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Investigating Host Communication Methods of Digital Host Interaction Strategies in Online Travel Booking

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Abstract

Despite the growing importance of online reviews in tourism and hospitality, there remains a significant research gap in understanding the optimal characteristics of management responses that drive guest satisfaction and loyalty. This study employed a quantitative approach, surveying 400 hotel and tourism guests to evaluate five critical response attributes: tone, language style, length, proactiveness, and timeliness. The findings reveal that guests strongly prefer warm, solution-focused responses that demonstrate proactive problem-solving and timely engagement, with responses combining professional courtesy and personal touch showing the highest positive impact. Our research contributes to the hospitality industry by providing empirically backed guidelines for crafting effective response strategies, offering practical implications for tourism and hospitality managers seeking to enhance guest communication, strengthen online reputation, and ultimately improve customer retention rates through optimised response practices. This study bridges the knowledge gap by providing concrete evidence of how specific response attributes influence guest satisfaction and loyalty in the digital hospitality landscape.

Keywords: Online reviews, Host responses, Guest preferences, Online Booking, Hospitality services; Tourism Digitalisation

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Introduction

Digital booking services have considerably transformed the tourism and hospitality sectors (San-Martín et al., 2020), with prominent platforms such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Airbnb, Vrbo, and HomeAway enabling peer-to-peer lodging rentals on a massive scale unprecedented before. This explosion in online reservations ushered in an innovative period of travel experiences, allowing guests to engage with local neighbourhoods deeply (Zhao et al., 2015), benefit from customised hospitality (Sparks & Browning, 2011), and participate in tourism activities and attractions (Sparks & Browning, 2011). However, the success of these platforms depends heavily on the reputation and trustworthiness established through online reviews (Schaarschmidt & Höber, 2017). In the digital age, potential visitors increasingly rely on online reviews to inform their booking decisions, making online reviews a critical factor in the success of online platform reservation businesses (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017). Positive word-of-mouth generates new business and plays an important role in various return visits of visitors, because satisfied guests would be more willing to revisit or recommend the accommodation and tourism activity based on others if they are satisfied (Gavilan et al., 2018). The intentions of the guests to return and their satisfaction levels rely on several factors, including how responsive the services of adjacent service providers are (Gavilan et al., 2018).

Effective communication and relationship establishment between the guests and hosts are currently needed to support good times and creating long-term relationships with visitors (Sparks et al., 2016). Managing hosts that engage with visitors, answer issues and positively respond to reviews can reverse the negative impact of negative comments, enhance their online reputation, and strengthen visitor loyalty (Sparks et al., 2016). Along with this, critics might also consider the guests' feedback while giving their experience a rating and deciding if they are going to book again or recommend the accommodation to others (San-Martín et al., 2020). Such feedback reflects hosts' professionalism, customer service attitude, and willingness to address and correct issues (Sparks et al., 2016). A good response to criticism can really neutralise its impact, restore trust, and even influence the decision-making of potential visitors (Sparks et al., 2016). While the importance of effective response practice in the hospitality and tourism industries has been established in previous research (Sparks & Bradley, 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Sparks et al., 2016), not much research has been done to conceptualize and categorize the different attributes (e.g., tone, language, length, proactiveness, promptness) of responses and their influence on the satisfaction and behavioral intentions of guests and tourists. Specifically, tone refers to the friendliness conveyed, language to the clarity and ease of understanding, length considers whether responses are too short or wordy, and proactiveness relates to actively offering solutions without prompting. Timeliness pertains to the speed of response. In this vein, little empirical research has examined the specific response strategies most effectively influencing visitor retention rates and nurturing long-term guest loyalty over time. By identifying the most effective approaches and communication styles, hosts can better navigate the challenges posed by negative feedback (Sparks et al., 2016). To bridge this gap, it is crucial to categorise common host response themes and styles in guest reviews. Therefore, the study aims to address the following questions:

- How do different attributes of customer service responses (e.g., tone, language, length, proactiveness, timeliness) influence tourists' and guests' satisfaction levels and behavioural intentions such as rebooking and revisiting intentions?
- Which response attributes (tone, language, length, proactiveness, timeliness) have the strongest influence on fostering long-term guest loyalty and positive word-of-mouth?

By answering these questions, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of online reputation management, empowering hosts to foster positive guest experiences, strengthen visitor loyalty, and ultimately drive the success of their businesses in the competitive tourism and hospitality landscape.

Literature review

The significance of online reviews in reservation platforms

The rise of online booking platforms has introduced a new era where guests can immerse themselves in local communities and enjoy personalised hospitality. However, these platforms depend heavily on the reputation and trust built through guest reviews online (Zhao et al., 2015). In today's digital age, potential visitors increasingly rely on online reviews to inform their decisions, making reviews a critical factor for online booking businesses' success (Sparks & Browning, 2011). The impact of these reviews on bookings and returning visitors cannot be overstated, as positive reviews attract new customers and encourage existing guests to rebook or recommend the accommodation (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Reviews significantly influence a host's reputation, guest satisfaction, revisit intentions, and business success in general (Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013). Good reviews are highly advisable, giving confidence to potential guests and increasing bookings. Bad reviews can greatly damage a host's reputation, deterring visitors and risking the loss of current guests (Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013). This interaction among guest satisfaction, revisit intentions, and online reviews is a self-perpetuating cycle (Zhao et al., 2015), where satisfied guests leave positive reviews, attracting new customers and reinforcing the good reputation, and dissatisfied guests leave negative reviews potentially discouraging future bookings and affecting long-term viability (San-Martín et al., 2020). Understanding and managing reviews appropriately has been important to hosts on online booking sites (Zhao et al., 2015). Communication and building a relationship are vital in creating positive experiences and enduring relationships with visitors (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017). As visitors seek customised interactions and experiential experiences, hosts' abilities to build meaningful relationships through genuine communication and authentic engagement differentiate in the competitive hospitality industry (Melián-González et al., 2013). The role of good communication in achieving positive guest experiences cannot be overstated. Open communication allows the host to find out the specific needs and wants of the guests so as to customise the experience to suit (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017). By listening carefully to feedback and addressing problems promptly, hosts can build trust and care that are paramount in overall guest satisfaction. Good, clear communication during booking, stay, and after departure can also set expectations and resolve problems, making the experience smooth and pleasant.

Host-guest communication and response strategies to negative reviews

The research establishes that building long-term relationships with visitors requires a holistic strategy that extends beyond the immediate service encounter (Safarov et al., 2024; Sparks et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). The review synthesises existing literature to understand how communication attributes influence guest perceptions and behavioural intentions in the digital hospitality landscape. The literature emphasises that successful host-guest relationships are built through understanding guests' interests, backgrounds (Noje, 2025), and goals to create tailored experiences that establish stronger connections. Hosts who share local secrets, propose hidden gems, and establish genuine rapport can transform guests into brand ambassadors who are likely to reorder and recommend experiences (Sparks et al., 2016). Post-stay contact and community building further solidify these relationships, creating loyal customers and long-term profitability (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017). The importance of

responsiveness and customer satisfaction is highlighted as crucial for preventing negative reviews and fostering guest loyalty. Prompt, empathetic responses to issues can de-escalate anger and demonstrate commitment to satisfaction (Sparks et al., 2016). Through proactive problem-solving and active listening, hosts can transform potentially negative experiences into positive ones with lasting effects (Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013). Language emerges as a fundamental factor shaping review response effectiveness and significantly influencing guest perceptions and future behaviors (Wu et al., 2017). The literature reveals that hosts employing professional, courteous tones while avoiding jargon or complexity are more likely to connect with guests and convey understanding (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). Clear, concise, and accessible language ensures messages are received and valued by diverse audiences while preventing misunderstandings (Mariani et al., 2020). Positive language incorporating empathy, appreciation, and improvement commitment can soothe tensions and facilitate effective communication (Wu et al., 2017). When guests feel heard, validated, and valued, they respond more positively despite negative experiences. Effective phrases include "We understand your frustration," "Thank you for bringing this to our attention," and "We are committed to addressing this issue" (Wu et al., 2017; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). Conversely, defensive, dismissive, or confrontational language can exacerbate tensions and alienate dissatisfied guests (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). Language implying indifference, blame-shifting, or lack of accountability can erode trust and damage reputation (Schuckert et al., 2015a). Thus, we propose the following:

> Proposition 1: Hosts' language affects guest brand image perception and perceived service quality, with professional, courteous, and empathetic language fostering trust while dismissive language risks reputation damage.

Moreover, the tone of review responses significantly impacts message reception and communication success (Rita et al., 2022). Defensive or dismissive tones fail to address underlying concerns and can further alienate guests, escalating situations and harming reputation (Sparks et al., 2016). Such tones reflect lack of empathy, responsibility, and respect, destroying confidence and deterring future engagement. Empathetic tones demonstrating humility and authentic improvement desire can soothe negative emotions and create reconciliation opportunities (Rita et al., 2022). Hosts can establish open communication through acknowledging guest anger, accepting fault, and demonstrating willingness to rectify mistakes (Zhang et al., 2024). The balance between professionalism and warmth is critical, with empathetic language building lasting relationships (Barcelos et al., 2018). Thus, we propose the following:

> Proposition 2: Empathetic, humble tones positively shape guest brand and experience perceptions, while defensive tones risk damaging brand image and service trust.

Additionally, the response strategy significantly impacts complaint resolution and reputation management (Kwok et al., 2017). Proactive hosts acknowledge problems upfront, accept responsibility, and offer clear resolution steps, reflecting a genuine commitment to improvement and establishing trust (Xu et al., 2019). Reactive approaches attempting to excuse poor experiences may appear defensive and heighten tensions (SZhang et al., 2024). Personalisation proves critical for demonstrating care and genuine interest. Hosts who reference guest names, experience details, or share personal stories create stronger emotional bonds and foster feelings of worth and gratitude (Liu et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2019). Generic responses lacking specific details may appear insincere and fail to engage guests meaningfully. Thus, we propose the following:

> Proposition 3: Proactive approaches acknowledging issues upfront and outlining specific resolution steps enhance perceived reliability and trustworthiness.

Also, the response length significantly influences effectiveness and guest connection (Xu et al., 2019). While brief responses may suffice for minor matters, serious issues require longer, more elaborate responses to adequately address concerns and provide necessary context (Chen et al., 2021). Overly brief responses to significant issues risk appearing dismissive and exacerbating frustration. However, excessively lengthy responses risk losing attention or appearing defensive and convoluted. Achieving an appropriate balance ensures effective communication and productive discussion (Lan et al., 2021). For complex issues, hosts must organise content clearly, breaking down problems into understandable segments while demonstrating thorough understanding and commitment to resolution (Chen et al., 2021). Thus, we propose the following:

> Proposition 4: Response length influences guest perception of host attention to detail and commitment, with comprehensive responses reinforcing brand image while brief responses may diminish perceived service quality.

In today's high-speed digital context, guests expect prompt responses, with delays signalling lack of care or low priority placement on feedback (Lan et al., 2021). Prompt responses to negative reviews demonstrate urgency and seriousness in issue resolution (Wang & Chaudhry, 2018). Timely responses validate guest experiences, signal service excellence dedication, and can de-escalate tensions while illustrating professionalism (Lui et al., 2018; Sparks et al., 2016). Delayed responses may be perceived as uncaring, contributing to negative impressions and increasing frustration while deterring future engagement (Wang & Chaudhry, 2018). Private channel responses can be more candid and personalised, tailored to specific guest needs (Sparks et al., 2016). Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 5: Response timeliness significantly shapes guest perception of host brand image and overall service quality.

The synthesis reveals that communication attributes function as interconnected, dynamic systems rather than isolated elements.

Drawing from multiple studies (Sparks & Bradley, 2016; Zhao et al., 2015; San-Martín et al., 2020), the research identifies a recursive feedback mechanism where linguistic choices, emotional tone, and response strategies create a holistic communication ecosystem fundamentally shaping visitor perceptions and behavioural intentions. The integration uncovers three vital theoretical dimensions (see Figure 1): (1) structural communication attributes defining interaction parameters, (2) emotional regulation mechanisms governing guest psychological responses, and (3) strategic communication strategies reframing negative experiences as relationship-building opportunities. This comprehensive model demonstrates that effective digital hospitality communication transcends information exchange to become a multifaceted mechanism of emotional and strategic engagement (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Zhang et al., 2024).

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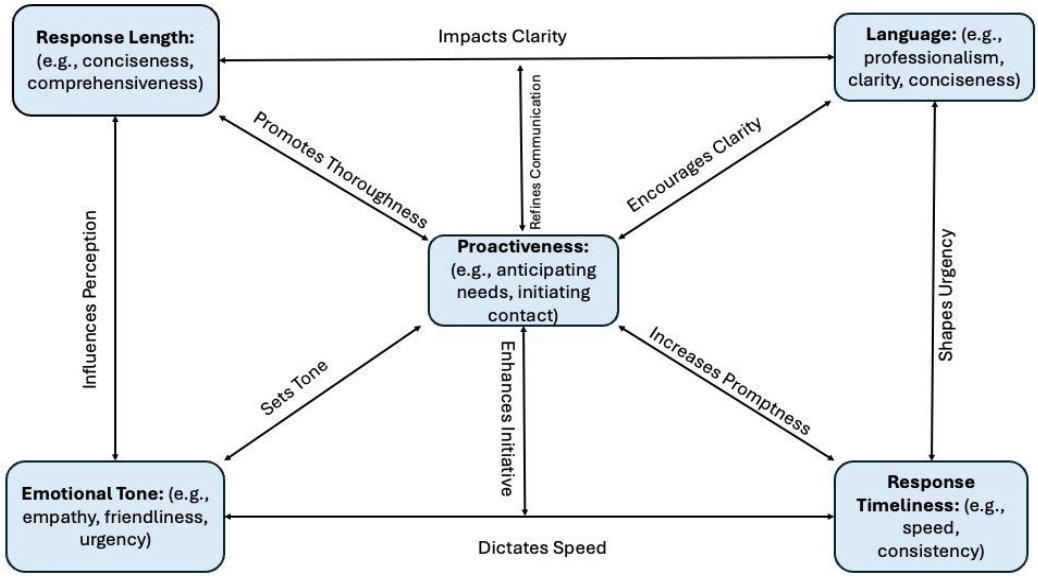

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey approach to gather data from hotel/tourism tourists and guests. We first reviewed existing literature on guest reviews and host reactions in the tourism and hospitality industry as part of an attempt to develop our survey instrument. Additionally, we also sought comments from experienced travelers and professionals in the field on the range of reviews and reactions they have encountered. With reference to this research and feedback, we concluded five important factors in measuring host responses: Tone, Language, Length, Proactiveness, and Timeliness (see Table 1). For each of these five attributes, we crafted a set of choices that comprehensively captures the various types of reviews and responses that guests and tourists may experience from service providers. These choices represent the spectrum of possibilities, from positive to negative, for each attribute. We created these choices under the supervision of 5 tourism experts in tourism psychology and related research of consumer ratings and online reviews. For the tone attribute, we asked participants to rate the host's response on a scale from 1-Detached/Impersonal to 5-Warm/Appreciative, with examples like "Your review has been noted" at the low end and "Thank you so much for your kind words!" at the high end. For language, there was a 1-Overly Familiar to 5-Formal/Professional scale, with examples ranging from "Yo, what's up with that review?" to "We acknowledge your comments regarding…". The length attribute had a 1-Dismissive/Incomplete to 5-Detailed/Thorough scale, with short responses like "Noted" at the low end and multi-paragraph solutions-oriented responses at the high end. Proactiveness was measured on a 1-No Commitment to 5-Proactive/Solutions-Oriented scale, anchored by examples like "Thank you for your review" versus "We've identified the cause and implemented these changes…". Finally, for timeliness, we asked, "How long after the initial review did this response occur?" with options like Immediate, Within 1-2 Days, Within 2-4 Weeks, etc. The survey structure allows participants to select the choice that best aligns with their perception of the host's response for each attribute. For each of the five attributes – tone, language, length, proactiveness, and timeliness – we asked respondents to choose the option that best described the host response they evaluated. As outlined in the table, the choices represented the range of possibilities for that attribute. The goal was to identify the response characteristics that positively impact visitor retention and the likelihood of returning to tourism destinations and hospitality services. By capturing respondents' preferences directly, we aimed to guide hosts in crafting review responses that resonate most effectively with their guest audience.

The selection criteria required participants to have experienced positive and negative interactions/responses from service providers in the hotels, resorts, tours, or other hospitality businesses they patronized. This ensured the sample captured

a range of response perception data. Moreover, respondents had to be familiar with online reservation systems and review systems as a requirement to participate. We applied a stratified sampling method to obtain a diverse but representative sample. Population was stratified by geographic location, age, gender, and experience with online reviews/bookings so that the final sample would not be severely unbalanced (Neyman, 1992). A total of 400 participants were randomly selected from this stratified population to participate in the research by a travel agency network, which helped us to access an organised sample. Stratified random sampling increases statistical precision by restricting sampling error and providing a sample that is more indicative of the overall population (Tassiopoulos & Haydam, 2008). After respondents had chosen across all the features, we reviewed the data to discover more about which host response features guests and tourists want most when responding to their reviews. The goal was to identify the response characteristics that positively impact visitor retention and the likelihood of returning to tourism destinations and hospitality services. From the stratified population, a sample of 400 respondents was analysed. The gender distribution was 160 males (40%) and 240 females (60%). In terms of education level, the majority were bachelor's degree holders at 180 (45%), followed by 100 with a master's degree (25%), 60 with a Ph.D. (15%), and 60 with a high school education or lower (15%). Moreover, youth dominated the sample, with 240 respondents (60%) aged between 20 and 45, 100 respondents (25%) aged between 45 and 55, and the remaining 60 respondents (15%) aged 55 and above.

Table 1: Survey measurements and the study design

Responses' review attributes	The experience valence
Tone	Warm and Appreciative *(Friendly, personable, and expressing sincere gratitude)*
	Apologetic and Understanding *(Acknowledging issues, taking responsibility, and conveying empathy)*
	Neutral and Factual *(Straightforward, objective, and focused on providing information)*
	Formal and Professional *(Polished, proper, and maintaining a business-like demeanor)*
	Detached and Impersonal (*Lacking warmth, empathy, or any personal connection*)
Language	Polite and Respectful *(Using courteous and considerate language)*
	Casual and Conversational *(Adopting a friendly, informal, and relatable tone)*
	Formal and Professional *(Maintaining a sophisticated, elevated, and business-like diction)*
	Overly Familiar *(Using excessively colloquial or inappropriate language)*
	Verbose and Convoluted *(Employing unnecessarily complex or confusing language)*
Length	Detailed and Thorough *(Providing an in-depth, comprehensive response)*
	Moderately Structured (*Offering a well-organized, reasonably detailed response)*
	Brief One-Sentence *(Providing a concise, single-sentence response)*
	Excessively Long and Rambling *(Providing an overly lengthy, unfocused response)*
	Dismissive or Incomplete (*Offering an abrupt, inadequate response*)
Proactiveness	Proactive and Solutions-Oriented (*Acknowledging the issue, taking responsibility, and offering specific solutions*)
	Committing to High Standards (*Expressing gratitude and assuring a commitment to quality*)
	Brief Acknowledgment without Commitment (*Providing a basic acknowledgment without any assurances or commitment*)
	Defensive and Dismissive (*Rejecting or downplaying the feedback without addressing it*)
	No Response or Acknowledgment (*Completely ignoring or failing to respond to the feedback*)
Timeliness	Immediate Response (*Responding within a few hours or the same day*)
	Within a Day or Two (*Responding within 1-2 days*)
	Within a Month (*Responding within 2-4 weeks*)

Results

Tone

The results provide valuable insights into guests' preferences for the tone of language used in host responses. Notably, the warm and appreciative tone is the most favored approach. This preference indicates guests' desire to feel genuinely thanked for their feedback and that their comments are sincerely valued. They want to feel the host's genuine gratitude for their business and perspective. The second most popular tone is apologetic and understanding, demonstrating that guests also appreciate hosts who acknowledge any issues or shortcomings, take responsibility for areas needing improvement, and communicate empathy for less-than-ideal aspects of the experience. Thirdly, a formal and professional tone is likely preferred as it maintains respectfulness and competence without becoming distant. However, the detached and impersonal language option has far less resonance, presumably because it lacks personalization, familiarity, or empathy (See Figure 2).

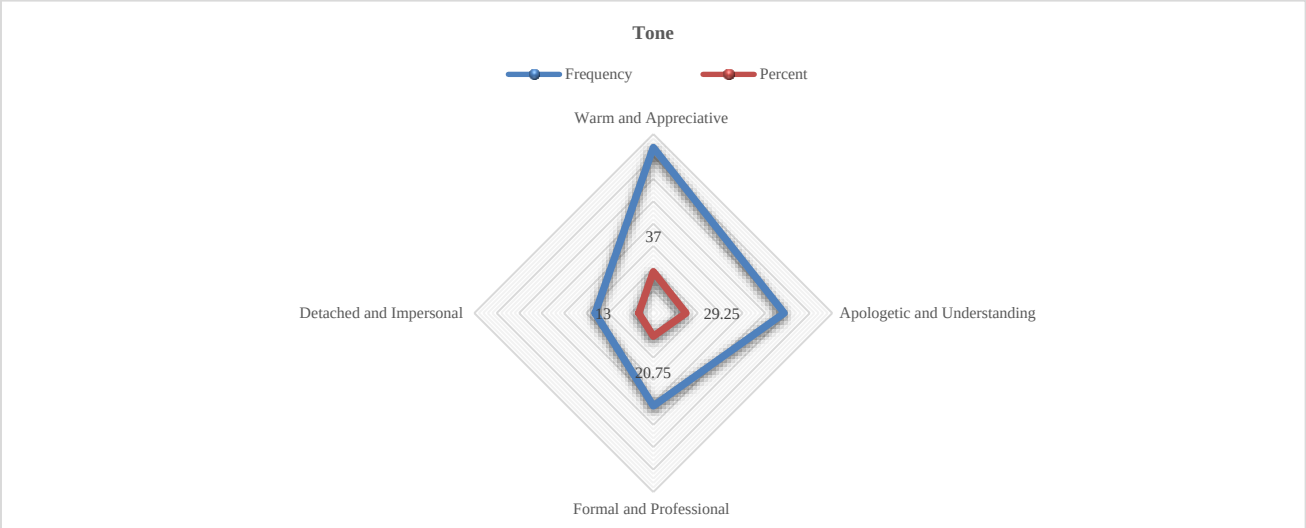

Figure 2: Guest preferences for tone in host review responses

Language

The findings provide valuable insight into what language approaches guests prefer hosts use in their response to reviews. By far, the most favored style was polite and respectful communication, as guests wanted responses that employed considerate word choices and demonstrated professional courtesy. This type of language effectively makes guests feel appreciated for sharing feedback. Conversational language followed, and guests appreciated being acknowledged by hosts in a friendly yet suitable manner that allowed for personal connection. The formal language was next in line, aligning with the standards guests expect hosts to uphold. However, overly casual registers were less popular, presumably for risking unprofessionalism or distrust. Wordy replies to students least as failing to address concerns or cause confusion sufficiently outweigh thoroughness. Ultimately, the results show guests are most engaged with hosts who use respect in balance with relatability through their language styles, thoughtfully connecting while maintaining capable competence to build rapport and trust through feedback interactions (See Figure 3).

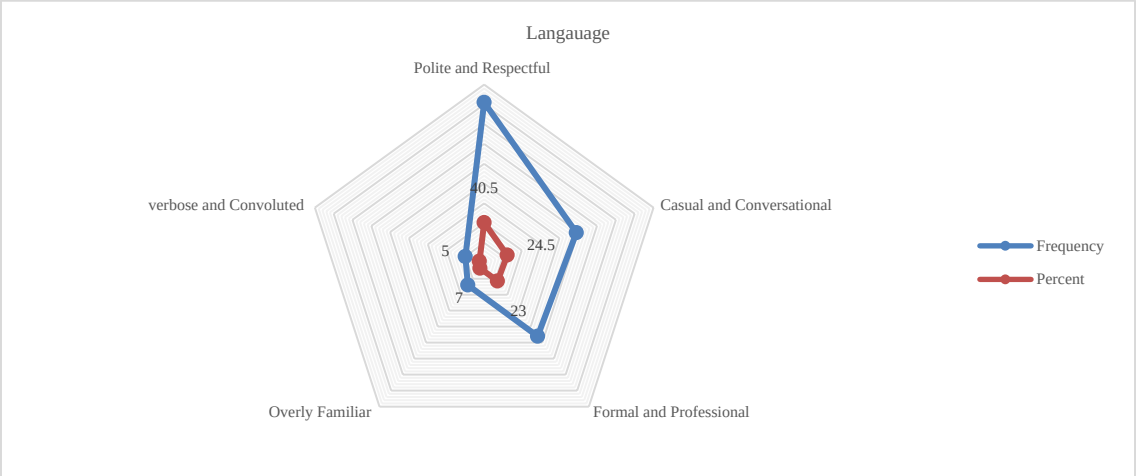

Figure 3: Preferred language styles in host review replies

Length

The results provide valuable insight into guests' preferences for the length of hosts' review responses. The most favoured style by some margin was moderately structured replies. Guests actively seek well-organised feedback that addresses issues while remaining reasonably focused. They appreciate responses that break down key points in a coherent manner, outlining the main takeaways and next steps. Brief one-sentence responses followed closely in popularity, demonstrating guests can also appreciate concise acknowledgment, especially for minor matters or positive feedback where a lengthy response may not be warranted. While some guests welcomed detailed and thorough answers when dealing with more significant or complex issues, excessively long and rambling responses defeated their purpose and were less preferred. Guests want hosts to respect their time by getting straight to the point rather than belaboring it. Response length should match the issue severity. Dismissive or incomplete replies that gloss over elements or fail to provide closure were also less preferred, presumably because they appear negligent or half-hearted. Guests expect their full feedback to be reviewed and addressed comprehensively so that they feel heard and can correctly resolve any problems (See Figure 4).

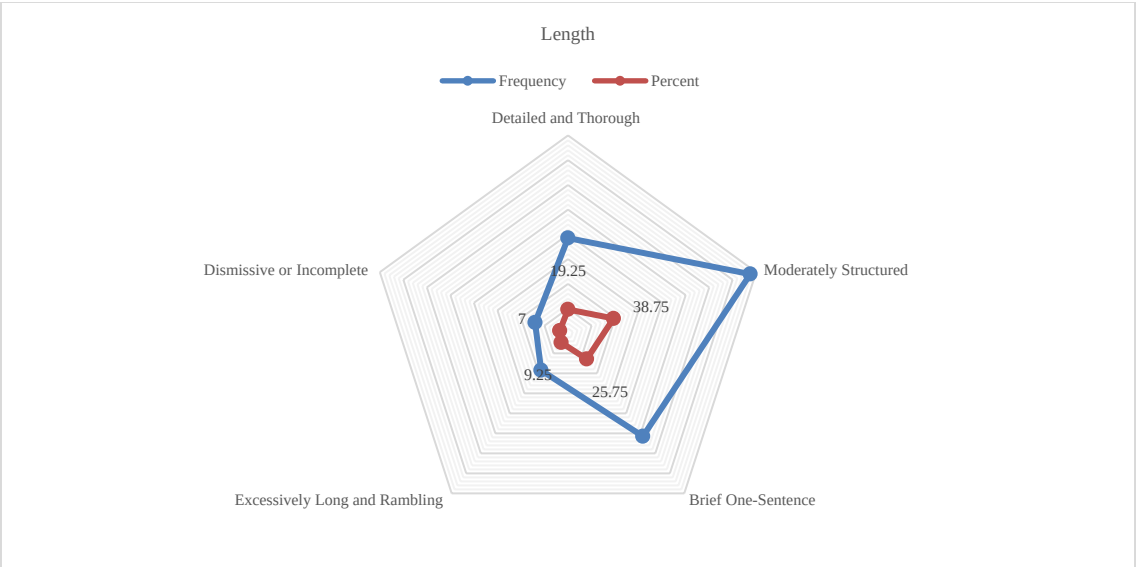

Figure 4: Ideal length of host responses to guest reviews

Proactivness

The illuminating results provide valuable cognitive insights into how proactively guests prefer hosts to respond to submitted customer reviews. The most favoured approach by a noticeable margin was one that can be described as proactive and solutions-oriented. Guests have an intrinsic desire for responses that actively acknowledge any evident issues or concerns raised, willingly accept responsibility on the part of the host where improvements may be needed, and, most importantly, offer tangible, practical solutions to address the problem at hand. This demonstrable preference for accountability indicates guests seek hosts who take concrete steps to rectify situations rather than gloss over them. The second most popular style was one that committed to high standards of service. This resonates with guests' understandable expectations of excellence they hope to experience when trusting an establishment with their patronage reliably. Brief acknowledgements garnered moderate appeal, while defensive or dismissive responses that shirked accountability satisfied guests far less and often did more harm than good. Complete non-acknowledgement of feedback was understandably the least satisfactory approach. In aggregate, the findings illuminate that guests are most impressed by hosts who tackle issues proactively and are solution-oriented rather than reactive (See Figure 5).

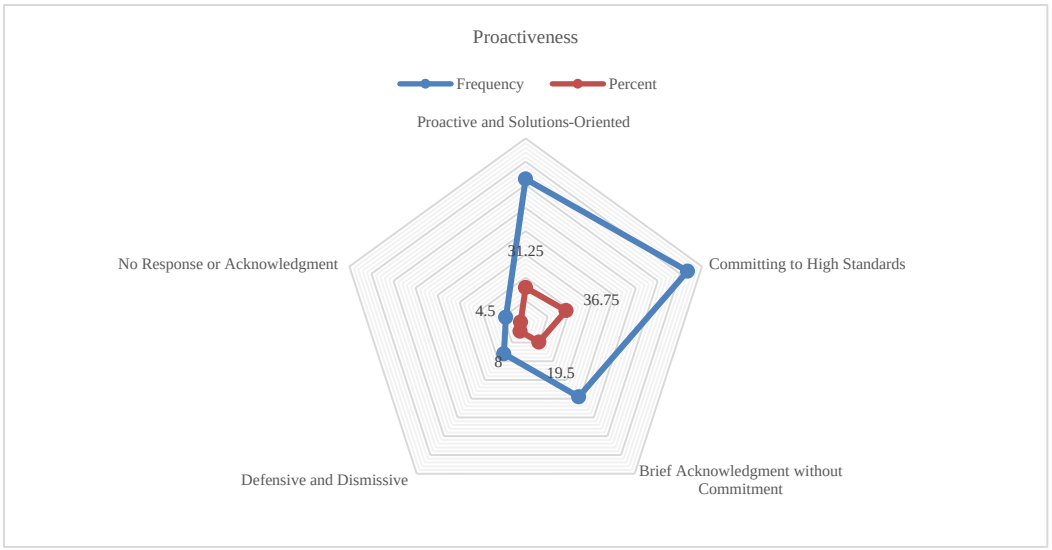

Figure 5: Guest-favored levels of proactivity in host review responses

Timeliness

The results provide valuable insight into how timely guests expect hosts to respond to reviews left on the platform. The most favoured turnaround time by a notable margin was an immediate response, indicating guests strongly desire issues and feedback to be addressed promptly. Coming in a close second was responding within a day or two, still viewed as highly attentive to guests' comments. However, replying for up to a month resonated far less with customers. Thus, it is suggested that while most guests will acknowledge that some latency may occur, delays in addressing concerns leave a suboptimal impression. Overall, the findings suggest guests prioritise hosts that demonstrate quick follow-through after reviews by handling matters rapidly and at the forefront. A well-timed response conveys the guest's feedback and experience and holds importance to the host rather than becoming an afterthought. Responsiveness in this context impacts guest perceptions of service quality and their likelihood to return or recommend the listing (See Figure 6).

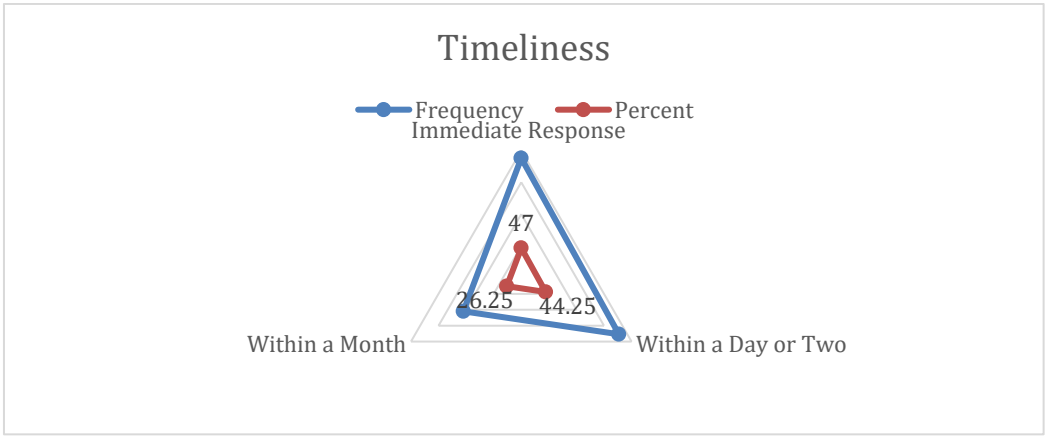

Figure 6: Timeliness expectations for host responses to online reviews

Discussion and conclusion

Research reveals that guests have distinct preferences for how hosts should communicate when responding to online reviews. The most fundamental expectation is for hosts to adopt a warm and appreciative tone that conveys sincere gratitude for guest feedback (Zhao et al., 2015). Guests want to feel genuinely valued and respected rather than receiving detached or impersonal responses (Barcelos et al., 2018; Ioan-Cristian et al., 2025; Mariani et al., 2020). This requires hosts to strike an empathetic chord, acknowledging shortcomings with an apologetic yet understanding demeanor (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Sparks et al., 2016). While professional decorum remains important, guests prefer conversational rapport-building over rigid formality (Sparks et al., 2016). The ideal communication approach balances polite respect with relatable affability to foster trust and connection (Park & Allen, 2012; Zhang et al., 2024). Guests appreciate thoughtful word choices that demonstrate courtesy while allowing the host's authentic personality to emerge in a friendly but appropriate manner (Park & Allen, 2012; Wu et al., 2017). However, they are deterred by overly casual language that appears disingenuous or unprofessional (Barcelos et al., 2018), as well as excessively wordy responses that obscure the core message (Sparks et al., 2016). Clear, organised communication that efficiently addresses the heart of the matter is preferred (Sparks et al., 2016). The most critical aspect of guest preferences centers on hosts adopting a proactively solutions-oriented approach (Amatulli et al., 2019). Guests expect open acknowledgement of problems or criticisms and for hosts to willingly accept accountability where appropriate (Sparks et al., 2016; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). Beyond merely admitting fault, guests genuinely desire tangible remedies and concrete action plans for resolving issues and preventing future occurrences (Liu et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2017). They are dissatisfied with defensive postures or dismissals that fail to demonstrate good-faith improvement efforts (Sparks et al., 2016). Non-acknowledgement and silence represent the least preferred approach, appearing negligent and disrespectful of guests' time investment in providing feedback (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). While commitment to high service standards appeals to guests, this takes secondary importance to proactive solution-oriented accountability (Amatulli et al., 2019). Guests have limited patience for platitudes without meaningful follow-through (Sparks et al., 2016). Hosts must listen and act swiftly and substantively on feedback to cultivate trust and encourage repeat patronage (Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013; Xie et al., 2017). Response timeliness emerges as another paramount factor influencing guest satisfaction (Lan et al., 2021; Sparks et al., 2016). Guests strongly prefer immediate replies, with responses within one to two days also viewed positively regarding attentiveness (Wang & Chaudhry, 2018). Extended delays substantially depreciate the experience, with even a few weeks creating suboptimal impressions that concerns have been deprioritized (Lan et al., 2021; Sparks & Browning, 2011). Guests expect the same punctuality across all service aspects (Schaarschmidt & Höber, 2017). Rapid responses signal that input has been prioritized as important rather than dismissed as afterthoughts (Xu et al., 2019), directly impacting perceptions of host quality, attention to detail, and commitment to exceptional customer experiences (Park & Allen, 2012). Delayed responses may be interpreted as discourteous lack of care, influencing decisions about repeat visits and recommendations (Park & Allen, 2012; Sparks et al., 2016). Swift, robust replies represent easily achievable opportunities for earning positive regard in the digital reputation era (Wang & Chaudhry, 2018).

Theoretical and managerial contribution

This study makes several notable contributions to the current body of research on tourism and hospitality digital platform management. Prior studies have explored aspects like online review impacts (Sparks et al., 2016), management responses (Lan et al., 2021; Sparks et al., 2016), and hospitality social media usage (Zhang et al., 2024), but this is one of the first comprehensive looks into what specific characteristics of host responses guests prefer. By illuminating desired tones, language styles, structures, proactivity levels, and timeliness, it provides a theoretically grounded framework for hosts to optimise their review response strategies, contributing to the studies addressing these issues (Amatulli et al., 2019; S. Liu et al., 2021; Sparks et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2024). The findings yield empirical insights that can directly inform the development of more effective platform communication protocols and tools. Knowing guests' marked preferences for warm yet solutions-oriented responses over defensive posturing can guide the design of educational resources, templated language, and AI-assisted drafting functionality. Moreover, this study's revelations create avenues for enhancing host training, quality assurance processes, and system integrations to facilitate more consistently positive guest-host interactions. This study offers substantive theoretical contributions, extending our knowledge bases within the online review literature. While earlier studies have examined issues such as reviews' impacts on firms (Liu et al., 2021), consumer actions when reviewing (Amatulli et al., 2019), and linguistic elements of commentary (Wu et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2024), this study is one of the first focused studies into what customers want and expect from management commentary. It gives empirical support to several novel theoretical constructs in the domain of receptivity factors like tone preference, vernacular sensitivity, structure format effect, proactivity/accountability orientation desires, and temporal sensitivity. Ultimately, the present study presents a theoretically grounded basis towards a deeper understanding of the social dynamics and implications of the emerging online review paradigm's central host response factor. The conclusions drawn from the study also make valuable contributions to the available research streams investigating revisit intentions in hospitality and tourism scenarios. Whereas earlier studies had pointed towards factors such as perceptions of value, emotional experiences (Sparks et al., 2016), service quality assessment, and brand trust as key drivers of guest loyalty, this research brings into focus the role such proactive management of online reviews can have in making a difference. Hosts implementing strategic approaches based on the revealed guest preferences – like warm responsibility, problem-solution repair, professional but personal communication, and timely responsiveness – can successfully mitigate negative incidents. It provides a new outlook to pro-reputation management tactics to build an engaging brand relationship that fosters long-term customer loyalty.

The findings present several managerial implications. First, hosts need to make sure they use a warm and thankful tone, genuinely showing thanks for the guest's feedback. An example such as "Thank you so much for taking the time to provide your valuable insight. We greatly appreciate your business and thoughtful feedback" achieves that purposeful tone. Hosts should also embrace shortcomings with a sheepish but sympathetic demeanor, such as, "I apologize we could not meet standards with the cleanliness issues you reported. We have room for improvement in our housekeeping procedures." Maintaining professionalism is essential, but by balancing it with conversational rapport-building, hosts can enhance personal connection. For example, " I understand how frustrating disruptions like the noise complaints can be. Please let me know if there's anything we could have done better to address it during your stay." Using polite, respectful language demonstrating courtesy ("Thank you for your patience…" "We value your feedback…") makes guests feel appreciated. The findings emphasize guests overwhelmingly prefer a proactive, solutions-oriented approach when hosts respond to negative reviews. Hosts must directly acknowledge the issue, willingly accept accountability when warranted, and, most crucially, provide tangible remediation plans (Zhang et al., 2017). An example could be: "You were right to call out the unacceptable delays with our valet service. That lapse is on us, and we're taking steps to ensure it doesn't happen again by adding more staff during peak hours." Vague platitudes won't cut it. Proposing real solutions like policy updates, staff retraining, renovation plans, or service enhancements shows proper accountability. Defensive responses deflecting blame should be avoided at all costs, as "Our records indicate you arrived over an hour late for your assigned valet window, which caused the backup." Guests will see right through such disingenuous tactics. Committing to high standards is expected, but actionable solutions are paramount. Furthermore, the findings highlight how crucial response timeliness is for making a positive impression. Guests expect and prefer extremely prompt replies – within 24 hours if possible. A simple acknowledgement like "Thank you for your review. We're still looking into this issue, but you'll receive a more detailed response from us shortly" can buy a little time while prioritising the guest's voice being heard quickly. Letting days or weeks elapse before responding will be seen as deprioritising the guest's concerns in their eyes. Elaborate processes and bottlenecks that delay responses represent a missed opportunity to validate the guest's feedback and reassure them of your commitment to improvement. Optimising workflows and perhaps exploring AI-assisted drafting could help achieve faster turnaround times. Swift responsiveness is a low-hanging fruit for strengthening rapport and signalling operational excellence.

The study limitations

This study had some limitations that should be noted, including a relatively modest sample size of respondents, which could be expanded across different populations and tourism contexts. Additionally, the concentrated scope on the hospitality and tourism events sectors limits the findings' complete transferability to other tourism businesses like restaurants or attractions. Future research directions from this study are plentiful - examining cross-cultural differences in guest preferences, longitudinal studies tracking expectation shifts over time, experimental designs precisely isolating causal effects of specific response factors, and integrating findings into AI-assisted response automation. Also, future research should investigate the potential moderating influences, such as guest demographics, pricing, and brand reputation, on the review sentiment. Through addressing these limitations, broadening the scope, and implementing more robust methodologies, subsequent scholarship can build upon these foundations to refine understandings of optimal review response strategies that maximise guest satisfaction, loyalty, and overall experience enhancement across the evolving tourism/hospitality landscape.

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