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Examination of Website Language Strategies Adopted by Five-Star Hotels in China: A Corpus Approach

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Abstract: Hotel websites are vital information channels for potential customers. Hence, their readability and attractiveness play a key role in online marketing for hotels. This study attempts to investigate how hotels use language strategies to better market themselves online. This study first proposes an analytical framework on the basis of appraisal theory, which aims to reveal the hidden mechanism by hotels in building interpersonal relationships, and uses such a framework to explore online language strategies used by five-star hotels in China. The general language strategy and the corresponding preference in the use of such a strategy amongst hotels are identified. Theoretical contributions and managerial implications are generated on the basis of the findings and analysis. It is among the early studies to modify appraisal theory to analyze tourism and hospitality text data and to adopt the corpus approach to explore the hidden mechanism of language use.

Keywords: appraisal theory; China's five-star hotels; corpus approach; hotel website; language strategies



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1. Introduction

China is gradually shifting its development focus from industries that produce heavy pollution to those that are relatively ecofriendly, among which the tourism industry is considered a good choice [1]. Although tourism may also generate ecological and social impact, this industry's advantages substantially outweigh the disadvantages when compared with the majority of the other industries [2]. Meanwhile, tourism can facilitate the economy to move up the value chain and create new economic niches [3]. Therefore, different levels of governments and destination marketing organizations in China are actively promoting their respective tourist spots worldwide. In such a process, substantial focus should be provided to the hotel segment because the majority of visitors usually stay and even spend much of their time at hotels during the entire trip [4]. Thus, their hotel experience immensely influences their impression of a destination and is closely related to generating either a positive or negative word of mouth towards travel the destination.

A hotel website is a vital source of information for prospective visitors. This platform can substantially influence people's decision-making process, thereby enabling hotel websites to receive considerable attention for its development [5]. The language of a hotel website provides a detailed depiction of the browsed hotel to encourage and persuade potential visitors to become actual purchasers. Although many studies [4,6,7] have been conducted to evaluate a hotel website's usability and functionality, no prior study has focused on the linguistic analysis of a website. It is recognized that language plays a vital role in shaping users' perception towards a hotel [6], and therefore academia should urgently bridge this research gap to better guide the website construction practice in the industry.

Accordingly, the specific objectives of this research are as follows: (1) develop a framework to investigate the language strategy in hotel websites; (2) explore how five-star

hotels that offer the highest service level in Mainland China employ linguistic resources to establish their image and align with potential customers in promoting the hotel on their websites; (3) display how a linguistic tool can be utilized to conduct textual studies in tourism and hospitality and (4) provide managerial implications and suggestions for five-star hotels in Mainland China to improve language construction and the overall content quality of their websites.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Website Evaluation

Websites provide businesses, regardless of size, with a sophisticated communication platform to promote their products or services and an avenue to generate profits by attracting many customers. However, not all websites are able to convert visitors into actual consumers. Additionally, substantial amounts of money have been allocated to website development, frequently without sufficient consideration whether such sites have achieved the established organizational targets [8]. Hence, an effective evaluation of websites has attracted the attention of researchers and industry practitioners.

Website evaluation is commonly referred to as the process that website developers use to determine how websites assist organizations meet their customers' needs and expectations [9]. Thus, developers can identify a website's weaknesses and focus on further improvement. The evaluation process often involves accuracy, quality, trustworthiness, effectiveness, and the overall satisfaction of customers [10]. Although immense effort has been exerted to develop an all-inclusive website evaluation criteria, a universally acknowledged standard for conducting the evaluation has yet to be developed [11]. Commonly, website evaluations differ slightly based on the nature and special expectations within a business. Therefore, different dimensions and attributes may be considered whilst measuring the performance of a website. Similarly, when tourism or hotel websites have been evaluated, the measurements used in different studies are divergent [4,12].

Among the available dimensions to be evaluated, functionality and usability evaluation are the two most common ones [4,13]. Meanwhile, various studies have developed and appraised the different attributes within the two dimensions. Reservation information, website management and surrounding area information are categorized under functionality [14], whilst website layout, information structure, and user interface fall under usability [15]. The use of language, which has been discussed in some studies as an attribute under usability, has yet to be evaluated [6,16].

2.2. Tourism Discourse in Language Studies

Although tourism has been broadly examined from the perspective of sociology, anthropology, and economics, an increasing awareness of tourism as a language has been identified recently [17]. Two dimensions are involved in the idea of tourism as a language. On the one hand, travel has become a common activity in people's daily lives; thus, the tourism discourse has gradually developed as a general and public language that can be understood by a wide audience without specific knowledge required [18]. On the other hand, tourism discourse is special and differs from other types of human language because it represents the largest and most promising industry throughout the world [19]. In reality, establishing a hierarchical system for tourism language is a relatively challenging task. The reason is that tourism is not a single discipline that is merely related to linguistics but a multidisciplinary field that involves economics, geography, art, and other disciplines. Overall, language in tourism bears three communicative functions, namely, vocative, expressive, and referential [20]. Although language occasionally bears one of the three functions, it can often be employed to simultaneously fulfil two or even three functions. Thus, tourism language is also multifaceted in terms of its function.

Although current tourism promotions emphasize visual aspects [21], the written text, in reality, continues to play a key role in influencing customers' purchase decisions [22]. Evidently, the function of a linguistic message is to secure a range of potential meanings

through the choice of interpretations, whilst rarely can a picture express all of its intended meaning without the written language [23]. This idea is consistent with Dann [19], who determined that despite the popularity of using featured photographs, the images constantly appear with a written message. Hence, the function of texts should remain widely applicable within the tourism and hospitality industry. One prominent feature, namely, being highly persuasive, has made the language of tourism different from general discourse. The reason is that the ultimate goal of such a language is to sell a tourism-related product by realistically and sincerely depicting a reality that the latent visitor may expect. Thus, the target population may acquire the illusion of authentically experiencing a product before actually taking it, whilst a positive expectation is likely to be formed [24].

Generally, Phipps explained that tourism texts have long been disregarded in linguistic studies, with merely a few attempts to explore the features of travel-related writing [25]. Moreover, tourism research has disregarded the main medium (i.e., language) that is used to promote products and services [26]. As tourism has become one of the most prosperous industries globally, tourism discourse has undoubtedly become one of the most common in daily public encounters. Therefore, a comprehensive and systematic linguistic analysis should be conducted to improve the quality of texts in tourism by enhancing their appeal and usefulness.

The effect that online reviews about tourism and hotel products or services can exert is the current focus in studies related with the language use in tourism and hotel websites [27,28]. The reviews are generated by customers and cannot be controlled by product or service providers. The only thing product or service providers can do is to perfect their offerings and lead customers to generate positive word of mouth. However, to date, only a few studies have attempted to further uncover the overall linguistic features and language strategy used for promotion in tourism and hospitality websites. Therefore, the present study is among the early and initial endeavors to attempt to achieve this goal. Moreover, this study focuses only on the texts in hotel websites for a considerably effective and efficient research.

3. Analytical Framework

3.1. Introduction to Appraisal Theory

Halliday [29] explained that three metafunctions are embedded in the lexico-grammatical level of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Each metafunction represents one aspect of the world and is concerned with one mode of meaning within clauses. All metafunctions are stimulated simultaneously whenever language is used. Appraisal theory is one of the further developments of interpersonal metafunction within the systemic functional linguistics (SFL). The focus of appraisal theory is the system, and the center is the evaluation. A writer's attitude or stance can be evaluated by analyzing the language; hence, appraisal theory goes beyond the surface meaning of a text to discover its deeply embedded meaning [30].

3.2. Application of Appraisal Theory on Hotel Website Examination

Appraisal theory has been developed to analyze the interpersonal metafunctions of language, which is in accordance with the aim of a hotel's website. The key subsystems can be used in the analysis. For example, "attitude" can be applied to exhibit a hotel's self-orientation, ethnic criteria and aesthetic value, while "engagement" functions to adjust the brand image, thereby helping to enclose the relationship between the hotel and customers, and "graduation" directly or indirectly alters the degree of the attitude or engagement. Hence, appraisal theory facilitates an improved understanding and assessment of how language is applied to present positions, the establishment of interpersonal relationships, and the development of textual personas. Moreover, this theory is a tool for exploring the evaluative meaning in discourse and has been adopted to study a variety of texts [31,32], although limited within the tourism or hospitality discourse. The current study adopts the

subsystem attitude as the most important and most widely examined system in appraisal theory [33].

Appraisal theory is a systemic, discourse analysis-driven, and lexicon-based theory concerning a special semantic field. Therefore, a genre-based modification is necessary in the application of this theory before any analysis is conducted [30]. The discourse of hotel introduction is apparently featured by the positive appraisal of products and services, degrees of fondness, and overall subjectivity. Hence, the use of the “appreciation” language is expected to play a significant role in the attitude subsystem; “affect” is the other attribute and may be similarly important. On the one hand, this attribute is often used to evaluate the services that hotels can offer. On the other hand, affect is often implicated in the value of appreciation. Martin and White [30] explained that judgment is related with social or moral evaluation, achievement appraisal, or obedience to recognized social norms. Thus, judgment is not frequently found on hotel websites. Accordingly, the theory modification mainly focuses on the appreciation of the attitude subsystem, although affect and judgment are likewise adjusted to suit the research context.

Oates and Pryce [34] subcategorized the promotional discourse used for selling property on the basis of the difference between logos and pathos. Logos refers to the factual information listed about the product and comprises the majority of the description, whereas pathos is concerned with emotive expressions [35]. Broad and narrow subcategories within pathos are further differentiated into possibly or recognizably emotive words and expressions. Although these two subcategories have no more straightforward definition, a list that contains all of their 181 words is made with the assistance of a large corpus and the related analysis. The broad group is further divided into four subgroups: originality of the property, prestige, excitement, and general ambience. Expressions such as “lovely”, “exceptional”, and “preferred” belong to the narrow or core group. Generally, Oates and Pryce [34] elucidated how the appreciation subsystem within appraisal theory can be modified to adequately evaluate hotel website discourse. The detailed appreciation framework used in this study is illustrated as follows.

Emotive impact merges the original impact of reaction and other considerably intense quality of reaction with several expressions from the narrow group of pathos and excitement of the broad group. This category includes expressions that can present the author’s highest level of subjective involvement in the discourse because they either originate from or refer to certain degrees of fondness, including “breathtaking”, “incredible” and “spectacular”. Pleasantness merges the balance and complexity of composition and other minimally intense quality of reaction with several expressions from the narrow group of pathos. Such expressions as “beautiful”, “appealing”, and “well organized” are included. Judgment in the framework of Martin and White [30] mainly concerns the people’s judgment in terms of social esteem and sanctions. In the hospitality industry, the people who can be mainly judged in introductory discourse are the hotel staff. The main subcategories that can be used in judgment are capacity and possibly tenacity. Given that the nature of the hotel industry is to offer excellent services to customers, staff hospitality level is relatively important in creating a good image for their customers. Thus, a new hospitality subcategory is added to the judgment subsystem. For the affect subsystem, all four subcategories are maintained because they could represent the evaluation of either the hotel staff or the present and future hotel guests. However, the use of a signifier is a new angle and is introduced to facilitate the analysis of the emotions reflected in the employed language resources.

4. Research Methodology

Given the immense popularity of online hotel bookings, consumers’ first impression of a hotel may arise from its website. Thus, the discourse in the introductory web page of five-star hotels in Mainland China is first collected in text format to establish a corpus. Only five-star hotels are selected as the research subject because they are regarded as the best hotels in China’s long established hotel rating system, can represent the highest hospitality

level in the industry, and serve as role models for low-starred hotels to follow. Additionally, the annual report from the China National Tourism Association (CNTA) 2015 indicated that five-star hotels obtained revenues that topped the industry and played the main role in entertaining tourists. As of February 2017, 852 five-star hotels have been approved by CNTA. To provide accurate and timely accommodation information, the English version of hotel websites plays an indispensable role in attracting numerous inbound tourists. Given this market focus, only the English introductions of hotel websites were extracted to form the corpus. The period to extract the textual data was from March to May 2017.

The next step is to conduct human judgments in identifying and coding the discourse components of the language, thereby requiring a detailed coding rubric to obtain clear definitions. Although corpus annotation may be conducted at multiple levels with different forms, the corpus used in the current research were annotated mainly by the first author on the basis of the modified framework of appraisal theory. The coding process started from June and ended in October 2017. After the manual coding process, two experts from the SFL field were invited to check the correctness of the coded text data. Prior to checking, the experts were given a brief training on the framework to ensure the consistency of their review. Thereafter, each expert was assigned to check a 20% random section of the annotated corpus. Eventually, both experts agreed on a 95% accuracy of the selected texts, which are considered reliable for further analysis.

The coding process utilized the UAM Corpus Tool developed by Mick O'Donnell in 2008 and comprised numerous programs for annotating the linguistic features of the corpus texts. This tool has been widely used in corpus studies worldwide and is recognized by linguistic scholars because of its considerable functionality and ease of use [36–38]. UAM has two advantages compared with other corpus tools, namely, its power to annotate the examined texts and ease of use.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Generational Text Statistics from Corpus Tool Coding

Table 1 shows the general text statistics of the 551 English introductory texts, including the length, text complexity, lexical density, subjectivity and reference density. Text length briefly presents information on the coded segments that lack specific meanings requiring interpretation. For text complexity, the average length of words in terms of characters is 5.97, which is longer than the average length of English words (i.e., 4.79 characters) but is within the normal range because 80% of English words comprise 2 to 7 characters [39]. The average syllable per word is 2.53, which is more than the English average of 1.66 syllables [40]. Both values can be attributed to the fact that although hotels mainly cater to customers' daily needs for accommodation, its introduction remains more complex than daily English usage.

This feature is also reflected in the lexical density, which is commonly defined as the proportion of lexical words to the entire text [41] and regarded as an important indicator of communicative competence and text readability [42,43]. Overall, the lexical density of the corpus is 71.18%, which is higher than the texts in physics and life sciences with 69.54% and 68.96%, respectively. Such density is likely to cause certain difficulties for customers in understanding the hotel introduction, thereby reducing the overall ease of use of the website. Undoubtedly, promotional texts are relatively positive as indicated by the value of subjectivity positivity (0.842). Meanwhile, the strength of subjectivity (0.455) also reaches a moderately strong level owing to the wide adoption of appraisal resources to engage with hotel customers. Text producers tend to use second-person reference in their texts, followed by the first person. The third person is rarely used and comprises a mere 0.041%. Additionally, as a part of the attitude resources, personal reference is discussed in detail when the coding result for appraisal resources is presented.

Table 1. General text statistics for the corpus.

| Length | |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| Number of segments | 15,212 |
| Words in segments | 21,982 |
| Tokens in segments | 24,230 |
| Text complexity | |
| Average word length (chars) | 5.97 |
| Average word length (syllables) | 2.53 |
| Average segment length (tokens) | 1.45 |
| Min. segment length (tokens) | 1 |
| Max. segment length (tokens) | 26 |
| Lexical density | |
| Lexemes per segment | 1.03 |
| Lexemes % of text | 71.18% |
| Subjectivity | |
| Subjective positivity | 0.842 |
| Subjective strength | 0.455 |
| Reference density | |
| First person (1p) reference | 3.480% |
| Second person (2p) reference | 5.509% |
| Third person (3p) reference | 0.041% |

5.2. Generational Text Statistics from Featured Coding

This section presents the general statistics on the use of appraisal resources. Figure 1 shows that attitude is the dominant dimension and represents 85.41% in the hotel websites' use of appraisal resources. This result confirms that attitude plays a leading role in communication and persuasion [44] and is the most widely examined dimension in the appraisal system [45,46]. In the attitude system, appreciation ranks first with 63.21%, followed by affect (20.74%) and judgement (1.47%). The prevalence of appreciation in the system is logical because of its main concern on object evaluation, performance, and natural phenomena, all of which are closely related with hotel products. However, staff members as service providers are seldom exposed to the introduction because the subsystem judgment that is used to appraise people occupies a low percentage at 1.47%. Meanwhile, the three subcategories take up below 1%. Affect resources deal with the expression of people's emotion and rank second in the entire attitude subsystem.

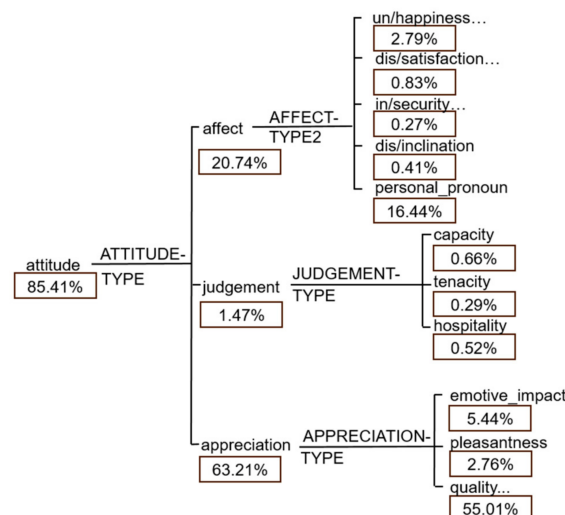


Figure 1. Use of attitude resources in the corpus.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of each appreciation subcategory to further explore this most important appraisal area. Quality is the least subjective and most prevalent attribute with over 50%. The percentage of second-class quality is larger than that of first class, thereby indicating that the hotel introductions focus considerably on presenting the relatively objective hotel information. Five-star hotels favor “location”, “space”, “facility” and “surroundings”, which all occupy over 5% of the resources. For first-class quality, hotels emphasize their prestige and ambience more than their other features. This percentage is considerably higher than the other features in the entire quality attribute, except for location. A detailed discussion of the two subcategories with high percentages is provided in the succeeding section.

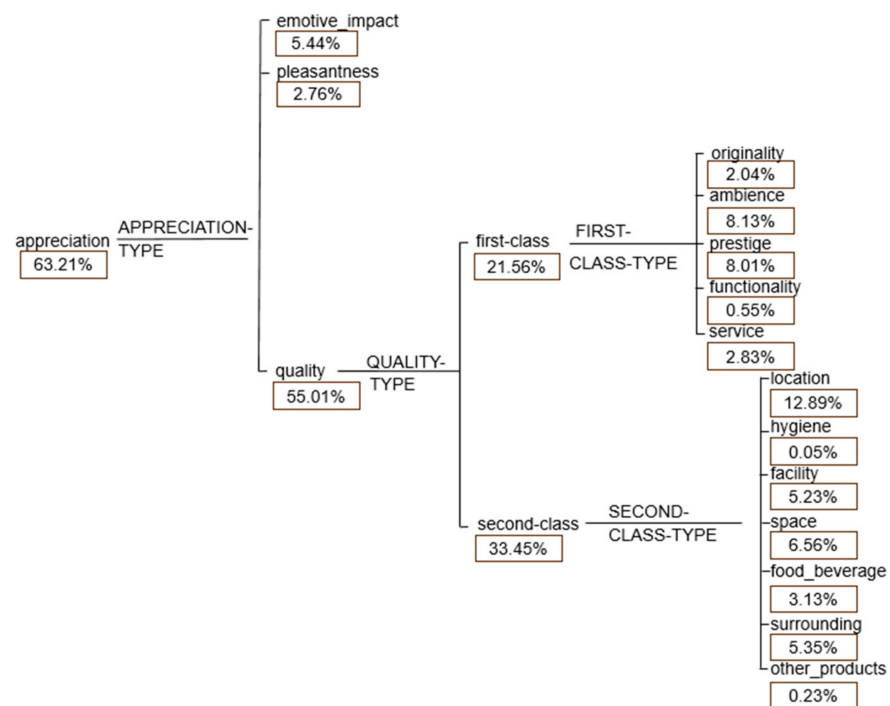


Figure 2. Use of appreciation resources in the corpus.

Table 2 shows the top expressions that hotels adopt to describe their ambience. “Elegant” (147 times), “elegance” (37 times), and “elegantly” (20 times) dominate the list, thereby indicating the indispensability of an elegant ambience as one quality of top-tier hotels in China. Elegance is followed by “modern” (84 times), “international” (38 times), and “contemporary” (29 times). “Traditional” (18 times) and “classical” (11 times) with a low percentage reflects how many five-star hotels aim to create a modern image amongst their customers, although other hotels may adopt a traditional style to establish a different market orientation. Other qualities, such as being “comfortable”, “quiet”, and “classic”, are likewise emphasized.

Table 2. Expressions in ambience and prestige.

| Token | Frequency | Token | Frequency |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| elegant | 147 | luxury | 192 |
| modern | 84 | luxurious | 110 |
| comfortable | 65 | view | 67 |
| international | 38 | private | 57 |
| elegance | 37 | views | 55 |
| warm | 30 | deluxe | 55 |
| contemporary | 29 | hotel | 39 |
| quiet | 20 | largest | 35 |
| classic | 19 | panoramic | 30 |
| new | 18 | famous | 26 |
| traditional | 18 | | |
| beautiful | 18 | | |
| designed | 17 | | |
| decorated | 16 | | |
| style | 16 | | |
| romantic | 15 | | |
| tranquil | 12 | | |
| appointed | 12 | | |
| peaceful | 11 | | |
| exquisite | 11 | | |
| classical | 11 | | |
| relaxing | 11 | | |

Table 2 also presents how hotels describe their prestige. Evidently, presenting a hotel’s luxury is dominant in this feature, thereby appearing to indicate that being luxurious has become synonymous to prestige. Other important characteristics of the prestige features include “serving private products” (Figure 3), “offering an unparalleled view” (Figure 4) and “owning something which is the largest in the region” (Figure 5). Generally, five-star hotels employ “luxury”, “scenery”, and “privacy” as the main features to create a prestigious image among their customers.

| Pretext | [word="private"] | PostText |
|--|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| the few five-star hotels with | private | beach. The central area |
| top-floor Club Lounge, offering | private | check-in and cocktails. From |
| Resort. Guests find the | private | spaces in Crowne Plaza Century |
| indoor swimming pool, a | private | Jacuzzi and sauna, the |
| from the office. With | private | dining options and a bar |
| a personalized concierge service and | private | lounge with complimentary food and |
| an elegant, comfortable and | private | living space. Meanwhile, |
| and function options, from | private | spaces to huge ballrooms, |
| than 30 Chinese and western | private | rooms, 3 multifunctional banquet |
| recreation places such as KTV | private | rooms, massage rooms, |
| shop, all kinds of | private | vip rooms and conference rooms |
| as 8 VIP rooms featuring | private | hot spring pool are also |
| experience about occident food .french | private | food.japanese food and so on |
| apartments as well as 126 | private | residential apartments, is minutes |
| four exclusive venues devoted to | private | dining are sure to delight |
| a flat-screen TV and a | private | bathroom. All units feature |
| well as more than 50 | private | dining rooms. Moreover, |
| Chinese and western restaurants, | private | rooms, and Grand Ballrooms |
| elegantly-designed, luxurious setting with | private | banquet options. The panoramic |
| Club Floor offers a fully-equipped | private | Club Lounge with panoramic view |
| bar, laundry service and | private | lounge check-in and check-out service |

Figure 3. Examples of the use of “private” in prestige.

| Pretext | [word="view"] | PostText |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|--|
| among the first class sea | view | hotels inChina Horizon Resort & |
| most excellent location of sea | view | on Yalong Bay, one |
| you can overlook the beautiful | view | of Yalong Bay, all |
| and bright line luxury sea | view | suites, suites enjoy Heaven |
| sulfur hot spring pool. | View | of the sea, bath |
| high-vision and romantic deluxe sea | view | rooms, pastoral garden view |
| view rooms, pastoral garden | view | rooms and deluxe suites, |
| balcony bathtubs. 180° sea | view | rooms enable you to have |
| will have a bird's eye | view | of the blue sky, |
| a stunning bird's eye | view | of both Puxi and Pudong |
| 5-star hotel with fantastic Bund | view | at same time, boasts |
| is famous for its unique | view | . This 5 star hotel |
| facilities have the most spectacular | view | of both banks of Huangpu |
| recognized as "The Best | View | Point on the bank of |
| rooms with a spectacular park | view | ; irresistible and distinctive restaurants |
| with an unparalleled, uninterrupted | view | of the historic Bund. |
| . There is no better | view | to complement the delicious flavours |
| time. Having a bird's-eye | view | , it looks like an |
| , Lujiazui. While the | view | out of your room in |
| the Royal building and the | View | building. The 268 rooms |
| square meters and the lake | view | of HuYin Park. The |

Figure 4. Examples of the use of "view" in prestige.

| Pretext | [word="largest"] | PostText |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| while the family pool and | largest | indoor Kids Club in Sanya |
| 100 hectares. As the | largest | national garden hotel in Pudong |
| Bridge, the world's fourth | largest | cable-stayed overpass of its kind |
| Jiang International Hotels, the | largest | hotel group in China, |
| 9 function rooms, the | largest | ballroom, the Magnolia Hall |
| Ballroom - one of the | largest | in downtown Shanghai. We |
| circle, and Asia's | largest | grassland in the city, |
| the Wudangzhao Lamasery (the | largest | Tibetan monastery in Inner Mongolia |
| and suites are amongst the | largest | in Beijing, with high |
| Beijing is one of the | largest | garden-style hotels in Asia. |
| at Kerry Sports, Beijing's | largest | hotel-based sports complex. With |
| , major government bodies and | largest | shopping area. Only 5 |
| authority of the country's | largest | hotel management company, Jin |
| Pacific International Hotel is the | largest | urban garden hotel with the |
| to be one of the | largest | and the most convenient hotels |
| floor hotel is now the | largest | Sea-Culture theme hotel in Weihai |
| 100 m2, is the | largest | one in Zhejiang province. |
| The Hotel also features the | largest | upscale health club in town |
| system; one of the | largest | in-hotel conference halls in Asia |
| palace garden hotel with the | largest | amounts of villas in China |
| picked the hotel with the | largest | rooms in the city centre |

Figure 5. Examples of the use of "largest" in prestige.

Moving back to the highly emotive and subjective subcategory, emotive impact also takes up a large proportion (5.44%) because hotels enjoy using such expressions as "a landmark hotel", "the first choice" and even "Lost Horizon" to state their position in the local industry. Other highly emotive words (see Table 3), such as "ideal", "perfect", and "best", are also highly utilized to describe the hotels. No concrete standard can measure hotels' idealness or perfection, and these terms are merely self-evaluations of hotel quality.

From another perspective, five-star hotels should be “perfect” and serve as a role model of other hotels.

Table 3. Expressions in the emotive impact and pleasantness.

| Token (Emotive Impact) | Frequency | Token (Pleasantness) | Frequency |
|------------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|
| ideal | 96 | comfort | 58 |
| perfect | 72 | convenience | 28 |
| best | 64 | charm | 21 |
| choice | 54 | comfortable | 19 |
| landmark | 46 | beautiful | 15 |
| home | 45 | great | 14 |
| place | 31 | wonderful | 14 |
| important | 17 | affordable | 13 |
| first | 15 | enchantment | 12 |
| away | 13 | comforts | 9 |
| sanctuary | 13 | good | 8 |
| paradise | 13 | pleasant | 7 |
| high-end | 12 | charming | 7 |
| unforgettable | 11 | honorable | 6 |
| oasis | 11 | conveniences | 6 |
| excellent | 11 | convenient | 5 |
| perfectly | 10 | efficiency | 5 |
| high | 10 | | |
| top | 10 | | |

Pleasantness, which is a minimally emotive subcategory, occupies a relatively small proportion in appreciation but not when compared with other attributes in the entire system. Table 3 also shows the top expressions in this subcategory. Evidently, several terms under pleasantness likewise appear in other attributes or features. For example, “comfortable” appears in the ambience feature accompanied by such words as “environment”, “atmosphere”, and “living space”. However, “ambience” under pleasantness is used to describe the overall living experience, such as a comfortable holiday experience, stay, and accommodation. The difference between “convenience” and “convenient” is considerably apparent, in which the former is a modifier for the overall experience of hotel living, whereas the latter is used to describe the location.

Personal pronouns are the most popular subcategory in the affect subsystem. Such a high percentage proves the correctness of inserting personal pronouns to the language evaluation study. Figure 6 demonstrates the use of personal pronouns in the corpus. The lead type is the second reference (i.e., you-oriented reference), thereby indicating that hotels highly value customers’ feelings whilst they are reading the introduction and attempt to bridge the gap to and win over these potential customers [47]. The first-person reference in the current study mainly refers to “we” rather than “I” because hotels cannot be represented by single entities, thereby prompting them to avoid using “I” in the introduction. The “we-oriented” reference comprises over 5%, thereby ranking second in this subcategory and enabling a certain confidence and authenticity to be presented [48]. However, the first-person perspective may also distance readers from a hotel because it suggests a strong subjectivity with its related statements or may isolate readers’ emotional engagement from the hotel’s products and services compared with the second-person reference.

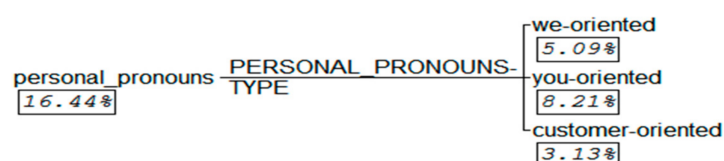


Figure 6. Use of personal pronouns in the corpus.

Introduction writers seldom use the third-person reference, which is the customer-oriented pronoun in this study. The words used in this reference are relatively divergent, including frequent use of “guests”, “customers”, and “clients” but minimal use of “travelers”, “vacationers” and “businessmen”. This feature offers both merits, the most evident of which is presenting information in a relatively objective manner [49], and demerits, in which the customer-oriented expression tends to target the potential customer as an observer but not a participant. Thus, the distance between hotels and customers increases as in the first-person reference. The use of the happiness subcategory (at 2.79%) also deserves special attention. In the current study, happiness is divided into two parts, namely, cheer and affection. Hotels tend to utilize affection substantially more than cheer. Affection is mainly conveyed by such words as “fond”, “loving”, and “adoring”. By contrast, cheer can be expressed by “cheerful”, “laugh”, and “jubilant”. The degree of happiness completely differs between these two types, whilst five-star hotels in China favor the relatively weak form of happiness.

6. Conclusions

The main objective of this study is to develop a framework for the language strategy evaluation of hotel websites in China. Language strategy evaluation is a scarcely examined area in website evaluation studies in the tourism and hospitality industry. This study adopted a step-by-step design to gradually achieve the aforementioned objective. Meanwhile, the importance of five-star hotels in China has prompted the current researcher to investigate only the websites of these hotels.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

Appraisal theory is developed from SFL and is widely adopted in exploring interpersonal relationships between authors and readers in various reading materials, such as newspaper reports, school textbooks, and grant proposals. Several studies have used this framework to examine language in the business or management context, in which interpersonal relationship is extremely important between the two parties. To the researchers' knowledge, the current research is amongst the first to apply appraisal theory to tourism and hospitality and conduct an empirical study to show its possibility and usefulness in the field.

The use of appraisal theory in this study is not merely an application but a modification to substantially suit the hotel context. In accordance with the nature of this theory, the current study develops a framework for the evaluation of hotel website language strategies and fills in this research gap. Thus, future studies in tourism and hospitality can learn from the current research to carefully design their framework on the basis of appraisal theory and generate considerably sound results to guarantee reliability.

Furthermore, this study opens an avenue for tourism and hospitality researchers to use the corpus approach. Despite being a major approach in linguistic studies, the corpus approach has not caught wide attention amongst researchers in this field. Apart from the language in hotel websites, numerous texts exist in tourism and hospitality. Researchers commonly deal with these texts by using content, textual, and semiotic analyses that involve extensive human participation. Hence, human bias can occur in every stage of the research. By contrast, the corpus approach follows a rigid research design of corpus linguistics from the extraction of texts to the establishment of the corpus and from the coding of the text data to the analysis and comparison of the corpus data sets. Lastly, this study demonstrates the power of the corpus in simultaneously dealing with numerous texts.

6.2. Managerial Contributions

As the core of the entire study, the evaluation of language strategies used by hotels relatively elucidate the hotel operations in China. For example, hotels generally prefer to use introductions with long and complex words, thereby posing difficulty for the average readers to understand. This situation is particularly apparent in hotels with domestic

brands. Thus, such hotels firstly need to decrease the length and complexity of words in their website introduction. How hotels use their language resources to demonstrate their unique features is likewise displayed. If other hotels tend to highlight these features, then the language strategy should be analyzed and skillfully adopted for comparison with their actual characteristics.

Another managerial contribution is a reminder for hotels to emphasize the importance of their staff in the introduction. Accordingly, the majority of the language resources are devoted to introducing the products or services that hotels can offer. However, such introductions do not emphasize the hotel staff as the actual service provider. In reality, hotels with sufficient money can easily buy advanced and luxury facilities to substantially satisfy their customers. By contrast, retaining their staff and providing guarantees that they can offer excellent services to hotel customers are relatively difficult. Moreover, motivating hotel staff to work well involves many factors, including salaries, promotional opportunities, and a sense of happiness. Thus, a successful hotel should allocate the appropriate resources to introduce how excellent their staff is, thereby differentiating themselves from the competition and showing their excellence from another perspective.

Although the hotel industry globally is currently being confronted with the biggest challenge in history, the industry is bound to recover and revitalize when proper measures have been adopted to mitigate the influence of COVID-19. Hence, it is time for hotels to rethink their images and the ways to project them, especially on how to project appealing online images in the context of internet economy. The current study offers the language strategy hotels can use to project the intended online image and consequently contributes to the revitalization of the industry in the post-pandemic era.

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