

TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST IN CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGEMENT

A cross-cultural study of restaurant responses to online complaints

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Abstract – This study investigates how restaurants use transparency to rebuild trust when responding publicly to 1-star *Google reviews* in three English-speaking contexts: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. A corpus of 1,500 business replies was compiled from restaurants rated 4 stars or higher, posted in 2024-2025 across major urban centres. Using corpus-assisted discourse analysis, the study combines keyword, collocation, and concordance analysis to examine a selection of transparency markers (e.g., “explain”, “because”, “reason”) and trust markers (e.g., “honest”, “ensure”, “acknowledge”). Results show broad convergence in public complaint replies: restaurants tend to make accountability visible through apology, recognition of the complaint, explanation, and references to follow-up. At the same time, national styles differ in tone and emphasis: UK replies are more formal and restrained, US replies more personal and reassurance-oriented, and Australian replies more direct, friendly, and action-focused.

Keywords: transparency; trust; cross-cultural communication; customer complaints; corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

Negative customer reviews, in other words public complaints, are often seen as the Achilles’ heel of all businesses with an online presence, but their impact is particularly severe in the restaurant industry, where reputation is a primary factor of success or failure (Xia and Ha 2023; Lappas *et al.* 2016; Zhang *et al.* 2021). A single caustic 1-star review, especially if left unaddressed, can deter potential customers, tarnish an establishment’s public image, and significantly undermine its credibility. Research (cf. Vàsquez 2014) stresses the influential role of online reviews in consumer decision-making, particularly in more weightless decisions such as dining choices. In this respect, empirical findings suggest that a one-star increase in a restaurant’s *Yelp* rating can lead to a 5–9% increase in revenue: hence consumer feedback has a real economic weight (Luca 2016). Given that such reviews can shape a restaurant’s financial trajectory, businesses must be strategic in their engagement with online criticism.

Yet, the danger of being the target of a negative review can also present an opportunity; the way restaurants handle criticism can restore reputational loss, demonstrate openness, and establish trust, and thus ultimately reassert their dedication to customer satisfaction. As Luca’s (2016) research on *Yelp*’s impact suggests, independent restaurants, i.e. those without the built-in brand recognition of chain establishments, are particularly affected by online reviews, making their response strategies even more consequential. It is with the proliferation of review-sharing platforms such as *Google reviews*, *Yelp*, and *TripAdvisor*, that public responses to customer complaints have started to evolve from private resolutions into highly visible digital performances that contribute

to a restaurant's broader brand narrative. These responses not only reveal a business's values and service standards but also affect how potential customers perceive its accountability and authenticity.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of response strategies is not uniform across all businesses or contexts. Cultural and rhetorical variations may influence how messages are perceived. Thus, the strategies that work for one culture may not necessarily be effective in another. For example, some cultures may expect a direct apology and an offer of compensation as a sign of accountability, while others may find a reaffirmation of service commitment more appropriate. These differences highlight key questions: How do businesses navigate cultural and contextual differences in their responses? What rhetorical strategies are most effective in demonstrating accountability and fostering customer loyalty?

This study seeks to elaborate on these questions by investigating cross-cultural variations in restaurant responses to 1-star reviews across three English-speaking countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Using a corpus of 1,500 *Google Review* responses collected from restaurants in urban centers across these countries, this research examines the strategies which businesses employ to communicate transparency, build trust, and manage public accountability. Drawing on Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory and Hall's (1976) high- vs. low-context communication framework, the study also explores the influence of cultural norms on these responses.

Hence, the focal research question guiding this study is: How do restaurants in different cultural contexts respond to 1-star customer reviews to build trust and demonstrate transparency? By shedding light on the linguistic and cultural aspects of these responses, this study aims to contribute to the growing understanding of digital business communication. It offers practical insights into how restaurants can effectively manage their public image and customer relationships in an increasingly interconnected and transparent digital landscape.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 explores the role of online reviews, with a particular focus on business responses, in building trust and transparency in digital communication. Sections 3 and 4 describe, respectively, the corpus and subcorpora specifically built for this study, and the methods employed for the analysis. Section 5 offers a quantitative and exploratory analysis of transparency and trust markers in the subcorpora, while Section 6 critically examines the contexts in which these markers are used, focusing on their functions and cross-cultural specificities. Section 7 engages in a discussion of the main findings, which are further elaborated in Section 8, the concluding remarks, where the research question introduced in Section 1 is addressed, along with suggestions for future research.

2. Online customer reviews and business responses as transparency and trust building genres

Online reviews and business responses have become essential components of digital communication, playing a pivotal role in shaping interactions between potential and actual consumers and businesses.

Commonly defined as user-generated content created for an audience of unknown peers, reviews are performative acts of communication that prototypically combine evaluation, persuasion, and public accountability (cf. *inter alia* Vásquez 2014; Vignozzi 2023; Simi and Vignozzi 2025). Simply put, online reviews serve as evaluative statements through which consumers or clients express their opinions regarding a product, service, or

overall experience. This evaluation often includes both objective and subjective aspects, ranging from factual descriptions of quality, pricing, or ambiance to more personal reflections on expectations, emotions, and levels of satisfaction (Simi and Vignozzi 2025). The evaluative nature of reviews, linguistically conveyed especially by the choice of adjectives, contributes to the construction of consumer-generated reputations, shaping public perceptions and influencing the decision-making processes of potential customers (Vignozzi 2023).

Beyond their evaluative function, online reviews also operate as persuasive texts. Given that reviews are produced for an audience of unknown peers, users often frame, willingly or not, their narratives in ways that attempt to guide or influence potential consumers' behavior. This persuasive function is particularly evident in the rhetorical strategies employed, such as storytelling, exaggeration, or comparative reasoning, which position the reviewed product or service in either a favorable or unfavorable light. Businesses, in turn, engage in persuasive communication through their responses, strategically acknowledging feedback, offering resolutions, and reinforcing their brand's values to mitigate reputational damage and maintain consumer trust.

Moreover, online reviews and business responses establish a framework of public accountability, requiring businesses to engage with customer feedback in a transparent and visible manner. Unlike private complaints, which are addressed through direct and often discreet communication channels such as email exchanges or instant messaging platforms, online reviews expose businesses to public scrutiny, compelling them to demonstrate attentiveness, professionalism, and commitment to customer satisfaction. The public nature of these exchanges necessitates careful rhetorical positioning, as businesses must balance defensive strategies with the need to project an image of responsiveness and reliability. Therefore, a well-crafted response not only addresses individual concerns but also signals to a broader and unknown audience commitment to continuous improvement, reinforcing the credibility and reputation of the business.

Overall, evaluation, persuasion, and public accountability underline the complexity of online reviews as a genre of digital discourse. Their performative nature extends beyond individual consumer experiences, influencing broader perceptions of businesses and contributing to the evolving dynamics of digital reputation management. These elements together highlight the strategic importance of online reviews and responses in shaping consumer trust and brand credibility in an increasingly digitalized marketplace. Recent research suggests that the impact of negative online reviews is emotional or reputational, and also interactional. Wang *et al.* (2020), for instance, show that strongly negative reviews tend to be perceived as more helpful than moderate ones, as they increase the pressure on businesses to respond in ways that are publicly legible and accountable. In a similar vein, Pooja and Upadhyaya's (2022) systematic review synthesizes the main determinants of perceived review credibility, highlighting that readers rarely evaluate reviews in a vacuum. Instead, they draw on cues from the message (specificity, coherence), the reviewer (expertise and reliability signals), and the platform (verification and reputational affordances). This is relevant for business replies because the response becomes part of the same credibility ecology: it can reinforce or destabilize how believable, and consequential, a complaint appears to other readers. Generally speaking, these studies help explain why business replies are increasingly crafted not just for the complainant itself but for a wider audience: restaurants must counter the persuasive weight of highly negative reviews by projecting reliability through transparent explanations and trust-oriented relational work.

Business responses to online reviews represent a genre that enables reviewed companies to address customer concerns, manage public reputation, and reaffirm their

commitments to transparency. While reviews perform evaluation, persuasion, and public accountability, business responses actively shape public perceptions of the business and signal its approach to key aspects such as transparency, trust, and accountability. Responses also extend beyond direct interaction with a single reviewer to encompass a broader dialogic engagement with the digital community at large. On this matter, studies have also shown that personalized, context-specific responses outperform generic replies in cultivating consumer trust and loyalty, showcasing a business's attentiveness and accountability (Liu *et al.* 2018). Therefore, at their core, reviews and responses exemplify a type of dialogic communication characterized by a dynamic exchange that intertwines individual complaints or praises with public narratives about service quality, values, and credibility. This genre pairing operates within the framework of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), amplifying individual voices into collective consumer influence. As Vignozzi (2023) contends, eWOM functions as a double-edged sword: while positive reviews can serve as powerful marketing tools, negative reviews require more attention and culturally informed responses to mitigate reputational risks.

Although most of the previous research listed above describes online reviews and mapped common response moves in hospitality service recovery, less attention has been paid to how transparency is linguistically enacted as a trust-building strategy across different national varieties of English. This study addresses that gap through a corpus-assisted comparison of 1-star *Google Review* responses from the US, UK, and Australia, linking recurrent transparency/trust markers to culturally patterned response styles.

2.1. The role of transparency and trust in business responses

Transparency and trust are foundational to effective communication in digital spaces, particularly in contexts where businesses must respond to public scrutiny. These concepts are inherently interconnected: transparency fosters trust by making corporate actions visible, accountable, and understandable, while trust reinforces transparency through the perception of honesty and reliability in communication (Christensen and Cheney 2015). Transparency is understood here as a communicative practice rather than a vague ideal: it involves sharing relevant information in a way that is clear and accessible and allows stakeholders (potential clients in this case) to evaluate an organization's conduct (Rawlins 2009; Bondi and Poppi 2025). Trust, instead, is understood here as the clients' willingness to view a restaurant as reliable and credible, based on the perceived consistency and integrity of its communication and actions (Christensen and Cheney 2015; Bondi and Poppi 2025).

Hence, transparency and trust are also closely connected in public complaint replies. Transparency can support trust because it makes accountability visible, for example, by acknowledging the customer's concern, offering an explanation (including, where appropriate, an admission of error), and outlining concrete follow-up or remedial steps (Rawlins 2009; Bondi and Poppi 2025). Trust-building, however, is not only a matter of disclosing information. When it comes to online reviews, replies also rely on interpersonal resources such as gratitude, reassurance, and empathy, which help present the business as attentive and relationship-oriented (Vásquez 2014; Simi and Vignozzi 2025; Vignozzi 2023).

Finally, it is worth noting that cultural norms can also shape how words conveying trust and transparency make meaning. Drawing on Hall's (1976) high-/low-context framework, prior work suggests that even within broadly comparable English-speaking contexts, businesses may differ in preferred degrees of explicitness, tone, and relational positioning (Hall 1976; Koskela 2017). This perspective provides a contextual lens for

interpreting cross-cultural tendencies in how restaurants project transparency and trust in responses to negative reviews.

3. The corpus

This study is based on a 1,500-response self-compiled corpus of 1-star restaurant *Google reviews* posted in 2024 and 2025, evenly divided (500 responses per country) among the United States (New York City and Los Angeles), the United Kingdom (London and Manchester), and Australia (Sydney and Melbourne). The choice of these cities was intended to obtain representative regional communication patterns in highly urbanized and diversified environments, providing a solid foundation for comparison. *Google reviews* was chosen as the source of data for this research since it is the most popular online review platform worldwide, as stated by Simi and Vignozzi (2025). Its presence in the *Google* network, including *Google Maps* and search results, guarantees great visibility and access to businesses and consumers alike. Specifically, when looking for a restaurant online, *Google reviews* will most likely be the first result, and thus it is a key point of reference for consumers. In addition, its existence in various locations makes it an ideal place for cross-cultural study, offering a dense and consistent data set with which to study communication strategies in various cultural and urban environments.

The corpus, named the *Global Restaurant Response Corpus* (GRRC), totals 657,750 tokens spread over the three subcorpora as follows: Australia (261,659 tokens), the United Kingdom (230,016 tokens), and the United States (166,075 tokens). The restaurant responses included in the corpus met strict selection criteria for both data quality and contextual relevance. In particular, only restaurant responses from restaurants with an overall rating of 4 stars and above were included in the corpus. This benchmark was used to identify businesses that were widely praised but had obtained some scattered negative criticism, thus enabling close analysis of how successful businesses handle customer dissatisfaction within an otherwise positive reputation context. In addition, only reviews from 2024 and 2025 were sampled to ensure a synchronic dataset. Following the aforementioned sampling and data collection, the resulting documents were uploaded to Sketch Engine (Kilgariff *et al.* 2014) corpus software that served as the web host of the corpus and primary analysis tool.

4. The methods

The methodological framework for this study is rooted in corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Partington *et al.* 2013), which integrates computational and interpretive techniques to explore how language functions within specific social and cultural contexts. This approach combines the quantitative power of corpus linguistics to identify patterns and the qualitative depth of discourse analysis to interpret their meanings.

Sketch Engine was employed as the primary tool for corpus analysis, offering advanced functionalities for extracting and analyzing linguistic patterns. The process began with the identification of key words using the keyword extraction tool, where LogLikelihood was used as the measure of keyness. This statistical comparison with the corresponding regional subsets of the *EnTenTen21* reference corpus facilitated the detection of words that were disproportionately frequent in the restaurant responses relative to general language use in each region. This step highlighted lexical items central to the discourse on transparency and trust-building.

Subsequently, the keyword lists were manually screened to identify potential transparency and trust markers. This screening followed two steps. First, I isolated the most salient keywords in each subcorpus (top 100 by LogLikelihood rank) and I searched for transparency- and trust-related words (cf. *inter alia* Bondi and Poppi 2025; Rawlins 2009; Christensen and Cheney 2015; Koskela 2017; Koskela and Camiciottoli 2020 for seminal works on the linguistic construction of trust and transparency). Second, each candidate word was checked in context by inspecting a sample of concordance lines in Sketch Engine to confirm that it was typically used with the intended discourse function in this genre (e.g., transparency as explaining causes/reasons; trust as reassuring, signalling sincerity, or explicitly recognizing feedback). Only words that (a) appeared as keywords in all three national subcorpora within the top 100 and (b) showed steady use in concordance samples were retained. This process yielded three transparency markers (“explain”, “because”, “reason”) and three trust markers (“honest”, “ensure”, “acknowledge”). The analysis then progressed to collocation analysis, carried out through Sketch Engine, in order to examine the words that most typically co-occur with each marker within a defined span (+5/-5) around the node word.

Cultural specificities were identified by comparing these recurring patterns across the three subcorpora and noting which patterns were shared, which were more prominent in one dataset, and which were largely restricted to one national subcorpus.

5. Quantitative analysis

This section presents the findings of the quantitative investigation into the keyword lists derived from the UK, US, and AU subcorpora, with a focus on finding some linguistic markers of transparency and trust. The analysis involved comparing keyword lists extracted from each subcorpus against *EnTenTen21*, a comprehensive English web corpus available on Sketch Engine and composed of texts from various English-speaking regions. For each subcorpus, the corresponding national subset of *EnTenTen21* was employed as a reference. For instance, the Australian subcorpus utilized the “AU domain.au” subset of *EnTenTen21* for keyword extraction.

The first 100 keywords from each subcorpus were manually examined to identify words that could be associated with the semantic domain of transparency and trust that were common across the UK, US, and AU subcorpora. This comparative analysis yielded six keywords, three which are more telling of transparency, i.e., “explain”, “because”, “reason” and three of the domain of trust, i.e., “honest”, “ensure”, and “acknowledge”. Table 1 summarizes LogLikelihood scores (as offered by Sketch Engine) and rankings within each subcorpus for the extracted keywords so as to provide insights into cross-cultural variations and lay the groundwork for the analysis proposed in Section 6. Figure 1 represents the same data in the form of a bar chart.

Marker	Region	LogLikelihood Scores	Rank
Explain	US	95.4	8
	UK	84.1	20
	AU	92.3	12
Because	US	90.7	10
	UK	78.3	25
	AU	88.5	15
Reason	US	78.9	22
	UK	56.6	30
	AU	85.4	18
Ensure	US	50.7	20
	UK	42.3	25
	AU	46.8	22
Honest	US	35.8	30
	UK	28.7	35
	AU	32.4	32
Acknowledge	US	6.9	80
	UK	5.5	85
	AU	13.2	71

Table 1
Loglikelihood and ranking scores for focus key terms.

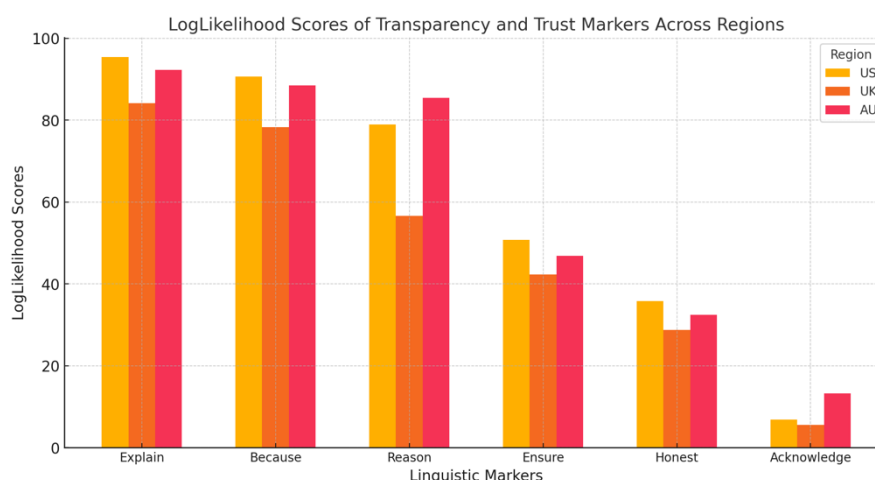


Figure 1
Loglikelihood scores of transparency and trust markers across subcorpora.

5.1. Transparency markers

Before interpreting tendencies across the subcorpora, it is useful to clarify how the three contexts are approached here in relation to Hall's (1976) high-/low-context continuum. In comparative terms, the US, UK, and Australia can all be treated as broadly low-context settings, in that public-facing institutional communication tends to privilege explicitness and message clarity over heavily implicit meaning-making (Hall 1976). At the same time, research on national communication styles suggests that low-context communication can still vary in tone and interactional expectations: for instance, Australian English has often been described as combining relative directness with an informal, rapport-oriented ethos (Bowe and Martin 2007). Cross-variety work in service

and professional response genres also points to differences in how explicitly responsibility and relational work are verbalized across Anglophone contexts (Vásquez 2014; Vignozzi 2023).

Regarding transparency markers, the United States subcorpus had a more pronounced emphasis on explicit justifications, with “explain” achieving the highest LogLikelihood score (95.4, Rank: 8) and “because” closely following (90.7, Rank: 10). The preference for explicit markers in the US is consistent with Hall’s (1976) characterization of relatively low-context communication, which typically favors detailed, unambiguous expression. The marker “reason” was slightly less prominent (78.9, Rank: 22). When used, it frequently occurred in explanations that were immediately followed by remedial promises. In contrast, the United Kingdom subcorpus exhibited lower LogLikelihood scores for “explain” (84.1, Rank: 20) and “because” (78.3, Rank: 25), reflecting a tendency towards more implicit communication. The relatively low score for “reason” (56.6, Rank: 30) may suggest that justification often remains understated in favor of shared understanding, consistent with high-context cultural norms (Hall, 1976). Results for the Australian subcorpus are found in between the two other subcorpora. “Explain” (92.3, Rank: 12) and “because” (88.5, Rank: 15) showed intermediate values between the US and UK, suggesting a style that draws on both explicit and implicit communication strategies. Interestingly, the word “reason” achieved the highest LogLikelihood score among the three subcorpora (85.4, Rank: 18), stressing its centrality in Australian responses as compared to the others. These results are aligned with the findings from Bowe and Martin (2007), who describe Australian communication as being often a hybrid of high- and low-context tendencies.

5.2. *Trust markers*

Trust-building markers also revealed distinct preferences in their use within the different restaurant review responses subcorpora. The United States subcorpus prominently featured “ensure” (LogLikelihood: 50.7, Rank: 20), which could be indicative of a preference for explicit reassurances. The term “honest” achieved a slightly lower score (35.8, Rank: 30), while “acknowledge” was quite rare (6.9, Rank: 80), suggesting that direct acknowledgment of feedback plays a minor role in US communication strategies. In the United Kingdom subcorpus, “ensure” (42.3, Rank: 25) and “honest” (28.7, Rank: 35) scored lower compared to the US, reflecting, perhaps, a preference for implicit trust-building strategies. This is confirmed by the marginal use of “acknowledge” in the UK subcorpus (5.5, Rank: 85), which aligns with a cultural inclination toward indirectness, where addressing feedback may be implied rather than explicitly stated (Hofstede 2001). By contrast, the Australian subcorpus placed greater emphasis on “acknowledge”, which achieved the highest LogLikelihood score among the regions (13.2, Rank: 71). This finding may highlight a cultural preference for directly addressing and validating feedback. “Ensure” (46.8, Rank: 22) and “honest” (32.4, Rank: 32) suggest an in-between profile in the Australian subcorpus, combining explicit reassurance with a stance of sincerity. Both items also sit between the corresponding US and UK values, which further supports the view that Australian responses display a hybrid communicative style, also in line with the pattern observed for the transparency markers.

6. A qualitative close-up on transparency and trust building across cultures

This section presents a qualitative examination of how the transparency and trust markers identified in Section 5 (i.e., “explain”, “because”, “reason” for transparency and “honest”, “ensure”, “acknowledge” for trust) are used within the three subcorpora of GRRC, with a particular focus on their contextual functions and cross-cultural specificities. By analyzing collocational patterns and discourse strategies associated with these markers, this section offers a deeper analysis of the rhetorical approaches employed by restaurants in handling negative reviews. More specifically, the analysis concentrated on a selection of recurrent collocates across the subcorpora whose concordances proved to be of interest for the present research. The discussion centers on how transparency is linguistically constructed through explicit justifications and how trust is reinforced through interpersonal engagement.

6.1. Transparency markers in context

Starting with the US subcorpus, some recurrent collocates of “explain” are the words “happened”, “policies”, and “happy”. An examination of the concordance lines reveals that American restaurants tend to provide explicit clarifications when addressing complaints. This approach could serve to demonstrate both honesty and willingness to resolve the issue described in the complaint as transparently as possible.

The collocation of “explain” with “happened” (10.4¹ occurrences) appears in contexts where restaurants aim to clarify the sequence of events leading to the reported issue. These transparent information disclosure responses help reassure customers and mitigate dissatisfaction. Example (1) illustrates how restaurants explicitly acknowledge errors, providing a direct and sincere explanation of what went wrong:

- (1) “We sincerely apologize for the misunderstanding and want to explain what happened. Our waitress accidentally mixed your order with another table’s.”

Example (2) below represents a shift in this pattern:

- (2) “You didn’t even explain what happened!”

Here, the expression is used to challenge a perceived lack of transparency, but in this case, it is the restaurant, not the customer, expressing frustration. Hence, it suggested that the reviewer posted a negative comment without clarifying their complaint, leaving the restaurant unable to properly address the issue. It highlights how explanations are not only expected from businesses but also from customers, reinforcing the reciprocal nature of transparency in online reviews.

Another recurrent pattern involves the word “policies” (6.3 occurrences), as shown in example (3). In this case, restaurants tend to mention their formal guidelines as a way to communicate precision, professionalism, and adherence to established procedures. Hence, this strategy not only lends credibility to their responses but also helps manage customer expectations regarding their service terms:

¹ All occurrence values have been normalised x10,000 words to allow comparability between subcorpora of different size.

- (3) “Let us explain our policies clearly: we do not offer refunds but are always happy to provide a replacement.”

Additionally, “happy” frequently appears (12.9 occurrences) in the formula “happy to explain”, as in example (4). This formulaic expression, typical of customer responses, conveys a positive and accommodating tone, reinforcing the restaurant’s good disposition towards providing clear and transparent explanations:

- (4) “We’re happy to explain our menu options in detail to ensure you find something you’ll enjoy.”

Turning to “because”, several recurring collocations emerge, particularly with “simply”, “we”, and “they”. These patterns offer insights into how restaurants justify or rationalize situations in their responses to complaints. A noteworthy combination is that of “because” with the adverb of manner “simply” (14.2 occurrences), which tends to introduce a direct yet somewhat mitigated justification for an issue. This collocation suggests that the cause of the problem is straightforward, sometimes implying that the restaurant had limited control over the circumstances, as in example (5):

- (5) “Your experience was disappointing simply because we were unusually understaffed that evening.”

Another frequent combination is that of “because” with “we”, which is commonly used when restaurants take ownership of an issue and provide reasoning for their actions or shortcomings. This pattern is recurrent in explanations (Examples 6 and 7):

- (6) “We had to adjust our menu because we received a delayed shipment of fresh ingredients.”
- (7) “Because we strive to maintain high standards, we cannot serve items that do not meet our quality criteria.”

Similarly, the collocation of “because” with “they” sometimes appears when restaurants attribute an issue to external factors, such as suppliers, customers, or unforeseen circumstances beyond their immediate control (Examples 8 and 9):

- (8) “Your order took longer than expected because they had to prepare a fresh batch of dough”
- (9) “Our suppliers only provide us with fresh food delivered daily. Because they failed to deliver our produce on time, we had to cut certain dishes from the menu.”

Moving on to the UK subcorpus, the analysis reveals that transparency is often constructed more implicitly through a relational and customer-centric approach. Notable collocates of “explain” include “you”, “hope” and “experience”, signalling a preference for interpersonal sensitivity alongside indirect disclosures. A detailed inspection of concordance lines demonstrates that UK restaurants frequently prioritize emotional rapport and relational repair over explicit explanations of procedural details. The frequent co-occurrence of “explain” with “you” (21.1 occurrences) often accompanies expressions of

personalized engagement, aiming at reassuring customers through direct and empathetic interaction, as exemplified in (10):

- (10) “We would like to explain to you personally why your experience was not up to our usual standards and hope you will give us another chance.”

The collocate “hope”, appearing 11.9 times, further emphasizes this relational strategy, frequently positioning explanations as part of a broader effort to regain customer trust and encourage future interactions. Example (11) clearly exemplifies this use:

- (11) “We hope to explain our error fully and regain your trust during your next visit.

Similarly, the recurrent use of “experience” (9.4 occurrences) could suggest that UK restaurants frame explanations as part of customer care, often embedded in expressions of regret and goodwill (Example 12).

- (12) “We’re deeply sorry your experience fell short, and we hope to explain exactly what went wrong so we can ensure your next visit is perfect”

Here, the explanation is explicitly tied to customer care, reinforcing the restaurant’s commitment to customer satisfaction.

For what concerns “because”, some collocates worth discussing are “like”, “you” and “review”, which reflect the tendency of UK restaurants to explicitly link explanations to the customer’s perspective or direct feedback. The second person pronoun “you” repeatedly co-occurs with “because” (23.1 occurrences), emphasizing a more personalized approach that addresses the customer directly and thus reinforces relational sincerity, as illustrated in example (13):

- (13) “We sincerely apologize because you had to wait much longer than usual for your order.”

This example highlights how directly addressing the customer’s experience is used strategically to demonstrate empathy and also validate customer concerns.

The collocate “like” appears notably alongside “because” (18 out of 122 occurrences, 15%), typically to soften explanations or in rationalizations of service issues, as showcased in example (14):

- (14) “Your meal was delayed because, like many restaurants, we faced unexpected staff shortages that evening.”

Here, the word “like” helps normalize the situation by contextualizing the explanation within broader industry challenges, indirectly encouraging customer understanding. Finally, the noun “review” co-occurs with “because” 21.3 times, directly acknowledging customer critiques in a concise yet respectful manner (Example 15):

- (15) “We’re very sorry because your review indicates we’ve fallen short of expectations.”

This pattern highlights an implicit transparency strategy, where the acknowledgment of the customer's viewpoint itself constitutes the explanation, minimizing extensive procedural justification in favor of greater relational sincerity.

In the Australian subcorpus, transparency markers reflect a sort of blend of explicit detail and personalized relational engagement. The verb “explain” clusters with “waitress”, “you” and “your”. Particularly prominent is the collocation with “waitress” (24.6 occurrences), which positions explanations within specific operational contexts involving employees. Example (16) illustrates this humanization of operational shortcomings:

- (16) “Please allow us to explain that your waitress was new and still learning our extensive menu.”

This frequent reference to staff members serves to contextualize explanations in a relatable and empathetic framework, thus fostering transparency through personalization of work dynamics. Furthermore, the frequent co-occurrence of “explain” with “you” (15 occurrences) and “your” (11.9 occurrences) underlines a consistent personalized tone. Example (17) showcases this:

- (17) “We’d like to explain the delay in your service and sincerely appreciate your patience and understanding.”

This approach clearly tries to position the customer at the center of explanations, so as to enhance relational connection and empathetic engagement. As for “because”, Australian responses often employ it alongside “food”, “negative” and “we” connecting explanations to precise issues cited by customers. The collocation with “food” occurs in 9.6 cases, often directly pinpointing culinary concerns as central explanatory factors (Example 18):

- (18) “I’m sorry your experience was negative because your food didn’t meet the high standards we’re known for.”

Moreover, the co-occurrence with “negative” (9.1) explicitly acknowledges dissatisfaction, demonstrating a highly forthright and detailed explanatory style, often directly acknowledging responsibility and transparently addressing the specific cause of complaints.

- (19) “We acknowledge your feedback was negative because your table wasn’t ready despite your reservation for Australia Day dinner, and we sincerely apologize for this oversight.”

Finally, for what concerns the word “reason”, it is interesting to notice that it shows distinct collocational patterns across the subcorpora, illustrating possible cultural distinctions in constructing transparency. In the US subcorpus, “reason” is frequently paired with intensifiers and authenticity markers such as “real” (3.9 occurrences) or “true” (2.1 occurrences), indicating a commitment to honest disclosure. Hence, here responders often frame explanations as genuine efforts to level with the customer, as shown in example (20).

- (20) “Just to be clear. The real reason your order took so long is that our oven unexpectedly broke down tonight.”

This upfront style foregrounds the explanation as a straightforward acknowledgment of fault. By contrast, the UK responses tend to embed “reason” in more formal or structured expressions; common collocates include “underlying” (2.7 occurrences) and “primary” (1.8 occurrences), which convey responsibility in a tone of composed professionalism. Example (21) illustrates this:

(21) “The underlying reason for your wait was a last-minute staff shortage this evening.”

This explanation offers factual clarity in a polite, restrained manner. Australian responses, while also stressing accountability, often feature a more straightforward tone than the US and UK ones. Collocates like “main” (2.4 occurrences) or “only” (1.9 occurrences) reflect a concise approach to explanations (Example 22).

(22) “The main reason the price is higher tonight is that the entertainment does come with some added costs.”

This plain explanation presents facts in a direct and rather unpretentious tone. These context-rich usages of “reason” highlight a shared commitment to transparency across all three cultures while also unveiling subtle distinctions: American responses lean towards overt frankness, British responses maintain formal clarity, and Australian responses prioritize clear, stripped-down disclosure of information.

6.2. Trust Building Markers in Context

Starting with the US subcorpus, trust-building markers tend to be deployed with clear, explicit assurances. “Ensure” collocates with words such as “service” (8.5 occurrences), “quality” (7.2 occurrences), and “standards” (6.8 occurrences), suggesting a practical commitment to customer satisfaction. For example, one response states (Example 23):

(23) “I personally ensure that every aspect of the service meets your expectations, and we are continuously improving our procedures. We are very sorry if our commitment was enough.”

Similarly, “honest” often appears with intensifiers like “always” (4.9 occurrences) and “very” (3.2 occurrences), reinforcing integrity. An illustrative example is (Example 24):

(24) “I’m always very honest about our shortcomings to be able to take immediate steps to correct them.”

The marker “acknowledge” typically collocates with “feedback” (4.1 occurrences) or “concerns” (3.8 occurrences), indicating a strategic preference for reassurance and commitment over direct admission. When employed, it generally functions to validate customer input (Example 25):

(25) “We acknowledge your feedback and are committed to making the necessary adjustments.”

In the UK subcorpus, trust markers are employed to a lower extent, thus potentially reflecting a preference for politeness and indirect validation rather than assertive reassurances. While “ensure” appears in some cases in combination with “service” (8.0 occurrences) and “standards” (6.1 occurrences), its function is less about promising change and more about maintaining an image of consistent quality. Consider example (26) below:

- (26) “We ensure that our service is maintained to the highest standards, and we appreciate your patience as we make improvements.”

Here, the verb “ensure” is framed within a formal, self-referential statement of professionalism, with little direct engagement with the specific complaint. Likewise, “honest” is typically embedded in controlled, strategically cautious constructions, as it frequently collocates with nouns such as “mistake” (3.6 occurrences), “approach” (3.1), and “feedback” (2.9), pointing to a communicative strategy that frames honesty not as vulnerability but as part of a managed, professional ethos. For instance (Example 27):

- (27) “It’s our aim to be honest in our feedback and clear about the steps we’re taking to improve.”

This use of “honest” suggests that UK replies often present honesty as a professional standard rather than as a moment of personal self-disclosure. In other words, it seems that restaurant managers tend to frame honesty in procedural terms (e.g., being honest in feedback, about our approach, or about a mistake) and then move quickly to what the business is doing to improve. Hence, the response constructs trust less through emotional openness and more through an image of controlled competence and institutional reliability. Crucially, “acknowledge” is almost absent in the UK subcorpus and does not develop stable collocations with semantically specific content words. When it occurs, it typically appears in brief, formulaic phrasing that signals recognition of the customer’s feedback (e.g., “We acknowledge your feedback”), but it is less often expanded into a fuller move that specifies the issue or outlines concrete remedial action. In other words, UK replies often foreground formality and a professional service tone over overt interpersonal openness, suggesting a preference for more implicit, restraint-oriented ways of managing complaints. In contrast, AU restaurants appear to favor a more direct and dialogic stance. The marker “acknowledge” is used more frequently and substantively than in either the US or UK subcorpora. Its common collocates, “concerns” (8.4 occurrences) and “feedback” (7.7 occurrences), signal more emphasis on validating customer dissatisfaction as part of a transparent and constructive response (Example 28):

- (28) “the team has acknowledged your concerns and have taken swift action to improve our service.”

Such responses suggest a communicative orientation that does not shy away from criticism but instead integrates it as a meaningful component of relational trust-building.

Australian responses also often blend assurance with accountability. “Ensure” collocates with “experience” (6.2 occurrences) and “review” (3.5 occurrences), highlighting a consistent focus on evaluating and enhancing the customer’s experience. Meanwhile, “honest” repeatedly occurs in a practical, action-oriented way, often appearing with “steps” (5.4 occurrences), as in (Example 29):

- (29) “We ensure that every part of your experience is carefully reviewed, and we are honest about the steps we are taking to resolve any issues.”

This combination suggests a more open and action-oriented style than in the US and UK subcorpora, where trust is more often built through reassurance (US) or professional formality (UK).

In sum, the use of trust-building markers reveals important cross-cultural divergences in how accountability is framed. While the US subcorpus emphasizes practical reassurance and clearly articulated commitments, the UK responses lean toward a formal, institutional tone that maintains a professional front without overtly engaging in self-criticism. Australian responses, by contrast, exhibit a more open and conversational style, combining direct acknowledgment with practical assurances. Importantly, though certain collocates recur across subcorpora, their rhetorical functions diverge, highlighting not just different preferences, but different communicative ideologies surrounding trust and accountability.

7. Discussion

The findings show how restaurants in the US, UK, and Australia use language to rebuild trust through transparency when replying to very negative *Google reviews*. In general, the three subcorpora share a similar communicative orientation: replies are generally direct and readable, and they often include an apology, a recognition of the complaint, an explanation and/or a reference to improvement or follow-up. This general similarity is consistent with Hall’s (1976) view of low-context settings, where meaning is typically carried in the words rather than left mainly to indirect inference (Hall 1976; Bowe and Martin 2007).

The patterns identified here are in line with research on organisational transparency and trust. Rawlins (2008) argues that transparency involves more than simply appearing open: it includes acknowledging failures, engaging publics, and avoiding ‘façade’ communication. Many replies in the corpus reflect this orientation by admitting shortcomings, offering explanations, and indicating that action will be taken. In this sense, the findings are also in line with earlier work on hospitality responses, where apologies, explanations, and problem-solving language are described as recurrent features of public replies to negative feedback (Zhang and Vásquez 2014; Vásquez 2018).

At the same time, the cross-cultural comparison reveals meaningful differences in tone and emphasis. UK replies often sound more restrained and formal, with less overt emotional language. US replies more often adopt a warmer and more personalised tone. Australian replies often combine directness with an informal, friendly tone, and they regularly pair acknowledgment with practical, action-focused wording. These differences suggest that even within broadly similar low-context environments, transparency and trust are not expressed in exactly the same way. In this sense, the results echo Koskela and Camiciottoli’s (2020) conclusion that trust can be constructed differently across cultures even when transparency is a shared goal.

Finally, the findings contribute to debates about formulaic transparency. Christensen and Cheney (2015) warn that transparency can become routine and performative, something organisations display because it is expected, rather than because it produces meaningful engagement. In the corpus, some replies are highly repetitive and generic, relying on apologies or broad assurances with limited reference to the specific

complaint. This matters because transparency cues do not automatically produce trust: their trust-building value depends on how clearly they connect to the concrete issue and how credible the commitment to improvement appears (Rawlins 2008). In other words, transparency-oriented language is important, but it is most trust-building when it is specific, responsive, and not merely formulaic.

8. Concluding Remarks

This study examined how restaurants use transparency to rebuild trust when responding publicly to 1-star *Google reviews*. Using a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of manager replies from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, it identified recurring ways in which restaurants explain problems, address dissatisfaction, and present themselves as accountable.

Two main points emerge. First, across the three contexts, replies tend to follow a similar overall orientation: they acknowledge the negative experience, express regret, provide some form of explanation, and signal follow-up or improvement. This suggests that public responses to online complaints are shaped by shared expectations of visible accountability in digital customer service. Second, national styles seem to play a role. UK replies tend to sound more formal and restrained, US replies more personal and customer-engaging, and Australian replies often combine directness with an informal, friendly tone. In other words, transparency is a shared goal, but its tone and wording are adjusted to local communication habits. The findings also reinforce an important point about trust. Transparency is most effective when it is specific and responsive, not simply generic. This supports Rawlins' view that transparency builds trust when it is genuine and dialogic (Rawlins 2008), and it is in line with concerns that routine, template-like disclosure can appear performative rather than meaningful (Christensen and Cheney 2015). Overall, the study suggests that public replies are most trust-building when they are clear, complaint-specific, and linked to credible follow-up.

This study also has limitations. The data come from three English-speaking contexts and from a single platform (*Google reviews*), focusing only on publicly visible managerial replies to 1-star ratings in 2024–2025. As a result, the findings should not be treated as representative of all service industries, platforms, or cultural settings, and they do not capture how customers perceive these responses. Future research could extend the analysis to other platforms (e.g., *Yelp*, *TripAdvisor*), additional countries and languages, and other rating levels. It could also combine corpus methods with audience-focused approaches (e.g., surveys or experiments) to test how different transparency styles affect perceived trust and credibility.

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