Managing Intercultural Business Relations: Metapragmatic Expressions in Online Negative Review Responses

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Abstract

The proliferation of mass media and online platforms has catalyzed the digital turn of business communication. This paper adopts an intercultural pragmatic perspective to explore the interpersonal functions of *metapragmatic expressions* (MPEs) in online negative review responses, an area that has received limited attention in earlier research, particularly with regard to the interpersonal dynamics in intercultural business settings. Based on 277 English negative reviews and responses gathered from *TripAdvisor* in the *Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area*, this study found agents use MPEs to manage rapport when responding to online negative reviews, thereby managing business relations with customers. More specifically, the interpersonal functions of MPEs are embodied in different move structures as they are used as common ground builders and salience adjusters. The present study advances our understanding of the MPEs in digital intercultural business communication and sheds light on metapragmatic awareness and intercultural pragmatic competence that are essential for managing business relations.

Keywords: online negative review responses; *metapragmatic expressions* (MPEs); business relations; intercultural pragmatics; intercultural business communication

1. Introduction

The present study sheds light on the interpersonal role of *metapragmatic expressions* (MPEs) in online negative review responses from an intercultural pragmatic perspective. As to metapragmatic studies, scholars investigate how interlocutors employ self-reflexive indicators to demonstrate metapragmatic awareness on a higher level of pragmatics (Mey, 1993:175), thereby monitoring and managing the appropriateness of communicative content and behavior (Caffi, 1994; Verschueren, 1999). Among these indicators, MPEs take the form of sentences or paragraphs within metapragmatic identifiers of consciousness (Hübler & Bublitz, 2007; Smith & Liang, 2007), serving as a metapragmatic manifestation to manage and regulate interactions in specific contexts. Intercultural pragmatics seeks to examine how groups or individuals from different cultures use linguistic and cultural resources to create common ground and accomplish communicative tasks through the negotiation of meaning production and comprehension (Kecskes, 2014, 2019). Previous research has revealed the role of MPEs in the intercultural business context (Liu & Liu, 2017a, 2021), as intercultural pragmatics offers a comprehensive perspective on investigating social and individual dynamics, cooperation and egocentrism, as well as attention and intention (Kecskes, 2014). This study, therefore, continues to examine digital business settings where MPEs are used in online negative review responses.

The evolution of mass media and digital communication have empowered consumers to post reviews of product consumption or service experiences online (Sparks & Bradley, 2014). As a typical genre of business complaints, online negative reviews disseminate through negative *electronic word-of-mouth* (e-WOM) channels (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014), contributing to the potential detriment of an organization's image and reputation (e.g., Vásquez, 2011; Ren, 2018), and thereby influencing the attitudes of prospective consumers toward such institutions. Notably, online negative reviews and their responses operate asynchronously (Creelman, 2022), which distinguishes them from traditional business complaints and responses. This asynchrony also affords businesses greater flexibility in formulating responses, allowing for careful consideration of various factors. Hence, it is worthwhile to examine how online negative reviews should be effectively responded to.

This paper explores MPEs as common ground builders and salience adjusters in terms of their interpersonal functions between businesses and customers. In this context, business relations assume a crucial role in different move structures, wherein considerations of customers' facework, institutional identity, and emotional support influence the effectiveness

of responses. Thus, the present study contends that agents responding to online negative reviews strategically use MPEs across different moves to manage and regulate their relationships with customers.

In what follows, section two undertakes a literature review on MPEs as well as online negative review responses. Section three outlines the data and method of this study. Detailed analysis and general discussions are presented in sections four, five and six before moving to a brief conclusion in section seven.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Metapragmatic Expressions

Metapragmatics refers to "the pragmatics of actually performed meta-utterances that serve as [a] means of commenting on and interfering with ongoing discourse or text" (Hübler & Bublitz, 2007:6), involving "the management of discourse, based on common knowledge and reflexivity" (Caffi, 2007:83). Linguistic devices that reflect metapragmatic awareness are identified as metapragmatic markers, which demonstrate the "therapeutic potential" (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967) and "double-voiced" nature (Bakhtin, 1981) of language, exemplifying the management, intervention, and monitoring of discourse (Caffi, 1994; Verschueren, 1999; Bublitz & Hübler, 2007) without contributing substantial propositional content.

Previous metapragmatics studies have been conducted in different contexts, including but not limited to the legal context (e.g., Jenney, 2007), the media context (Liu & Ran, 2016a, 2016b), and the business context (Liu & Liu, 2017a, 2017b, 2021). However, the intercultural business context has not yet been fully investigated, especially within the discourse in the digital era. Besides, metapragmatic research explores different types and functions of metapragmatic indicators (e.g., Kopple, 1985; Silverstein, 1993; Verschueren, 1999; Penz, 2007) in both daily interaction and institutional discourse, such as metapragmatic indicators (Verschueren, 2000), metapragmatic comments (Ciliberti & Anderson, 2007), and metapragmatic utterances (Hübler & Bublitz, 2007). Further, metapragmatics research pertaining to interpersonal relationships, remains limited, particularly in the intercultural business context. This paper concentrates on MPEs as Liu & Liu (2017a, 2021) and Liu *et al.* (2023) disclose the feasibility and viability of analyzing them in intercultural business communication.

Metapragmatic expressions (MPEs), among these explicit metapragmatic indicators, are "expressions which referred not to the content but to how the audience might understand, use, or orient themselves to it" (Smith & Liang, 2007:172). MPEs serve to reduce cognitive difficulty (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) and more commonly, constrain information processing while upgrading the salience of relevant information (Kecskes, 2014), which helps interlocutors to information comprehension and understanding. As articulated by Caffi (2007:86), MPEs indicate that "the speaker is both the involved participant and the observer of him/herself and of the interaction". Structured as clauses, sentences, or sentence fragments with a relatively complete syntactic structure and semantic meaning, MPEs are not directly associated with specific issues or topics in communication (Liu & Ran, 2016a, 2016b). MPEs illuminate the speakers' ability to be better involved in regulating and managing communication. For the present study, MPEs are defined as linguistic expressions which explicitly display the speaker's reflexive awareness of language use and his/her intention to manipulate the ongoing interactions to meet particular communicative goals and/or needs (also see Liu & Ran, 2016a, Liu & Liu, 2021).

MPEs, alongside other metapragmatic indicators, have been extensively explored in diverse contexts. This diverse range of environments has been documented in studies, encompassing everyday conversations and institutional settings (Caffi, 1984; Silverstein, 1993; Verschueren, 1999, 2000; Mey, 2001; Hübler & Bublitz, 2007; Hübler, 2011; Cruz, 2015; Kleinke & Bös, 2015; Bridges, 2017; Sinkeviciute, 2017). These studies have significantly enriched our understanding of the role and functioning of metapragmatic indicators in various communicative scenarios, which play a crucial role in shaping interactions by reflexively influencing them (cf. Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Lucy, 1993; Caffi, 1999). While comprehensive research has been conducted in various contexts, a noticeable gap exists in the use of MPEs in conflictual interactions. Despite Liu & Liu's (2017b, 2021) and Liu *et al.*'s (2023) studies on common ground building in business meetings and salience adjusting in telephone complaints and responses, the digital context demands further attention. The present study, thus, extends existing research on MPEs associated with common ground building and salience adjusting to uncover their interpersonal functions in online negative review responses.

2.2 Online Negative Review Responses

Research on online negative review responses has predominantly centered around genre analysis and move structures. Based on Vásquez's (2011, 2012) examination of negative reviews and their responses on *TripAdvisor*, Zhang & Vásquez (2014) have supplemented and advanced the exploration of moves structures within online negative review responses. Subsequently, Ho (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) has conducted an extensive series of studies grounding the rapport management framework (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), involving linguistic devices such as metadiscourse and speech acts while evaluating the effectiveness of responses through questionnaires. Recent investigations have gradually touched on the structure and function of language use from a micro perspective (cf. Cenni & Goethals, 2017; Feng & Ren, 2019). They have yet to reveal specific linguistic resources or strategies in online

negative review responses, particularly in intercultural settings, as existing studies often treat these responses as a whole, overlooking nuanced components and strategies. A comprehensive understanding of the use and effects of strategies in different moves remains underexplored in existing studies.

Managing business relations in online negative review responses is a critical issue in this domain. When private offline interactions extend to public platforms, businesses and customer service agents must consider the impact of their responses on potential customers (e.g., Gu & Yi, 2014; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014; Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). Recent studies illuminate emotion-based webcare across various platforms (Fuoli *et al.*, 2021), such as the use of emojis expressing negative emotions (regret or embarrassment) on *Twitter* to convey empathy (Page, 2014), and positive politeness strategies anchoring relational work on *Facebook* (Creelman, 2022). These findings underscore the significance of affectivity in the realm of webcare. These investigations involve apology strategies (Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020), the participation framework (Tian, 2013), and face needs in restaurants (Lai, 2019), mainly focusing on the differences between English and Chinese, Japanese or other languages. This cross-linguistic analysis not only conforms to the concept of sharing economy (Zhu *et al.*, 2019) but also provides guiding significance for the development of intercultural business communication. The ongoing process of globalization has prompted a shift from monoculture to multicultures in business communication, which discloses the necessity for research on online negative review responses from an intercultural pragmatic perspective.

More specifically, Ho (2017b, 2021) found that while denial may potentially cause offense or threaten the customer's face, it is consistently accompanied by a strategy aimed at repairing the rapport with the customer. This dual approach contributes to the overarching goal of service repair. Therefore, constrained by online harmony or webcare (Van Noort *et al.*, 2015), the maintenance and restoration of digital business relations assume critical importance alongside the considerations of responding to issues raised in negative reviews. However, few studies have explored the mechanism of these strategies, especially on a meta level, so the management of online business relations in online negative review responses is worth further investigation.

2.3 Research Questions

Metapragmatics research has been conducted in intercultural business communication, but less attention has been paid to CMC settings in the digital era. Moreover, previous studies emphasize the information-oriented roles of MPEs, potentially neglecting the significance of interpersonal relations to some extent.

Research on online negative review responses often approaches this topic from a marketing/hospitality perspective (e.g., Park & Allen, 2013; Sparks & Bradley, 2014; Lui *et al.*, 2018). Linguistic research, on the other hand, typically resides within the paradigm of genre/move analysis (e.g., Zhang & Vásquez, 2014; Ho, 2017; Cenni & Goethals, 2020, 2021), leaving room for a more in-depth exploration of specific linguistic resources or pragmatic strategies within move structures.

Therefore, the present study intends to answer the following two research questions: 1) What kinds of MPEs are used in online negative review responses? 2) How are MPEs used in different move structures to manage business relations? To answer the first research, the types and frequencies of MPEs are presented after introducing the source, identification, and classification of data. The second research question are addressed in sections four and five with a comprehensive picture of the interpersonal functions of MPEs in online negative review responses.

3. Data and Method

3.1 Data Source

The data of the present study were drawn from *TripAdvisor*, the largest and most widely used online review channel for travel accommodations (e.g., Levy *et al.*, 2013; Vásquez, 2011). Situated in the *Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area*, this study selectively gathered all English reviews and responses of the top five popular hotels in four cities, respectively, up to June 1, 2022, to form a small database. Negative reviews, i.e., those rated as "terrible" (1 star) or "poor" (2 stars), were identified as per established criteria (cf. Zhang & Vásquez, 2014; Cenni & Goethals, 2020; Ho 2017a, 2017b, 2018), and those with responses were further selected for the present study.

The compiled database constitutes a comprehensive assembly of customer reviews and responses, encompassing a total of 1,164,274 words distributed across 7,215 reviews. Within this dataset, 281 negative reviews, rated either one or two stars, were identified, of which 227 had elicited responses. The cumulative word count for these negative reviews and their corresponding responses amounts to 52,153 words, contributing to customer negative reviews and the hotels' engagement.

3.2 Data Identification and Classification

This paper focuses on the interpersonal role of MPEs in different move structures in online negative review responses. Building upon established categories of metapragmatic indicators, especially MPEs in previous intercultural business settings (e.g., Liu & Liu, 2017a, 2017b, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2023), MPEs are identified and classified into different types, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Types, coding schema, and exames of MPEs

Type	Coding Scheme	Example
speech-action descriptions	MPEs containing speech-action verbs that have illocutionary force	we would express our thanks; I assure
evidentials	MPEs containing descriptions of the source of information and message	according to the rules; kindly be noted
message glosses	MPEs containing reformulating or exemplifying expressions	for example; in other words; that is
commentaries	MPEs containing judgments, evaluations, attitudes, and feelings	we are sorry to hear; it is true

The transcription process involved several sequential steps. First, three coders extensively familiarized themselves with the corpus and relevant literature to grasp the definitions of MPEs as applicable to this study. Then, they independently coded the responses, drawing on examples and analyses from prior research as guidelines. Following the coding process, they compared and discussed their findings, focusing on resolving any discrepancies in their interpretations of the corpus. In instances where divergent identifications arose, comprehensive discussions ensued, and consultation with other researchers was sought as needed, persisting until a consensus was reached.

4. Quantitative Results of MPEs and Move Structures

Before moving into the qualitative analysis, this section presents an overview of the quantitative results of MPEs and move structures. First, results of different MPEs are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Types, frequencies, and percentages of MPEs

Type	Frequency	Percentage
speech-action descriptions	345	25.8%
evidentials	83	6.2%
message glosses	56	4.2%
commentaries	852	63.8%
Total	1336	100%

Table 2 functions in dissecting the interpersonal functions of MPEs in online negative review responses. These expressions are systematically classified into four distinct types. The 345 instances of speech-action descriptions unveil the deployment of illocutionary force, notably in expressing gratitude or providing assurances as responses to negative reviews. Evidentials, accounting for 83 instances, manifest the explicit reference to information sources or rules, substantiating the responses. Message glosses, observed in 56 instances, function to clarify and exemplify, contributing to an augmented understanding within negative review interactions. The most extensive category, commentaries, encompassing 852 instances (63.8%), lays bare the prevalence of personal judgments, evaluations, attitudes, and feelings conveyed through adjectives or negations. This systematic categorization enables a nuanced exploration of the interpersonal dynamics inherent in online negative review responses, offering valuable insights into the linguistic resources and pragmatic strategies employed in this specific context.

Next, informed by previous studies, especially by Ho (2017b, 2018, 2021), Feng & Ren (2019), Cenni & Goethals (2020), and Herck *et al.* (2022), the present study categorizes move structures into four principal parts: opening, acknowledging the failure, dismissing the service failure, and closing. Before moving into qualitative analysis, and an overview of major moves and sub-moves is succinctly presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Major moves and sub-moves in the data

Major Move	Sub-move	Frequency
Opening	thanking the customer	196
	apologizing or expressing regret	149
Acknowledging the failure	enquiring more details	63
	taking responsibility for service failure	124
	mentioning corrective actions	86
	offering explanations	175
Dismissing the service failure	highlighting the merits of the hotel (and/or staff)	95
	mentioning past positive reviews by other guests	71
Closing	inviting further contact	58
	expecting future visits	120

In the opening move, expressions of gratitude or apologies aim to acknowledge feedback and demonstrate empathy towards their experience. By thanking the customer or expressing regret, agents convey appreciation for the feedback and show their willingness to address any concerns. Next, when acknowledging failure, agents use various sub-moves to address the reported issues. The 63 recorded instances of requesting more details indicate a proactive approach to understanding customers' specific grievances. This strategy enables agents to gather additional information, guiding their subsequent actions in resolving the negative review. The sub-move of taking responsibility for service failure, observed in 124 instances, represents a critical step towards accountability. By acknowledging their role in the reported shortcomings, agents demonstrate their commitment to addressing the issue and rebuilding trust with the costumers. This move is essential for mitigating negative perceptions and fostering a sense of transparency in the process. Mentioning corrective actions (86 instances) and offering explanations (175 instances) further contribute to the interpersonal dynamics of the response. These sub-moves aim to provide clarity and reassurance to the costumer by outlining the steps taken or planned to rectify the situation. By clearly communicating their efforts to address the reported issues, agents seek to instill confidence in the costumer and reaffirm their commitment to customer satisfaction.

5. Interpersonal Functions of MPEs in Online Negative Review Responses

Guided by the types of MPEs in Table 2 and move structures in Table 3, this section qualitatively analyzes the interpersonal functions of MPEs in different moves of online negative review responses.

5.1 Move 1: Opening

Opening plays a significant role in online negative review responses. It consists of two sub-moves, namely thanking the customer and apologizing or expressing regret. In Move 1, agents are able to mitigate customers' negative emotions, making it more appropriate to implement the subsequent moves..

5.1.1 Thanking the Customer

This sub-move aims to show agents' gratitude to customers to make the subsequent move more soft and smooth.

> (1)   *We would like to thank you for* taking the time to write a review.

In (1), the agent starts the opening move with the speech-action description "We would like to thank you for". By showing gratitude and alignment with the customer's effort in writing the review, the agent acknowledges positive contributions made by the customer, which enhances the customer's face. In this MPE, the use of the first-person plural pronoun "we" creates a sense of shared identity, which can help the customer feel more connected to both the agent and the hotel, promoting their perceived identity with the brand or company. Also, as this MPE conveys a strong sense of appreciation, it can provide positive and sufficient emotional support for the customer, increasing his or her willingness to engage in further communication. The expression of positive emotion can achieve webcare by building a harmonious relationship between both parties. This speech-action description is conducive to maintaining customers' dignity and fulfilling customers' psychological need to be treated attentively in the thanking move.

5.1.2 Apologizing or Expressing Regret

Apologizing or expressing regret is essential in the whole response process. This sub-move is strongly relative to the possibility of whether customers accept responses or not. The examples below would describe the features of this sub-move.

> (2)   *I am extremely sorry for* what happened.

> (3)   *I feel very disappointed that* you did not enjoy the hotel.

"I am extremely sorry for" in (2) and "I feel very disappointed that" in (3) both serve as commentaries in the move structure that help to show apology and regret by fulfilling interpersonal functions to achieve webcare. These two MPEs help indicate that the hotel has admitted to the negative review and publicly expressed regret. This kind of MPEs typically includes "apologize", "sorry", and expressions like "feel disappointed". For customers, an apology from hotels is a humble act that helps restore their dignity when they feel dissatisfied. It also conveys a sincere intention to avoid a similar crisis in the future. Therefore, commentaries in these two examples support the move that can protect or restore customers' face, and effectively repair trust in the process of rapport management (Ho, 2019). For the hotel, the sincerity of the apology represents the hotel's collective face and customers' views, as an apology means that the hotel has admitted mistakes to an extent. By apologizing for the negative experiences customers may have had in the hotel, the agents show that they care about the customers' feelings and are taking responsibility for them.

Plus, both MPEs help create a sense of shared identity between the two parties. The expression of empathy towards the customers' negative experiences reveals that the agents care about their concerns and want to build a stronger connection between customers and the brand or company. To achieve webcare, the hotel chooses more adverbs of degree in these MPEs for modification, such as "extremely" and "very". They are conducive to allowing customers to

re-establish their trust in the hotel and feel emotionally compensated. Overall, both MPEs convey a strong sense of empathy and concern for the customers' feelings by expressing disappointment and apologizing for any negative experience. The agents attempt to care about their customers' emotions, which can help reduce negative responses and lead to better webcare.

5.2 Move 2: Acknowledging the Failure

Acknowledging the failure includes enquiring more details, taking responsibility for service failure, mentioning corrective actions, and offering explanations. These sub-moves aim to provide more necessary and useful information for customers.

5.2.1 Enquiring More Details

This sub-move involves proactively seeking additional information from the customer to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand. By enquiring more details, agents demonstrate their commitment to resolving the issue and emphasize the importance of the customer's perspective. The two examples listed below indicate the significance of this sub-move and analyze the role of each MPEs.

(4) ***Could you please indicate more details of*** your experience?

(5) ***I would be most grateful if you could share with us more information of*** the situation so that we can confirm that.

In these two examples, "Could you please indicate more details of" and "I would be most grateful if you could share with us more information of" are MPEs that usually appear after apologies. These two MPEs are used to gather relevant information while managing the face and emotions of the customers.

In (4), the agent is inviting the customer to provide more information of their experience. The speech-action description, "Could you please indicate more details of", is polite and respectful, which helps to show the sincerity of the hotel and protect the customer' face, so the customer would not feel inferior or bossed around. The use of "please" also adds a sense of urgency and importance to the request, which encourages the customer to respond promptly. Similarly, in (5), the commentary, "I would be most grateful if you could share with us more information of", shows that the agent is thanking the recipient in advance for sharing additional information. This MPE also helps to manage the face and emotions of both parties. Likewise, the use of "grateful" indicates that the agent values and appreciates the information that the customer will provide, which encourages the customer to interact and participate in further interaction. To a large extent, these two MPEs are conducive to providing webcare and help maintain a harmonious relation between the agents and customers, which can be crucial in achieving successful communication outcomes.

5.2.2 Taking Responsibility for Service Failure

Taking responsibility of service failure is a fundamental aspect of effective customer service management. This step involves acknowledging shortcomings on the part of the business and expressing genuine regret for the inconvenience caused to the customer. By accepting responsibility, businesses convey accountability and integrity, which are essential for rebuilding trust with dissatisfied customers.

(6) ***Kindly be noted that*** we have failure on this occasion.

(7) ***According to the rules***, the incident with the lunch shouldn't have happened.

In (6) and (7), "Kindly be noted that" and "according to the rules" are used as evidentials to convey information to the customer clearly and directly. In (6), "Kindly be noted that" helps manage the face and identity of both parties by admitting the advent of the failure politely. It also adds a sense of urgency to the message, which implicitly encourages the recipient to take action. It expresses the hotel's sincerity in handling the complaints. Similarly, in (7), the speaker is referring to a specific set of rules that reflects the hotel's service standards. It helps create a hospitable and professional brand image. Additionally, the use of "according to the rules" adds a sense of objectivity to the message, which can help mitigate the negative emotions that the recipient may feel.

Both phrases effectively achieve webcare by conveying important information to the recipients while managing the interpersonal dynamics of the conversation through specific words such as "kindly" which resonates with the recipient. These MPEs also clarify the hotel's positioning and help maintain the collective face. The MPEs can prevent complaints and trust crises between hotels and customers to achieve webcare. While these evidentials may not be as explicitly polite or grateful as those in previous examples, they still serve to maintain a positive relationship between the sender and the recipient by being clear and direct.

5.2.3 Mentioning Corrective Actions

Following the acknowledgment of service failure, it is imperative for businesses to outline the corrective measures they

intend to take to rectify the situation. This sub-move involves clearly communicating the steps that will be implemented to address the customer's concerns and prevent similar issues in the future. By mentioning corrective actions, businesses reassure customers of their dedication to improvement and instill confidence in their ability to deliver satisfactory service.

(8) Each point *you've raised* has been discussed in detail with my manager.

(9) we have shared your valued feedback with the appropriate hotel team to ensure that *this was an isolated issue and is corrected moving forward*.

The interpersonal role of both phrases is to address feedback or concerns that have been raised by the recipient. These MPEs in (8) and (9) are used to achieve webcare by managing the face, identity, and emotions of both the sender and the recipient.

In (8), the agent is acknowledging that the recipient has raised specific concerns or points, showing a customer-centered attitude. Similarly, in (9), the speaker is addressing specific feedback that has been provided by the recipient. The phrases "isolated issue" and "moving forward" in the MPE of (9) help reassure the recipient and mitigate any negative emotions that they may feel. They also help manage the emotions of both the sender and the recipient by demonstrating empathy and understanding towards the recipient's position. These MPEs can eliminate customers' dissatisfaction to a certain extent, so as to repair the trust in the hotel. It helps avoid affecting the hotel's collective face, so as to repair the interpersonal relationship with customers.

5.2.4 Offering Explanations

The final sub-move involves providing a clear and concise explanation of the factors contributing to the service failure. While not all circumstances may warrant a detailed explanation, offering insights into the underlying reasons can help customers better understand the situation and alleviate any misconceptions or frustrations. Whether external factors beyond the business's control or internal challenges that have been addressed, transparency fosters trust and facilitates constructive dialogue between the business and the customer.

(10) *I am perfectly aware of the fact that* the check-in unfortunately take a bit long because of all the 'bureaucracy' that we have to respect.

(11) *It is logical that* when the room is not occupied it is not economic to keep it on 24 h.

The interpersonal role of MPEs in (10) and (11) is to provide an explanation or justification for a situation that may have caused frustration or dissatisfaction to the recipient. In (10), the agent highlights the self-reflection that he completely understands the problems and the real causes and acknowledges that the check-in process may have been slower than expected due to certain bureaucratic procedures that need to be followed. "perfectly" and "unfortunately" are used to convey emotional support for the complainant, which makes the complaint feel respected and valued. After realizing webcare, the agent explains the company procedures that account for the customer's long wait. It indicates that the problem is not caused by a single employee, which protects self-face.

In (11), the speaker indicates a supportive attitude towards the following point and then provides a logical explanation for a situation that may have caused frustration or dissatisfaction to the recipient. Furthermore, the agent uncovers the business information that for economic reason, the hotel must improve the utilization rate of rooms. Additionally, the adjective "logical" validates each other and signals persuasive explanation. By this means, the MPE helps construct the corporate image and cultivate customers' trust in the hotel.

5.3 Move 3: Dismissing the Service Failure

Within the realm of addressing negative feedback from customers, businesses often employ a series of structured steps to effectively manage customer emotions and cultivate positive relationships. In the third major move, businesses strategically highlight the strengths of their establishment and staff while referencing past positive reviews to counterbalance any negative feedback. This proactive approach aims to uphold the reputation of the business.

5.3.1 Highlighting the Merits of the Hotel (and/or Staff)

The first sub-move involves accentuating the positive attributes of the hotel and/or its staff. By highlighting the merits, such as exceptional amenities, personalized service, or unique offerings, businesses aim to shift the focus away from the perceived service failure towards the overall positive aspects of the customer experience. This tactic serves to reaffirm the value proposition of the establishment and instill confidence in the customer's decision to patronize the business.

(12) Probably you passed by in a very busy moment, but *I assure you that* our staff is always very attentive and ready to satisfy any necessity.

The speech-action description "I assure you that" in (12) is used to provide assurance and reassurance to the recipient.

Instead of directly refusing complaints, the dismissal of the service failure focuses on the merits of the hotel. The agent is acknowledging that the recipient may have had a negative experience in the past with the staff. However, they are assuring the recipient that this was likely due to a busy moment. It approves and underlines the attentive and businesslike staff to shift the negative comments to positive ones, which helps construct their corporate identity by acknowledging the recipient's experience while also providing reassurance that the staff is typically attentive and helpful. This MPE is also an attempt to establish trust and credibility with the recipient.

Apart from adopting the moderate strategy of dismissing the failure, the agent uses "always" to avoid absolute commentaries. Absolute commentaries have the risk of destroying the common ground and threatening customers' personal and social face, because they indicate the agent implicitly refuses to solve the problem and safeguard customers' rights. The MPE demonstrates empathy and understanding towards the recipient's position and maintains the positive image of the corporation, taking into account the face of the other party and avoiding further complaints or disputes.

5.3.2 Mentioning Past Positive Reviews by Other Guests

The second sub-move entails referencing past positive reviews from other guests. By showcasing previous favorable feedback, businesses seek to reassure customers of the consistent quality of their services and alleviate concerns stemming from a single negative experience. This social proof not only validates the credibility of the establishment but also fosters trust and confidence in prospective customers, reaffirming their decision to engage with the business.

> (13) Concerning the inappropriate welcome, we will verify what here reported, *we can only guarantee you that* kindness and welcome to all our clients are some of our strong points, *which one can read in many other reviews*.

In (13), the agent holds several ideas on the basis of two MPEs, including a speech-action description "we can only guarantee you that" and a evidential "which one can read in many other reviews". The agent provides assurance and reassurance to the recipient. In this example, "we can only guarantee you that" indicates that the agent ensures the hotel is welcomed by other customers by using the speech-action verb "guarantee". In this phrase, while this description gets their institutional interest preserved, it implicitly denies the problem which may bring potential face threat.

In order to prevent the face threat from escalating into a severe contradiction, the agent also uses an evidential to add some background information. The source of "many other reviews" provides evidence to support the claim that kindness and welcome are strong points of the establishment. Informing the complainant that the content is guaranteed to be real reviews from other customers reveals the extent to which the agent adheres to the conversational guidelines, reducing the likelihood that the agent dismisses the service failure on a subjective level. Overall, these MPEs both successfully dismiss the service failure and achieve webcare.

5.4 Move 4: Closing

The last major move "closing", encompasses actions aimed at concluding the interaction on a positive note and fostering ongoing engagement with the customer. This move involves inviting further contact and expressing anticipation for future visits, thereby reinforcing the business's commitment to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

5.4.1 Inviting Further Contact

By encouraging direct communication, businesses demonstrate their willingness to address any lingering issues or concerns the customers may have. This proactive approach not only provides an opportunity to resolve outstanding issues but also strengthens the relationship between the business and the customers. Whether through email, phone, or in-person communication, inviting further contact signifies the business's commitment to personalized service and continuous improvement.

> (14) *We sincerely hope that* you could contact us directly via email or phone.

In (14), the commentary "we sincerely hope that" mainly expresses a genuine desire for the customer to take action while also managing their emotions and identity in the interaction. This MPE is used to achieve webcare by demonstrating empathy towards the agent's situation and offering support. The agent is encouraging the customer to take action by contacting them directly to address any issues they may have. That is, it offers support and provides a solution by suggesting direct communication through email or phone out of consideration for preserving face. This commentary also helps to mitigate negative emotions that the customer may feel by expressing empathy and offering a clear solution to the issue that may happen.

Moreover, the adverb "sincerely" is used as an attitude indicator to show genuine concern, emphasizing the hotel's affirmation of customers contacting them and indicating a willingness to initiate a harmonious business relation. Overall, this MPE effectively achieves webcare by providing reassurance and support to the recipient while also expressing

empathy and the desire to help, which can establish trust and credibility between two parties and promote the business relation.

5.4.2 Expecting Future Visits

This sub-move conveys enthusiasm for the prospect of serving the customer again, so that businesses can reinforce the notion of a mutually beneficial relationship. This positive reinforcement serves to instill confidence in the customer's decision to patronize the business in the future and encourages repeat business.

(15) ***I am expecting that*** I would greatly like a second chance to host you again.

The MPE "I am expecting that" in (15) is used to express a hopeful desire for a future opportunity while managing the emotions and identity of the agent and customer. This commentary is used to achieve webcare by demonstrating anticipation towards the customer's situation and expressing a genuine desire to improve the relationship. In the example, the agent is expressing a hope that they may have the opportunity to host the customer again in the future. Expecting the other party to give a second chance is not only for promoting customers' awareness of the responsible corporate image, but more importantly, it is to protect the face of both parties so as to realize service recovery. For the sake of self-face, the hotel would not directly acknowledge the service failure, but would send the message by inviting customers to revisit.

A psychological mechanism of balancing admitting their own weakness and elevating the status of the other party drives the hotel to use MPEs that maintain the customers' personal face and take webcare interventions. The use of the MPE here expresses enthusiasm and a positive attitude towards a future transaction, which can help provide sufficient emotional support for the customer. This MPE indicates the following invitation and discloses the concern for each other's faces by expressing appreciation for a future opportunity while also showing respect for the customer's position. It can also help establish trust and credibility with the customer by demonstrating a willingness to improve the relationship and providing a positive outlook for the future.

6. General Discussions

This study provides some insights into the interpersonal functions of MPEs in digital intercultural business communication, specifically within the context of responding to negative online reviews. From an intercultural pragmatic perspective, the exploration illuminates the crucial role of MPEs as tools for agents to effectively manage business-customer relations. This discussion further touches on these functions, emphasizing the roles of MPEs as common ground builders (Liu *et al.*, 2023) and salience adjusters (Liu & Liu, 2017, 2021).

In intercultural business communication, particularly within online settings, the establishment of common ground proves to be crucial for fostering effective interaction (Liu, 2023). This study confirms that MPEs significantly contribute to this process by acknowledging customers' concerns, demonstrating understanding, and aligning responses with the complainants' perspectives. Such alignment serves to bridge cultural and communicative gaps, nurturing a sense of shared understanding and respect. For example, in responding to a negative review, an agent may employ commentaries to mirror the language or sentiment expressed by the complainant. This mirroring not only validates the customer's feelings but also showcases empathy (Van Herck *et al.*, 2021), a fundamental element in managing rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Through the strategic use of MPEs to create common ground, agents can effectively mitigate the negative impact of complaints (Liu *et al.*, 2023), demonstrating responsiveness, cultural sensitivity, and customer-oriented practices.

Salience in communication revolves around the ability to accentuate specific aspects of a message while downplaying others (Kecskes, 2014). In negative online review responses, MPEs function as tools for adjusting salience (Liu & Liu, 2021), thereby managing the focal points of communication. Agents utilize MPEs strategically to emphasize or de-emphasize certain elements of the review or response. For instance, a business agent might employ speech-action descriptions to draw attention to the steps taken by the company to address the issue raised in the review. This strategic emphasis shifts the focus from the complaint to the solution, portraying a proactive approach and reconstructing the narrative from a negative experience to a positive, solution-oriented interaction.

The utilization of MPEs in managing rapport in response to negative online reviews holds broader implications for digital intercultural business communication. It underscores the importance of metapragmatic awareness and intercultural pragmatic competence in online business contexts. Businesses must be cognizant of cultural nuances and linguistic subtleties inherent in online communication, especially within intercultural settings. Agents should be trained not only in language proficiency but also in the adept understanding and effective utilization of MPEs. This includes the ability to recognize cultural differences in communication styles, expectations, and interpretations. Thus, metapragmatic awareness emerges as a pivotal component in training programs for customer service agents, particularly those operating in multicultural and digital environments.

7. Concluding Remarks

The present study contributes to existing studies by extending the exploration of MPEs in online negative review responses from an intercultural pragmatic perspective. This paper presents a comprehensive picture of interpersonal issues underpinning MPEs to promote intercultural business communication in the digital era. By acting as common ground builders and salience adjusters, MPEs facilitate agents in more effectively managing business-customer relations in online negative review responses. This highlights the crucial role of metapragmatic awareness and intercultural pragmatic competence in digital business communication. Theoretical implications of this paper involve the advancement of our comprehension of metapragmatic awareness in digital intercultural business communication, expanding our insights into pragmatic strategies and institutional features within digital business discourse. From a practical standpoint, this study offers valuable guidance for businesses seeking to enhance the quality of business communication and online review responses, ultimately improving competitive performance and fostering positive consumer engagement and feedback.

There remain some limitations that need further exploration, such as expanding the quantity and scope of data, observing and describing the use of other interpersonal management strategies in digital intercultural business communication. Additionally, comparative and contrastive analyses in business communication are also worth a metapragmatic investigation, such as online negative review responses and face-to-face complaint responses. These studies are expected to further enrich our understanding of metapragmatic awareness in digital intercultural business communication.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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