



MANAGING DIGITAL RAPPORT: ANALYZING HOTEL RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE ONLINE REVIEWS IN PAKISTAN THROUGH RAPPORT MANAGEMENT THEORY

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Abstract

This study investigates how hotels in Pakistan handle customer rapport in response to negative online encounters by framing the study within Rapport Management Theory (RMT). This research analyzes 120 responses from three major cities, i.e., Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, from various hotels to evaluate the key strategies hotels adopt to respond to customer complaints and maintain customer relationships. The researcher studied the types of face sensitivity, social rights, interactional goals, empathy, respect, and relational communication that are priorities for Pakistani hotels. Results show that Islamic hospitality values influence hotels' service recovery practices, and hotels' response often reflects cultural and religious norms. The findings show that hotels in Pakistan are directed more at relational than transactional goals when handling complaints. This research contributes to the broader knowledge of service recovery by considering the collectivist culture and practical recommendations for hotel managers in service recovery situations, which are presented to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. In future research, cultural and religious factors might be further evaluated to determine their effects on service recovery in specific markets and industries.

Keywords: Rapport Management Theory, Digital customer service, Hotel responses, Negative feedback, Hospitality industry

1. Introduction

Digital communication platforms have proliferated and changed how businesses (particularly in the hospitality sector) connect to customers. With online reviews, which are now permanent and searchable, the hotels' public image will be significantly affected (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). In addition, the current tourist markets are dependent on platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and Booking.com, where customers express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with these hotels, which significantly influences the final decision of other potential customers in selecting the platforms (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Negative reviews can impact customer trust, decrease conversion rates, and induce skepticism (Güler & Hüseyinov, 2021). With online customer feedback now an essential element of a hotel's reputation management, it has become imperative for hotels to address negative reviews not only to guarantee immediate short-term customer satisfaction but also to safeguard long-term brand equity (Gössling et al., 2018).

For hotels, addressing customer problems and responding to online complaints also serves an additional purpose: maintaining the brand's value of quality, attentiveness, and professionalism, which customers expect from them (Fernández, 2024). However, this must be managed by holding transactional goals (solving complaints) in tension with relational goals of rebuilding rapport and demonstrating customer empathy (Nikbin et al., 2014). Digital communication is an effective alternative to passive problem-solving while also fostering a good relationship that converts unhappy guests into loyal ones.

Given the growing dependence on digital platforms for customer feedback, it is surprising that there is a dearth of empirical research on how hotels in Pakistan manage online reviews to build and maintain rapport. The hospitality sector in Pakistan has experienced rapid growth, driven by the increasing use of digital tools for customer interaction. However, research on applying these tools to garner customer service and brand management is rare. In almost all digital

customer service and rapport management studies, the context is typically Western or global, which appears to overlook the cultural practices of South Asian markets, and many of them do not include Pakistan.

In Pakistan's collectivist culture, online communication is indirect, face-saving practices are observed, and respect for hierarchical relationships is prevalent. This cultural context can lead to misunderstandings, which can result in damage to reputations and customer dissatisfaction. As such, there is a need for research on rapport management strategies that Pakistani hotels employ to handle negative reviews effectively. Therefore, this study intends to address the gap in understanding how Pakistani hotels respond to a hotel's negative online review from the perspective of Rapport Management Theory and how cultural nuances impact this response.

2. Theoretical Framework: Rapport Management Theory

In this study, the Rapport Management Theory (RMT) proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2000) is applied in researching the way that hotels are able to manage customer relationships within online reviews in an effective manner. RMT gives an emphasis on services contexts and how face, social rights and interactional goals are achieved or repaired in the effort of maintaining or restoring a relationship in the context of relational dynamics of communication (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

RMT states that face sensitivity may be an issue in designing not to lose personal and social identities in the process of interactions. The same happens in responding to hotel reviews since responses are done in a manner that saves the reputation or quality of the hotel being reviewed, and the identity and social value of the customer. Considering the example of a hotel in Pakistan, it would help out a great deal to have no acknowledgement of the fact that customers are dissatisfied with the services because that would imply publicly discrediting the person who entered the guest simply because he was unsatisfied.

Another concept that RMT focuses on is social rights and obligations, which pertain to fairness and equity in interactions (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). In the hospitality industry, this means being fair to customers by listening to them, validating their issues, and proposing genuine solutions that meet their expectations. Collegial norms of Pakistani hotels dictate that they show a sense of fairness and empathy and should be respectful while responding, which needs to be personalized. Otherwise, failing to do so can jeopardize the trust and rapport with the customer (Hernández López, 2008).

In RMT, these goals are interactional and concern the communicative purpose; in hotel responses, they are transactional (solving the problem) and relational (maintaining or improving the relationship) (Spencer-Oatey, 2015). In hotels, responding to current complaints should not only address the complaint but also attempt to restore or rebuild trust, providing an opportunity for the company to be involved in the future. In the digital space, where nonverbal cues are often absent, tone and word choice serve as key tools for conveying empathy and professionalism (Güler & Hüseyinov, 2021).

Pakistan's collectivist culture is characterized by strong community ties and a people's interest in maintaining interpersonal harmony (Iram et al., 2023). In these circumstances, it is essential to keep one's face so that public clashes and discourses do not cause any sort of social shame or strained relations between parties. For this reason, the actions of hotels responding to negative reviews should meet culturally sensitive requirements and the application of indirect language, formal honorifics, and expressions of respect. For instance, responses such as "*Insha'Allah*" (God willing), which are often used phrases to soften a response and communicate humility and sincerity to one's interlocutor, thus acknowledging the relational side of the interaction—are common (Spencer Oatey, 2015).

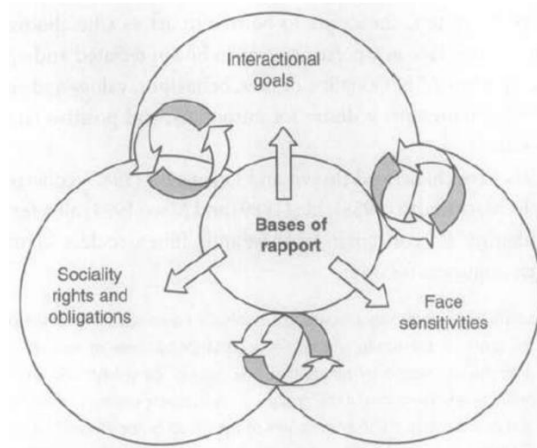


Fig. 1. Rapport Management Theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2008)

Additionally, there is a hierarchy of politeness, which is firmly rooted in Pakistani culture. Grey-haired individuals are honored, and their concerns are of the utmost importance, particularly when it comes to visitors. Such a cultural model suggests that communication between hotel staff and clients online is likely to be formalized and grounded in the principles of preserving dignity (Ahmed and Jabeen, 2022).

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- i. How do Pakistani hotels respond to negative online reviews in a way that reflects Rapport Management Theory (RMT)?
- ii. What strategies do these responses employ to balance transactional goals (resolving complaints) with relational goals (trust-building and empathy)?
- iii. How do cultural norms in Pakistan influence the nature and effectiveness of these strategies in digital interactions?

3. Methodology

This research will employ qualitative content analysis to examine how hotels in Pakistan manage customer rapport in response to negative online reviews. Content analysis is a standard method for analyzing text data and identifying patterns, themes, and means of communication (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, it is feasible to use this method to examine the work of hotels in addressing negative reviews and improving customer relations through their written communication (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023).

3.1. Data Collection

For this inquiry, the study obtained 120 publicly available hotel responses reviewed three stars or below with negative online reviews (by guests) from January 2024 to June 2025 on Booking.com. The stratified sampling technique was employed to achieve a balanced representation of the three major Pakistani cities: Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Each city gave forty responses to equal distribution in business, cultural, and diplomatic hospitality contexts. A government report highlights the significance of these sectors, as business and commercial hospitality are prevalent in Karachi, while cultural and heritage tourism are catered to in Lahore, and diplomatic and international visitor exchanges are handled by Islamabad. (Elahi & Khan 2024)

Table 1: Distribution of Hotel Responses by City

Sr.No	City	Significance	Reviews	Time Limit
1	Karachi	Business and Commercial Hub: Key Destination for Business Tourism	40	2024-2025
2	Lahore	Cultural Capital of Pakistan; Major Tourist and Heritage Site	40	2024-2025
3	Islamabad	Capital City, Diplomatic Tourism, and Natural Beauty	40	2024-2025

The sampling criteria included substantive service quality complaints, such as cleanliness, staff behavior, and amenities. This agrees with Güler and Hüseyinov (2021) on how substantive complaints make sense within a failure of service. The non-textual, vague critiques or ratings were excluded to ensure a meaningful and transparent standard of data.

3.2. Analysis Procedure

The data enable a detailed, close manual content analysis, following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Distinct communicative actions in the hotel responses were defined and coded based on the framework of Rapport Management Theory (RMT) (Spencer-Oatey, 2000), which identified them as moves. The theory has a solid basis for explaining how communication can manage or repair relationships, particularly via face sensitivity, social rights, and interactional goals (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

To this end, the analysis found that these strategies included apologies, explanations, making promises of action, and showing empathy. However, these moves were classified into either dealing with the transactional goal of solving complaints or the relational goal of building or reconstructing rapport. It follows established content analysis procedures (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), making data categorization systematic and theoretically relevant.

The study was conducted strictly following the ethical guidelines. Since the data was collected from publicly available sources, there were no ethical concerns about privacy as the reviewers' names and specific hotel identifiers were anonymized (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). The data was applied following the principles of nonintrusive digital ethnography, ensuring ethical use of publicly available content as a basis for academic purposes (Hernández López, 2008). Since the reviews had been made public earlier, approval of the volunteers for that consent was not required. Yet all personal data was anonymized to respect their privacy.

The stratified sampling of the study, while the sample size is only 120 reviews, may not make generalizability from the study possible. Interpreted following Sparks & Fredline (2007), this approach is the same in that a manageable sample size permits in-depth analysis without overburdening the researcher. Moreover, the study considers only negative reviews with ratings below three stars, which may not paint the whole picture of the customers' experience. The confined scope of the research is also attributable to the fact that it solely relies on Booking.com as the only data source and, therefore, does not include reviews from other sources like TripAdvisor or Google Reviews (Ye et al., 2011).

4. Data Analysis

In this section, 120 hotel responses to negative online reviews from Booking.com between January 2024 and June 2025 are analyzed qualitatively through content. Based on Rapport Management Theory (RMT), an analysis of how hotels work such rapport through communication strategies regarding face sensitivity, social rights and obligations, and interactional goals is presented. The responses were then analyzed manually so that a deeper engagement in the data was possible, and moves in the hotel responses were highlighted and categorized according to RMT themes. In other words, we wanted to determine whether these were, by their responses, addressed transactional goals (getting complaints settled) or relational goals (building rapport and trust). All responses were analyzed to ensure that the emphasis was

on these key aspects of RMT and that the hotels' communication strategies to enhance relationships with customers and resolve grievances were comprehensively understood.

Table 2: Thematic Categorization of Hotel Responses

Hotel Response	RMT Theme
We deeply regret your experience and will improve.	Face Sensitivity
Our apologies for the inconvenience caused. Please know we are working on a solution.	
We hope to serve you better in the future.	Interactional Goals
We understand your concerns, and we will work on enhancing our services.	
Thank you for your feedback. We assure you that this issue will be addressed.	Social Rights and Obligations
Your feedback is valuable to us, and we will take immediate action.	

4.1. Face Sensitivities

As Spencer Oatey (2000, 2015) has put it, face sensitivities are individuals' and organizations' concern for their appearances in social relationships. In the case of digital hospitality, these sensitivities are represented by attempts to maintain both a quality face (competence and professionalism) and an identity face (social worth and interpersonal respect). When responding to public complaints, hotels feel pressure not only to maintain brand image (quality face) but also to express concern for the identity face of the guest.

In this study, hotel responses are considered ways to manage face with the criticism. A common approach often seen is to use general, non-specific apologies designed to convey politeness and regret, but avoid making specific comments regarding the complaint. For example, when a guest complained about bedsheets and toilet hygiene after paying a premium amount the hotel responded: *'This is the kind of feedback we seek from and intend to use to improve.'* In this case, we had failed to provide an exceptional guest experience. Whatever we can do to earn back your trust, we will fight to ensure that we give you that same great hotel experience that so many of our guests have experienced. This response seeks to save the hotel's quality face by admitting a failure, but in general terms and without mentioning a particular guest's complaint about cleanliness. In tone, it is polite and optimistic, but it fails to address the guest's concerns and thus may threaten the identity face and render the guest feel unheard.

On the other hand, another hotel responded with a more face-sensitive strategy, resulting in an apology and an internal follow-up. After a guest complained about inappropriate behavior by a day manager, the hotel responded: "We regret any inconvenience that you might have encountered during your stay. Please be sure that the incident of the Day Manager in contact with you and taking part in an internal investigation is being handled." This response balances the credibility of the hotel's quality face (asserting procedural accountability) and the legitimacy of the guest's identified face (recognizing the lifting of the complaint). Concern and action are essential keys in maintaining a relationship with the customer and preventing the rapport and trust that had built up from slipping away.

However, not all responses show sensitivity to face concerns. In other words, certain hotels have become defensive (or even confrontational) sometimes, where, as shown in the first case, the guest's credibility is questioned. Indeed, their rapport is threatened. For instance, a hotel snaps back at a guest's negative experience, and thus, "Mr. X checked in after two days of trying to stay for 4 hours, but we allowed him not to stay free, and he continued demanding a free stay. As for that, he was annoyed, and he did a negative review. So ignore him, please."



Here, we see an example of a hotel that sticks to preserving its face at the expense of the guest's identity by labeling the review dishonest. These are face-threatening responses that can present as dismissive and tarnish the hotel's reputation among the complaints and prospective guests who read the exchange.

Hotels also try to save face by justifying, thus avoiding direct responsibility for servicing failure. A major one was a guest complaint of bed bugs and lousy breakfast. Hospitality company Marriott said hotels do not allow bed bugs in guest rooms and respond to this issue: "We fumigate the property weekly and, as far as I knew, had no question of them being anywhere in rooms." Besides that, Pakistani and continental items for breakfast are also available. At this stage of the dialogue, the hotel does its best to ensure the quality of its face by adhering to standard procedures to deny the possibility of service lapses. However, without empathy and a personalized resolution, the rapport is threatened, as their bad experience is not accounted for on a deeper level.

Collectively, these examples demonstrate that where hotels are frequently aware of the need to protect their image, the effectiveness of their responses will hinge on how sensitive they remain towards a balance of their influence vs. the guest's viewpoint. While too general or defensive responses may protect the hotel's quality face in the short term, this will likely damage its face among its stakeholders. Conversely, replies acknowledging the guest's concerns and establishing the hotel's accountability can generally keep the hotel's standing and relationships with its customers intact.

In the Pakistani context, where the norms are indirect communication, hospitality, and face-saving, managing face sensitivities becomes more critical. There are several ways of expressing humility, admitting discomfort, and using culturally familiar terms (e.g., *Insha'Allah*) to cushion the complaint and reassure the guests that we mean no harm. In as much as this means there's little consideration for face concerns during rapport building, it also means there is no way to maintain a sustainable brand reputation for future clients in digital hospitality.

4.2. Sociality Rights and Obligations

The concept is pivotal in the theory of RMT, especially in digital customer service, particularly when managing negative feedback from the hospitality sector. Hotel representatives must address customers' complaints and defend policies with dignity and fairness, according to customers' expectations. Failing to conform to these expectations can ruin rapport and customer trust, even if a correct response is procedural.

Hotel responses in this study are analyzed, resulting in maintaining hotel policies and guest experience. Several Pakistani hotels have been found to justify internal operating procedures (like pricing, check-in rules, or room assignments), but they also conveniently fail to recognize the guest's dissatisfaction. Although this serves the purpose of protecting institutional integrity, it is at the cost of the guest's sense of equity and fairness, which are essential to social rights. However, one guest explained being upset that they were being charged for air conditioning in a country they felt the booking should have covered. According to the hotel, "*We need the necessary documents which were not available due to our hotel policy. Our guests have separate AC and non-AC types of rooms and, therefore, prices were extra. They request guests to select a room for themselves as per their budget.*" While the hotel is undoubtedly standing up for its policy and being operationally transparent, it does not validate the guest's misunderstanding or harsh feelings of being mistreated. A refusal to employ an empathetic tone or suggest how the issue could be resolved represents a disregard for social rights, and the guest may be left feeling that they have been made wrong or blamed.

In the most extreme cases, the responses are infused with a tone that goes out of its way to dismiss the validity of the guest's complaint and erodes trust even deeper. The poor service and my experience regarding room hygiene was one frustrating review. Rather than apologizing or explaining, the hotel dismissed the complaint outright: "He stayed for four hours, demanded a

free stay, and was annoyed when denied—ignore him, please.” In addition to dismissing the guest’s concerns, this reply publicly attacks and undermines their credibility. If the hotel neglects to treat the guest in a manner equivalent to respect and fair treatment, i.e., social rights in service interaction norms, then the hotel risks destroying rapport with the specific complainant and every prospective customer who may view the response.

However, not all the responses in the dataset failed to recognize social rights. There was one positive example from a hotel responding to a guest who had questioned security and bed linens. In a statement, the hotel said: “We are sincerely sorry for the problems that you experienced during your stay.” It’s not our usual standard and we are sorry that you did not feel safe. “We will take your feedback seriously and are speaking to the team on your behalf.” Even though the response does not specify the following steps, it acknowledges the guest’s concern, apologizes for it, and intends to pass along the information. It demonstrates a higher sensitivity towards the rights of association for the customer: the feeling of being regarded seriously and as a person of value. Even if the guest’s problem is not entirely solved, the response will hold rapport as it hints at attentiveness and concern.

Another favorable case occurred when a guest complained about a staff member's stern behavior. The hotel replied: “Your feedback is essential to us.’ I am sorry we are not yet where you want us to be but know that we are also doing all we can to address the issue of the day manager and what his interaction with you has been.” The hotel adheres to the guest’s equity rights by affirming that the situation was intolerable and will take specific action. An important aspect is that the guest is not blamed or reprimanded but instead is supported to some degree that is yet to be entirely determined, which increases rapport and shows a true dedication to a more fair and service-oriented stance.

In general, this section of the analysis makes an important point: hotels that seek the protection of institutional face without regard for social rights run the risk of alienating guests. Responses that acknowledge guest concerns even as policies are upheld typically are paternalistic but seem fairer and more likely to preserve rapport and trust. In contrast, defensive or purely procedural responses often seem impersonal and unfair. In this Pakistani context, where there is an influential service culture to be regarded, respectful, and courteous, recognizing social rights is of special importance. The most effective form of rapport management is responses that maintain operational standards while validating the customer’s experience.

4.3. Interactional Goals

The third dimension of Spencer Oatey’s Rapport Management Theory is interactional goals, which are an individual's goals for communication in everyday interaction. Finally, in the case of online hotel reviews and responses, interactional goals generally exist on two of the different levels: transactional and relational. In a transactional goal, however, the specific matter the customer raises has to be responded to, such as correcting misinformation, responding to a complaint, or clarifying a policy. Alternatively, the relational goal relates to keeping the relationship with the guest positive, keeping goodwill, and encouraging future interactions.

Therefore, an effective response resolves the complaint or misunderstanding while showing empathy, accountability, and willingness to restore the relationship. However, the findings in this study show that hotels tend to favor the transactional rather than the relational aspect at the expense of the long-run rapport.

The hotel, for example, retorted to a guest who complained of a problem in the water supply and expressed that he was picked unfairly and that ‘the problem was only for a very short time.’ I did not charge unlawfully, and I ran your query with these extra charges you speak of. And you also remember that I didn’t want to give you a discount when you called me about it. “We can’t cheat Booking.com.” This response directly explains and defends hotel actions in a highly transactional way. It’s furthermore lacking any relational warmth and acknowledging the guest’s distress. While it seems the hotel was only concerned about defending itself by solely

focusing on defending the hotel policy, it is an opportunity wasted to at least make the guest feel that the hotel is concerned or invite him to come back, which could salvage the effect of the complaint.

For instance, other responses do not engage with either goal, providing only vague reassurances without meaningful follow-through. ‘When a guest talks about the bed linens and security reasons they have, they replied that we regret this.’ However, we can’t refund you, and we will consider your feedback very seriously and share it with our team.” Although this reply commends the problem, it is vague and does not prescribe a course of action to resolve or restore the relationship. The response fails to achieve either goal fully because there is no tangible corrective action or invitation for continued engagement.

However, in a different hotel, the reply to a guest who complained about staff received a more balanced response. In response, the hotel said, “We are taking the matter seriously and investigating internally.” We hope to welcome you again for a much better experience and regret it wholeheartedly.” This reply has a transactional component—that is, promises to take action—and a relational component, as it does apologize and wants to host the guest again. Instead, this is more likely to preserve rapport and rebuild trust by following this dual-goal approach.

The kind of goal we are discussing in the Pakistani cultural context carries much weight regarding relationships. Guests also expect to be treated with warmth and courtesy, and the use of respectful language or unnecessary religious expressions (e.g., “Insha’Allah”) adds to the perceived sincerity of the response. After explaining its pricing structure, one such hotel ended its reply with: “We look forward to having the opportunity to serve you again, Insha’Allah.” Including a culturally resonant closing on top of the transactional component lifted the tone and helped keep the relational connection.

However, not all relational initiatives are successful. However, the relational language may sometimes be formulaic or lack sincerity if not coupled with substantive action. For example, telling a guest, “We hope to see you again soon,” while denying any wrongdoing or failing to resolve the complaint, can be perceived as dismissive. The most successful relational gestures tend to be those embedded in responses that offer practical resolutions or address specific concerns.

It is posited, overall, that the most effective rapport management of digital hospitality communication lies in reaching an effective balance between transactional and relational goals. What tends to be more effective and reputation-enhancing is resolving what is wrong and doing so in a way that cares for the guest’s emotional experience. Because Pakistan’s culture is highly context and relationship-oriented, the relational element of service recovery isn’t optional but necessary. Hotels that rely exclusively on defensive policies or justify their practices often make a terrible impression and seem out of reach; however, hotels that combine empathy and proactive outreach are more likely to turn complaints into opportunities to retain customers or convert them into loyalists.

5. Discussion

The study examines how hotels in Pakistan address customer relationships in response to negative feedback on online reviews. The results serve to reaffirm the relevance of Rapport Management Theory (RMT) to collectivistic societies, whose key considerations include face-saving, respect, and harmony in relationships during service recovery in that respect, the responses of the hotels are also determined by the norms of socio-cultural tradition, following which more importance is given to maintaining relationships rather than resolving the problem at the moment (Spencer-Oatey, 2015).

The techniques adopted by Pakistani hotels align with broader trends observed in high-context societies, such as China and Japan, where words or messages are often veiled and indirect forms of communication are used to avert confrontation and maintain face. Examples of such

a strategy include statements such as the following: 'We are sorry you had to have that experience; we will do everything to ensure that your next experience will be better.' This contrasts with Western service cultures, such as those in the United States, where providing direct apologies, offering compensation, or rectifying a policy is more prevalent. (Merolla, et al. 2013; Morrow, & Yamanouchi, 2020). The views of Western customer service respondents, when reacting to similar hotel-related transaction failures, tend to focus on financial gains, expressed in the form of refunds or product replacements, as the ultimate measure of success. However, the same reaction reveals a relational vision of the Pakistani people, who would apply cultural beliefs to such encounters and view ultimate success in terms of emotional control, as well as a long-term customer relationship.

Rapport management in Pakistan is also greatly influenced by religion. Islamic ethics are based on hospitality, whereby kindness, humility, and respect for guests are encouraged, regardless of their background. This ethical requirement is reflected in the application of language informed by religion, i.e., using terms like 'Insha'Allah' (God willing), which are used to demonstrate honesty and a desire to enhance the hotel's work. These terms not only represent a culturally specific way of communication but also correspond with the values of Islamic services (Razzaque & Chaudhry, 2013). As Alam et al. (2019) suggest, it is essential to deliver services under the Islamic ethos of empathy and face-saving communication. The hotels seem to adopt this model, as they prioritize addressing customer issues, even when it is unclear or disputable whether the service has failed or not.

To put these findings into perspective, comparisons with related industries are warranted. The same case applies in the airline industry, which heavily relies on relational services recovery procedures, namely responsive and personal actions, such as apologies and promises of future reparation (Nikbin et al., 2014). This is compared to the retail industry, which is primarily transactional. Although the Pakistani hotel also applies transactional solutions, such as refunds or discounts, these are of secondary importance to the two most apparent forms of relational solutions: saving the customer's face and ensuring they experience emotional pleasure. This aligns with previous studies conducted by Sparks and Browning (2011), who argue that relational goals are fundamental in industries where guests spend a significant amount of time, such as the hospitality and air travel sectors.

Outside RMT, the study's results have also yielded associations with Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) and Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory. As SDL suggests, we should co-create value through interaction between the service provider and the customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The relation-oriented work exemplified in hotel responses, particularly in the use of follow-up communication and polite tone, represents how value is co-constructed, even in the case of a service failure. Similarly, the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory, formulated by Oliver (1980), suggests that the satisfaction experienced by customers is a predictive response to disconfirming experiences compared to their expectations (Oliver, 1980). In the examples reviewed, when the hotel's reaction involved above-par empathy, politeness, and knowledge of the key cultural cues of interaction, it was more likely to contribute to sustained trust and rapport.

The arising insights also have significant managerial implications. The staff training in culturally and emotionally intelligent communication, which extends beyond the correctness of procedures, should be prioritized in the professional development of hotel staff in Pakistan. Focusing on empathy, indirect politeness, and observing cultural and religious conventions are the main ways that can considerably help improve rapport levels and address reputational risks, which are often tied to online complaints. With digital platforms significantly influencing consumer behavior, becoming culturally attuned to the language becomes not only a courtesy but also a competitive requirement.

To conclude, the study highlights the key role of relational strategies in the context of digital service recovery within collectivist, religiously influenced cultures. These cultural values are significant in the Pakistani context is maintaining rapport through preferred responses that reinforce congruence with the theme of Pakistani culture, which emphasizes respect, humility, and social harmony. Not only do these practices align with theoretical models of RMT but they also provide actual channels through which a hospitality enterprise can develop customer loyalty in an increasingly review-based hospitality industry.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the role of Rapport Management Theory (RMT) in designing responses to negative reviews on the online booking website (Booking.com) based on feedback from Pakistani hotel customer service managers. The findings revealed that cultural and religious norms, particularly collectivistic norms and Islamic norms of hospitality, play a significant role in shaping rapport following service recovery. The analysis used of 120 hotel responses in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad indicated that they preferred face-saving and empathetic communication over transactional solutions. These results align with the fundamental aspects of RMT, specifically face sensitivity, social rights, and interactional aims, and reinforce the significance of Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), which describes how value is co-generated through culturally aware interactions. For instance, relational responses that acknowledge cultural norms can transform a dissatisfied guest into a loyal customer. The work adds value to the service recovery discourse by explaining why emotional and cultural intelligence is essential in digital hospitality and pointing out the practical necessity of hotel managers training employees to adopt culturally responsive ways to deal with complaints. These implications involve placing importance on indirect politeness, culturally acceptable apologies, and acknowledging face-saving needs. Nevertheless, as only one cultural background and information were collected from a single platform (Booking.com), generalization is limited in this case. Future studies should investigate the existence of regional, industrial, and religious differences in rapport strategies to determine their long-term effects on customer beliefs and loyalty.

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