"We Are Glad That You Enjoyed Our Mouthwatering Food": Achieving Brand Self-promoting Through Interpersonal Strategies on Tripadvisor

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Abstract
This study investigates how Chinese restaurant brands on TripAdvisor employ interpersonal strategies to achieve self-promotion while fostering rapport with domestic Mandarin-speaking and foreign English-speaking consumers. Analyzing 200 management responses to positive and negative reviews, this study identified 1,211 instances of 12 interpersonal strategies. Consumer-caring strategies dominate in negative review responses, while brand self-promoting strategies prevail in positive ones. "*Highlighting positive features,*" the most frequent self-promoting strategy, ranks second overall after "*Thanking*", underscoring its role in transaction-oriented communication. Qualitative analysis reveals nuanced negotiations between consumer-caring and self-promoting dimensions, with varied promotional effects achieved through creative linguistic choices. By presenting authentic examples, this study offers insights for brands to enhance their online presence and maximize the impact of public platforms.

Keywords: Interpersonal strategies, management responses, online consumer reviews, self-promoting, TripAdvisor

1. Introduction

With an ever-growing exploration of opinion-based and consumer-generated platforms such as TripAdvisor, online reviews have increasingly become a major source of information that can affect consumers' decision-making (Harrington *et al.*, 2013) with ultimate impacts on sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Unlike face-to-face compliments or complaints, online consumer reviews on public platforms serve not only to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with brands but also to recommend or warn potential customers, creating significant and far-reaching impacts (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). Therefore, now more than ever before, the importance of managing online consumer reviews has been broadly recognized. The main communicative concern of managing online consumer reviews is to enhance and restore brand-consumer relations (Ho, 2017a), and ideally, to save both the consumers' face and the brand's own face (Cenni & Goethals, 2021:39).

Indeed, brand self-promoting orientation of online management responses embedded in this specific communicative situation should not be ignored (Van Herck et al., 2022), as brands can and must protect and enhance their own face in order to be successful (Cenni & Goethals, 2021:48). Responding to online compliments bears excellent opportunities for brand self-promoting through stressing positive features of their accommodation and service mentioned by the reviewers (Cenni & Goethals, 2021). A series of promotional strategies are also at the brand's disposal in responding to online complaints to maintain brand reputation and protect brand image (Thumvichit & Gampper, 2019). However, response writers face relational differences and various risks underlying different public brand-consumer relations. Managing negative reviews currently constitutes a major challenge for response writers to pacify consumers' dissatisfaction while achieving self-promoting purposes at the same time. And responding to positive reviews puts response writers into a self-promoting dilemma (Pfeffer et al., 2006) between the choice of 'self-enhancement' and 'self-effacement' (modesty) (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), since rejecting the compliment may seem inappropriate but accepting a compliment too wholeheartedly might seem arrogant (Placencia et al., 2016: 340). Handling user-generated content on TripAdvisor becomes more challenging and complicated due to consumers from diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds. This complexity arises as issues of business, communication, and multilingualism are intricately interwoven.

So far, previous discourse-oriented studies have put the spotlight on the relational aspect of online service encounters, focusing almost exclusively on responses to negative reviews in the field of service recovery (e.g., Ho, 2017a,b, 2020; Sparks & Bradley, 2017; Cenni & Goethals, 2020; Creelman, 2022; just name a few), with only a paucity of studies taking positive reviews into consideration (eg., Feng & Ren, 2019; Cenni & Goethals, 2021). Moreover, brand self-promoting dimension embedded in such a unique and critical realm of the online review response genre has been underexplored. It is unclear how and to what extent brand self-promoting purposes can be achieved through the language use of response writers while tackling difficulties of managing rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) in online business contexts.

To disrupt this persistent oversight, this study is designed to explore how Chinese restaurants exploit interpersonal strategies (Nickerson, 2000; Liu & Liu, 2023) to achieve brand self-promoting pragmalinguistically by managing rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) with domestic Mandarin-speaking consumers and foreign English-speaking consumers, either satisfied or dissatisfied, so as to capture the challenging situations on TripAdvisor mentioned above. This study focuses on Chinese restaurants due to their increasing engagement with global consumers on TripAdvisor and the unique interplay of multilingualism and cultural politeness in their responses. Accordingly, there are four different types of management responses examined for this research: management responses to Chinese positive reviews, management responses to Chinese negative reviews, management responses to English positive reviews, and management responses to English negative reviews, all of which are written by Chinese restaurant brands. Taking a closer look at specific linguistic realizations and formulations displayed in different interpersonal strategies, it is possible to observe more nuanced brand self-promoting and consumer-caring negotiations in this context. Relational effects can be aggravated, maintained,

or enhanced by choosing different language options (Locher, 2013:146). For instance, *Thanks for your positive comments* and *Thanks for your lovely comments regarding our friendly and professional service* load with different brand self-promoting and consumer-caring commitments and effects. Moreover, compared with previous studies that predominately focused on online negative review responses by paying more attention to the consumer-caring aspect from a monolinguistic perspective, this study is hoped to provide a more comprehensive picture of the real business context online.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online management response and brand self-promoting

Within the discourse tradition, previous studies to date mainly resort to the genre/move analytical framework to identify and explore linguistic characteristics of different and salient online management response strategies, particularly in the hotel industry (e.g., Zhang & Vásquez, 2014; Ho,2017a,b; Sparks & Bradley, 2017; Cenni & Goethals, 2021). In light of the business communicative situation, brand self-promoting orientation embedded in management response is self-evident for the reason that businesses can and must protect and enhance their own face in order to be successful, make a profit and not be surpassed by competitors (Cenni & Goethals, 2021:39). *Self-promoting* (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Rudman, 1998; Scopelliti et al., 2015) is labeled synonymously as *bragging* (Berman et al., 2015), *boasting* (Levine & West, 1976), *self-praise* (Dayter, 2014), *positive self-disclosure* (Miller et al., 1992), *positive self-description* (Holtgraves & Srull, 1989) and so on.

Positive reviews, which can serve as brands' promotional materials, boost new consumers' confidence and promote business success (Xie et al., 2017; Gupta, 2019). Cenni & Goethals (2021) also found that responding to positive reviews presents opportunities par excellence for enhancing the brand's own face through the employment of self-promoting face-work strategies (*highlighting brand's positive features*). However, even if the brand-consumer interaction is initiated to show reciprocal appreciation and respect, maintaining and enhancing rapport between the interlocutors by responding to a compliment is "far from simple" (Maíz-Arevalo, 2013). Because compliment receivers are confronted with difficulties in reaching an appropriate point between 'self-enhancement' and 'self-effacement' (modesty) (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Negative reviews, which can damage brand reputation and harm future patronage intentions (Chiou & Cheng, 2003), can also be handled with promotional moves to mitigate their negative effects. In the analysis of business responses to customer complaints through business English emails (Van Herck et al., 2022), one major move labeled as *brand positioning*, which contains *reference to standards* and *improvement of services/products* two sub-moves, was identified to mainly perform the promotional function. Similarly, in management responses to negative hotel reviews, Thumvichit and Gampp (2019) found that more than half of the texts in their data included the move *brand positioning*, which consists of two sub-moves: *stating hotel's commitment* and *confirming hotel's standard*. Ho (2017) identified *self-promoting* move functioning to establish hotels as popular and well-liked travel accommodation providers.

Even though it has been attested that those reviews with positive polarity far outnumber negative ones on platforms such as TripAdvisor (Pantelidis, 2010), previous research on management responses is so far exclusively on negative reviews (Sotiriadis, 2017; Schuckert et al., 2015). While analyzing online reviews has become quite common to both scholars and practitioners, most of the research within the hospitality industry has been conducted in hotels. In comparison, restaurants have received less attention (Yu, et al., 2022). To date, the majority of investigations have been mainly restricted to monolingual data (English). Yet studies that paid attention to handling consumers against different lingua-cultural backgrounds are limited. Moreover, although the brand self-promoting dimension has been mentioned by previous studies, it is still unclear how and to what extent it can be achieved linguistically.

2.2 Rapport management and interpersonal strategies in online business contexts

Rapport management is always considered as an essential part of business communication to build trust and common ground (Thomas et al., 2009; Liu & Liu, 2017). Rapport management refers to the use of language to promote, maintain, or threaten harmonious social relations (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009:102), which mainly entails three main interconnected components: management of face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals (Spencer-Oatey, 2008:13). The rapport management model has been widely applied in online business contexts (e.g., Abdulasalam & Ja'afar, 2020; Schmidt, 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2018), and its application also is found useful in tapping into relational aspects of online management responses (e.g., Ho, 2020; Feng &Ren, 2019; Cenni & Goethals, 2020b).

A cluster of strategies performing the relational work (Locher & Watts, 2008; Locher, 2013) in business contexts are labeled with different names, such as rapport management strategies (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), face-work strategies (Cenni & Goethals, 2020a, 2021), relational acts (Feng & Ren, 2019), interpersonal strategies (Nickerson, 2000; Liu & Liu, 2023) and so on. The notion of interpersonal strategies is conceptualized as those strategies that "contribute to the reconstruction of the activities and roles necessary to achieve institutional goals and to the maintenance of a good corporate relationship between the participants" (Nickerson 2000: 136). Later, situated in intercultural business communication contexts, Liu & Liu (2023:561) defined interpersonal strategies as strategies that are intended to take care of face and emotional needs and to clarify or redefine the responsibilities and obligations of the involved parties. Three major categories of interpersonal strategies (*alliance building, other-caring, self-enhancing/defending*) are used by BELF (English as a business lingua franca) email communicators to facilitate the accomplishment of communication tasks by creating common ground.

Most previous studies mentioned above, which focused on the interpersonal/relational functions of online management response, mainly elaborated on how the reviewers' face, sociality rights, and interactional goals were addressed. Therefore, how service providers achieve brand self-promoting purposes while attending to consumers' needs and how they negotiate in the two dimensions of brand self-promoting and consumer-caring wait for further exploration.

Based on previous studies, this study is designed to demonstrate how and whether Chinese restaurant brands can strategically and effectively utilize interpersonal strategies to address the brand self-promoting dimension while managing rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) with different types of consumers on TripAdvisor. And this study also aims to explore what possible creative linguistic resources are utilized to maximize the positive effects of online compliments and minimize the negative effects of online complaints through exploiting interpersonal strategies, with the ultimate goal of achieving brand self-promoting while enhancing brand-consumer relationships. We envisage to reach this goal by answering two research questions:

1. What and how often interpersonal strategies are used in Chinese restaurants' management responses to online consumer reviews?
2. How and to what extent do Chinese restaurants achieve self-promoting purposes through interpersonal strategies in management responses to online consumer reviews?

3. Methodology

This study examines management responses to online consumer reviews on TripAdvisor, written in Chinese and English, to explore how Chinese restaurant brands use interpersonal strategies to achieve self-promotion while managing rapport with domestic and foreign consumers. A mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, was employed to address the research questions: (1) What interpersonal strategies are used, and how frequently, in Chinese restaurants' management responses to online consumer reviews? (2) How and to what extent are brand self-promotion purposes achieved through these interpersonal strategies? The quantitative analysis identifies the frequency and distribution of strategies, providing a broad overview of their use (Research Question 1), while the qualitative analysis examines the linguistic realizations and nuanced effects of these strategies, revealing how self-promotion is achieved (Research Question 2).

3.1 Data collecting

TripAdvisor, as one of the most successful user-generated content websites, has continued to grow in popularity since its inception, in which reviews and responses are written and read in a multiplicity of languages by users from all over the world. A considerable proportion of service reviews cover restaurants, with dedicated reviews being widely used by both locals and visitors (Pezenka & Weismayer, 2020). TripAdvisor offers an abundant repository of naturally occurring brand-consumer interactions for studying the discourse of online service encounters.

Data were collected from restaurants in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, as they are China's leading economic and tourism hubs, attracting substantial international visitors and generating significant TripAdvisor review activity. In 2019, these cities were among the top destinations for China's 145.31 million inbound tourists, with Beijing and Shanghai hosting 3.21 million and 4.97 million foreign visitors, respectively (China Tourism Academy, 2024). Their global visibility is further evidenced by high engagement on platforms like TripAdvisor, reflecting their appeal to international travelers and suitability for studying multilingual

restaurant responses (TravelChinaGuide.com, 2025). And this study restricted selection to reviews showing a clear positive polarity (with ratings 4 ("very good") or 5 ("excellent") bullets out of 5) and negative polarity (with ratings 1 ("terrible") or 2 ("poor") bullets out of 5). We selected no more than 5 of the same type of responses from the same hotel and excluded identical responses from the same hotel. A total of 200 management responses, collected from December 2015 to September 2022, were analyzed: 100 in Chinese (50 to positive reviews, 50 to negative) and 100 in English (50 to positive reviews, 50 to negative). By doing so, an even contribution was achieved for better comparing and constructing to obtain similarities and differences with respect to the usage of interpersonal strategies (see Table 1).

Table 1 The distribution of data

Responding to	Responses written in Chinese (100)		Responses written in English (100)	
	positive reviews	negative reviews	positive reviews	negative reviews
Number	50	50	50	50

3.2 Data coding and analytical procedure

Following a bottom-up approach (De Ascaniis et al., 2015), this study first identified and coded each type of interpersonal strategy appearing in all these 200 online management responses by means of NVivo 12 software. Based on previous definition and classification of interpersonal strategy (Nickerson, 2000; Liu & Liu, 2023), this study focuses on two core interpersonal strategies: consumer-caring strategy and brand self-promoting strategy. Consumer-caring strategy refers to those strategies intended to take care of consumers' face, emotion, and benefit; brand self-promoting strategy refers to those strategies intended to enhance the brand's own face, emotion, and benefit (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Subcategories of the two core categories were identified and coded as well. By doing so, it could be identified which interpersonal strategies were the most frequently occurring and what the communicative function of each interpersonal strategy was in terms of completing brand self-promoting or consumer-caring. Similarities and differences in the frequency of interpersonal strategies appearing in management responses to different types of online reviews will accordingly be revealed. Once the communicative function of each interpersonal strategy was determined, the second part of my analysis followed a more fine-grained approach whereby each interpersonal strategy was examined to identify its intrinsic linguistic elements. In what follows, this research mapped the combinations of interpersonal strategy initiated in each management response and highlighted representative examples of the linguistic evidence that reflect efforts paid by response writers to negotiate in the two dimensions of brand self-promoting and consumer-caring.

4. Analysis and findings

4.1 Type and number of interpersonal strategies

To address the first research question, all interpersonal strategies in the data were identified and grouped into two core categories and different subcategories. Because one item of management

response may consist of more than one interpersonal strategy, analysis of the 200 items resulted in a total of 1211 occurrences of interpersonal strategy. The different core categories and subcategories with frequencies, percentages, and examples are presented in Table 1.

The study mainly identified 12 interpersonal strategies in online management responses written by Chinese restaurant brands, which are, in the order of descending in frequency: *Thanking* (260 instances, 21% of all interpersonal strategies), *Highlighting positive features* (181 instances, 15%), *Soliciting future visit* (178 instances, 15%), *Phatic communication* (147 instances, 12%), *Expressing feelings* (99 instances, 8%), *Apologizing* (93 instances, 8%), *Improvement of services/products* (82 instances, 7%), *Recognizing value of the review(er)* (55 instances, 5%), *Investigating* (47 instances, 4%), *Requesting for details* (25 instances, 2%), *Self-denigration* (24 instances, 2%), *Reference to standards* (20 instances, 2%).

Table 2 Type and number of interpersonal strategies

Interpersonal strategies				
Categories	**Subcategories**	**F**	**%**	**Example**
Consumer-caring	Thanking	260	21%	*Thank you for taking time to share your good dining experience on TripAdvisor.*
77% (928/1211)	Soliciting future visit	178	15%	*We would be delighted to welcome you back in the near future to share further uplifting memories.*
	Phatic communication	147	12%	*Including greeting (hello), closing (best regards), small talks (have a nice day!), wishes (Gong Xi Fa Cai!), etc.*
	Expressing feelings	99	8%	*We absolutely <u>loved</u> your visit. / <u>I am so shamed</u> to learn the shortfall in the service rendered and nobody to take care of you*
	Recognizing value of the review(er)	55	5%	*Your review is our motivation and reaffirms our hard work we put in every day.*
	Self-denigration	24	2%	*Our team is extremely honored as we have been able to make you a memorable and satisfied dining experience.*
	Requesting for details	25	2%	*Please do contact me at XX@XX.com to share more details about your experience.*
	Apologizing	93	8%	*We are truly sorry for all*

	Investigating	47	4%	*incidents that we have caused to you.* *We will conduct a further investigation into the seafood issue you mentioned.*
Brand Self-promoting 23% (283/1211)	Highlighting positive features	181	15%	*Our dinner menu is thoughtfully designed by chef to reflect the seasonality and diversity in our cuisine.*
	Reference to standards	20	2%	*It is far beyond our usual level of service.*
	Improvement of services/products	82	7%	*We will strive even harder to improve our service and food in the future.*
	Total	**1211**	**100%**	

Among these 12 types of interpersonal strategies, 9 types of them mainly attend to the consumers' face, sociality rights, and interactional goals, accounting for 77% of the total occurrences. And 3 types of promotional strategies are identified in our data (*Highlighting positive features, Improvement of services/products, Reference to standards*) functioning to enhance the brand's own face and benefit.

Table 3 Distribution of interpersonal strategies

Interpersonal strategy		Management responses to			
Categories	Subcategories	CPR	CNR	EPR	ENR[1]
Consumer-caring	Thanking	63	65	72	60
	Soliciting future visit	49	48	44	37
	Phatic communication	34	36	32	45
	Expressing feelings	25	8	40	26
	Recognizing value of the review(er)	9	17	14	15
	Self-denigration	11	7	4	2
	Requesting for details	0	9	0	16
	Apologizing	0	42	0	51
	Investigating	0	21	0	26
Self-promoting					
	Highlighting positive features	64	24	78	15
	Improvement of services/products	11	34	6	31
	Reference to standards	0	8	0	12
	Total	**266**	**319**	**290**	**336**

Table 3 takes a snapshot of the distribution of all 12 interpersonal strategies employed in management responses to domestic Chinese-speaking consumers and foreign English-speaking consumers, taking both positive and negative reviews into consideration at the same time. The management responses to different types of online reviews were compared and contrasted to obtain similarities and differences by the Chi-square test with respect to the usage of interpersonal strategy.

To examine differences in interpersonal strategy use, Chi-square tests were conducted on the 1,211 strategy instances identified across 200 management responses. No significant differences were found between responses to Chinese-speaking (585 instances) and English-speaking (626 instances) reviewers for either consumer-caring (χ^2 (1) = 0.87, p = 0.35) or brand self-promoting (χ^2 (1) = 0.12, p = 0.73) strategies, suggesting similar approaches across languages. However, significant differences emerged between positive (556 instances) and negative (655 instances) reviews (χ^2 (1) = 12.45, p < 0.001), with negative reviews eliciting more strategies overall.

For English reviews, significant differences were observed between positive and negative reviews for consumer-caring (206 vs. 278 instances; χ^2 (1) = 9.32, p < 0.01) and self-promoting

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[1] CPR, CER, EPR and ENR stand for Chinese positive reviews, Chinese negative reviews, English positive reviews, English positive reviews respectively.

(84 vs. 58 instances; χ^2 (1) = 4.76, $p < 0.05$) strategies, indicating greater use of consumer-caring strategies in negative responses. For Chinese reviews, consumer-caring strategies differed significantly between positive and negative reviews (191 vs. 253 instances; χ^2 (1) = 5.14, $p < 0.05$), but no significant difference was found for self-promoting strategies (75 vs. 66 instances; χ^2 (1) = 0.58, $p = 0.45$).

These findings highlight that review valence, rather than reviewer language, significantly influences strategy use, with negative reviews prompting more consumer-caring strategies. Chinese restaurant brands made similar commitments to manage rapport with domestic and foreign consumers on TripAdvisor in terms of employing interpersonal strategies. Nevertheless, Chinese restaurant brands made more efforts to attend to the consumers' face, emotion, and benefits in responding to dissatisfied consumers, whereas paid more attention to their self-promoting needs in responding to satisfied consumers.

4.2 The achievement of band self-promoting

Based on a fine-grained examination of all 200 response items, this chapter is presented here mainly to reveal how different types of and to what extent brand self-promoting strategies are linguistically realized in our data. Table 4 presents the distribution of subcategories of brand self-promoting strategy employed in the four different types of review responses.

Table 4 Distribution of brand self-promoting sub-strategies

Management responses to	CPR	CNR	EPR	ENR
Highlighting positive features	**64**	**24**	**78**	**15**
Echoing the reviewer (general)	13	0	14	0
Echoing the reviewer (specific)	27	4	31	4
Own statement (general)	11	12	12	7
Own statement (specific)	13	8	21	4
Improvement of services/products	**11**	**34**	**6**	**31**
Reference to standards	**0**	**8**	**0**	**12**
Total	**75**	**66**	**84**	**58**

There are three types of sub-strategies identified in our data mainly performing the promotional function (*Highlighting positive features, Improvement of services/products, Reference to standards*). Among them, *Highlighting positive features* is the most frequently used self-promoting strategy which is further distinguished into echoing the reviewers' content and presenting restaurants' own statements by stressing general or specific positive features of brands (Cenni & Goethals, 2021), ranking the second highest order in the frequency of the total 12 interpersonal strategies. Representative examples that reflect varying commitments paid by response writers to negotiate in the two dimensions of brand self-promoting and consumer-caring will be presented and analyzed in the following sections.

4.2.1 *Highlighting positive features*

The positive review genre itself can be considered as the brand's promotional materials which can enhance brand reputation and facilitate business success (Dickinger & Lalicic, 2017; Levy et al., 2013). Therefore, responding to positive reviews provides excellent opportunities for brands to achieve self-promoting intentions by echoing or emphasizing positive restaurant features mentioned by the reviewers (Example (1)-(4)).

(1) *很高兴得知您在这里有一次难忘的体验。(It is pleasant to know that you had a memorable experience here.)*

(2) *看到您对XX餐厅的正面评价我们感到很高兴，您提到了XX良好的用餐环境和员工们一流的服务体验。我们还想特别感谢您提及了XX好吃的鹅肝以及甜品。(We are glad to learn about your positive comments on XX regarding the good dining ambiance and "first class service" of our Ladies and Gentlemen. We also want to thank you for your highlight on delicious Foie gras and desserts provided by XX.)*

(3) *We are delighted to read that you enjoyed our beautiful view and the outstanding service from our talented staff.*

(4) *It was such an honor that we could have your compliment regarding our friendly and helpful service.*

In responding to online positive reviews, compared to Example (1) which just generally summarized the consumer's positive comments about his/her dining in the restaurant as a memorable experience, specific features such as (*professional and outstanding)* service, (*beautiful)* view, (*talented*) staff, and (*delicious*) food are listed and emphasized in Example (1)-(4) with up-scaled expressions added by response writers deliberately, in order to increase self-promoting effects. *Highlighting positive features* by echoing the reviewers' content is mainly bundled with three consumer-caring strategies in our data: *Expressing positive feelings* (Example (1)(2)(3)), *Thanking* (Example (2)), and *Self-denigration* (Example (4)), to which the consumers' quality face, association rights relating to affective involvement, and relational goals are attended. Moreover, repeating (parts of) reviewers' content signals that the agent has actually read them (Van Herck et al., 2022), thus demonstrating attentiveness (Clark et al., 2012) and making responses more personal and less generic (Min et al., 2015).

When facing the consumers' complaints in which negative aspects are demonstrated in detail and shared on such a public platform, although a few positive aspects mentioned in passing are far from offsetting customers' unpleasant experiences, response writers sized every opportunity to pinpoint these positive aspects (Example (5)(6)) to help restaurants to win back some their face in such face-losing situations. Varying linguistic commitments were paid to exploit interpersonal strategies thus achieving different degrees of brand self-promoting effects between Example (5) and Example (6). In addition to listing positive aspects mentioned in negative responses by passing (Example (5)), the response writer of Example (6) not only self-prized the brand's food as *delicious,* service ambiance as *conviviality,* and staff as *nice* but also mentioned evidentiality-based (Cenni & Goethals, 2021) praises given by other 100 TripAdvisor consumers who found the restaurant excellent and very good, so as to minimize the negative effects of online negative responses and maintain brand reputation.

(5) *感谢您莅临XX中餐厅，并认可了我们的环境和服务。我们非常抱歉当天的菜式没能给您满意的体验.(Thank you for coming to XX Chinese Restaurant and approving our environment and service. We are very sorry that the dishes of the day did not satisfy you.)*

(6) *We are glad you appreciate the delicious food we make, but we truly regret that you don't appreciate our conviviality and our nice staff. Almost more than 100 of our TripAdvisor comments say they find it excellent and very good.*

Rather than resorting to the consumers' compliments, brand self-promoting can, of course, be achieved by the most obvious promotional strategy – *highlighting positive features* in the brand's own statements regarding an essential range of restaurant elements (Example (7)-(10)), including such positive self-disclosure contents as advertisement, the brand's mission, the brand's commitment, etc.

(7) *餐厅位于酒店31楼，坐拥绝佳美景，宾客在餐厅内即可饱览深港边界的优美景致和深圳特区的现代化都市风采，视野绝佳。(The restaurant is located on the 31st floor of the hotel with excellent views, where guests can enjoy the beautiful scenery of the Shenzhen and Hong Kong border and the modern city style of Shenzhen Special Zone.)*

(8) *我们坚持使用最新鲜的食材烹饪美食，所有的酱汁都是厨师亲自料理的。(We insist on using the freshest ingredients and all sauces are prepared by the chef himself.）*

(9) *We open the door every evening to guests around the world to experience our authentic Chinese cuisine and warm hospitality.*

(10) *We are aiming at customizing care and attention for each guest and creating an individualized experience.*

In many cases in our data, the strategy of *highlighting positive features*, no matter whether achieved through echoing the consumers' contents or being presented in the brand's own statements, is realized within the consumer-caring strategy — *Recognizing value of the review(er)*. With the employment of such a consumer-caring centered strategy, restaurants achieved their brand self-promoting purposes while taking reviewers' both quality face (by acknowledging the significant meaning and honesty of their comments) and relational face (by emphasizing the importance of guests) into great concern at the same time, which shows more efforts paid to negotiate in the brand self-promoting and consumer-caring dimensions than presenting self-boasting content alone (Example (11)-(14)).

(11) *于我们而言，您对我们酒店优质服务和美味食物的认可有着很重要的意义。(For us, your approval of the high quality of our service and the delicious food is very important.)*

(12) *您对餐厅同事提供的食物以及贴心专业的服务的认可，是我们最大的动力。(Your approval of the food and professional service provided by our restaurant colleagues is our greatest motivation.)*

(13) *Your kind comments encourage us to continuously deliver high standards of service, products, and facilities.*

(14) *We are focused on* <u>*continuous improvement of our guests' individual experiences*</u> *and this cannot be achieved without honest feedback from guests like your good-self.*

However, even though *Recognizing value of the review(er)* in negative review responses is much more devoted to the consumer-caring dimension than to the brand self-promoting dimension, such strategy still can be exploited for showcasing the brand's mission/commitment to construct a positive brand image that strives for improvement and puts consumer benefits first (comparing Example (15) with Example (16)), particularly aiming to address consumers' quality face and interactional goals.

(15) *I am truly concerned about your dissatisfaction at our Horizon Chinese Restaurant as mentioned in your comments.*

(16) 这些宝贵意见有助于我们餐厅更快更好地提高服务质量和出品。*(These valuable suggestions help our restaurant to improve service quality and production faster and better.)*

4.2.2 Improvement of services/products

Improvement of services/products (82 instances, 7%) is more common in negative reviews, signaling the brand's commitment to quality in response to criticism. Differences in terms of brand self-promoting effects achieved by the same interpersonal strategy are also identified in the strategy of *Improvement of services/products*.

(17) *We will continue to provide our guests with the most memorable XX experiences.*

(18) 我们会继续努力提供高质量食物及服务予客人，我相信您今次的体验并不是我们日常的服务标准。*(We will continue to strive to provide high-quality food and service to our guests, and I believe that your experience is not our usual standard of service.)*

(19) *We will do our very best to improve for the future.*

In response to positive reviews, management responses such as Example ((17)(18)) which state what actions were taken or will be taken to upgrade their services/products enforced the promotional effects while attending to consumers' quality face as well as interactional goals at the same time. In response to negative reviews, the employment of *Improvement of services/products* is mainly to stress specific improvement measures for service recovery (Example (18)), through which consumers' equity rights are particularly taken into account and the transactional goal of consumers' attempts at speeding time to comment on TripAdvisor are also fulfilled. However, as it remains vague what these improvement measures might be, the employment of *Improvement of services/products* becomes less convincing in its promotional function in Example (19).

4.2.3 Reference to Standards

The strategy of *Improvement of services/products* in Example (18) cooperates with another brand self-promoting strategy *Reference to standards*. *Reference to standards* (20 instances, 2%) is the least frequent self-promoting strategy to assert the brand's usual high standards. *Reference to standards* is exclusively used in response to negative reviews which frames consumers' negative

experience as *far from the normal standard* or as *an isolated case* by emphasizing the brand's quality standard, so as to maintain and restore the brand-consumer relationships (Example (20)).

(20) *We hope that this isolated situation will not compromise the long-term relationship that our Ladies & Gentlemen have been able to build up with you over time.*

The above examples are analyzed to illustrate how brand self-promoting intentions are linguistically realized through the three types of sub-strategies, while at the same time maintaining and enhancing brand–consumer relationships by attending to consumers' face, emotions, and benefits. The analysis also reveals that the varying degrees of commitment and impact of brand self-promotion arise not only from different linguistic realizations of the self-promoting sub-strategies, but also from the use of consumer-caring sub-strategies and their combinations.

5. Discussion

This study advances prior research by examining how Chinese restaurant brands on TripAdvisor employ interpersonal strategies to balance self-promotion and rapport management across multilingual positive and negative reviews, unlike earlier studies focusing on monolingual negative hotel reviews (Ho, 2017a; Cenni & Goethals, 2021). Quantitative analysis shows consumer-caring strategies (77%) dominate, with "Thanking" (21%) and "Soliciting future visit" (15%) most frequent, reflecting efforts to build lasting relationships. Among self-promoting strategies (23%), "Highlighting positive features" (15%) prevails, especially in positive reviews, leveraging praise to enhance brand image (Xie et al., 2017). Chi-square tests indicate review valence drives strategy use (χ^2 (1) = 12.45, p < 0.001), with negative reviews prompting more consumer-caring strategies to address dissatisfaction, consistent with negativity bias where negative feedback has greater impact (Yang & Mai, 2010; Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012). Positive reviews offer more self-promotion opportunities.

No significant differences were found between Chinese and English responses (χ^2 (1) = 0.87, p = 0.35 for consumer-caring; χ^2 (1) = 0.12, p = 0.73 for self-promoting), challenging assumptions of cultural divergence (Feng & Ren, 2019) and suggesting a standardized approach on TripAdvisor. Qualitative analysis reveals nuanced negotiations: echoing specific reviewer comments in positive reviews (e.g., "*outstanding service*") boosts self-promotion while personalizing responses (Cenni & Goethals, 2021; Wilson, 2012). In negative reviews, brands highlight minor positive mentions to mitigate criticism, often pairing them with consumer-caring strategies like "*Recognizing value of the review(er)*" to project an improvement-focused image. Linguistic choices, such as superlatives or expressive punctuation, enhance promotional effects.

Consumer-caring strategies can also serve promotional goals. For example, the primary communicative function of advertisement language such as "*XX Restaurant features a spacious balcony with a sea view, where you can sit around, drink tea, free your mind, as well as enjoy spectacular sunrise, sunset, and aquamarine sea landscape*" (Example 21) is to stress the brand's advantaged facilities. This simultaneously addresses consumer needs, as these facilities

are for customer enjoyment, unlike strategies like apologizing, which prioritize consumer-caring over self-promotion.

Moreover, Chinese management responses also reflected the two notions of Chinese politeness: respectfulness and modesty (self-denigration) (Gu,1990:239). In addition to using expressions showing respectfulness and modesty such as *It is such a great honor that…..,* Chinese response writers stick to the address maxim (Gu, 1990:248) by using the politeness vocative *nín* (您, the more polite form of *you*) in all situations and opening reviews by *respectful guest (尊敬的客人) in most cases*. And politeness expressions such as您的莅临 (*the more polite form of your presence*) and 阁下 *(Your Excellence)* were also identified in Chinese management responses. Whereas almost all responses written in English start with *Dear* directly followed by @*the foreign reviewer's platform name.*

Based on in-depth qualitative analysis, what can be indicated is that Chinese restaurant brands on TripAdvisor are aware of the importance of pragmatic aspects of interpersonal strategies, whose usage is not only to maintain harmony, smoothness, and warmth (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009) in positive brand-consumer relations but also in relatively more conflictive situations. It is also relevant to observe that the "pragmatic attitude" (Ehrenreich, 2010:417) held by Chinese restaurant response writers as professionals was manifested in their personal involvement rather than that of formal training (Pullin, 2010), which can be proven by the above mentioned strategic and creative employment of interpersonal strategy for achieving various functions. Moreover, in the data examined for this study, despite occurrences of conventional phatic communication (e.g., *Wishing you and your family a prosperous new year! Thank you and best regards*.), some examples also revealed the responses' creative attempts to personalize their pragmatic formula (e.g., *We wish to see you soon and Gong Xi Fa Cai! Feel like we are all part of one big family!)* by peppering responses written in English with Chinese culture.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of how Chinese restaurant brands on TripAdvisor strategically employ interpersonal strategies to balance self-promotion with rapport management across multilingual positive and negative reviews. By examining 200 management responses, this study identified a predominance of consumer-caring strategies, such as "*Thanking*" and "*Soliciting future visit*," which foster enduring relationships; while self-promoting strategies, particularly "*Highlighting positive features*," capitalize on positive reviews to enhance brand image. The findings reveal that review valence significantly influences strategy use, with negative reviews prompting greater consumer-caring efforts to mitigate dissatisfaction, and positive reviews offering fertile ground for self-promotion. Notably, the absence of significant linguistic differences between Chinese and English responses suggests a standardized pragmatic approach, challenging assumptions of cultural divergence in online business communication.

6.2 Practical Implications

Reflecting on these findings, this study underscores the dynamic interplay between transactional and relational goals in digital service encounters. The nuanced linguistic choices—such as echoing specific reviewer comments, using superlatives, or incorporating cultural politeness like "nín" (您) for Mandarin audiences—demonstrate how brands can amplify promotional effects while maintaining consumer trust. This dual focus not only addresses immediate business needs but also cultivates long-term loyalty in a competitive digital landscape. The creative integration of Chinese cultural elements, such as "Gong Xi Fa Cai," in English responses further highlights the potential for culturally nuanced personalization to strengthen global consumer connections.

To maximize the impact of online reviews, Chinese restaurant brands should strategically echo specific reviewer praise with enhanced expressions (e.g., "exceptional service") to reinforce brand strengths while personalizing responses. For negative reviews, blending consumer-caring strategies (e.g., apologies, soliciting feedback) with subtle self-promotion (e.g., highlighting minor positive mentions) can effectively rebuild trust. Training response writers in pragmatic language use, emphasizing creative and culturally sensitive formulations, can further elevate response effectiveness on platforms like TripAdvisor. These strategies enable brands to transform online reviews into powerful tools for both promotion and relationship-building, fostering resilience and growth in a globalized market.

6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study's etic perspective, based solely on textual analysis, limits insights into response writers' intentions. Future research could use emic methods, like interviews, to explore strategic choices. Examining review readers' perceptions of strategy effectiveness could further clarify relational impacts. The focus on Chinese restaurants in major cities may limit generalizability; broader restaurant types and regions should be studied. Longitudinal research could also investigate how evolving platform dynamics affect strategy use, deepening understanding of online brand-consumer interactions.

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