

"I FOUND THIS LAW FIRM ON GOOGLE REVIEWS, AND I WASN'T DISAPPOINTED" A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF POSITIVE LAW FIRM CLIENT REVIEWS AND BUSINESS OWNER RESPONSES IN THE US AND THE UK

Gianmarco Vignozzi
(University of Pisa, Italy)

Abstract

This paper proposes a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of positive online reviews of US and UK law firms and the corresponding business owners' responses. The aim is to better understand and describe their linguistic nature and their structure, and assess whether and to what extent cross-cultural variation occurs. The methodology used to carry out the analysis combines different approaches to linguistic inquiry. It starts with a lexico-grammatical description of reviews and responses through corpus methods, then continues with a move structure analysis that focuses on rhetorical differences between British and American reviews and responses and ends with an attentive cross-cultural analysis on the usage of positive evaluative adjectives in reviews, conducted through the lens of appraisal theory. The cross-cultural analysis indicates that US reviews and responses are more oriented towards experience-sharing, recommendation, and publicity. By contrast, the UK's samples are characterized by a more attentive expression of politeness and conversational rituals. Moreover, the adjectives used to express positive evaluations reveals an interesting tendency: that of foregrounding communication and social skills in US reviews and technical and professional skills in UK reviews.

1. Introduction

In today's digital society, online tools for expressing evaluative feedback are part of nearly every aspect of our lives. Before buying a product or using a service, it has become natural, if not essential, to surf the internet and check whether we are making the right decision based on what other people have previously said. Because of this wide-ranging phenomenon, consumers and clients living in the digital age are often referred to as *prosumers* (producers + consumers) who have the power to influence future decisions of their peers through the product and service reviews they share on the web (Vásquez 2014). Therefore, it goes without saying that all business entities that have an online presence, which has become a vital requirement to keep pace with the market, are affected by digital reviews and should carefully consider their potential as digital marketing tools, e.g. for building credibility, trust, and rapport with both prospective and habitual clients (Liu *et al.* 2020).

According to a recent legal marketing survey (Reuters 2022), clients often rely on online feedback before choosing the law firm that best suits their needs. Consequently, a law firm with a strong and effective digital identity has the edge over others and is likely to get more enquiries, thereby increasing the chances of securing big and lucrative cases. This makes it essential for law firms to curate their online presence in all its aspects, from the production and dissemination of pre-service consumption promotional content, such as online ads and law-related blog and vlog¹ posts, to the careful monitoring of which and how many post-service consumption materials, such as reviews and testimonials, circulate on the internet.

Some studies from the field of linguistics have concentrated on the increasing attention paid by American and British law firms in particular to the contents published on their websites, which are clearly exploited to promote the expertise and, most of all, the reliability of the lawyers working at the firm. In Vignozzi (2022a, 2022b), for example, I focused on the emerging genre of attorneys' video FAQs, which are short videoclips uploaded to law firm websites where lawyers answer a series of questions prospective clients may have on the range of services they offer. The research showed that video FAQs are carefully targeted towards the receivers, constantly siding and sympathizing with the citizen at the expense of the legal system, which is repeatedly framed as a dangerous enemy from whom only skillful lawyers can grant protection. Cavalieri (2018) also explored how videos popularizing legal issues are embedded in some successful British law firm websites in order to reach nonexperts (i.e. clients) effectively and engage them. No linguistic studies, however, concentrate on post-service genres, i.e. on those texts produced directly by former law firm clients, to observe, for instance, the extent to which their wording may contribute to the promotion and to the construction of the digital identity of law firms.

Against this background, this paper aims to bridge this gap in research and carry out a linguistic analysis of the genres of online law firm client reviews and business owner responses. Specifically, the study focuses on a corpus of positive-polarity Google reviews, and their corresponding responses, of British and American law firms. The reason for concentrating on positive reviews is twofold. Firstly, they contribute the most to the promotion of the law firm and to the creation of a successful online identity; hence they are the type of reviews lawyers wish to elicit with their services. Secondly, as several studies have demonstrated (cf. Bridges and Vásquez 2018; Melian-Gonzalez *et al.* 2013), positive online reviews tend to be more numerous than negative ones and have a higher reach and impact on the web. The present research aims to define some of the key lexico-grammatical features of online law firm reviews and responses as textual genres, fuelling the ongoing debate on how, and to what extent, web-mediated genres affect consumers' choices (Nofal *et al.* 2022). Moreover, the analysis also tackles cross-cultural differences and specificities as reviews/responses to US- and UK-based law firms are analysed comparatively to unveil whether different cultural contexts of production play a relevant role in the actual linguistic and rhetorical realization of reviews and responses. The initial research hypothesis would be that, despite sharing the same language (English), positive reviews of US and UK law firms should differ in the way they are worded. This is because the distinct cultural contexts in which they are

¹ Vlogs are a particular type of blog for which the medium of the posts is video.

produced have been shown to play a crucial role in the formulation of politeness rituals (e.g. complimenting, greeting, apologizing) (Vignozzi 2019).

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on online reviews and responses concentrating on studies carried out from the point of view of linguistics. Section 3 is devoted to the description of the design and compilation of the *ad hoc* corpus built for this study and of the methods used for the analysis. The analysis is presented in Section 4. The first two subsections (4.1. and 4.2.) describe positive reviews and responses as a textual genre highlighting cross-cultural differences between the US and UK corpus components. The third subsection (4.3.) delves into the examination of positive evaluation in terms of adjective choice, comparatively in US and UK reviews. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered in Section 5.

2. Online reviews and business owner responses

Online reviews represent a form of user-generated evaluative feedback posted on the internet by users for an audience of unknown peers. In other words, they are a form of one-to-many computer-mediated communication that has the intent of providing information, help, and advice to fellow consumers or clients (Vásquez 2014). Several studies from a business marketing perspective have pointed to the significance of online reviews for consumer decision-making (e.g. Duan *et al.* 2008; Fan *et al.* 2019; Forman *et al.* 2008). According to a survey carried out by Forbes (2019), 90% of American adults research products and services on the internet and value the transparency that reviews provide before their purchase decision, and 58% post comments or reviews online afterwards (Forbes 2019). Such a big impact on consumers’ habits is also related to the diffusion and the facility with which online reviews can be found and accessed through web search engines. In fact, product and service feedback make up a large part of the user-generated content that is published online every day, so much so that an estimate from a decade ago placed the genre of online reviews as comprising 2-4% of the searchable internet (Egbert *et al.* 2013). Nowadays, this figure has very likely increased. Online platforms hosting user-generated reviews have been multiplying in the last decade (e.g. Yelp, Netflix, The Fork, TripAdvisor, or Amazon), and every kind of product, service, or experience has become reviewable. Therefore, this ever-growing importance of online reviews as a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Dellarocas 2003) has dramatically changed how consumers inform themselves, and each other, about businesses and products, i.e. from relying upon reviews written by professionals in the field to trusting unverified consumer-generated evaluations (Taboada 2011).

The importance of this pervasive digital genre is reflected in the growing body of research that draws upon online customer review data. Scholars interested in the analysis of discourse have concentrated on the pragmatic and linguistic features of online reviews concerning a variety of topics, such as movies (De Jong and Burgers 2013; Taboada 2011; Vásquez 2014), Amazon-sold products (Miao *et al.* 2019), books (Virтанen 2017), and, last but not least, tourism activities such as restaurants (Chik and Vásquez 2017) and accommodation (Bridges and Vásquez 2018; Cappelli 2013; Cenni and Goethals 2020a; Fina 2011; Napolitano 2018; Vásquez 2014). The majority of these studies are centred on negative polarity reviews that have commonly been associated with the speech act of ‘complaining’. However, some works on the linguistic construction

of positive reviews, usually associated with the speech act of ‘complimenting’, have also been carried out (cf. *inter alia* Bridges and Vásquez 2018; Cappelli 2013; Cenni and Goethals 2020a). Another perspective through which reviews have been studied is that of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variation. For example, Cappelli (2013) and Fina (2011) studied differences between English and Italian travel reviews on TripAdvisor, and Cenni and Goethals (2020a) investigated differences between Dutch, Italian and English reviews on Airbnb.

With the advent of online reviews and their impact on business communication practices, another ancillary genre was born, i.e. business owner responses to online reviews. This new practice of client-relations management started to spread from the tourism industry, for which “responses to the evaluations may repair or consolidate hotel-guest relations” (Cenni and Goethals 2020b: 39), and is now becoming common to all business practices (San-Martín Gutierrez *et al.* 2018). For this reason, businesses have started to make a point of replying to consumer reviews. As far as discourse-oriented studies are concerned, most of the existing body of research focuses on responses to travel reviews (cf. Cenni and Goethals 2020b; Zhang and Vásquez 2014) and generally addresses aspects such as genre description and the analysis of face-strategies in handling responses to complaints and, to a minor extent, to compliments. An interesting result is described by Lui *et al.* (2018) who were able to demonstrate that customized responses, i.e. those that do not follow an impersonal standard template, are more effective in engaging clients in the case of both positive and negative reviews.

Notwithstanding the considerable number of linguistic and cross-cultural studies on online reviews and responses, to the best of my knowledge no studies deal with online reviews (and responses) to law firms and law-related services. The study that is presented in the following Sections seeks to fill this void.

3. Corpus and methodology

The study is based on a self-compiled corpus of positive polarity online reviews to US- and UK-based law firms and the corresponding responses given by business owners or other employees². The review/response interactions were sourced from Google reviews, which has been an integrated feature within the Google search engine since 2014. Google reviews allows customers to publicly post reviews about their experiences with businesses that have a registered account on Google my Business. These reviews can be accessed through Google maps or Google Search, and are automatically displayed when searching for a business or a business category (e.g. “law firms in London”). Reviewers are invited to evaluate their experience with the firm using a five-star rating scale and they are also encouraged to leave textual feedback, with the possibility of attaching pictures as well. After that, business owners can post their response to the review. One of the advantages of getting (positive) Google reviews is that they boost, through an algorithm, the visibility of businesses on Google Search and Google maps, the rationale being that the more positive reviews the higher a business appears on the search ranking.

² It was impossible to establish whether the reviews and responses were written by native speakers. Hence, the geographical location of the law firm was chosen as a criterion for selection.

In detail, the corpus consists of 600 reviews and 600 responses. 300 review/response pairs come from US-based law firms. The other 300 pairs are taken from UK-based law firms. Since the focus of the present paper is on positive feedback, the review/response pairs come from law firms scoring, on average, between 4.5 and 5 out of 5 in Google reviews ranking, i.e. those that have a large majority of positive reviews. For the sake of balance and representativeness, the sampling took into consideration reviews *i*) of 10 law firms for each of the two capital cities (Washington DC and London), *ii*) of 10 law firms for each of the most populated cities after the capital (New York and Birmingham) and *iii*) of 10 law firms for each of the two second-most populated after the capital cities (Los Angeles and Manchester). Law firms were identified by entering on Google maps the name of the city followed by “law firm”, e.g. “New York law firm”. For each of the selected law firms, the latest 20 4.5/5-star (i.e. rated as extremely positive) review/response couplets were manually collected by copying and pasting each text into a separate Microsoft Word document³. Table 1 gives an overview of the size and the composition of the corpus according to *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014) corpus software, which was chosen as the main web host of the corpus. Thanks to *Sketch Engine*, each file was also tagged with metadata to indicate *i*) whether the text is a review or a response, and *ii*) whether it belongs to the US or the UK component of the corpus.

Overall, the *Law Firm Reviews and Responses Corpus* (henceforth *LFR Corpus*) consists of 164,355 running words (tokens) per 7,705 unique words (types). The two subcorpora that make up the corpus, i.e. Reviews and Responses, contain respectively 110,235 tokens and 6,893 types and 52,835 tokens and 2,996 types. These counts demonstrate that reviews are both wordier (more than twice as many tokens) and richer in different words than responses. The two subcomponents of the corpus (US and UK) are quite similar in terms of size, with a slight tendency of US reviews and UK responses to contain more word tokens as compared to UK reviews and US responses.

Law Firm Reviews and Responses Corpus (<i>LFR Corpus</i>)									
Reviews subcorpus					Responses subcorpus				
110,235 (tokens)			6,893 (types)		52,835 (tokens)			2,996 (types)	
US subcomponent					UK subcomponent				
Law firms	Reviews (tokens)		Responses (tokens)		Law firms	Reviews (tokens)		Responses (tokens)	
Washington	20,151		9,000		London	16,592		8,272	
New York	18,160		7,803		Birmingham	19,590		10,387	
Los Angeles	19,548		7,853		Manchester	17,479		9,520	
	57,859 (tokens)	4,518 (types)	24,656 (tokens)	2,015 (types)		53,661 (tokens)	4,579 (types)	28,179 (tokens)	1,816 (types)
TOTAL COUNTS									
164,355 (tokens)					7,705 (types)				

Table 1. Law Firm Reviews and Responses Corpus composition

³ Texts were kept exactly as they were found, including grammar and spelling mistakes, and emojis.

As for the methods, the analysis combined quantitative corpus methods and qualitative discourse analysis, thus making this study fall under the broad category of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington *et al.* 2013). Corpus quantitative methods were used to explore salient lexico-grammatical aspects of the *LFR Corpus*. More in detail, corpus software *WordSmith tools 8.00* (Scott 2020) and *UAM CorpusTool* (O'Donnell 2008) were used to calculate some exploratory lexical measurements (i.e. type/token ratio and lexical density).

A more qualitative data perusal was undertaken to identify the move structure that characterizes US and UK reviews and responses as textual genres (cf. Biber *et al.* 2007 for a general introduction to move analysis). Move analysis essentially aims at describing the communicative purposes of a text, by classifying units of discourse into rhetorical moves (*ibid.*). A move is therefore intended as a section of text that performs a specific communicative function (Tardy and Swales 2014). Rhetorical moves were identified and manually annotated in each textual file of the *LFR Corpus* building on Cenni and Goethals' (2020a) taxonomy and coding scheme developed for the analysis of positive hotel reviews. The grid elaborated for this study distinguished between five moves in law firm client reviews: *i*) background information, *ii*) positive evaluation, *iii*) recommendations, *iv*) future intentions, *v*) thanking the law firm or the lawyer, and six in responses: *i*) thanking the client, *ii*) acceptance of thanks, *iii*) law firm self-promotion, *iv*) experience with the client, *v*) future solicitation, *vi*) sign off. Furthermore, for the comparative analysis between the US and the UK subcomponents, a statistical test (Z-test⁴) (cf. Brezina 2018 for a practical introduction to the use of statistics in linguistics) was used to verify the statistical significance of the obtained results.

Finally, since "positive evaluation" predictably came out as the most defining move of the *LFR Corpus*, an attentive corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the evaluative adjectives used in US and UK reviews was carried out. This was done by manually assessing the concordances of key adjectives retrieved and explored with the help of *Sketch Engine*. More precisely, I used the "keyword and term extraction" tool of the software that allows users to extract the words (tokens) that appear more frequently (from a statistical point of view) in a corpus than they would in general language, this latter being the reference corpus (cf. Bondi and Scott 2010 for a general introduction to the analysis of keywords in texts). In the case of the present analysis, the software *Sketch Engine* was set up to filter the results by word class and only include adjectives. More precisely, in order to examine salient differences in terms of keyness between Reviews US and Reviews UK, the two subcomponents were set as each other's reference corpus. Once the two lists of adjectives were produced, I concentrated on the 50 most salient ones for each subcomponent and manually selected, through close concordance reading, those that were used to express evaluation. The criterion for evaluation was Hunston and Thompson's (2000) broad characterization as the means through which

⁴ The statistical test performed was a two-tailed proportion Z-test, i.e. a test used to compare proportions between two groups. This test is commonly used when you want to determine if there is a significant difference between the proportions of two categorical variables. The two-tailed aspect of the test means that it checks for a significant difference in either direction. In other words, it tests whether the proportions are significantly different and not just whether one proportion is larger or smaller than the other. The tool used for the calculation can be found here: https://www.socscistatistics.com/tests/ztest_sample_mean/default2.aspx.

speakers (or writers) express attitudes, judgements, and feelings. This operation produced a list of 16 adjective types for Reviews US and 12 for Reviews UK, which were further analysed through the lens of Martin and White's (2005) "appraisal theory". In particular, the analysis takes advantage of their classification of "attitude" that distinguishes between *i*) "affect", i.e. the characterization of phenomena by reference to emotion, *ii*) "judgement", i.e. the evaluation of human behaviour with respect to social norms, and *iii*) "appreciation", i.e. the evaluation of objects and products (rather than human behaviour) by reference to aesthetic principles.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. *Reviews and responses as genres: overall lexico-grammatical statistics*

The first operation to determine distinguishing lexico-grammatical features of online reviews and responses was the calculation of their type/token ratio, i.e. the level of lexical variation, and the lexical density, i.e. the percentage of content-carrying words to function words. A high type/token ratio is telling of a large percentage of different words, whereas a high lexical density signals a large amount of information. Starting from lexical variation, a standardized and comparable value for the type/token ratio (henceforth STTR) was computed using the corpus software *WordSmith tools*⁵. The analysis found that the STTR for the reviews subcorpus is 39.55% and for the responses subcorpus 25.10%. If we compare these findings with the general values found for written (between 65-75%) and oral (between 45-55%) English (Biber *et al.* 2021), we can observe that both reviews and responses score more similar results to those found for unplanned oral communication, which is well known for its high degree of repetitiveness and for its limited vocabulary range. Notwithstanding that, the difference between reviews and responses is quite marked with reviews scoring almost 15% more than responses. Thus, this measure seems to suggest an overall stable and specific set of language resources employed for the textual realization of positive reviews to law firms and, even more markedly, of business owner responses. As for the lexical density parameters, which were automatically calculated using *UAM CorpusTool*, the reviews subcorpus yielded a lexical density of 46.36% whereas the responses subcorpus gave 41.23%. Looking at these results in contrast to what is described in the literature on variation between spoken and written English, in which spontaneous speech hardly ever has a lexical density above 40% and written production (both fiction and non-fiction) generally produces values ranging from 40% to 65% (Biber *et al.* 2021), it appears that both reviews (in particular) and responses are highly informative texts, rich in nouns, verbs, adjectives, and lexical adverbs.

On a surface level, these preliminary statistics indicate that the vocabulary range in both subcorpora is close to what is generally found for conversation pointing, perhaps, to the high formulaicity and repetitiveness of positive feedback expression (Vásquez 2014) and of the corresponding response. Moreover, the sectorial nature of the topics dealt with, e.g. the legal issues that brought the client to the law firm and that tend to

⁵ The STTR is the percentage established by computing the average TTR of a series of TTR calculations made every 1000 tokens in the corpus. This transforms the output into a comparable value also across corpora of different lengths (Scott 2020).

be repeated among the different reviewers, contributes to the repetitiveness. On the contrary, as regards the information-package, results are on the cline of written discourse, meaning that content words are at the heart of these interactions.

4.2. Rhetorical moves in US and UK reviews and responses: a quantitative and qualitative overview

To further explore the characteristics of law firm client reviews and business owner responses as textual genres, their constituting rhetorical moves were identified and described, taking into account the cross-cultural variation. Hence, data for the US and the UK subcomponents of the corpus were compared so as to bring to light potential differences and similarities. The following Tables show the distribution, both as a raw number and as a percentage, of the five moves that were identified in the US and UK reviews (Table 2) and of the six in US and UK responses (Table 3). In addition, the Tables also feature the results of the statistical significance test (Z-test) performed when comparing the results obtained for Reviews and Responses US and UK. The test proved that the differences in the distribution of moves between the US and the UK subcomponents are statically significant on all occasions. For both reviews and responses, moves are sorted in their most common order of appearance, meaning that, even though some degree of variation may occur, this is the order that was found in the majority (more than two thirds) of the texts in the *LFR Corpus*.

Rhetorical Moves	Reviews				Statistically significant difference Reviews US vs Reviews UK (Z-test)	
	Distribution in Reviews US		Distribution in Reviews UK			
Background information	583/600	97.34%	419/600	69.83%	Yes	Z=12.75, p<0.001
Positive evaluation	600/600	100%	600/600	100%		
Recommendation	571/600	95.28%	501/600	83.50%	Yes	Z=6.54, p<0.001
Future intentions	213/600	35.50%	31/600	5.17%	Yes	Z=13.05, p<0.001
Thanking the law firm or the lawyer	385/600	64.15%	427/600	71.67%	Yes	Z=2.59, p<.05

Table 2. Moves in Reviews in *LFR Corpus*

Rhetorical Moves	Responses				Statistically significant difference Responses US vs Responses UK (Z-test)	
	Distribution in Responses US		Distribution in Responses UK			
Thanking the client	494/600	82.17%	600/600	100%	Yes	Z=10.78, p<0.001
Acceptance of thanks	111/600	18.50%	52/600	8.67%	Yes	Z=4.97, p<0.001
Experience with the client	206/600	34.33%	164/600	27.39%	Yes	Z=2.62, p<.05
Law firm self-promotion	395/600	65.83%	129/600	21.50%	Yes	Z=15.48, p<0.001
Future solicitation	298/600	49.67%	221/600	36.83%	Yes	Z=4.48, p<0.001
Sign off	162/600	27%	264/600	44%	Yes	Z=-6.15, p<0.001

Table 3. Moves in Responses in *LFR Corpus*

4.2.1. *Moves in US and UK law firm client reviews*

To comment on the distribution of moves in Table 2, the passage that most commonly opens the review is “background information”, in which clients describe their case, i.e. the reason(s) why they needed to use a lawyer and share information concerning their personal experience with the assisting law firm/lawyer. This move occurs in 97.34% of US reviews, where it stands as the second most recurrent move, and in 69.83% of UK reviews (the fourth most frequent move). This evident frequency disparity could indicate that US clients are more prone to share personal details about their experience with the web and the law company, using it as a way to make their review more subjective and engaging. Excerpts 1 and 2 are two examples of this move respectively in the US and the UK subcomponents of the *LFR Corpus*.

1. I live in PA and received a DUI in Maryland. I had already been convicted of 3 DUI here in PA and I did not think I was going to be coming home (facing prison sentence) [...]. (Washington, Law firm 8)

2. It is our first time to purchase a property in UK and we are not clear about the details and trick in the conveyancing process. (Birmingham, Law firm 3)

The segment that generally follows the introductory background information is the ensemble of “positive evaluation(s)”, which is the core part of the review, i.e. the passage where the client evaluates the service received from the law firm, praising and making covert or overt compliments about the aspects that he/she appreciated the most. As expected, this move is present in all the positive polarity reviews taken into account, irrespective of the cultural context in which the review was produced. This could testify to the homogeneity of the genre and to the way its structure is framed in people’s minds: when someone leaves a web review, he/she knows that an evaluative judgement is required. The two passages that follow (Example 3 for Reviews US and Example 4 for Reviews UK) exemplify this move.

3. [name], the attorney, took my phone call and made me feel comfortable right off the bat. [name] and his staff set me up with the most amazing doctors, and took care of me throughout the entire process. They were patient, kind, professional, and took the time each time I called them. They frequently checked in with me before and after my appointments to make sure I was doing okay during one of the most stressful times. Appreciate all the help I got from [name] and his whole team. (New York, Law firm 1)

4. I have been very pleased with the service provided by [law firm name] and especially [lawyer name]. Through what is obviously a difficult time, the professionalism and responsiveness of [lawyer name] has really helped and I couldn’t ask for more. I’d give 5 stars just based on his professionalism so far. (Manchester, Law firm 6)

As can be noticed, in both reviews the reviewers make direct reference to the specific lawyers who assisted them. This seems to be a very widespread practice in law firm reviews. Moreover, as Example 4 illustrates, sometimes the 5-star reviewing scale is overtly mentioned.

Positive evaluations are recurrently followed by a “recommendation”. In this move, the reviewer recommends the law firm and/or the lawyer he/she used to his/her readers, nurturing the word-of-mouth mechanism of web reviews (Example 6).

6. I would 100% recommend Lea and this firm to any of my family and friends. (Washington, Law firm 7)

If we assess variation between US and UK reviews, we may observe that this move is more defining of the US subcomponent of the corpus. It occurs in 95.28% of US texts as compared to 83.50% in the UK, thus denoting a preference of US reviewers for offering overt recommendations to peers. In some reviews, reviewers also declare their “future intentions” in the sense that they announce that they would use the services of the reviewed law firm/lawyer again in the future, should the necessity arise (Example 7).

7. 10/10 would definitely recommend and hire him again, if needed. (Washington, Law firm 4)

This move is present in 35.50% of US reviews, where it is often intertwined with recommendations, but in just 5.17% of UK reviews. Therefore, the divide between the two subcomponents is quite clear for this rhetorical move making it more central in US reviews. Finally, reviews are frequently closed by a “thanking” that can be targeted at a lawyer or at the law firm in general. These expressions of gratitude tend to be realized through a narrow range of linguistic items, generally involving a thanking formula. Interestingly, this is the only move that is more widespread in UK reviews (71.67%) than in US reviews (64.15%) (Example 8).

8. Thank you for taking the time to write this 5-star review. (London, Law firm 9)

Such a result is in line with what Vignozzi (2019) found for British versus American media interviews with politicians, with the former containing more direct expressions of thanking than the latter.

4.2.2. *Moves in US and UK business owner responses*

The move that prototypically opens business owner responses (Table 3) is “thanking the client”. Here the person who writes the response generally remains anonymous; in fact, the plural personal pronoun “we” seems to be the preferred agent in responses, referring to the whole team of lawyers and employees working for the law firm (Example 9).

9. [client’s name], thank you so much for the kind words and the wonderful recommendation, we really appreciate. (London, Law firm 5)

This move is the most frequent one in both US and UK subcomponents. However, if in the UK component it occurs in 100% of responses, in US responses it is sometimes omitted (82.17%) and is occasionally substituted by some “acceptance of thanks” formulae (Example 10), which, in fact, are more common in US than in UK responses (18.50% for the US against 8.67% for the UK).

10. You're very welcome. We're not all bad guys! 🤝 (Washington, Law firm 2)

As for the moves "experience with the client" and "law firm self-promotion", which constitute the body of the response, there does not seem to be a prototypical order of appearance. In the "experience with the client" sequence, the respondent briefly hints at the experience with the client, which is, in all responses, described in very positive terms. The function of this move is clearly that of showing sympathy and engagement with clients. This is often emphasized by addressing clients using their first names (Example 11), which creates a sense of symmetry and closeness.

11. [client's name], it was our pleasure representing you in court and supporting you through the process. We are so happy that everything worked out as planned! (New York, Law firm 7)

A similar move, in terms of purpose, is that of "law firm self-promotion". In this case, the respondent overtly praises the good work and efforts the lawyers working at the firm are using to dedicate to clients (Example 12).

12. We always strive for the best and we are glad it shows in our results. (Los Angeles, Law firm 1)

Interestingly, both moves are more common in US responses, but if for passages describing the "experience with the client" the gap between the US and the UK is narrow, yet statistically significant, (34.33% vs 27.39%), for "law firm self-promotion" it is quite clear that the move is more typical of US responses (65.83% vs 21.50%), thus suggesting greater attention to publicity for US law firms. The move "future solicitation" (49.47% for US responses and 36.83% for UK) indicates the sequence through which business owners show their willingness to offer the client the services of the law firm again in the future. It, has, therefore, a retention purpose. In line with the more promotional nature emerging from the US response, this move is more recurrent in this subcomponent. It is interesting to observe that in some cases, in the UK component of the corpus in particular, these manifestations of availability are accompanied by a hedge that strategically reduces the risk of anxiety as needing a lawyer usually entails being in a situation of distress (Example 13).

13. We hope you don't need us again in the future, but we are only a phone call away if you ever do. (London, Law firm 3)

The move "sign off" is typically found in the closing position, where it is used to terminate the response in a polite way and most commonly involves a wish (Example 14). In keeping with the formulaicity of this speech act, sometimes the same closing sequences are found among different responses. As displayed in example (14), it is common to add the name of the assisting lawyer and/or the law firm to the closing formula in order to personalize the reply and make it more sympathetic.

14. We wish you all the best for the future: warm regards from [assisting lawyer's name] and [law firm]. (Birmingham, Law firm 2)

Sign offs occur in both US (27%) and UK (44%) responses, with a higher concentration in the latter corroborating, again, a greater attention to politeness rituals in the UK subcomponent of the *LFR Corpus*.

4.3. A focus on positive evaluations in Reviews US and UK

After concentrating on some lexico-grammatical features of US and UK reviews and responses and investigating their sequential structure through the description of their constituting rhetorical moves, I decided to further explore positive evaluations, which, as previously said, are at the heart of the positive review/response exchange. In fact, “positive evaluation” is the only move present in 100% of the reviews analysed. As the most canonical linguistic realization of evaluation is through adjectives (Martin and White 2005: 58), which are also central to the speech act of complimenting (Liao and Zhang 2023), the analysis concentrated on their usage and functions across American and British reviews and refers to Martin and White’s (*ibid.*) appraisal theory categorization that, as explained in Section 3, describes linguistic items as expressions of “affect”, “appreciation”, or “judgement”. Table 4 presents the key evaluative adjective types (Hunston and Thompson 2000), ranked in order of keyness, along with their occurrences, in Reviews US compared to Reviews UK as the reference corpus, and in Reviews UK compared to Reviews US.

Key evaluative adjectives				
	Reviews US	hits	Reviews UK	hits
1	comforting	21	superb	29
2	direct	23	professional	73
3	reliable	38	approachable	25
4	intelligent	19	pragmatic	20
5	passionate	31	brilliant	16
6	lovely	64	knowledgeable	78
7	awesome	27	assertive	11
8	responsible	10	smart	35
9	amazing	88	fast	22
10	sweet	8	informed	39
11	wonderful	55	bright	9
12	reassuring	11	precise	7
13	compassionate	26		
14	sympathetic	13		
15	fantastic	16		
16	creative	12		

Table 4. Key evaluative adjectives in Reviews US and Reviews UK ranked in order of keyness

As expected for positive polarity reviews, all key evaluative adjectives, 16 for Reviews US and 12 for Reviews UK, have obvious and inherently positive meanings. If we take a general look at the array of key adjectives used to express positive evaluations, we can observe that none of them belong to Manes and Wolfson’s (1981) narrow list of adjectives that most commonly occur in formulaic (American) English compliments,

i.e. “nice”, “good”, “pretty”, “great” and “beautiful”. This suggests that adjectivization in positive law firm online reviews is denser than in compliments in conversation. If we analyse the concordances of the adjectives in Reviews US, it emerges that most adjective types are clear expressions of Martin and White’s (2005) “judgement” that serve to positively evaluate lawyers’ behaviour, i.e. “comforting”, “direct”, “reliable”, “intelligent”, “passionate”, “lovely”, “responsible”, “sweet”, “reassuring”, “compassionate”, “sympathetic”, “creative”. Interestingly, the vast majority of these positive attitudinal evaluations refer to non-technical attributes, most of which indicate some of the so-called “soft skills”, i.e. lawyers’ interpersonal and communication skills (Example 15). The only judgements that overtly denote lawyers as professional figures, describing some of their technical “hard skills”, are “creative” and “intelligent”, which are repeatedly used to praise how clever they have been throughout the legal case (Examples 16 and 17).

15. She is highly sympathetic and compassionate. She was the rock steady for me to pass those times. (Los Angeles, Law firm 5)

16. Their range of expertise is helpful to any size of client and they find creative solutions to a wide range of issues and efficacious pathways for desired objective. (New York, Law firm 1)

17. [lawyer’s name] is by far the most intelligent and caring for his clients that I’ve ever witnessed. (Washington, Law firm 10)

The meanings and functions of the adjectives “wonderful”, “fantastic”, “awesome” and “amazing” are highly dependent on the context (Martin and White 2005). In the *LFR Corpus* they are predominantly (61% of cases) used to evaluate the overall experience with the lawyer and the law firm; hence, they pertain to the category of “appreciation” (Examples 18 and 19). However, in some passages (31% of cases), they are used as expressions of “affect” to express, for example, surprise and happiness deriving from the positive experience with the law firm (Example 20). Moreover, in some instances (8% of cases), “amazing” and “awesome” are also employed as informal positive “judgements” towards the lawyer (Example 21).

18. My experience with [law firm’s name] was just absolutely wonderful. (New York, Law firm 4)

19. I am dealing with [Law firm’s name] since last 6 months and their service is awesome (Los Angeles, Law firm 3)

20. It was just amazing how they all went the extra mile to keep me calm during this awful experience. (New York, Law firm 4)

21. [Lawyer’s name] answered my initial call, not a secretary or an assistant. This man is just awesome! (Los Angeles, Law firm 7)

Moving on to Reviews UK, all the key evaluative adjectives are expressions of “judgement” towards lawyers’ behaviour, apart from “superb” and “brilliant” that sometimes (19% of cases) occur as instances of “appreciation” of the service (Example 22).

22. [Law firm’s name] is a superb service. (London, Law firm 2)

Instead, none of the analysed adjectives appear to be used to convey “affect”. When examining the concordances of the key adjective types that are adopted for “judgement”, i.e. “professional”, “approachable”, “pragmatic”, “brilliant”, “knowledgeable”, “professional”, “assertive”, “smart”, “fast”, “informed”, “bright”, and “precise”, it becomes apparent that, unlike the case for Reviews US, many of them explicitly refer to and praise the lawyers’ professional capacities, specifically their “hard skills”. Examples include “professional”, “pragmatic”, “knowledgeable”, “assertive”, “smart”, “fast”, and “informed” (Examples 23-24), highlighting the lawyers’ crucial technical qualities essential for winning legal cases.

23. She was very easy to reach, happy to talk through things on the phone when needed, and extremely knowledgeable and professional throughout. (Birmingham, Law firm 6)

24. Smart, tactical, well organised and pays really close attention to detail. (London, Law firm 1)

Therefore, positive evaluations in Reviews UK seem to foreground the importance of lawyers’ expertise and their ability to provide efficient and effective legal services. This slightly differs in focus compared to Reviews US, where a greater emphasis appears to be placed on the non-technical attributes and “soft skills” of the lawyers.

5. Final remarks

Starting from a self-compiled corpus of law firm positive-polarity Google reviews and responses to law firms located in different cities in the United States and in the United Kingdom, the analysis has explored some defining features of online law firm reviews and responses as genres from different angles of linguistic analysis. The preliminary statistics calculated for the two main subcorpora of the *LFR Corpus* (i.e. Reviews and Responses) brought to light some distinctive trends that may help us to describe and understand the lexico-grammatical nature of these two interdependent genres. The lexical variation and lexical diversity parameters disclosed their complex nature as they are quite repetitive, like conversation, but also very rich in content words, like written discourse. This hybridity is shared with other forms of online communication such as social media posts (Tagg 2015).

The rhetorical move analysis identified and described five main moves in reviews and six in responses. This investigation was conducted comparatively, focusing on cross-cultural differences between the US and the UK components of the *LFR Corpus*. As far as reviews are concerned, in general terms, the results highlighted that the most defining move that characterizes the genre unanimously in the US and the UK is “positive evaluation”, which hints at the entrenchment of the genre in consumers’ minds, regardless of the cultural background of the reviewer. Despite that, significant

discrepancies (tested through a statistical significance test) were found for the distribution of the other moves: "background information", "recommendation", and "future intentions" were noticeably more prevalent in US reviews, whereas "thanking the law firm or the lawyer" was more prominent in UK reviews. This would seem to suggest that in the US the genre is more diversified and oriented towards the word-of-mouth mechanisms of experience sharing and peers' recommendation (cf. Vázquez 2014). The results obtained for responses seem to confirm and strengthen the findings from the reviews, as "thanking the client" and "sign off", i.e. two conversational routines generally working as politeness social lubricants, are more defining of UK responses, whereas the other moves "acceptance of thanks", "experience with the client", "law firm self-promotion", and "future solicitation", which can be associated with the perception of responses as a means to publicize and promote the law firm, are more frequently represented in US responses.

The in-depth corpus-based analysis of positive evaluation in American and British reviews brought to light the most prominent evaluative adjectives for the two corpus subcomponents. The findings revealed that in both US and UK reviews the expression of a positive judgement is the most recurrent function of evaluative adjectives. However, an interesting trend surfaced when evaluating the types of adjectives used to express judgements in the two subcomponents. Specifically, in US reviews most adjectives refer to the interpersonal and communicative skills of the assisting lawyer(s), while in UK reviews, they more often highlight technical and professional qualities. This finding holds significant implications for law firms, as it provides insights into what clients value the most and could, for example, be useful in selecting which aspects to prioritize and advertise in their pre-service materials.

Future research should also consider the rhetorical and linguistic features of negative polarity law firm client reviews and corresponding responses in the US and UK. This will contribute to obtaining a comprehensive understanding of this genre and of how it can vary based on the cultural context. Results could, therefore, also be helpful in formulating guidelines for managing law firm reviews.

References

- Biber D., U. Connor and T. Upton 2007. *Discourse on the Move: Using Corpus Analysis to Describe Discourse Structure*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Biber D., S. Johansson, G. Leech, S. Conrad, E. Finegan and R. Quirk 2021. *Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Bondi M. and M. Scott (eds) 2010. *Keyness in Texts*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Brezina V. 2018. *Statistics in Corpus Linguistics: A Practical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bridges J. and C. Vázquez 2018. If nearly all Airbnb reviews are positive, does that make them meaningless? *Current Issues in Tourism* 21: 2057-2075.
- Cappelli G. 2013. 'A perfect Tuscan experience': destination image and cultural expectations in positive travel reviews in English and Italian. *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata* 1: 59-85.

- Cavaliere S. 2018. Broadcasting legal discourse: the popularization of family law through YouTube. In J. Engberg, K. Luttermann, S. Cacchiani and C. Preite (eds), *Popularization and Knowledge Mediation in the Legal Field*. Münster: LIT Verlag: 251-270.
- Cenni I. and P. Goethals 2020a. Positive reviews on TripAdvisor: a cross-linguistic study of contemporary digital tourism discourse. *ONOMAZEIN* 7: 18-40.
- Cenni I. and P. Goethals 2020b. Responding to negative hotel reviews: a cross-linguistic perspective on online rapport-management. *Discourse, Context & Media* 37.
- Chik A. and C. Vázquez 2017. A comparative multimodal analysis of restaurant reviews from two geographical contexts. *Visual Communication* 16/1: 3-26.
- Dellarocas C. 2003. The digitization of word of mouth: promise and challenges of online feedback mechanisms. *Management Science* 49/10: 1407-1424. At: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4134013>.
- De Jong I. and C. Burgers 2013. Do consumer critics write differently from professional critics? A genre analysis of online film reviews. *Discourse, Context & Media* 2: 75-83.
- Duan W., B. Gu and A.B. Whinston 2008. The dynamics of online word-of-mouth and product sales: an empirical investigation of the movie industry. *Journal of Retailing* 84/2: 233-242.
- Egbert J., D. Biber and M. Davies 2013. Developing a user-based method of web register classification. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 66.
- Fan M., F. Chao, G. Lin, S. Mingming and L. Ping 2019. Product-aware helpfulness prediction of online reviews. In *The World Wide Web Conference (WWW '19) Association for Computing Machinery*: 2715-2721.
- Fina M. 2011. What a TripAdvisor corpus can tell us about culture. *CULTUS* 4: 59-80.
- Forbes 2019. Online reviews and their impact on the bottom line. *Forbes* 15 January 2019. At: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/01/15/online-reviews-and-their-impact-on-the-bottom-line/>.
- Forman C., A. Ghose and B. Wiesenfeld 2008. Examining the relationship between reviews and sales: the role of reviewer identity disclosure in electronic markets. *Information Systems Research* 19: 291-313.
- Hunston S. and G. Thompson (eds) 2000. *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and The Construction of Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kilgarriff A. et al. 2014. The Sketch Engine: ten years on. *Lexicography ASIALEX* 1: 7-36.
- Liao X. and Y. Zhang 2023. Stylistic and linguistic variations in compliments: an empirical analysis of children's gender schema development with machine learning algorithms. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10/151.
- Liu Z., S. Lei, Y. Guo and Z. Zhou 2020. The interaction effect of online review language style and product type on consumers' purchase intentions. *Palgrave Communication* 6/11. At: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-0387-6>.
- Lui T., M. Bartosiak, G. Piccoli and V. Sadhya 2018. Online review response strategy and its effects on competitive performance. *Tourism Management* 67: 180-190.
- Manes J. and N. Wolfson 1981. The compliment formula. In F. Coulmas (ed.), *Conversational Routine (Volume 2)*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton: 115-132.
- Martin J. and P.R. White 2005. *The Language of Evaluation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melián-González S., J. Bulchand-Gidumal, and B. González López-Valcárcel 2013. Online customer reviews of hotels: as participation increases, better evaluation is obtained. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 54/3: 274-283.

- Napolitano A. 2018. Image repair or self-destruction? A genre and corpus-assisted discourse analysis of restaurants' responses to online complaints. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines* 10/1: 135-153.
- Nofal R., P. Bayram, O.L. Emeagwali, and L. Al-Mu'ani 2022. The effect of eWOM source on purchase intention: the moderation role of weak-tie eWOM. *Sustainability* 14/16.
- O'Donnell M. 2008. The UAM corpus tool: software for corpus annotation and exploration. In B. Callejas *et al.* (eds), *Applied Linguistics Now: Understanding Language and Mind / La Lingüística Aplicada Hoy: Comprendiendo el Lenguaje y la Mente*. Almería: Universidad de Almería: 1433-1447.
- Partridge A., A. Duguid and C. Taylor 2013. *Patterns and Meanings in Discourse: Theory and Practice in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS)*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Reuters 2022. Client feedback: trends in client feedback for 2022 and beyond. At: <https://www.reuters.com/legal/legalindustry/client-feedback-trends-client-feedback-2022-beyond-2022-06-28/>.
- San-Martín Gutiérrez S., N. Jiménez Torres and N. Puente Domínguez 2018. The replies of hotels to clients through TripAdvisor: a big data analysis. *ESIC MARKET* 49/2: 339-357.
- Scott M. 2020. *WordSmith Tools version 8*. Stroud: Lexical Analysis Software.
- Taboada M. 2011. Stages in an online review genre. *Text and Talk* 31/2: 247-269.
- Tagg C. 2015. *Exploring Digital Communication: Language in Action*. London: Routledge.
- Tardy C.M. and J.M. Swales 2014. Genre analysis. In K.P. Schneider and A. Barron (eds), *Pragmatics of Discourse*. Berlin: de Gruyter: 165-187.
- Vásquez C. 2014. *The Discourse of Online Consumer Reviews*. London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Vignozzi G. 2019. *Assessing the Language of TV Political Interviews: A Corpus-assisted Perspective*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Vignozzi G. 2022a. Embedding oral communication in law firm websites: a study on identity construction through person pro-forms in attorneys' video FAQs. In A. Zanola and B. Doerr (eds), *Oral Communication in English: Established Trends, Good Practice(s), and Future Perspectives, Textus: English Studies 1/Language Issue*: 185-209.
- Vignozzi G. 2022b. What are Miranda rights?": the case of video FAQs on a criminal law firm website". In V. Bonsignori, B. Crawford Camiciottoli and D. Filmer (eds), *Analyzing Multimodality in Specialized Discourse Settings. Innovative Research Methods and Applications*. Vernon: Vernon Press: 115-139.
- Virtanen T. 2017. Adaptability in online consumer reviews: exploring genre dynamics and interactional choices. *Journal of Pragmatics* 117: 77-90.
- Zhang Y. and C. Vásquez 2014. Hotels' responses to online reviews: managing consumer dissatisfaction. *Discourse, Context and Media* 6: 54-64.

