. Compared to English, the German language includes a strong emphasis of the content level of communication (House, 1996). Most research concerning differences between these languages indicates that in both business and private interactions, Germans tend to be content, goal and truth-oriented and less relationship-oriented (Grieve, 2010) while for English speaking people the content level and the relationship level are equally important toward successful dialogue (Nees, 2000). These differences may serve to explain why the human voice in a German-speaking country like Austria is less important than suggested. This result clearly indicates an avenue for further research.

In addition, our study confirms that readers of online reviews either internally or externally attribute the corporate response, and that the respondent position and voice can leverage the external attribution. Surprisingly, our study results show that the corporate voice, written by a staff member, is perceived more externally attributed than the same response written by management. This might be due to the role of the manager and common associations of management and owners possessing stronger self-serving motivations.

Finally, our data suggests that for attribution a 3-way interaction exists with the explicit identification of the respondent. It appears that, generally, if the respondent position is explicitly recalled that increases in external attribution occur. However, most critically, is the difference for the manager responding in corporate voice. If the respondent position is not explicitly recalled, this response creates the lowest level of external attribution whilst in the identification condition it created the highest level of attribution. Thus, if management responds to online reviews, they must give several hints to confirm his, or her, identity within the response to increase external attribution.

Our work opens several avenues for further research: Firstly, the role of culture needs more investigation. Secondly, we created a mixed review with few positive and mostly negative arguments,. Thus, it would be worthwhile to research if effects for an answer to a positive review were the same. Finally, we tested the hypotheses within a hospitality context; other services like doctors or suppliers of material goods might experience different outcomes.

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Figures and tables

Source	df	F	P
VOICE	1	0.033	0.855
RESPONDENT	1	2.565	0.110
IDENTIFICATION	1	2.300	0.130
VOICE * RESPONDENT	1	16.084	0.003
VOICE * IDENTIFICATION	1	5.090	0.099
RESPONDENT * IDENTIFICATION	1	0.001	0.981
VOICE * RESPONDENT * IDENTIFICATION	1	2.471	0.249

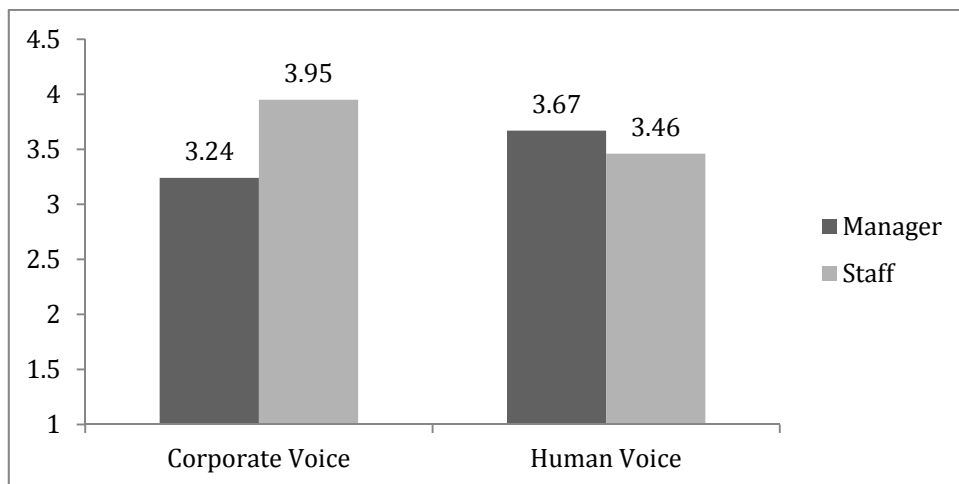**Table 1:** Results of the ANOVA for Attitude towards the hotel

Figure 1: Response Voice and Respondent Position

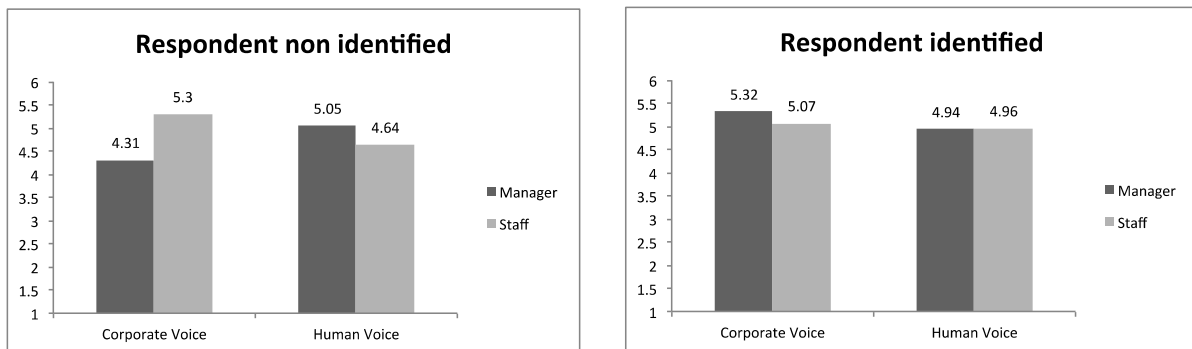|	Mediator (EXT ATTRIBUTION)				DV *(AH)*	
Source	Coeff	P			Coeff	P
Constant	4.949	.00			1.948	.00
VOICE (V)	-.100	.52			.004	.98
RESPONDENT (R)	.091	.64			.220	.14
IDENTIFICATION (I)	.251	.08			-.319	.03
V x R	-.559	.05			-.735	.02
V x I	-.293	.31			-.420	.16
R x I	-.401	.16			-.141	.64
V x I x R	1.676	.00			-.168	.78
EXT ATTRIBUTION					.294	.00
	R^2=.06, F(7,306)=2.733, p=.01				R^2=.14, F(8,305)=6.061, p=.00	

Table 2: Regression Model

Figure 2: Effect of Levels of Voice, Respondent Position and Identification

Indirect effect of VOICE on AH at the levels of respondent position and identification mediated via external attribution					Direct effect of VOICE at the levels of respondent position and identification on AH	
Respondent	Identification	Indirect effect	LLCI to ULCI		Coeff	P
Manager	Non identified	.246	.054 to .494*		.626	.07
Manager	Identified	-.128	-.336 to .038		.120	.66
Staff	Non identified	-.216	-.450 to -.033*		-.195	.52
Staff	Identified	-.035	-.214to 130		-.531	.07

Table 3: Direct and Indirect Effects on Attitude Toward the Hotel