Abstract:

Since the advent of the Web 2.0, the internet has enabled dissatisfied customers to share their negative experience with a great number of people via websites, blogs and other online forums. Especially in the tourism industry, third-party platforms such as TripAdvisor are providing the perfect setting for dissatisfied customers to share unpleasant experiences by posting negative reviews. Due to their range, straightforwardness, convenience, and anonymity, online travel platforms are gaining in popularity and, as a result, also in importance, since peer-reviews are considered more trustworthy than information provided by marketers. Word of mouth serves as the most important source of information in the tourism industry when it comes to travelers' decision-making process. Once word of mouth has gone online, its scale and anonymity require more than conventional methods for analyzing and handling complaints.

In order not to lose the complaining customer and, in this case, more importantly, to keep and win over observing customers, very negative reviews need to be addressed in an appropriate way. Regarding this matter, research shows that accommodative responses addressing the complainant in a polite and understanding way are often considered the most effective way of dealing with negative online reviews, while defensive responses is often attributed a lack of politeness and empathy. However, while accommodative responses manage to contain a certain level of politeness, they are in many cases very standardized and could, therefore, convey a low level on interest in the reviewers' problems.

The objective of this thesis is to investigate whether defensive responses to negative hotel reviews containing verbal attacks on the part of the customer on TripAdvisor really fail to politely and empathetically address the complainant's problems or if they might actually represent an alternative to accommodative responses broadly seen as the better choice when handling a negative online review. In order to find an answer to this research question, a comparison between accommodative and defensive responses is drawn regarding the factors considered as polite and empathetic in accordance with the academic literature as well as regarding their level of standardization.