The effects of language errors in service recovery communication on customers' hotel perceptions and booking intentions

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Abstract

Research in the field of marketing and crisis communication has shown that language errors negatively affect consumers' image of a company and their buying intentions. We extended this line of research to the hospitality industry. Using a between-subjects design, we tested whether language errors in a hotel response to a negative online guest review affect customers' perceptions of the hotel and their booking intentions in two service recovery contexts: a customer complaint regarding a service failure and a customer complaint which the hotel could not be held responsible for. The results show that language errors negatively influence customers' perceptions of the hotel's expertise, its reputation, and its trustworthiness and affect their booking intentions, irrespective of the type of complaints. Therefore, hotels should pay significant attention to avoid language errors in their online service recovery communication.

1.   Introduction

More and more people post their customer experiences on social network sites, weblogs, online discussion forums, and consumer review sites. This is also the case for travelers. Online reviews of travelers are considered to be an important source of travel information for (potential) customers (Everard & Galletta, 2005; Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2011). Studies also show that online hotel reviews of previous guests influence readers' perceptions towards the hotel and their booking intentions (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; Roozen & Raedts, 2018; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Online reviews by hotel guests can be seen as a gift or a threat for the hospitality industry. Hotel managers can use guest reviews as a useful information source to improve their services for future guests (Gursoy, Ekiz, & Chi, 2007), but at the same time, negative reviews can easily damage a hotel's reputation (Fernandes & Fernandes, 2018). Furthermore, it is important for hotel managers to set up effective response strategies as part of their service recovery strategy (Sparks & Bradley, 2017).

For many hotel managers, responding effectively to negative online guest reviews remains a communicative balancing act (Dens, De Pelsmacker & Purnawirawan, 2015; Li, Cui, & Peng, 2017; Park & Allen, 2013; Sparks, So, & Bradley, 2016). The effectiveness of the management response is related to various factors, such as personalization of the answer (Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015; Roozen & Raedts, 2018; Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013; Zhang, Li, Meng, & Li, 2019), using a human voice (Sparks et al., 2016), and response speed (Cui, & Peng, 2017; Min et al., 2015; Sparks et al., 2016).

Speedy hotel management reactions to negative guest reviews sometimes come with a downside. If writers are in a hurry, they may overlook typos and language errors in their own texts. Research

shows that even letter-level and word-level mistakes in online and offline marketing communication negatively affect readers' perceptions of the writer and the persuasive power of the text (Habtay, McCallum, & Gujral, 2013; Jansen, 2010; Jansen & De Roo, 2012; Jansen & Janssen, 2016; Kloet et al. 2003; Mozafari, El-Alayi, Kunemund, & Fry, 2019).

Many online resources with practical guidelines for managing responses to (negative) guest reviews (e.g., guessttouch.com, hospitality.net, travelmediagroup.com, hotelminder.com) underline that a hotel's reply to a guest review should be free of any spelling and grammatical errors. According to Heywood (2015) correct use of spelling and grammar in a hotel response is one of the elements readers use to judge the hotel's professionalism. Research on the impact of language errors in hotels' responses to guest reviews, however, has remained unexplored by researchers that focus on reputation recovery strategies in the hospitality industry.

This study tries to fill that research gap. It complements previous research on hotel response strategies to negative customer online reviews in two ways. First, we examined the impact of language errors on business reputation in a service recovery communication in the hospitality industry. Previous studies found that multiple language errors in business communication influence readers' perceptions of business competence and trustworthiness (Everard & Galletta, 2005; Jansen, 2010; Raedts & Roozen, 2015; Jansen & Jansen, 2016). In some cases, language errors also had a negative impact on readers' interests in using the advertised business' service (Mozafari et al., 2019) or their willingness to buy the company's products (Everard & Galletta, 2005; Raedts & Roozen, 2015). We sought to examine whether the same negative effects might hold true for readers of error-laden hotel responses on e-reviews posted by dissatisfied guests. Another contribution to past research is the inclusion of the service recovery context as a potential factor. Based on Rose and Blodgett's (2016) findings on the moderating role of the type of guest

complaint on a hotel's reputation, we expected that language errors in management responses to guest reviews about service failures that stem from an external uncontrollable factor, have less impact on readers' hotel perceptions and booking intentions than language errors in management responses to guest reviews based on an internal service failure.

In an experimental between subjects setting, we analyzed the effects of language errors (i.e. word conjugation errors, and ill-constructed sentences) in a hotel management response on readers' perceptions of the hotel (i.e., its competence and trustworthiness) and on their booking intentions. In addition, we examined whether the alleged negative effects of language errors differ depending on the type of guest complaint. We compared two reputation recovery contexts (cf. Rose & Blodgett, 2016). In the first context, the hotel guest's complaint was related to an issue that was not under the control of the hotel management (i.e. bad weather during the stay). In the second reputation recovery context, the guest complained about a controllable hotel service failure (i.e. used towels of the previous guests were not replaced). We expected that language errors have a larger negative impact in the latter context, because the hotel once again fails to provide an error-free customer service.

2.   Literature review and research questions

eWOM in the hospitality industry

The way people share opinions about products or service experiences with each other has rapidly changed over the last decades (Cheung & Thadani, 2012): from interpersonal word-of-mouth (WOM) within people's limited network of friends, family, and colleagues to various forms of

electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) between "a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Because of the easy access to the internet and the variety of posting platforms, eWOM content is relatively simple to produce (Chen & Xie, 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Not only customers who buy tangible products, but also many hotel guests share their positive and negative experiences on the internet (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013). A popular eWOM platform for travelers is TripAdvisor, which allows visitors to seek, compare and share information about hotels throughout the world (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; O'Connor, 2010; Sparks & Browning, 2010). TripAdvisor monthly has over 490 million visitors who can consult over 730 million reviews (TripAdvisor, 2019a). A large-scale survey among more than 23.000 users of the travel website revealed that 81% always or frequently read reviews before booking an accommodation (TripAdvisor, 2019b). These figures are in line with Mauri and Minazzi (2013) who found that 75% of their respondents consulted online reviews before booking a hotel.

The impact of negative guest reviews on travelers' booking intentions

The impact of online guest reviews on travelers' booking intentions has been demonstrated by numerous researchers (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Litvin et al., 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Tsao, Sieh, Shih, & Lin, 2015; Zhao, Wang, Guo, & Law, 2015). Moreover, studies show that potential consumers have lower attitudes towards the hotel and lower booking intentions after reading negatively framed reviews (Casado-Díaz, Andreu, Beckmann, & Miller, 2020). Therefore, the influence of online reviews, especially negative online reviews, should not be underestimated by hotel managers (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Fernandes & Fernandes, 2018; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Roozen & Raedts, 2018; Rose & Blodgett, 2016; Sparks & Bradley 2017).

Although research has shown that any response is better than no response, there is still a great number of hotel managers who choose not to respond to negative guest reviews (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Fernandes & Fernandes, 2018; Jones, Stevens, Breazeale, & Spaid, 2018; Sparks et al., 2016). Ignoring negative online reviews, however, can affect potential guests' perceptions about the hotel, especially when the service failures pertain to controllable factors (Rose & Blodgett, 2016). Content analyses show that it is precisely this type of complaints that occurs most frequently in guest reviews. A lack of cleanliness is, for example, a common complaint in online guest reviews (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Fernandes & Fernandes, 2018; Kim, Kim, & Heo, 2016; Levy, Duan, & Boo, 2013; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Sparks & Bradley 2017; Xu & Li, 2016). The negative behavior and conducts of hotel staff towards guests is another common guest dissatisfier (see e.g., Kim, Kim, & Heo, 2016; Levy, Duan, & Boo, 2013; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Xu & Li, 2016). Hotel managers should be particularly attentive to these kinds of guest complaints, because staff friendliness is related to guest loyalty (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Fernandes & Fernandes, 2018; Zheng, Youn & Kincaid, 2009).

Just as it is important to handle complaints in offline situations, this is also the case in an online environment. Negative online hotel reviews are consulted by a great number of potential customers, so it is important that the management takes these reviews seriously (O'Connor, 2010; Sreejesh, Anusree, & Abhilash, 2019). Despite the fact that reviews with guest complaints cannot be erased, online platforms provide a tool which makes it possible for managers to interact with their customers. Gu and Ye (2014) found that managerial responses increase the satisfaction of the complainants. Hence, managerial responses to online (negative) reviews can be seen as an online service recovery or webcare strategy (Dens et al., 2015).

Effective online service recovery strategies

Hotel managers should implement effective online service recovery communication strategies. However, the main question remains how hotels should respond to e-complaints. Experimental studies identified various adequate reputation and recovery strategies (Dens et al., 2015). Min et al. (2015) concluded that managerial responses to negative online guest reviews containing an empathy statement (e.g., 'so, sorry to read this') and a paraphrase of the complaint led to more favorable evaluations of the hotel's response. Wei, Mia, and Huang (2013) found that specific hotel responses (i.e. responses that address issues raised by the guest in the review) were rated higher than generic or standardized hotel responses. The impact of the hotel's communication strategies, however, goes beyond text evaluations. Sparks, Fung So, and Bradley (2016) found that hotels which respond to online guest complaints in a conversational human voice style are perceived as more trustworthy and more concerned about their customers than hotels who answer in a more standard corporate style, i.e. "respectful, formal, and task-oriented, but limited in affective content" (Sparks et al., 2016, p. 77). Roozen and Raedts (2018) concluded that personalized managerial responses to reviews with both positive and negative hotel attributes positively affect customers' perceptions about the hotel and their WOM and booking intentions. Furthermore, the majority of customers expect that hotels respond quickly (i.e. within 24 hours) to their online reviews (Sterling, 2018). Min et al. (2015), however, found no effect of response speed on consumers' satisfaction scores for the hotel response itself. Yet, there is empirical evidence that a timely hotel response positively influences potential guests' perceptions of hotel trustworthiness and customer concern (Sparks et al., 2016). "Speedy response signals that hotels care about customers' comments and make conscientious efforts to address their concerns" (Li et al., 2013, p. 48). Besides, "an immediate response helps to clarify any ambiguity and minimize any confusion

raised by customer reviews and enables future travelers to quickly structure their expectations of accommodation experience" (Li et al., 2013, p. 48).

Effects of language errors in business communication

Hotel employees responsible for web communication are expected to perform effectively in service delivery and complaint-handling processes. However, employees in the hospitality industry not only work irregular shifts and long working hours causing stress and physical and emotional fatigue (Lo & Lamm, 2005; Lee, Moon, Lee & Kim, 2014), they also have to face tight deadlines, which means that writing flawless hotel responses to online guest complaints is not self-evident.

Do hotels have to worry about language errors in their online recovery communication? The answer to that question is affirmative based on the Language Expectancy Theory (LET) of Burgoon & Miller (1985). The Language Expectancy Theory "assumes that language is a rule-governed system and that people develop macro-sociological expectations and preferences concerning the language or message strategies employed by others in persuasive attempts" (Burgoon, Denning, & Roberts, 2002, p. 120). In any communicative situation, people hold expectations about what is appropriate language and what is not. These language expectations vary according to the communicator (e.g., age, social status, credibility), the relationship between the receiver and the communicator (e.g., status equality), and the context in which the message is given/received (e.g., informal or formal). Text deviations will affect readers' attitudes and behaviors towards the sender (Burgoon et al., 2002). Furthermore, when a message does not meet the receivers' linguistic expectations, it loses its persuasive power, resulting in either no attitude change or even the opposite effect of what the sender wanted to attain (Burgoon et al., 2002).

Readers expect hotel responses to be written with due care and diligence, and thus to be error-free. Violations of these expectations will affect their image of the writer/company because readers project the deficiencies in the text onto the sender (Kloet et al., 2003). For example, violations of language rules (e.g., grammar and spelling errors) can evoke negative impressions about the writer's intelligence and skills (Figueredo & Varnhagen, 2005; Kreiner et al., 2002), and his trustworthiness (Mozafari et al., 2019). Readers of an error-laden hotel response to a guest review could assume that the hotel staff is not competent and trustworthy. These potential customers might even decide to look for another hotel. The size of these effects could depend on the service recovery context. Readers' impressions about the hotel might differ between hotels responding to a guest complaint that shows sloppiness in the way the hotel is run, and hotels responding to a guest complaint they have no control over such as traffic or the weather. When a hotel response to a guest complaint about an internal service failure contains language errors, readers of that response might build a more negative impression of the hotel because the hotel is once again failing in its guest service.

Various experimental studies within the field of marketing communication have shown that language errors negatively affect the perceptions of potential customers. Mozafari et al., (2019) examined the effects of spelling and grammar errors in an advertisement for a white collar service (a computer memory upgrade) and a blue collar service (a car oil change). They found that potential customers saw the business, its services and employees as inferior when the ad contained multiple language errors. In the experiment of Everard and Galetta (2005) typographical errors and spelling errors on the webpages of a fictitious online bookstore affected visitors' perceived quality of the online store's website, which in turn resulted in lower store trust scores, and subsequently in lower intentions to purchase from the online store. Janssen and Janssen (2016)

found that verb conjugation errors in a sponsor letter affect the letter's persuasiveness. Finally, two experiments by Jansen (2010) showed that spelling, verb conjugation errors and ill-constructed sentences in a direct mail negatively influenced readers' perceptions about the text and the writer. Research in the field of crisis communication by Raedts and Roozen (2015) shows that typos, verb conjugation errors, and ill-constructed sentences in a product recall advertisement lower readers' perceptions about both the recall ad and the company that issues the recall action. Readers who detected ill-structured sentences in the ad, also had more negative perceptions about the brand's products and were less likely to buy products from the company that organized the recall. Just like a company that is facing a recall action because of product quality issues, a hotel that receives one or more negative online guest reviews, has to regain (potential) customers' trust through reputation repair communication. In these conditions, posting an effective and appropriate hotel management response is of utmost importance.

Based on the literature review the two main research questions of this study were formulated:

RQ1. Do language errors in a managerial response to a negative online review negatively affect consumers' perceptions of the hotel, and does this negative impact depend on the service recovery context?

RQ2. Do language errors in a managerial response to a negative online review negatively affect consumers' intention to book the hotel, and does this negative impact depend on the service recovery context?

Based on previous research on the effects of language errors, our dependent variable (i.e. consumers' perceptions of the hotel) was broken down into the following variables: 'hotel quality' (measure of business *expertise*) and 'hotel trustworthiness' (measure of business *credibility*). The literature showed that the perceptions related towards the credibility of a business are often measured by the trustworthiness of the message of the sender (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Roozen & Raedts, 2017, Sparks et al., 2016) and perceptions related towards the expertise are measured by the attitude towards the quality of the message of the sender (Everard and Galetta, 2005; Park et al. 2007; Roozen & Raedts, 2018). Furthermore, based on the Language Expectancy Theory, we also added the variable 'hotel *reputation*' as a dependent variable under the umbrella of consumers' perceptions towards the hotel, because hotel responses to negative online guest reviews are a form of reputation management (Jani & Han, 2014; Kloet et al., 2003; Rose & Blodgett, 2016).

In Figure 1 an overview of the research design is presented with the two independent variables of the experimental setting (type of guest complaint in the online hotel review and service recovery communication strategy) and the two dependent variables, i.e. consumers' perceptions of the hotel and their booking intentions.

{insert Figure 1 about here}

3.   Research method

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Pre-test I

In order to create authentic-like language errors in the online hotel management responses, we first conducted a content analysis of managerial responses on TripAdvisor. We selected the platform TripAdvisor because it is a powerful online marketing tool in the hospitality industry for the perceptions and booking intentions of (potential) customers (Fernandes & Fernandes, 2018). The content analysis of 130 selected hotel responses of 40 different hotels on positive and negative online reviews, revealed a total of 182 typos (an average of 1.42 'language' errors per management response, with a maximum of 10 errors in one single hotel management response). Most of the language errors were typos (42.39%), verb conjugation errors (20.11%), and 15.76% were ill-constructed sentences errors.

Pre-test II

Furthermore, we conducted a second pre-test to select the stimuli for the experiment: the complaints in the guest reviews and the language errors in the managerial responses. Based on content analyses (e.g., Kim, Kim, & Heo, 2016; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Xu & Li, 2016) about dissatisfiers in online hotel reviews, we created five reviews with the following common guest complaints: bad weather during stay, noisy neighbor guests, unsmiling staff, no clearing of the breakfast table, and towels from previous guests still hanging in the bathroom. The first two complaints cannot be resolved by hotels. These are external uncontrollable factors. The last three complaints are issues that hotels can avoid. Participants were asked to read the negative online hotel reviews, and score the following statements on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree): 'The hotel owes the negative review to itself' and 'For me, the guest's complaint in the review is a decisive factor in my decision whether or not to book a hotel'. Next, participants were

confronted with five managerial responses to the guests' reviews. One of the five managerial responses contained two ill-constructed sentences, another managerial response contained two typos, and two other managerial responses contained two verb conjugation errors. For each of the error-laden managerial responses, participants indicated on a 5-point Likert scale how annoying they found the language errors in the text. Finally, we asked respondents if they knew TripAdvisor, and had already used the platform in their decision-making process when booking a hotel.

A total of 25 participants completed the second pre-test. All participants indicated that they knew TripAdvisor, and two out of three (66,7%) had already consulted reviews on the platform before booking a hotel.

Table 1 shows the average scores on both items (hotel blame and letdown on hotel choice) for the five guest complaints. The findings show that the average scores for the complaint about the bad weather conditions and the complaint about used towels in the bathroom differed significantly on both the hotel blame item ($F[1, 24] = 970.313, p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .977$) and the letdown item ($F[1, 24] = 64.828, p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .738$). Complaint 1 (bad weather) received the lowest average score on the question whether the hotel was to blame for the negative comments, whereas complaint 5 (used towels of previous guests that were left in the bathroom) received the highest blame scores. On the question wether the complaint mentioned in the guest review is a letdown in hotel choice, bad weather conditions received the lowest averages scores and the used towels the highest scores.

{insert Table 1 about here}

As far as the errors in the managerial responses are concerned, we found no significant differences between annoyance scores for typos, verb conjugation errors and ill-constructed sentences: $F[1, 24] = .270$, $p = .608$; $\eta_p^2 = .012$. The average annoyance score for the typos was 3.62 on a scale of 5 (SD = 1.09). The annoyance scores for the ill-constructed sentences and verb conjugation errors ranged from 4.00 (SD = .87) to 4.14 (SD = .94).

Based on the findings of the pre-test we decided to select the first review (i.e. complaint about bad weather) and fifth review (i.e. complaint about dirty towels in the bathroom) for our experiment. With regard to the managerial responses, we decided to include two verb conjugation errors and one ill-constructed sentence in the error-laden management response in the hope that at least one of the errors would be noticed by the participants.

Experimental design

Our experiment had a 2 (the hotel management could have avoided the guest complaint versus the hotel can't be blamed for the guest dissatisfier) x 2 (error-free versus error-laden management response) between subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

Text materials

Based on our pretest-findings we constructed two versions of the TripAdvisor guest review: a version in which the guest complained about bad weather conditions and a version in which the guest complained about used bathroom towels. Both complaints were also mentioned in the title of the guest review ('Rain holiday' and 'Used bathroom towels'). Both reviews were written on

the same date by 'Kim' (a gender-neutral name) who gave the hotel an overall rating score of 2. The review started with two positive elements about the hotel (hotel facilities and spacious room), and ended with the guest complaint. The text of both reviews was identical, except for the guest complaint. Based on the research of Wang, Wang, and Yao (2019) we formulated relatively moderate reviews (rating score of 2 out of 5) instead of an extreme review (1 out of 5) because moderated reviews are evaluated as more helpful. The managerial response in all experimental conditions contained the same information in the same order, and used the following service recovery strategies: personalised answer ('Dear Kim'), thanking guest for writing review, showing empathy, and paraphrasing the guest's complaint. The managerial response in both error laden conditions contained two verb conjugation errors and one ill-structured sentence (see Figure 2 of the text material used in condition 1 and condition 4).

{insert Figure 2 about here}

Measures

We collected our data through an online Qualtrics survey. After the introductory page, participants were presented with one version of the online hotel review (complaint about bad weather or complaint about used towels) followed by an error-free or an error-laden version of the managerial response (see Figure 2).

Next, we measured participants' perceived hotel quality using 4 items based on McCroskey and Teven (1999): *This hotel … 'is of a high quality', 'is very good', 'is definitely a good choice' and 'offers a good experience'* ($\alpha = .94$). The perceived trustworthiness of the hotel was measured with

two items based on Sparks and Browning (2011): *'This is a reliable hotel'* and *'This is a trustworthy hotel'* ($r = .829$, $p < .001$). Participants' perception of the hotel's reputation was measured with the following items from Jani and Han (2014): '*The reputation of this hotel is good' and 'The overall image of this hotel is good'* ($r = .881$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, we measured booking intentions by asking our participants to indicate their intentions to (1) consider the hotel, and (2) book the hotel if it was at their holiday destination (based on Roozen & Raedts, 2018, $\alpha = .94$). All items were measured on 7-point scales.

In the following section of the survey, we asked our participants if they had noticed any language errors in the hotel feedback (yes/no) and if so, whether they could identify the type of language error among the following list: 'verb-errors', 'typos' or 'ill-constructed sentences'. Both questions served as manipulation check. In the last section of the questionnaire, we asked our participants whether they knew TripAdvisor, and how often they used the platform (regularly, sometimes, never). The questionnaire ended with sociodemographic questions about gender, educational level and age. The average time to complete the survey was 6.41 minutes (SD = 2.57).

4.   Research results

Sample

We collected our data with the support of Prolific Academic. In total 263 Dutch-speaking participants (132 men and 131 women) completed the survey. Their average age was 28.54 years (SD = 9.54; min. 20; max. 73 years). The majority of the respondents held a university degree (with 38.0% holding a master's degree and 36.4% a bachelor's degree), 21.7% graduated from

high school, and 3.9% only finished primary school. All respondents knew TripAdvisor. Almost four out of ten (38.4%) used the platform regularly, 46.5% sometimes and 15.1% never.

Table 2 displays the distribution of the participants across the experimental conditions. There were no significant differences between the different experimental groups in terms of gender and age (χ^2_{gender} [3] = 3.281; p = .350; F_{age} [3; 254]= .094, p = .964).

{insert Table 2 about here}

Manipulation check

Before we started our analysis, we performed a quality check on the data. We verified whether participants had answered the questions about the presence/absence of language errors in the managerial responses correctly. Most participants (72.2%) who read the error-laden text version indicated that they had seen language errors (verb errors and/or an ill-structured sentence). However, almost 30% of participants who were exposed to the error-free version of the managerial response, also indicated they had noticed one or more typos, verb errors or ill-constructed sentences in the hotel's response. Because this study investigated the effects of language errors in managerial response, all participants with an incorrect answer on the manipulation check questions (n = 76) were excluded from further analyses (cf. Raedts & Roozen, 2015).

Results

Table 3 presents an overview of the average scores on the dependent variables across the four experimental conditions. Scores are lowest for the condition in which the participants saw a review

with a guest complaint about a controllable service failure and an error-laden hotel response. For example, the average score on reputation is 3.40 (SD 1.14), expertise is 3.58 (SD 1.06) and credibility is 4.61 (SD 1.25) on a 7 point scale, also the average score for the intention to book this hotel is relatively low 3.41 (SD 1.28). Whereas scores are highest for the condition in which the participants saw a review with a guest complaint about an external uncontrollable factor and an error-free hotel response. The average score on reputation is 5.73 (SD 1.10), expertise 5.47 (SD 0.89) and credibility is 5.88 (SD 0.91) and the average score for the intention to book this hotel is relatively high 4.61 (SD 1.16). In addition, scores for all four dependent variables are lower in the two experimental conditions in which participants read an online review in which the guest complained about a controllable internal service failure. Moreover, participants who read the review about the used towels, had less positive perceptions about the hotel and lower booking intentions if they had read an error-laden hotel response. We see the same pattern in the data among participants who read a guest review with a complaint about an uncontrollable (bad weather) factor.

{insert Table 3 about here}

A MANOVA was used to answer our two research questions and examine the effects of the two independent factors (i.e., type of guest complaint in the hotel review and the absence/presence of language errors in the hotel's response) on the four dependent variables. The analyses revealed a significant main effect of type of complaint on perceived hotel quality ($F[1, 182] = 75.022$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .292$), perceived hotel credibility ($F[1, 182] = 23.164$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .113$), perceived hotel reputation ($F[1, 182] = 79.939$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .305$), and booking intentions ($F[1, 182] =$

19.774; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .098$). Participants who had read a review with a complaint about a controllable internal service failure, had less positive perceptions about the hotel and were less likely to book a room in the hotel. We also found a main effect of language errors in the hotel's answer on perceived hotel expertise (F[1,182] = 16.784; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .082$); perceived hotel credibility (F[1,182]= 9.140, $p = .003$; $\eta^2 = .048$; perceived hotel reputation (F[1,182] = 19.085; p <.001; $\eta^2 = .095$), and the intention to book the hotel (F[1,182] = 4.325; $p = .039$; $\eta^2 = .023$). The scores of the dependent variables decreased significantly if the hotel reaction contained language errors. Because the context of the service recovery is highly significant compared to the language errors, no significant interactions were found between type of complaint in the guest review and the absence/presence of language errors in the hotel's response in relation with the four dependent measures. In Figure 3 the results of the analyses are visualized. The significant main effect of the two factors are clearly visible (also the reliability interval indicated in Figure 3 shows the significant differences between the conditions).

{insert Figure 3 about here}

Overall, the results show that professionally error-free service recovery communication of the hotel management significantly increases the perceptions towards the hotel and the intentions to book the hotel. Moreover, Table 4 shows that when a guest complains about an internal service failure, extra attention (i.e. an error-free online managerial response) significantly boosts the reputation (+20.29%), expertise (+16.76%) and credibility (+10.20%) of the hotel, next to the intention to book the hotel (14.08%).

5.   Conclusion and Discussion

The literature shows that negative and positive evaluations of hotel attributes in online customer reviews significantly influence travellers' decision-making processes. Research indicates that *personalized* written online responses of the management on online guest reviews ('the service recovery communication strategy' of the hotel), significantly increase the perceptions and booking intentions of the hotel (Min et al., 2015; Roozen & Raedts, 2018; Wei et al., 2013). However, research also shows that extra fatigue and stress related factors are significantly high among hotel workers (Lee et al., 2014; Lo & Lamm, 2005), and the need to quickly draft management responses is relatively high (Li et al., 2013; Sterling, 2018), which in turn often leads to language errors. We detected an average of 1.42 typographical, orthographical and grammatical errors in a corpus of 130 hotel responses on TripAdvisor. The guideline of hospitality organizations and communication experts to carefully proofread the text before posting it online, does not always seems feasible in practice. According to Heywood (2015), the correct use of spelling and grammar in a hotel response is one of the elements readers use to judge a hotel's professionalism. Research on the impact of language errors in hotels' responses to guest reviews, however, has, to our best knowledge, remained unexplored by researchers that focus on reputation recovery strategies in the hospitality field.

To address this research gap we examined the effects of language errors in the service recovery communication strategy of the hotel management. We studied these effects in two webcare contexts: in the first context the hotel was faced with a guest complaint it was unable to resolve (bad weather); in the second context the guest complained about an internal service failure

(cleanliness of the room). Based on earlier research (Wang et al. 2019), we used relatively moderate reviews (rating score of 2 out of 5). In both contexts language errors had a significantly negative effect on readers' perceptions of the expertise, the credibility, the reputation of the hotel and on their booking intentions. In other words, the hotel management not only has to write *personalized* responses, but their webcare strategy must also be *flawless* to satisfy the requirements of an effective online service recovery communication strategy.

The findings of our study are in line with previous research on the negative effects of language errors on the persuasiveness of print ads (Mozafari et al., 2019), online web shops (Everard & Galletta, 2005) and product recall ads (Raedts & Roozen, 2015). Our study, like that of Raedts and Roozen (2015) has shown that language errors in a text that was intended to restore a company's image undermine its persuasive power. The product recall ad in the study of Raedts and Roozen (2015) had to restore consumer confidence for a tangible and inexpensive product (pizzas). Our study shows that language errors also reduce the persuasive power of image repair communication for expensive services (i.e. hotel stays).

Besides, in previous studies on the negative effects of language errors in business communication, the presence or absence of language errors in the text was the only independent variable. Hence, participants in those studies built their perceptions of the company based on one ad (Mozafari et al., 2019; Raedts & Roozen, 2015) or one website text (Everard & Galletta, 2005) that was either error-free of error-laden. We used a more complex research design in which participants read two texts: a guest review and a hotel response to that review. In the first text we manipulated the information about the company's customer service quality. In this way, we were able to examine the role of this factor in the persuasion process.

In absolute value the effects of language errors in the hotel response were even worse when the complaints described in the online guest review discussed an internal service failure (the average scores are lower in this context) compared to the complaints about uncontrollable and, therefore, external service failures. The stronger negative effects of language errors in the internal service failure condition can be accounted for by the Language Expectancy Theory (Burgoon & Miller, 1985; Burgoon et al., 2002). Because the hotel in the internal service failure condition had already failed at least once in its guest service, the sloppy language in its service recovery communication strengthened readers' negative impressions about the hotel.

Our study also shows that almost 3 out of 4 persons detected the language errors in the managerial responses. This indicates that most of the readers of online hotel reviews definitely notice the errors in online management responses which significantly decreases their perceptions of the hotel and their booking intentions.

Furthermore, our findings emphasize the importance of an error-free and personally written managerial response on a *negative* online review as an online service recovery communication strategy. Managers should not only incorporate the online service recovery communication strategy as part of their duties, but it should be part of their job description to carefully read the negative evaluations of their customers and develop a personalized managerial response without any language errors. Hence, managers should carefully reread their responses before posting them. Also, the findings of Rose and Blodgett (2016), suggest that the service recovery strategy on e-complaints based on controllable factors of the hotel should be top priority for hotel managers. They indicated that a managerial response is in *any* case favorable for the hotels' image. Furthermore, the study of Bhandari and Rodgers (2018) illustrates that feedback of a company on product-attributed problems by customers has a positive and indirect impact on purchase intention

and brand trust. It may, therefore, be in the hotel's best interest to put the online service recovery strategy high on the communication agenda of the hotel. Because this pressure on the management responses is relatively high and with the - often - extra fatigue and stress related factors among hotel workers (Lo & Lamm, 2005; Lee, Moon, Lee & Kim, 2014), we suggest that this task should get extra priority in the job description of the hotel management. Hotel managers should, therefore, consider designating a specific team and/or put quality control checks in place. Moreover, our content analysis (our first pre-test) shows that language errors are a common phenomenon ~~on TripAdviso~~r, and that all different errors are evaluated as highly *annoying* and should be avoided as much as possible. Therefore, we can conclude that language errors can deteriorate the service recovery communication strategy.

Furthermore, we found that an online service recovery communication strategy, i.e. a professionally well written management response, cannot fully rectify a negative online review, but it can significantly increase readers' perceptions of the reputation, expertise, and credibility of the hotel, and their intentions to book the hotel.

6. Limitations and future research

Despite the contributions of this study, there are several limitations. First, our research ~~is~~ focused on negative guest reviews and their managerial responses. However, the literature also shows the importance of the service recovery strategy with regard to positive and or mixed online reviews (Roozen & Raedts, 2018; Xie et al., 2017). Therefore, additional research could investigate how language errors in managerial responses to non-negative reviews of hotel guests significantly influence the perceptions and booking intentions of (potential) customers.

Second, our experiment is based on online reviews and management responses of native speakers of the language. For all the participants, the reviews and managerial responses were in their native language. A replication of this study with reviews and managerial responses in second languages (L2) would be desirable. However, research indicates that (potential) customers prefer to read online reviews written in their 'own' language (Chan, Wu & Vipulakomb, 2020).

Third, our study is exclusively based on an analysis of the service recovery communication strategy in respect to the hotel industry. An interesting extension might be to evaluate other services in the hospitality industry, e.g. restaurants, events and travel experiences. Furthermore, we recommend an extension to other online platforms such as Booking.com and or Yelp.

Fourth, we did not include a condition in which the hotel management did not answer on the negative online guest review. Rose and Blodgett (2016) found that ignoring negative online reviews based on controllable internal service failures affect readers' perceptions about the hotel. Future research could show whether not answering has a greater negative impact than an error-laden hotel management response.

Finally, further research could measure and explore how the management of responses on platforms is structured by the companies and whether this affects language errors. When, how and by whom are they written? Does there exist a time schedule for the service recovery communication strategy? Do companies allocate this task as a special duty? Does the hotel have a specific online service recovery communication strategy team? Is this task even classified in the organogram? This analysis would shed light on the extent to which specific management processes can remedy language errors and their concomitant effects on the effectiveness of the service recovery communication strategy.

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Guest complaint in the online hotel review:

- internal service failure 'controllable factor'

- external 'uncontrollable factor'

Service Recovery Communication Stragey:

- error free managerial response

- error-laden managerial response

Hotel perceptions:

- hotel's expertise

- hotel's credibility

- hotel's reputation

Booking intentions
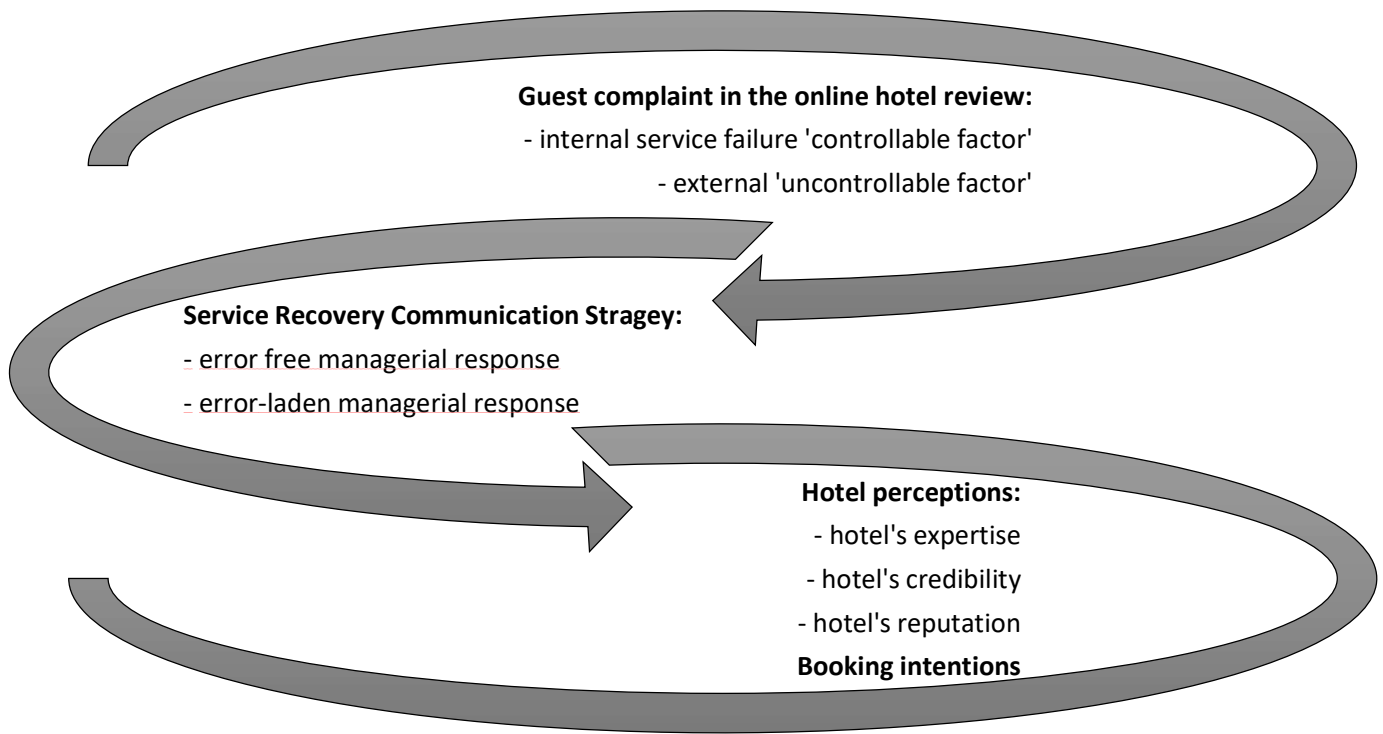
Figure 1. Research design

Table 1

Average scores and standard deviations (between brackets) for pre-test items measuring hotel blame and letdown on hotel choice for the five guest complaints (N =25)

	Guest complaints				
	Bad weather	**Dirty tables**	**Noisy neighbors**	**Staff behavior**	**Used towels**
Hotel blame[1]	1.00 (0.00)	4.04 (0.85)	2.44 (0.85)	4.00 (0.78)	4.78 (0.42)
Letdown hotel choice[1]	2.52 (1.28)	4.26 (0.76)	3.96 (0.94)	4.48 (0.58)	4.85 (0.36)

[1] 5-points Likert scale '1' totally disagree and '5' totally agree

Table 2

Distribution of the participants (N = 263) across experimental conditions

Condition	Guest complaint in hotel review	Hotel response	n
1	external, uncontrollable factor	error-free	62
2	external, uncontrollable factor	error-laden	69
3	internal, controllable service failure	error-free	67
4	internal, controllable service failure	error-laden	65

Figure 2. Text stimuli of condition 1 (external uncontrollable factor, error-free hotel response) and condition 4 (internal controllable service failure, error-laden hotel response).

Table 3

Average scores and standard deviations (between brackets) for the dependent variables[*] across the four experimental conditions

	Guest complaint based on controllable internal service failure		Guest complaint based on uncontrollable external factor	
	Error-laden hotel response	**Error-free hotel response**	**Error-laden hotel response**	**Error-free hotel response**
Reputation	3.40 (1.14)	4.09 (1.11)	4.89 (1.36)	5.73 (1.10)
Expertise	3.58 (1.06)	4.18 (0.83)	4.87 (1.22)	5.47 (0.89)
Credibility	4.61 (1.25)	5.08 (1.26)	5.37 (1.10)	5.88 (0.91)
Booking intentions	3.41 (1.28)	3.89 (1.02)	4.32 (1.46)	4.61 (1.16)

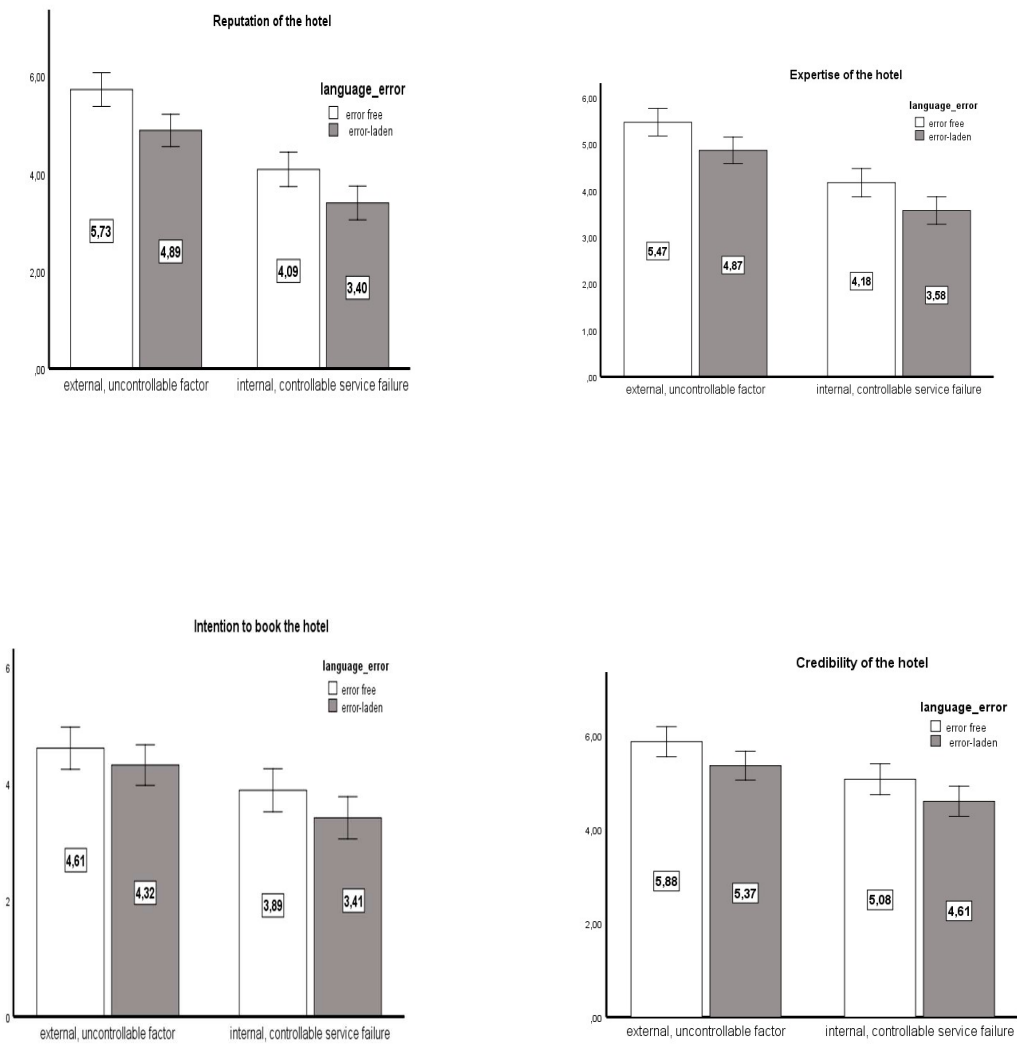* the items were measured on a 7-points Likert scale

Figure 3. The effect of language errors in the service recovery communication strategy for the reputation, expertise and credibility of the hotel and the bookings intention.

Table 4

Influence of error free service recovery strategy on the dependent variables

	Guest complaint based on:	
	controllable internal service failure	uncontrollable external factor
	Service recovery strategy error free (compared to error-laden)	Service recovery strategy error free (compared to error-laden))
Reputation	+ 20.29%***	+ 17.18%***
Expertise	+ 16.76%***	+ 12.32%***
Credibility	+ 10.20%**	+ 9.49%**
Intention to book the hotel	+ 14.08%**	+ 6.71%*

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05