Aleksandra Radovanović
University of Kragujevac, Serbia

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"It Is Always Disappointing to Receive Negative Feedback": Attitudinal Stance in Managerial Responses to Negative Hotel Reviews

ABSTRACT

Effective responses to negative online customer reviews are seen as highly beneficial for influencing customer perceptions and protecting brand reputation. However, managers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds may affect their linguistic choices. This study examines the markers of attitudinal stance in managerial responses, pointing to the range of rhetorical purposes associated with these forms, and comparing the ways in which managers of British and Serbian hotels exploit these devices. Tripadvisor responses from hotels located in the two countries were analysed drawing upon Biber's approach (Biber et al. 1999). The results highlight the importance of attitudinal stance in achieving the overall communicative purpose of this genre. They also reveal that British hotel representatives use them slightly more frequently than Serbian hotel managers, which may be somewhat unexpected, and tend to show greater reliance on adjectives and verbs, while modals and adverbs are slightly more common in the responses from Serbian hotels.

Keywords: Tripadvisor, managerial responses, attitudinal stance, comparative analysis

»Negativne povratne informacije so vedno razočaranje«: izražanje odnosa v odzivih vodstva na negativne hotelske ocene

IZVLEČEK

Učinkoviti odzivi na negativne spletne ocene strank veljajo za zelo koristne pri oblikovanju zaznav kupcev in zaščiti ugleda blagovne znamke. Vendar lahko jezikovno in kulturno ozadje vodstvenega osebja vpliva na njihove jezikovne izbire. Pričujoča študija preučuje označevalce izražanja odnosa v odzivih vodstva, pri čemer opozarja na raznolikost retoričnih namenov, povezanih s temi oblikami, ter primerja, kako jih uporabljajo vodje britanskih in srbskih hotelov. Analizirali smo odzive na Tripadvisorju iz hotelov v obeh državah, pri čemer smo se oprli na pristop Biberja et al. (1999). Rezultati poudarjajo pomen izraženega odnosa pri doseganju celotnega komunikacijskega namena tega žanra. Prav tako razkrivajo, da britanski hotelski predstavniki te prvine uporabljajo nekoliko pogosteje kot srbski, kar je lahko nekoliko nepričakovano, ter da se bolj opirajo na pridevnike in glagole, medtem ko so modalni glagoli in prislovi nekoliko pogostejši v odzivih srbskih hotelov.

Ključne besede: Tripadvisor, odzivi vodstva, izražanje odnosa, primerjalna analiza

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1 Introduction[1]

The advent of Web 2.0 irrevocably changed the way we connect, communicate, and share information, in private and business contexts alike. In 2000, the Tripadvisor platform[2] pioneered the travel industry by offering travellers the unprecedented opportunity to share their reviews, opinions and photos of attractions and hospitality businesses (hotels, restaurants, etc.), while also allowing companies to respond to customers' praise or criticism. From a tourism and hospitality management perspective, user-generated reviews represent a powerful form of electronic word-of-mouth, as they play a significant role in motivating and informing travel decisions, as well as influencing purchase intentions (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). As Bonfanti, Vigolo, and Negri (2016, 398) put it, "online reviews can encourage or discourage travellers in visiting destinations and selecting hotels".

Hospitality businesses should therefore carefully manage their reputations online by "continuously engaging in dialogue with the customer, to protect their brand image" (O'Connor 2010, 768). Crucial here is the public nature of these business interactions, such that the responses given by hotel representatives, typically management, affect not only the customers who post the responses but can also influence other prospective customers who engage in reading them, especially during the travel planning stage (see Ho 2017a; Li, Cui, and He 2020). Indeed, hotel responses are potentially an effective way to increase review volume, which may ultimately increase future sales (Chen et al. 2019). This is all the more true for negative customer reviews, that is, those voicing criticism or complaints, due to their potentially "damaging effect on a hotel's reputation" (Levy, Duan, and Boo 2012, 50), principally because prospective customers are influenced to a greater extent by negative reviews than by positive ones (Ho 2017a, 2). The questions arising against this backdrop are "how to respond and how to do so effectively" (Sparks and Bradley 2017, 719). As regards designing effective responses, some useful insights stem from discourse-based analyses.

Managerial responses to negative online reviews (hereafter MRs) have proved to be a quite fruitful topic of linguistic inquiry. First undertaken only about a decade ago, research initially drew on aspects of genre theory, consistently pointing to the regularity and conventionality of the rhetorical organization of MRs (e.g. Ho 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Zhang and Vásquez 2014). The bulk of research has, understandably, addressed responses written in English, including cross-linguistic comparisons (e.g. English and Japanese in Morrow and Yamanouchi (2020)), with the focus recently shifting to responses written in other languages (e.g. Arabic (Al-Sager and Mahzari 2025)). Not infrequently, move-based analysis has been conflated with some other theoretical or conceptual frameworks (e.g. metadiscourse (Ho 2018, 2020), speech act theory (Morrow and Yamanouchi 2020), rapport management theory (Al-Sager and Mahzari 2025; Ho 2020)). Drawing on Ho's (2020) study, the "review response genre", to use the author's term, features a 10-move structure: Acknowledging Problem, Agreeing with Reviewer, Continuing Relationship, Expressing Feelings, Offering Assistance, Recognizing

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[2] See https://www.tripadvisor.com/.

Reviewer's or Comment's Value, Thanking Reviewer, Accusing Reviewer, Denying Problem, and Self-Promoting. Much in line with related research (Levy, Duan, and Boo 2012; Sparks and Bradley 2017; Zhang and Vásquez 2014), Ho (2017b) shows that Acknowledging Problem, Expressing Feeling, and Thanking Reviewer occur in most analysed responses (with a threshold set at 60%), making them obligatory moves, while the remaining ones are optional. The reason behind the dominance of this triad is that they are central rapport-enhancing moves. Specifically, approaching the genre from a rapport-management perspective, Ho (2017b, 2018, 2020) distinguishes between moves based on their central communicative function, categorizing them as either rapport-enhancing or rapport-challenging. The former attend to the reviewer's face needs, sociality rights, and interactional goals, whereas the latter do the opposite, threatening or ignoring these facets; thus, rapport-enhancing moves indicate that managers fulfil their obligations, while rapport-challenging ones signal their neglect of such responsibilities (Ho 2020, 71). Most moves, naturally, intend to improve the hotel's relationship with reviewers, with only three moves – Accusing Reviewer, Denying Problem, and Self-Promoting – classified as rapport-challenging (Ho 2020).

Besides speech acts (apologies (Hopkinson 2017; Morrow and Yamanouchi 2020) and expressives (Radovanović 2023)), a discourse-pragmatic feature that stands out for the amount of scholarly attention is metadiscourse (e.g. Ho 2018, 2020; Huang and Xiao 2024; Li, Cui, and He 2020; Zhou and Li 2023). This body of research, typically anchored in Hyland's (2005b) interpersonal model, demonstrates the immense importance of metadiscourse in producing appropriate MRs. Put succinctly, the ways managers employ these resources may enhance the effectiveness of their responses, as they aid in strengthening persuasive appeals to logos, ethos and pathos (see Sub-section 2.2), thereby helping managers to build rapport with dissatisfied customers, increase their trust, and restore the hotel's e-reputation (Ho 2018, 2020; Zhou and Li 2023).

The present study extends this line of research by focusing on an interrelated, but thus far neglected, concept: attitudinal stance. More specifically, it examines the grammatical markers used to convey "personal attitudes and feelings" (Biber et al. 1999, 974) in MRs. Given that prior research (Hopkinson 2017; Huang and Xiao 2024; Radovanović 2024) has consistently shown that pragmatic strategies and the use of linguistic resources tend to vary according to managers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, a comparative end is pursued. The aim is to identify attitudinal stance expressions in MRs and determine whether the use of these pragmatic markers differs between responses from UK- and Serbia-based hotels, representing native and non-native contexts, respectively. A further stimulus for the study comes from compelling evidence indicating marked variation in the use of stance expressions between the texts, particularly academic ones, by writers with different language user statuses (native vs non-native), as described below.

2 Theoretical Background

This section provides the theoretical basis for the study, outlining the central concepts and previous research that informed it, and presenting the framework applied in the ensuing analysis and interpretation of the findings.

2.1 Attitudinal Stance – Concept and Marking

The linguistic realizations of the writer's or speaker's (hereafter writer's) personal attitudes and emotions have long been of scholarly interest, with research set within several theoretical frameworks. While these linguistic resources have traditionally been dealt with under the heading of *affect*, as in Ochs and Schieffelin (1989), the term *attitude* has gained prominence in later related strands of research. Within appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005), attitude constitutes one of the three main sub-systems, alongside engagement and graduation. Engagement captures the ways in which resources position the speaker/writer with respect to other voices and value positions in the discourse; graduation concerns grading phenomena, and attitude refers to "our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behaviour and evaluation of things" (Martin and White 2005, 35–37). Thus, attitude comprises three semantic regions: affect, concerned with "registering positive and negative feelings"; judgement, dealing with "attitudes towards behaviour"; and appreciation, dealing with "evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena" (Martin and White, 2005, 42– 43). Attitude markers, likewise, belong to major interactional metadiscourse categories which essentially "involve the reader in the text" (Hyland 2005b, 49). Each of these theoretical positions on attitude contributes to the view of attitudinal stance endorsed here.[3]

Central to the current study are the grounding positions on stance laid out by Douglas Biber and colleagues (Biber and Finegan 1989; Biber et al. 1999; Biber 2006a, 2006b). The framework they provide for the analysis of stance applies a lexico-grammatical methodological approach, which makes it highly effective in corpus-based analyses of spoken and written texts (see Batchelor 2024; Gray and Biber 2014). Stance, in essence, refers to "the expression of personal feelings and assessments" (Conrad and Biber 2000, 57), and therefore comprises a multitude of lexical and grammatical markers of "attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message" (Biber and Finegan 1989, 93). Consistent with the central distinction between two major semantic domains for these markers – evidentiality and affect – stance was originally conceived of as a dual concept with two corresponding categories: epistemic stance and attitudinal stance (see Biber and Finegan 1989). Enriching the framework for the study of stance, the exhaustive corpus-based study of English grammar (LGSWE, Biber et al. 1999, 965–984) introduces the style of speaking as the third major domain. Style stance involves "describing the manner in which the information is being presented" (Conrad and Biber 2000, 57), that is, it comprises "the speaker's/writer's comments on the communication itself" (e.g. *honestly*) (Biber et al. 1999, 975). In that it differs from the two originally established categories, as they basically embody a distinction between two major facets of human experience: knowledge and emotivity.

Related to the former, epistemic stance is about "the status of information in a proposition", thus involving commenting on "certainty (or doubt), actuality, precision, or limitation", together with indicators of "the source of knowledge" (Biber et al. 1999, 972) (e.g. *probably*, *according to X*). Epistemic stance markers indicate the level of the writer's commitment to the propositional content, which entails further differentiation between hedges and boosters,

[3] For a detailed discussion on stance and overlapping notions, see Gray and Biber (2012).

as Hyland (2005a) proposes. Rather than the assessment of knowledge, attitudinal stance involves conveying "attitudes, evaluations and personal feelings or emotions" (Gray and Biber 2012, 17) (e.g. *unfortunately*, *angry*). The spectrum of attitudinal meanings is, of course, rather broad. Hyland (2005a, 180), for instance, observes that attitude markers convey "surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on". Furthermore, many linguistic devices do not pinpoint a precise affective meaning, yet typically convey a positive or negative attitude (Biber and Finegan 1989; Hyland 2005a; Martin and White 2005; Ochs and Schieffelin 1989).

The expression of personal stance involves various linguistic items, ranging from grammatical devices to affective or evaluative word choice. In the latter case, stance marking involves a single proposition and is usually implicit in that stance is inferred from the use of value-laden lexis. Many of the most frequently used words that indicate attitudes or emotions (e.g. *happy*, *like*) and evaluations (e.g. *good*, *need*) are used for lexical expressions of stance (Biber et al. 1999, 972). As such, they reflect underlying attitudes or feelings, but do not overtly express an evaluative frame for another proposition. In effect, almost any word could be seen as reflecting an evaluation, which makes operationalizing value-laden word choice extremely difficult, as Biber (2006b, 90) explicates. For these reasons, lexical stance marking is excluded from the study, thereby restricting it to explicit grammatical devices that function to express attitudinal meaning. That is, the focus is on stance marking that involves two components: a distinct grammatical structure used to express stance and a proposition framed by that stance (Biber et al. 1999, 969). Grammatical markers are typically grouped into three major structural categories: stance adverbials (single adverbs, prepositional phrases, comment clauses), stance complement clauses (*that*- and *to*- clauses controlled by stance adjectives, verbs, and nouns) and modal verbs (including semi-modals). In light of this, it seems reasonable to classify attitudinal stance markers into core grammatical categories, as done elsewhere (e.g. Ağçam 2015; Azher, Jehanagir, and Faiz 2019).

2.2 Previous Research

A considerable amount of corpus-based research has addressed grammatical stance-marking, often comparing devices across genres/registers, disciplines, modes and languages, with the greatest attention given to the language of the academy (for an extensive overview, see Gray and Biber 2012, 23–27). We now know that stance is "centrally important" in academic registers (Biber 2006b, 87), yet it is more frequent in oral than in written productions (Biber 2006b). Also, there are important differences in both the extent to which, and the devices through which, stance is expressed in research articles written by native and non-native English speakers (see, e.g. Al Fajri and Oktavianti 2024 and references therein), novice and expert writers (Larsson 2019), as well as (sub)disciplinary differences (e.g. between applied linguistics and literature (Alghazo et al. 2021)) and even variations within a single discipline over time (e.g. the use of *that*-complement clauses in tourism research articles (Godnič Vičič 2015)).

While most researchers have looked at stance features in their entirety, several studies have examined attitudinal stance markers independently. Generally, these studies closely mirror broader stance research in both focus and findings. In particular, comparing attitudinal stance marking in academic texts with respect to nativeness status has attracted particular interest.

Blagojević (2009) explored attitudinal stance in research articles from three disciplines (sociology, social psychology, and philosophy) written by English and Serbian authors. The results show that while more or less the same linguistic forms are used to express attitudes in the investigated languages, Serbian authors are more inclined to express their attitudes than their English peers. More to the point, this tendency is observed regardless of the language used, whether English or Serbian. These findings are largely echoed in similar research. For instance, Ağçam's (2015) study of attitudinal stance devices in doctoral dissertations written in English by native authors, Turkish-speaking authors and Spanish- speaking authors showed that these markers were overused by both groups of non-native writers, irrespective of their reliance on the same grammatical forms. In addition, disciplinary variations in the use of attitudinal stance markers have also been confirmed. As an illustration, Azher, Jehanagir, and Faiz's (2019) study of Pakistani university students' writing showed that writers in the humanities and social sciences are more inclined towards subjective and opinion-based discourse, expressing their attitudes more frequently than those in the hard sciences.

With regard to professional genres, expressions of attitude have mainly been explored as part of metadiscourse, or more frequently, as interactional resources (e.g. attitude markers in the shareholders' letters of US and mainland Chinese corporations (Lee 2021)). This holds true for the genre this study deals with, managerial responses (MRs). Research on stance markers in MRs is, to the best of my knowledge, practically non-existent, and therefore what may be relevant are the findings of the few studies exploring interactional metadiscourse, as they shed valuable light on the use of attitude markers. Notably, these studies posit strong links between these markers and the realization of persuasive goals, as indicated above, relying on the principles of persuasion introduced in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Hyland 2005, 64–65). Essentially, the model involves three central means of persuasion: ethos (the personal appeal of one's character, i.e., credibility), pathos (the appeal to emotions), and logos (the appeal to reason) (Hyland 2005, 64). In one of the first studies on the topic, Ho (2018) highlights the relevance of attitude markers, showing that effective responses contain more attitude markers, along with several other metadiscourse resources. By explicitly expressing the managers' attitudes and feelings towards events or objects, these markers allow managers to appeal to reviewers' emotions and are thus valuable for making credibility and affective appeals (Ho 2018). The persuasive effectiveness of metadiscourse, including attitude markers, has been further corroborated in subsequent research (e.g. Ho 2020; Zhou and Li 2023). Importantly, recent research indicates cross-cultural variations in the use of these markers. Comparing responses from Chinese and British hotels, Huang and Xiao (2024) show that respondents from Beijing hotels employ attitude markers more frequently, especially those revealing positive attitudes, which indicates that they place greater emphasis on expressing positive emotions such as gratitude, pleasure and hope.

2.3 Observing the Differences in Attitudinal Stance Marking

Concerning the above-mentioned tendency of Serbian writers to use more attitudinal stance markers, Blagojević (2009, 72) posits that it "is not easy to explain and all endeavours to account for it should include a variety of cultural, social, and psychological factors embedded in the two writing cultures". The matter seems to be complicated even further with MRs,

given the increasingly common practice in the hospitality industry of employing staff from different parts of the world (Hopkinson 2017; Zhang and Vásquez, 2014), and the fact that Tripadvisor offers no means of conclusively determining the respondent's nationality. While it is possible that the analysed responses were written by hotel representatives with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it is reasonable to assume that they were predominantly produced by native speakers of the respective languages (English and Serbian), adopting the criteria of nativeness commonly used in applied studies of academic discourse: (sur)name and affiliation, i.e. the hotel the representative belongs to. This allows us to take into account the potential influence of the native language (L1) in the case of responses from Serbian hotels, more specifically pragmatic transfer, which, in interlanguage pragmatics refers to "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of language sand cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information" (Kasper 1992, 207). In effect, MRs are designed for international customers, hence they may well be taken as instances of intercultural communication. Be that as it may, and as mentioned in the introduction, (pragma)linguistic and rhetorical choices have been shown to vary across the socio-cultural contexts in which the responses were produced. It has also been demonstrated (e.g. Radovanović 2023) that these cross-cultural variations can be better understood through the lens of Hofstede's (1983, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010) cultural model.

Developed to explain how nationality predisposes human feeling, thinking, and social action, this framework originally identified four (Hofstede 1983), expanding later to five, dimensions that shape values and behaviour in professional settings. These cultural value dimensions are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, and long- vs short-term orientation (Hofstede 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Empirically obtained national scores on specific dimensions have been shown to correlate closely with linguistic choices observed in MRs. For example, Serbia's relatively low score (25) on the individualism dimension is reflected in a more frequent use of first-person plural pronouns in MRs than in those from the UK, which, with an index of 89, is a perfect exemplar of an individualist society (Radovanović 2023, 283). Thus, the differences in stance-marking behaviour can plausibly be interpreted as reflecting different national cultural patterns. Specifically, attitudinal stance can be linked to the uncertainty avoidance dimension, which relates to "the extent to which a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations" (Hofstede 2001, xix). As Hofstede (1983, 59) maintains, societies that score high on the uncertainty avoidance scale are characterized by "more showing of emotions", as opposed to those with low scores on this dimension where people are less likely to express their emotions.

3 Corpus and Procedure

The corpus used for the analysis consists of 456 hotel responses written in English and manually searched for and retrieved from Tripadvisor, choosing, in line with Ho (2018, 2020), those with the ratings "terrible", "poor", and "average".[4] Half of these are from 3-, 4-, and 5-star hotels in three Serbian cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš), with none posted by a

[4] The process of corpus compilation is described in more precise details in Radovanović (2024).

native English speaker, taking the name of the undersigned employee as an indicator. These form the SrbMRs sub-corpus (25,954 words). The UKMRs sub-corpus (26,469 words) contains the same number of MRs from London hotels of the same categories. The initial idea was to include only responses from hotels located in capitals. However, this did not yield a sufficient number of responses for Belgrade hotels, so two other urban tourism destinations in Serbia were also included. The sub-corpora are closely comparable as they are identical in the number of responses of each specific rating from hotels of a particular category, yet cover different periods (2012–2022 and 2016–2022, respectively)[5], which was deemed irrelevant.

Once all irrelevant content (greetings and salutations, signatures, and contact details) had been removed, the Sketch Engine software (Kilgarriff et al. 2004) was used to compile and analyse the corpus. After obtaining the frequency wordlist, I conducted a concordance search in both sub-corpora for every relevant controlling word identified by Biber (2006a, 101–102; 2006b, 92–93) that could potentially serve as an attitudinal stance marker. Using the concordance tool, I examined each occurrence in a broader context to identify the instances, if any, as an attitudinal stance marker. In compliance with the above, only those items occurring in specific environments, i.e. explicit grammatical markers, were counted. By way of illustration, *great* in (1) was considered an attitudinal adjective, in contrast to *great* in (2), which was disregarded as it was not the grammatical controlling element of another proposition.

> (1) *It is **great** to know that you found our location convenient and we really hope you enjoyed your visit to* __. (UKMRs_31)
>
> (2) *We are usually known for our **great** customer service and attention to detail in everything that we do.* (SrbMRs_33)

For the same reason, I omitted from the analysis adverbs that modify the intensity of utterances, i.e. affect intensifiers (Ochs and Schieffelin 1989), although these have previously been treated as attitude markers in related studies (e.g. Blagojević 2009; Huang and Xiao 2024). These items were not included in Biber's (Biber and Finegan 1989; Biber et al. 1999; Biber 2006a, 2006b) research, which served as a starting point for this study, and moreover, they could be more appropriately assigned a boosting function (see Radovanović 2024). Consequently, this study deviates from related research on MRs, which makes the results not directly comparable.

After repeating the process for each item in both sub-corpora, the frequency counts for all identified instances were combined and classified into grammatical categories. To enable comparison, I applied frequency normalization, a commonplace procedure in corpus-based studies. The raw frequency (RF) of each category was normalized (normalized frequency – NF) by calculating the number of occurrences per 1,000 words (ptw). Finally, for both sub-corpora, I calculated the percentage of each category's frequency relative to the total number of attitudinal stance markers to determine a proportion of its use. To determine whether

[5] The difference in time spans also arises from the much greater presence of London hotels on the platform compared to Serbian ones. The need to achieve an exact match between the sub-corpora in terms of the number of responses and the types of hotels they come from resulted in considering a longer period for Serbian hotels (see Radovanović 2024 for details).

differences between the sub-corpora are statistically significant, *Lancaster University's web-based Log-likelihood and effect size calculator (UCREL)*, available at https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html, was used. This tool applies the form of log-likelihood calculation described in Rayson and Garside (2000). The analyses included log-likelihood results (LL), reported according to the significance level scale provided on the website, complemented with log ratio (LR) results, which indicate the effect size of the difference.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Attitudinal Stance in MRs

The analysis has identified 95 items used by hotel managers as attitudinal stance markers, listed in the Appendix.[6] It is, however, rather surprising that the responses from Serbian hotels display a slightly more extensive repertoire than those from British hotels (74 and 68 items, respectively), but the difference is not statistically significant (LL = 0.39, $p > 0.05$). Overall, the results point to the importance of attitudinal stance in the investigated genre, with 1,403 cases, or one marker every 37 words. This can be attributed to the features of the genre, particularly its highly formulaic nature, which relies on the reiterative use of fixed expressions, most of which contain attitude markers, as elaborated below. Table 1 shows the frequency of markers across grammatical categories in the two sub-corpora.

Table 1. Attitudinal stance markers in MRs.

	UKMRs			SrbMRs		
	RF	**NF**	**%**	**RF**	**NF**	**%**
Adverbials	23	0.86	2.93	27	1.04	4.38
Adjectives	327	12.35	41.60	212	8.17	34.36
Verbs	331	12.51	42.11	266	10.25	43.11
Nouns	87	3.29	11.07	80	3.08	12.96
Modal verbs	18	0.68	2.29	32	1.23	5.19
Total	786	29.69	100	617	23.77	100

As can be seen from the table, managers of UK hotels employ attitudinal stance markers more frequently than Serbian managers (29.69 vs 23.77).[7] The frequency is significantly higher in UKMRs than in SrbMRs (LL = 17.22, $p < 0.001$), but the difference is relatively small (LR = 0.32), suggesting that these markers are only slightly more characteristic of responses from British hotels. This leads us to believe that British hotel managers place greater emphasis on expressing emotions and attitudes, which is an unexpected result in light of the previous research presented above, particularly the findings of Blagojević's (2009) study. Even more importantly, this contradicts my initial expectations influenced by Hofstede's work on cultural values (2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Regarding the uncertainty

[6] With regard to verbs, the Appendix lists only the base forms.

[7] Unless stated otherwise, the numbers in brackets indicate normalized frequency, following the order used in the tabular presentation (UKMRs, SrbMRs).

avoidance dimension, the UK scores low (35), in contrast to Serbia that scores high (92), with the lowest recorded index being 8 and the highest 112 (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, 192–194). Therefore, one would expect emotional expression, and by implication, attitudinal stance, to be more pronounced in MRs from Serbian hotels.

The results pertaining to each category are presented and discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections, paying special attention to the similarities and differences between the sub-corpora.

4.2 Adverbials

Table 1 clearly shows that adverbs are a rather rare means of expressing attitudinal stance in MRs, slightly less preferred by British employees than by Serbian ones (0.86 vs 1.04). However, the difference is not statistically significant (LL = 0.40, $p > 0.05$), and the effect size is very small (LR = –0.26). Such low frequency might be expected since adverbial stance markers are significantly less common than other grammatical categories in most written genres (Biber et al. 1999). In addition, adverbial marking of attitudinal stance in my corpus comprises only nine items, all single-word adverbs, typically used in initial position, such as *unfortunately* and *hopefully* in (3) and (4). Conveying opposing affect, these two adverbs are the two most frequent attitudinal adverbs in both sub-corpora, while the remaining ones (e.g. *importantly*, *sadly*, *luckily*) are not used more than twice in either sub-corpus.

> (3) ***Unfortunately**, due to COVID 19 regulations issued by local government of Novi Sad, Thermal Zone is currently closed.* (SrbMRs_214)

> (4) ***Hopefully**, we will have a second opportunity to show you our real value.* (UKMRs_24)

We can see that adverbs of negative affect help managers sound more empathetic when providing explanations for the issues raised by customers, while positive affect adverbs add emotivity to attempts to restore good relations with the reviewer. Turning to the move structure of an MR, we observe here that attitudinal adverbs may help realize the rhetorical intent of two different moves: Acknowledging Problem and Continuing Relationship.

4.3 Adjectives

Adjectives controlling complement clauses are a particularly frequent means of expressing personal attitudes/emotions in MRs, admittedly considerably more so in UKMRs than in SrbMRs (12.35 vs 8.17). The difference in frequency is highly significant (LL = 22.52, $p < 0.001$), with a moderate effect size (LR = 0.60) indicating that adjectives as attitudinal stance markers are about 1.5 times more common in UKMRs. As the percentages in Table 1 show (41.60%; 34.36%), they are the second most preferred option for hotel managers from both countries. In this respect, MRs seem to resemble fiction and news, as these are the registers where complement constructions are quite common (Biber et al. 1999, 979). At the same time, adjectives are by far the most diverse category of attitudinal stance in MRs, comprising 47 items. They can be classified into three semantic groupings: adjectives that convey personal feelings and attitudes, i.e. attitude/emotion adjectives (e.g. *sorry*, *happy*, *glad*); adjectives that express personal judgements and qualifications, i.e. evaluation adjectives (e.g. *important*,

bad, *great*); and adjectives that express capability, intentionality, or volition with respect to propositions, i.e. ability or willingness adjectives (e.g. *determined*, *willing*).[8] The four adjectives that stand out for their high frequency in each sub-corpus are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. The most frequent adjectival markers of attitudinal stance in MRs.

UKMRs			SrbMRs		
adjective	**RF**	**NF**	**adjective**	**RF**	**NF**
sorry	152	5.74	sorry	93	3.58
happy	29	1.10	glad	36	1.39
pleased	29	1.10	happy	18	0.69
disappointed	25	0.94	delighted	9	0.35

It is evident from Table 2 that attitude/emotion adjectives dominate in both sub-corpora, with *sorry* being not only the most frequent item in this category but also the most frequently used attitudinal stance marker in both. This is hardly surprising as it is one of the lexical items characteristic of explicit apologies, such as (5), which are, viewed either as a rhetorical move in its own right (Zhang and Vásquez 2014), or as the sub-move (the Acknowledging Problem move in Ho 2017a, 2017b 2020), undeniably one of the key components of MRs (Ho 2020; Hopkinson 2017; Morrow and Yamanouchi 2020; Zhang and Vásquez 2014).

(5) *I am truly **sorry** to hear about your unpleasant experience.* (UKMRs_7)

Besides *sorry*, the only other adjective that denotes negative feelings/emotions in Table 2 is *disappointed*, while the others are positive emotion adjectives. As examples (6) and (7) illustrate, constructions with both positive (*delighted*) and negative (*upsetting*, *disappointing*) adjectives are an efficient means for managers to make known their affective attitudes towards the review and its content.

(6) *I am **delighted** you found our location attractive and at the same time it is upsetting to read you had experienced IT issues during your stay …* (UKMRs_197)

(7) *It is always **disappointing** to receive negative feedback.* (UKMRs_127)

Such instances, clearly associated with the Expressing Feelings move, help managers develop "an affective relationship and forming solidarity with reviewers" (Ho 2020, 75). The majority of adjectival markers in MRs, in fact, belong to attitude/emotion adjectives (11.77; 7.24), and thus serve this rhetorical purpose. Evaluation adjectives, exemplified by *weird* in (8), are far less common throughout the corpus (0.49; 0.77).

(8) *… and it is very **weird** that you are unsatisfied.* (SrbMRs_227)

This leads to the assumption that managers from both countries refrain from expressing a subjective viewpoint or evaluation about the reviewer's claims, especially criticism, as this might reflect badly on prospective cooperation. The least represented in the corpus are adjectives semantically related to willingness.

[8] Adjectives and verbs are grouped drawing on semantic classes provided in Biber (2006a; 2006b).

Finally, worth addressing is the issue brought to the fore by example (8), namely the choice of an inappropriate, or even inaccurate, stance marker. Specifically, the attitudinal stance construction in (8) appears to be a direct translation of the Serbian expression *jako je čudno*, which, coupled with the fact that this is the only instance of the adjective *weird* in the corpus, may imply a case of pragmatic transfer. Likewise, the use of its synonym *strange* in the same syntactic environment (*it is strange that...*) is also restricted to SrbMRs, as is the use of *regretful* with *that*-clause. Interestingly, both sub-corpora contain one instance of the adjective *regrettable* occurring in non-standard frame (*I/we BE regrettable to*-clause).

4.4 Verbs

The figures in Table 1 show that verbs are the central means hotel managers use to express attitudes/feelings, which makes MRs more similar to conversation than to academic prose (see Biber et al. 1999, 984). In both sub-corpora, over 40% of attitudinal stance instances belong to this category, with attitudinal verbs occurring at a lower rate in MRs from Serbian hotels (12.51 vs 10.25). While the difference is statistically significant (LL = 5.87, $p < 0.05$), the effect size is small (LR = 0.29). However, this category does not have a particularly wide range of items, involving only 21 verbs, and, as shown in Table 3, the two sub-corpora almost coincide in terms of the most preferred verbs.

Table 3. The most frequent verbal markers of attitudinal stance in MRs.

UKMRs			**SrbMRs**		
verb	**RF**	**NF**	**verb**	**RF**	**NF**
hope	124	4.68	hope	127	4.89
would like	50	1.89	would like	65	2.50
ensure	50	1.89	ensure	12	0.46
want	23	0.87	try	10	0.38

As with adjectives, the identified verbs can be roughly divided in the following groupings: verbs that describe emotional/attitudinal states, attitude verbs (e.g. *hope*, *sadden*, *regret*), verbs that refer to writers decision or intention regarding the action stated in the proposition (e.g. *agree*, *decide*), and verbs that indicate causation or effort (e.g. *try*, *strive*, *seek*). We can see at a glance that particularly frequent in both sub-corpora are the verbs that mark various kinds of affective attitude, conveying a positive stance towards the envisioned action stated in the *to*-clause. Thus, verbs such as *hope* in (9), *wish*, and *would love*, express the manager's optimistic expectation concerning the reviewer's revisiting the establishment, i.e. the move Continuing Relationship.

(9) *We **hope** to get the opportunity to welcome you back in the future and...* (SrbMRs_142)

Besides this, verbs such as *would like* and *want* often precede communication (illocutionary) verbs such as *inform*, *apologise* and *thank*, contributing an emotive overtone to rather routinized and fixed communicative acts (see Radovanović 2023). Alongside these, there are a few verbs that convey a negative stance (e.g. *regret*, *sadden*, *upset*), which, like negative affect adjectives, help managers express emotive reactions to the reviewer's dissatisfaction,

i.e. signal the move Expressing Feelings. As already pointed out (Huang and Xiao 2024), by using attitudinal markers like these, regardless of their affect polarity, hotel managers convey understanding towards customers in an empathetic way. Yet it is worth noting that attitudinal stance markers may also relate to rapport-challenging moves. A straightforward example is (8) above, linked to Denying Problem. Similarly, this seems to be the case with *strive* in (10), which, despite demonstrating the hotel's commitment to guest satisfaction, relates to Self-Promoting and as such may impede rapport development (Ho 2020).

(10) *We **strive** to give outstanding service to all our guests and...* (UKMRs_90)

4.5 Nouns

As seen from Table 1, nouns followed by *that-* and *to*-complement clauses, and *of* phrases, are comparatively rare attitudinal stance markers, which is another point of resemblance between MRs and news texts (Biber et al. 1999, 986). With this category, we observe the strongest similarity between the two sub-corpora, both in terms of frequency (3.29, 3.08), with a statistically insignificant difference (LL = 0.17, $p > 0.05$) and the negligible effect size (LR = 0.09), and the proportion of its use (11.07, 12.96). This indicates an almost identical use of nouns as attitudinal stance markers in the two sub-corpora. Further, in both sub-corpora, the same two nouns, *opportunity* and *pleasure*, are the most prominent among the 14 identified. The former quite commonly has the verb *hope* within its collocational range, as is shown in (9), adding to the forward-looking and encouraging attitude. It should be mentioned in connection with (9) that it is not uncommon in MRs for attitudinal markers to appear in close proximity to one another (see, for example, (1) above). Most of the other attitudinal nouns in the corpus share their uses with the morphologically related words discussed above (especially verbs and adjectives). By way of illustration, the following examples contain markers that belong to the same morphologically and semantically related lexical set.

(11) *It is with deep **regret** to read about your unsatisfactory experience you had during your stay with us...* (UKMRs_129)

(12) *…we **regret** that expectations were not met on this occasion.* (UKMRs_67)

(13) *…it is **regrettable** to read that you have left our hotel with such a negative impression.* (SrbMRs_70)

(14) ***Regretfully**, we are not able to reverse this unpleasant experience…* (SrbMRs_23)

Examples (11) to (14) serve the same rhetorical function, realizing the Acknowledging Problem move, but differ in the syntactic realization of the attitudinal stance marker (noun, verb, adjective, and adverb, respectively). They belong to the same word family and, despite semantic and functional similarity, are not fully synonymous variants. That is, they differ with regard the level of formality each can be associated with, with some being considered more informal than others, as Larsson (2019) claims. Thus, stance adverbs are more characteristic of informality, whereas stance complement clause constructions tend to be a feature of formal language (Larsson 2019).

4.6 Modal Verbs

The least represented attitudinal stance category in MRs consists of modal and semi-modal verbs conveying necessity and obligation, along with one instance of *be going to* expressing intention. Although they occur almost twice as frequently in the SrbMRs sub-corpus (0.68 vs 1.23), reaching a statistically significant difference (LL = 4.25, $p < 0.05$) with a moderate effect size (LR = –0.86), we again observe an exact match in the most common modals – *should*, *must*, and *have to*. Reflecting the manager's stance on the necessity of an action, they can be a useful means for reframing criticism by shifting the focus towards prospective enhancement, especially in the case of the Acknowledging Problem move such as (15).

(15) *Thank you for giving us notice on what we* ***should*** *improve and...* (SrbMRs_136)

In addition, *have to* and *must* tend to frame communication verbs (e.g. *admit*, *agree*, *apologise*), similar to some attitudinal verbs mentioned above, with the aim to increase the sincerity of a communicative act by highlighting the internal necessity for it.

5 Concluding Remarks

This study has explored attitudinal stance in managerial responses, seeking to compare the ways the managers of British and Serbian hotels exploit these markers when responding to negative online reviews. The study is certainly not devoid of any limitations, the most notable being the absence of another coder who would contribute to the reliability of the results. Nevertheless, it has hopefully shed additional light on attitudinal stance in written genres and provided some novel insights into managerial responses from a comparative perspective.

The results indicate that hotel managers from both countries quite commonly express attitudinal stance when responding to customers' complaints. The high frequency of markers in both sub-corpora (29.69; 23.77) aligns with the observation that stance is marked more frequently in written registers/genres with an interpersonal or persuasive purpose (Gray and Biber 2014, 220). Looking through the lens of the rhetorical organization of the investigated genre, attitudinal stance is associated with the realization of multiple moves shown to be rapport-enhancing (Ho 2020), most obviously Expressing Feelings, along with other moves mentioned in Section 4. By allowing managers to make their personal feelings and attitudes publicly known, these markers primarily aid in producing responses in a heartfelt and emotional manner. In terms of modes of persuasion, they address the pathos dimension and as such are vital ingredients in the written communication style characterized as "customer-focused" (Bonfanti, Vigolo, and Negri 2016). Relatedly, appealing to pathos is a meta-strategy for managing rapport (Ho 2020). It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that attitudinal stance plays an important role in achieving the overall communicative purpose of an MR, which may ultimately result in customer revisit intentions and brand commitment.

The analysis has, however, revealed that British hotel representatives employ attitudinal stance markers slightly more frequently than the managers of Serbian hotels, which may be somewhat unexpected. Yet there are marked similarities in the preference for particular grammatical categories. With the responses from British hotels, the frequency of use decreased

in the following order: verbs (12.51), adjectives (12.35), nouns (3.29), adverbials (0.86), and modal verbs (0.68). The ranking order in the Serbian sub-corpus is almost identical, except that the last two categories appear in reversed order. The results also show that British hotel managers tend to show greater reliance on adjectives and verbs, while modals and adverbs are slightly more common in responses given by Serbian hotel managers. This potentially paves the way for future research that could examine attitudinal stance in MRs written in Serbian to determine whether the observed differences arise from the influence of native language interference. This appears to be a promising academic endeavour, as research on managerial responses from an English-Serbian contrastive perspective is still lacking. Finally, this study has not considered the potential impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on Tripadvisor's professional communication. Therefore, as the reviewers have kindly suggested, focusing on the period before and after the pandemic might be a worthwhile direction for future research.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset supporting the findings of this study (Radovanović 2026) is openly acessible via Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20085395.

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Appendix

Attitudinal stance markers in managerial responses

aim $_{n.}$
aim $_{v.}$
attempt
believe
challenging
clear
common
concerned
confident
convinced
decide
delighted
determined
difficult
disappoint
disappointed
disappointing
disheartened
disheartening
displeased
eager
encourage
endeavour
ensure
excited
fortunate
glad
going to
good
grateful
great
happy
hard
have to
honoured
hope $_{n.}$
hope $_{v.}$
hopefully
important
importantly
intention
joy
keen
lack
lovely
luckily
mandated
must
naturally
necessarily
need to
objective
obliged
opportunity
pity
pleasant
pleased
privileged
proud
ready
reason
regret $_{n.}$
regret $_{v.}$
regretfully
regrettable
regrettably
sad
sadden
sadly
seek
shame
shocked
shocking
should
sorry
strange
strive
supposed
surprise
surprised
take aback
thrilled
try
unfortunately
unhappy
upset
upsetting
urge
want
weird
willing
wish
wonderful
would like
would love