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“Jerry was a terrific host!” “You were a brilliant guest!”

Reciprocal compliments on Airbnb

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Expanding the research investigating compliments in CMC genres, this study explores reciprocal compliments from consumers and service-providers on Airbnb, a major tourism platform. Specifically, the study examines distribution of compliments in both guest reviews of Online Experiences (a virtual tourism service) and hosts’ responses to those reviews, focusing on compliment topics, their syntactic realizations, and their associated intensification strategies. Despite some similarities with prior research on CMC compliments with respect to the overall frequency and general expression of compliments, we also identified several differences related to compliment reciprocity as well as a greater tendency toward more formal language use in this professional digital context. These differences are likely related to the different relationships among participants, as well as different user goals when communicating on commercially-oriented sites versus social networking sites, demonstrating the need to expand the scope of CMC compliment research to include a broader range of platforms.

Keywords: compliments, reciprocal compliments, online compliments, computer-mediated discourse, online reviews, Airbnb Online Experiences, face-work

1. Introduction

As we spend more of our time interacting via various technologies, there is growing interest in matters of ‘face’¹ in digital communication (Tagg, Seargeant and

1. We refer to the concept of ‘face’ as an ubiquitous phenomenon “related to a person’s sense of identity or self-concept: self as an individual (individual identity), self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with others (relational identity)” (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 14).

Brown 2017; Virtanen and Lee 2022). The speech act of complimenting, long understood as a positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987) – albeit one which varies in form and function both cross-culturally and across communicative contexts – represents a key form of face-work related to the interpersonal, relational, and phatic functions of communication. The increased use of social media over the last two decades has provided new interactive contexts for the study of complimenting behavior online, with several scholars observing that giving/receiving compliments is as well-established and widespread a practice in digital interactions as it is in more traditional spoken communication (e.g., Placencia and Lower 2017). Recent scholarship has shown that cross-cultural differences in complimenting behavior persist in digital contexts (e.g., Eslami and Yang 2018) and also that an increasing number of social media platforms have given rise to new patterns of interaction where compliments are concerned. These studies have tended to focus on patterns of complimenting found on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) or similar platforms, with communications taking place among peers, acquaintances, friends or family members. However, less is known about complimenting practices occurring in digital spaces that are primarily dedicated to commercial activity. To address this gap, the present study builds on prior work regarding compliments in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments, and extends it to consider complimenting behaviors in one type of digital business communication: online consumer reviews (OCRs). Furthermore, in response to the unique nature of the online context investigated,² rather than focusing on the speech acts set of compliments/compliment responses, our study instead shifts attention to forms of reciprocity in complimenting behavior. Specifically, our study addresses the compliments from both “guest to hosts” and “hosts to guests” found on the travel platform, Airbnb, focusing specifically on reviews of a recently-launched virtual tourism service: Online Experiences (hereafter OE). Our aim in examining compliment behavior in this digital context is to broaden the scope of inquiry on CMC compliments, going beyond more informal and social digital contexts, to include professional³ business contexts, as well.

2. We consider this context to be unique, because Airbnb is the only platform to date (to the best of our knowledge) to offer this type of virtual tourism service (i.e., Online Experiences); thus it represents an innovative context for studying interaction.

3. We refer to our context as a professional one, because the interactions under examination involve interlocutors whose contact originates from a commercial service transaction. Airbnb serves as middleman collecting and distributing payments and guests pay fees for each OE that have been established by hosts (usually ranging between 3 and 100 USD). This means that the relationship among participants in our context is that of consumer (guest) and service provider (host). Referring to these relations and their resulting discourse, we use the terms professional/business/commercial interchangeably.

1.1 Compliments

Compliments have been a topic of interest for language scholars since the 1970s and have been studied extensively, primarily in naturally occurring oral interactions (e.g., Holmes 1988; Manes 1983; Wolfson 1983). Described by some scholars as a face-flattering act (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1987) or as “social lubricants that grease the social wheels” (Wolfson 1983: 89), compliments are a type of face-work that is managed by all participants involved in an interaction. One of the main functions of compliments is to maintain or strengthen common ground between individuals (e.g., Holmes 1988; Manes 1983; Wolfson 1983). Beyond enhancing rapport between speakers (Spencer-Oatey 2008), in some specific contexts, compliments may also serve additional communicative functions. For instance, compliments may be used as conversation starters (Placencia and Lower 2017) or to stimulate and encourage a particular desired behavior (Holmes 1988). Although usually assumed to be a positive politeness strategy, in some communicative situations, compliments can actually be face-threatening as well; for example when they are used to manipulate an interlocutor (Manes 1983), when they are produced to deliver a negative attitude toward the interlocutor (Morady Moghaddam 2019b), or when they are perceived as inappropriate or insincere, given the existing relationship between the speakers (Spencer-Oatey, Ng, and Dong 2008).

Additionally, responding to a compliment is “far from simple” (Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez 2013: 736), as the addressee might be confronted with opposite possible strategies, facing, for instance, a tension between the use of ‘modesty’ versus ‘self-enhancement’ (Spencer-Oatey 2008). Indeed, declining a compliment might seem impolite and ungrateful, while at the same time, “accepting a compliment too wholeheartedly might seem arrogant” (Placencia et al. 2016: 340). In addition to these studies, which have considered the functions of compliments and compliment responses, scholars of pragmatics have also identified typical patterns of content as well as form. Specifically, compliment studies (e.g., Manes and Wolfson 1981; Holmes 1988) have noted the rather limited range of syntactic realization of compliments as we discuss in the following section.

1.2 Compliments and compliment responses in online settings

Responding to the rise of digital media, scholars of pragmatics have turned their attention to compliments in online settings. Specifically, complimenting behavior has been studied on digital platforms ranging from Skype chats (Morady Moghaddam 2019a), to the online gaming environment Second Life (Cirillo 2012), and to microblogging and photo/video-sharing sites such as Twitter (Yusof and Hoon 2014) and Instagram (Placencia 2019). By far however, the site that has gen-

erated the most studies related to CMC compliments is the social networking platform, Facebook (Maíz-Arévalo 2013; Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez 2013; Eslami and Yang 2018; Eslami, Jabbari and Kuo 2015, 2019; Placencia et al. 2016). Most of these studies have involved participants (i.e., compliment givers and addressees) with some kind of pre-existing social ties, thus investigating compliment exchanges between interlocutors who, many times, also know each other also in an offline sense. Moreover, these studies have often focused on compliments generated by photos (Placencia 2019; Placencia and Lower 2013; Eslami, Jabbari and Kuo 2019), and in the vast majority of the cases, the compliments investigated have referred to a limited set of topics, such as appearance, possessions or lifestyle attributes, ability/performance, or aspects related to personality (Eslami, Jabbari and Kuo 2019; Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez 2013).

Regarding the formulation of compliments, studies of CMC compliments have observed a high frequency of only a few syntactic patterns, such as elliptical forms (e.g., *Beautiful!*) and structures such as “*I love/like + (ADJ) NP*”, or “*You are + ADJ*” (Eslami, Jabbari and Kuo 2019; Placencia 2019), previously attested in earlier work on spoken compliments (Manes and Wolfson 1981). Overall, abbreviated and succinct compliments appear to be highly prolific in Social Networking Sites (SNS) settings. In addition, the “like” button – embedded as a standard interactive option on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (in the latter case, in the form of a heart symbol) – has been identified as one of the preferred ways not only to give a compliment, but also to respond to one (Maíz-Arévalo 2013; Placencia and Lower 2013). Several of these studies have found that the great majority of online compliments are intensified through the use of a few recurrent strategies such as prosodic spelling (i.e., capital letters/letter repetition), expressive punctuation, adverbs, interjections and emoji (Placencia 2019; Eslami, Jabbari and Kuo 2019).

In contrast, far less research has examined complimenting in professional or business CMC contexts. One exception is represented by Cenni and Goethals (2020; 2021), who have identified compliments in online consumer reviews of hotels – as well as in hoteliers’ responses to guest reviews on the same platform. These studies suggest that compliments are one means by which individuals can provide a positive evaluation of consumer experiences in online reviews, while at the same time addressing the highly interpersonal nature of the travel-related service experience. Businesses were also found to use compliments as a relational strategy in responding to guests’ reviews, suggesting that in these contexts, compliments may occur as a reciprocal activity.

The present study adds to this more recent interest in compliments occurring within public forms of online professional communication. Specifically, we focus on reciprocal compliments appearing in online texts related to a type of ‘digital

tourism, offered by Airbnb. In early April 2020, Airbnb launched the new service called ‘Online Experiences’ (OE) as a creative adaptation to the COVID-19 public health crisis, which restricted traditional forms of tourism for several months. Briefly, OEs involve “hosts” offering various types of virtual “experiences” (e.g., cooking classes, meditation sessions) via Zoom to interested consumers. Airbnb provides the online platform through which hosts and consumers (“guests”) can connect and complete the financial transaction involved; and the resulting reviews and responses can be found on this same platform. Our context is innovative in that it represents two levels of computer-mediated communication. On one level, our data consist of compliments in two related genres of digital communication: guest reviews of OEs and hosts’ responses to those reviews. On another level, these digitally-mediated communications are related to a prior communicative event(s) that also took place in a digitally-mediated format (i.e., Zoom sessions), which was – most likely – the first and only interaction to take place involving the participants. What makes our data distinct from prior studies of CMC compliments is that the compliments that we focus on refer to a commercial, yet highly personalized, encounter: the Online Experience as a “site of engagement” (Scollon 1997) which – as we will illustrate below – blends discourses of tourism, entertainment and education.

1.3 Airbnb

A leader in the peer-to-peer or ‘sharing’ economy, Airbnb provides an online platform through which individuals can rent private properties as tourist accommodations. Airbnb has enjoyed rapid growth and success since its emergence in 2008, which has in turn inspired a great deal of research from the field of tourism studies (see Guttentag 2019 for a comprehensive literature review). Several of these studies have identified several factors positively valued by customers during their Airbnb stay, such as, for example, cost/value benefits, authenticity and memorability of the experience, home atmosphere and the social appeal of the Airbnb community (i.e. contact with the host and the local community). One central factor that has emerged as a key feature of the Airbnb experience is the host. More specifically, positive interactions and clear communication with the host have been identified as aspects particularly appreciated by guests (Cheng and Jing 2019; Ju et al. 2019) – even in situations where no face-to-face meetings were involved, and all interaction took place virtually (Cenni and Vásquez 2021). Several studies have observed that Airbnb hosts are expected to be helpful, friendly, welcoming and responsive (Johnson and Neuhofer 2017; Luo and Tang 2019). Indeed, the host-guest relation, as a central aspect of an Airbnb stay, is believed to promote a sense of belonging (Möhlmann 2015) and make the tourism experience

more personal (Tussyadiah and Pesonen 2018; Lyu et al. 2019), highlighting the importance of the social dimension connected to this type of lodging experience.

Since the company's inception, Airbnb has encouraged consumers to post reviews on its public platform (Guttentag 2019), and it has been suggested that consumer reviews have been major factor in Airbnb's success, both in helping to establish trust/credibility between consumers and non-traditional service providers and reducing uncertainty prior to purchasing decisions (Luo and Tang 2019; Yannopoulou et al. 2013). Bridges and Vásquez (2016), one of the first studies to examine Airbnb reviews from a linguistic perspective, observed that the vast majority of Airbnb reviews from both guests and hosts were positively-oriented and tended to display a somewhat limited range of linguistic resources. One consistent feature observed in this study was the importance of the host-guest interaction – even if those interactions took place entirely online and the guest and host never met in person. The present study shifts the focus from Airbnb's accommodations offerings to the platform's Online Experiences, as we address compliments both *about* Airbnb's hosts as well as *from* Airbnb's hosts.

Airbnb began offering 'Online Experiences' (OE) in response to global travel restrictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. This new form of digital tourism, an innovative adaption to the conditions restricting physical forms of travel, is described by a company spokesperson as offering a "new way for people to connect, travel virtually, and earn income during the COVID-19 crisis." (travelandleisure.com). Activities offered as Online Experiences on the platform experiences are quite varied, and include, to name a few, virtual tours of European cities, meditation sessions (e.g. with Buddhist monks in Japan, or with sheep in a barn in the Welsh countryside), coaching sessions with Olympic athletes, coffee and wine tasting classes.

One of the most significant changes on the platform for Airbnb's Online Experiences is a different reviewing procedure from the one used for reviews of Airbnb's Accommodations. Guests are still encouraged to post a review after having participated in the OE, but hosts of OEs are now given space to respond to those reviews. In other words, hosts can decide to answer guest reviews (or not) – after having read them. This guest review-host response interaction⁴ represents our unit of investigation (see also 2.1). Figure 1 shows a screenshot of a typical example of such an exchange, where a review from a guest, Emily, receives a response from the host, Lhea. (It is worth noting that this sequential communication structure differs from the reviewing system used for Airbnb accommodations on the same platform, which employs a "simultaneous reveal" process for publishing reviews, wherein reviews are revealed to guests and hosts at the same time).

4. One feature of the mediated nature of these public online communications is that Airbnb platform does not allow for ongoing public turn-taking, beyond this review/response pair.
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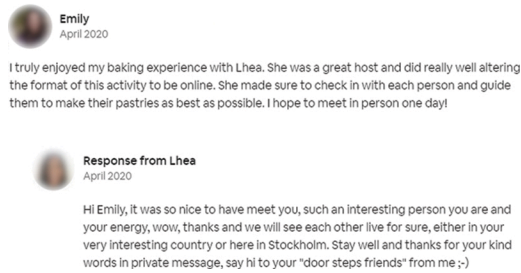


Figure 1. Screenshot of OE review, followed by response from host

Building on prior research, both about CMC compliments and about Airbnb, our study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the distribution of compliments included in Airbnb OE reviews – and in hosts’ responses? To what extent are compliments reciprocated?
2. What are the linguistic realizations of compliments in this digital context? What are the most common topics, syntactic forms and intensification strategies adopted by users?

2. Methodology

2.1 Dataset: Airbnb’s online experiences reviews

Our dataset consists of consumer reviews and host responses to those reviews. Guided by our interest in reciprocity in complimenting behavior, we collected only those reviews which had received public responses from the hosts, resulting in 220 pairs of guest reviews/host responses. We collected data at the end of the first week that Online Experiences (OE) were made available. One week after their launch (April 16 2020), there was a total of 69 Online Experiences offered by Airbnb. (This number has increased exponentially since then – over 650 at last count – which may serve as some indication of the success and popularity of this service.) The majority (50/69) were classified as some type of “class” (e.g., cooking, yoga, dancing, drawing), while other categories included “encounter” “tour” “concert” and “performance.” The number of reviews per OE at the time of data collection ranged from 0 to 173, with an average number of reviews per OE of 25 and a median of 17.

In terms of ratings, for those Experiences that had at least one review ($N=60$), the majority had a 5-star rating. Only 17 Experiences had overall ratings lower

than 5 stars, and those ranged from 4.75–4.99.⁵ As mentioned, Airbnb actively encourages guests to review OEs (both on the platform itself and in the form of three follow-up email reminders), giving them 30 days following their OE to post a review. Guests have the option of sending either private feedback directly to their host, posting public feedback on the platform about the OE for both the host and future guests to read – or both. In terms of host responses to guest reviews, we found that hosts from only 22 of the 69 OEs posted one or more responses to reviews they had received from guests. In our study, we focus only on those guest reviews that received a unique response from the host.⁶ Therefore, our sample of 220 pairs of guest/host communications are associated with 22 different OEs. All 220 pairs of text were written in English.⁷

2.2 Coding procedure and data analysis

We operationalized compliments, in accordance with Holmes' definition (1988: 445), as a speech act “which attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed.” In our context, this speech act occurs in the shape of compliments from guests/consumers to the hosts/service-providers as well as conversely, from hosts/service-providers to guests/consumers. For our purposes, guests' positive statements of general evaluation concerning the OE itself were not considered compliments, given the genre-based expectation of OCRs in providing some type of positive/negative assessment of the service experience (Vásquez 2014; Cenni, Goethals and Vásquez 2020). The first step in our analysis was identifying all compliments within each of the 220 pairs of

5. Airbnb is known for its strong positivity bias (Zervas et al., 2015) and reviews of OEs are no exception. The term “positivity bias” refers to the great percentage of reviews posted on Airbnb displaying positive star ratings. In other words, Airbnb is known to be characterized by an overwhelming number of positive reviews (when considering the total number of reviews), when compared to other platforms, such as Booking or TripAdvisor in which we find more variation in the percentages of negative, neutral and positive reviews. In fact, in the guidelines for prospective OE hosts, Airbnb makes explicit that online experiences with too many negative reviews, or an overall rating of 4.7 or lower, may be removed from the platform.

6. When the same host provided ‘canned’ responses and repeated the same wording for multiple guests, we only collected the first instance. This situation applied to responses from only 2 of the 22 OE hosts.

7. Because both guests and hosts appear to be located all over the world, it is likely that at least some of the interactions on this platform occur among multilingual users, with English serving as the lingua franca. At present (7 months after the launch of OEs), 99% of communication of the reviews and responses occur in English. The platform shows users' and hosts' location, however, we cannot determine their L1s with certainty, as we are well aware that the dominant language in one's current country of residence does not necessarily correspond to one's L1.

guest/host communication. Once identified and extracted, each compliment was then coded in multiple rounds, using the program NVivo12. Ambiguous cases were resolved by examining the surrounding context. In the following sections, we will (due to space limitations) present and discuss only the relevant excerpts of the reviews under investigation, namely compliments’ realizations (and not the entire review text).

Following the analytic approach of previous studies of compliments on SNSs (e.g., Eslami et al. 2019; Placencia 2019), three layers of coding were carried out for each compliment identified, focusing on three main dimensions: (1) content, (2) syntactic realization, and (3) intensification strategies. By analyzing the same features addressed by prior scholarship, we aim to extend the study on digital complimenting behavior, identifying similar and distinctive traits of compliments produced in this professional context compared to compliments found on other SNSs platforms.

First, compliments were coded based on their content, depending on which attribute of the addressee was complimented. As shown in Table 1, five main attributes were identified, namely (a) general, (b) the personality of the addressee, (c) their expertise/abilities, (d) their role as host/teacher or guest/student and (e) an “other” category, in which we included compliments more tangentially related to the guest or host (i.e., their children, their associates, their location, etc.).

Table 1. Content categories

	Guests’ reviews	Hosts’ responses
General	<i>Rafa is fantastic!</i>	<i>You two were amazing!</i>
Personality	<i>Aneta is super sweet.</i>	<i>You are the kindest person!</i>
Subject matter expert / ability	<i>She has such clear insight and great suggestions.</i>	<i>Well done on remembering so many of the facts!</i>
Role as host/teacher	<i>Thomas was a wonderful teacher.</i>	/
Role as guest/student	/	<i>All of you were great students.</i>
Other	/	<i>All your family is very nice.</i>

Next, because compliments can be expressed using a wide range of pragma-linguistic strategies, we also coded each compliment based on its syntactic realization. Compliments in our dataset fell into one of the following five categories: (a) direct compliment, using 2nd person pronoun (+ proper name, used as form of address), (b) compliments in the third person, using 3rd person pronouns or proper names, (c) compliments embedded in other speech acts, most typically expressions of gratitude, (d) compliments realized through *I love/like* construc-

tions, and (e) compliments expressed in elliptical constructions.⁸ Table 2 illustrates each category with examples from our dataset.

Table 2. Syntactic realizations

	Guests' reviews	Hosts' responses
2nd person (pronouns or proper name)	<i>You are an extraordinary narrator.</i>	<i>You made a really good job with pasta!</i>
3rd person (pronouns or proper name)	<i>Rafa is fantastic!</i>	<i>[...] Betty who was the life and soul of the group today.</i>
Embedded	<i>Thank you for being a wonderful host!</i>	<i>Thank you for your openness!</i>
<i>I love/like +</i>	<i>I loved the Opera singer Maria!</i>	<i>I love your drive.</i>
Elliptical	<i>True talents!</i>	<i>Teachable students.</i>

As other studies of CMC compliments have observed, online compliments are often intensified in order to strengthen the impact of the main communicative action (Placencia and Lower 2013). Accordingly, in our third round of coding, we concentrated on various (optional) intensification strategies which appeared in the compliments. As shown in Table 3, we identified several intensification strategies including: (a) intensifying adverbs, (b) intensifying adjectives, (c) hyperbole, (d) exclamation marks (single or multiple), (e) expressive orthography (i.e., CAPS) and (f) emoji. Compliments that did not include any intensifying strategies were considered unmarked.

Table 3. Intensification strategies: Examples extracted from the dataset

	Guests' reviews	Hosts' responses
Exclamation mark(s)	<i>Jerry was a terrific host!</i>	<i>You two were amazing!</i>
Intensifying adverbs	<i>She was very sweet</i>	<i>Your energy was absolutely super great.</i>
Intensifying adjectives	<i>Wide knowledge!</i>	<i>You brought good energy to the class,</i>
Hyperbole	<i>Rafa has it all!</i>	/
Expressive orthography	<i>Lucrezia and her mum were INCREDIBLE !</i>	<i>YOU were great</i>
Emoji	/	<i>thank you and Greg for the amazing mood you had :)</i>

8. Elliptical compliments refer to cases where a compliment realization is “reduced to the use of an adjective or noun phrase, omitting other elements like the verbal phrase, exclamative pronouns or the subject” Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez 2013: 751).

2.3 Approaches to quantification

We used three different counting methods (see below, Section 3.1) to determine the overall distributions of compliments in our data. Applying these different counting methods provides insights into the distribution of compliments from multiple perspectives. Specifically, in this way we are able to show (a) whether compliments are more common in guests’ reviews or hosts’ responses to those reviews, (b) whether a single review or response includes more than one complimenting instance, and (c) whether a compliment expressed in a guest review is met with a compliment in the host response or not – addressing questions of reciprocity.

Our first method of quantification takes into account the number of individual guest reviews and individual host responses ($N=440$) in which at least one compliment was found. (Below, this is labeled #reviews #responses). The second method focuses on the total number of compliment occurrences. For instance, if three compliments were identified within the same guest review, they were counted as three compliment occurrences (labelled #occurrences). The third method considers the guest reviews and host responses as a single unit: a communicative pair. In this case, we considered pairs of texts in which at least one compliment was found, and we then examined whether compliments occurred only in the review, only in the response, or in both the review and its consequent response (labelled #pairs).

3. Results

3.1 Distribution of compliments

We begin by presenting the distribution of compliments in our dataset, showing how each approach to quantifying our data yields slightly different insights. This is followed by a presentation of our findings regarding the three aspects compliments addressed in the present study: topics, syntactic realizations and intensification strategies. We analyze and compare the patterns found in guest reviews and host responses to those reviews, and we offer a more qualitative discussion of examples extracted from our dataset.

Table 4 shows the distribution of compliments, based on compliment giver/addressee relationships and includes two of our approaches to quantification. The second column illustrates how many of the texts in each category (i.e., guest reviews and host responses) included at least one compliment, whereas the third column shows the total number of compliment occurrences in each category.

Table 4 shows that, in our dataset, compliments occurred in 60% ($N=132$) of guests' reviews of hosts, where the presence of compliments is not unexpected. It also shows that compliments appear with considerable frequency in 40% ($N=89$) of hosts' responses. When examining the total number of compliments (third column in Table 4), this difference between guests' and hosts' complimenting behavior, in terms of frequency, becomes even more pronounced (i.e., 203 and 97). In addition, it is worth pointing out that, as Table 4 suggests, some of the reviews and responses included no compliments at all, whereas some individual texts featured multiple compliments.

Table 4. Distribution of compliments, considering single guest reviews, single host responses and total compliment occurrences

220 reviews + 220 responses	#Reviews #Responses /Total	# Occurrences
Compliments in guests' reviews	132 /220	203
Compliments in hosts' responses	89 /220	97
Total N of compliments	221 /440	300

Table 5 displays the results from our third strategy of quantification – considering pairs of guest reviews and host responses as one unit. Of the 220 pairs of guest reviews/host responses forming our dataset, 163 pairs (74%) contained at least one compliment, while 57 pairs (26%) did not contain any compliments.

Table 5. Distribution of compliments, in paired reviews and responses

	#Pairs
N of g+h pairs in which at least one compliment was found	N 163 (74%)
N of pairs containing compliment(s) only in review*	N74 (45%)
N of pairs containing compliment(s) only in responses	N 31 (19%)
N of pairs containing compliment(s) in both review and response	N 58 (36%)
N of g+h pairs in which no compliments were found	N 57 (26%)
Total N g+h pairs	N 220

* Percentages calculated considering the pairs in which at least one compliment was found ($N=163$).

When considering compliments from the perspective of the paired texts, in 36% of the 163 guest/host pairs that included at least one compliment, hosts return the compliment to their guests. This observation related to the reciprocal nature of compliments in OE interactions shows a strikingly different pattern compared to complimenting behavior examined on other platforms. Previous studies of

compliment responses on SNSs (e.g., Maíz-Arevalo 2013; Placencia et al. 2016) found that the preferred response strategies to online compliments included the use of the ‘like’ button, or no response at all, with very few of the responses consisting of reciprocal compliments: only 2.7% in Maíz-Arevalo (2013) and 6.8% in Placencia et al. (2016). Even in a study that was more similar to ours in terms of its professional context (focusing on hotel managers’ responses to positive reviews on TripAdvisor), instances of returning compliments were also more limited, found in less than 10% of responses (Cenni and Goethals, 2021).

While our findings demonstrate some variability in compliment responses in this specific digital context, we found that one out of every three hosts who receives a compliment from a guest responded with a compliment (i.e., in 36% of the cases, see Table 5), making reciprocal complimenting in this context far less exceptional than what is shown in previous work on CMC compliments. This difference may be due to several factors. One of these has to do with the technological affordances and constraints of different online platforms. Specifically, Airbnb’s platform does not provide a “like” button for its reviews; therefore, this strategy is obviously not possible in this context. Furthermore, on Airbnb – a leader in the so-called ‘sharing/peer-to-peer economy’ – guest-host rapport plays a pivotal role. Online review spaces (and their associated response spaces) provide further opportunities for sociality between hosts and guests in this professional environment. Many hosts, aware of the positive communicative potential of returning a compliment, exploit this opportunity not only to consolidate their relationship with the guest who wrote a positive review, but also – by publicly showing their appreciation of that individual guest – to simultaneously provide an additional glimpse of their personality to other prospective guests who are reading the reviews and responses.

While each of the approaches we used to quantify our data provide slightly different perspectives on the distribution of compliments, when taken as a whole (see Table 4 and Table 5), they indicate that overall, compliments are very common in our dataset. These results lend support to the pervasiveness of compliments found online, corroborating findings related to frequency of compliments on other digital platforms (Eslami and Yang 2018) and demonstrating that this speech act is also a recurrent feature of interaction in the context of Airbnb’s OEs.

3.2 Topics

Previous studies examining compliments on SNSs found that appearance, personality, possessions/lifestyle and abilities were the most common topics of compliments, with appearance being the most frequent – especially on Instagram and Facebook (Placencia and Lower 2017: 8). This is not surprising, because the types

of posts that often prompt compliments on SNSs typically include photos. In contrast, in our context, where the focus of the texts is on a prior professional encounter (the OE), individuals' appearance appears not to be a salient feature. Instead, as seen in Table 6, users seem to orient their compliments most frequently to the individuals' professional roles, either as host or as guest.

Table 6. Compliment topics, frequencies in guest reviews and hosts' responses

Topics	Guest reviews	Host responses
General	19 (9%)	12 (12%)
Hosts' /guests' personality	40 (20%)	19 (20%)
Hosts' / guests' abilities/expertise	46 (23%)	25 (26%)
Role as teacher	94 (46%)	/
Role as student	/	33 (34%)
Other	4 (2%)	8 (8%)
Total compliments	203	97

More specifically, the highest percentage of compliments address the hosts in their role as “teachers” (46%) and guests in their role as “students” (34%). (As mentioned earlier, a majority of OEs were classified by Airbnb as “classes.”) This finding highlights the relevance of the educational aspect of OEs, which appears not only in general “teacher/student” types of compliments as in (1–2), but also in compliments referring to more specific aspects of instruction, commonly associated with traditional educational settings.

- (1) Sandrine is a phenomenal instructor.
- (2) Lucrezia was an excellent teacher

In particular, hosts in their role as teachers were complimented for being patient (3), encouraging (4), engaging and for their clarity in their explanations (5):

- (3) He was very patient.
- (4) She was very encouraging!
- (5) Lhea was very clear and easy to follow

We also found that hosts often complimented their guests for “student behaviors” such as participation, sharing insights and asking questions (6–8), again addressing the learning dimension promoted by Airbnb OEs.

- (6) Thanks for your lovely participation!

- (7) Great participation and questions Eduardo!
- (8) Your input during our time online was priceless and added to the quality conversation!

These examples display the hosts’ awareness of the impact that guests have on their OEs’ success. Indeed, just as in a conventional in-person classroom, in Airbnb OEs the guests/students also contribute to the positive realization of the experience through their active engagement and participatory behaviors.

Other common topics of compliments in OEs include the hosts’ personality and their ability/expertise (20%–23%, respectively, as shown in Table 6). These findings are in line with previous studies investigating Airbnb, many of which have emphasized how crucial the host’s personality is to consumer satisfaction in Airbnb accommodations transactions. Several of these studies have reported that consumers expect Airbnb hosts to be friendly, helpful and welcoming (Johnson and Neuhofer 2017; Ju et al. 2019; Luo and Tang 2019). Yet, in the specific context of OEs – where the nature of the service provided has shifted from providing accommodations to providing a virtual tourism product – beyond hosts’ kindness and helpfulness, other personality attributes seem to be particularly appreciated. In our data, hosts are often complimented for their sense of humor, their (positive) energy and charisma, as in (9–12), which indicates that OEs are characterized not only by their educational appeals, but also by their potential for providing entertainment to guests/consumers.

- (9) Martin is so funny!
- (10) Incredible energy and sense of humor.
- (11) She has such a positive and upbeat energy!
- (12) Jon is a very friendly and courteous man with a great charisma!!

In addition, we observed that other, more specific, kinds of personality traits were the focus of compliments in certain types of OEs, suggesting an interaction between the type of OEs and the specific focus of the compliments. To offer one example, we observed that hosts’ personality traits’ complimented in yoga/meditation OEs, included their warmth and calmness (13–15).

- (13) He is such a warm and supportive person!!!
- (14) Sandrine is so warm and friendly!
- (15) With her calm and gentle voice she made my day!!

Guests also compliment the hosts on their abilities and knowledge: in particular, on their passion and talent (16) as well as their in-depth subject matter expertise

(17–19). As noted earlier, these aspects are clearly connected to the educational dimension of OEs.

(16) He seemed to be into what he did and passionately cares about it.

(17) She is clearly an expert in her field.

(18) She has so much wisdom about wellness practices!!!

(19) Jerry was savvy and knowledgeable!

Similarly, not only are the hosts' personalities and abilities the focus of compliments, but guests also receive compliments on their character demonstrated during the OE. In particular, hosts complimented guests on their openness (20) and on their positive mood and attitude (21–22):

(20) I appreciate your willingness to be open and try something new!

(21) Your energy was absolutely super great.

(22) Katie I love your drive and enthusiasm.

Additionally, hosts paid compliments to the guests' performance, or the result(s) they achieved during the OE (23–25). These compliments also function as a form of positive feedback and encouragement, and in few cases co-occurred with common formulaic expressions, such as "great job!" or "well done" (as in (23)).

(23) Your result was perfect! Well done!

(24) Your artwork was amazing.

(25) I'm so impressed with what you wrote!

In sum, we found a difference in compliment topics, when compared to the compliments examined on other platforms such as Facebook or Instagram (Placencia and Lower 2017) as well as an expansion of the positive attributes of the host that have been identified in reviews of Airbnb accommodations (Johnson and Neuhofer 2017; Ju et al. 2019). More specifically, in our dataset, we notice that compliments often concern the participants in their role as students, complimented for their learning and participative skills and behaviors, whereas hosts are praised for their teaching skills, their talents and expertise, and their charming and engaging personalities.

3.3 Syntactic realizations

Like other studies of CMC compliments, our data took linguistic different forms. Compliments in our dataset occurred in one of five syntactic realizations (see Table 7).

Table 7. Syntactic realizations, frequencies in guest reviews and hosts’ responses

Syntactic realization	Guest reviews	Host responses
Third person subject	163 (80%)	13 (13%)
Second person subject	6 (3%)	42 (43%)
Embedded	19 (9%)	20 (21%)
<i>I love/like</i>	2 (1%)	18 (19%)
Elliptical	13 (6%)	4 (4%)
Total	203	97

In terms of syntactic form, guests’ reviews show a strong preference for third person constructions, with a third person singular pronoun or the proper name of the host (26–28) occurring as grammatical subjects, described by ADJ/Noun phrase in the predicate. This pattern accounts for 80% of the total of guest-produced compliments, whereas the remaining realizations each account for less than 10% of the other categories, as also seen in Table 7.

- (26) Jerry was a terrific host!
- (27) He is such a warm and supportive person.
- (28) Rafa is amazing!

In contrast, hosts’ responses reveal much greater variation in terms of their syntactic realizations. Although the different syntactic realizations are somewhat more evenly distributed in hosts’ responses, second person pronoun subject constructions are the most common category (43%) as in (29), followed by syntactically embedded compliments (21%) (30), which are very often embedded in expressions of gratitude, as well as *I love/like* constructions (19%) (31):

- (29) You were a brilliant guest!
- (30) Thank you so much for being a wonderful guest!
- (31) I love the story you started.

When comparing the syntactic patterns in guests’ and hosts’ compliments, the majority of guests tend to compliment the host using a third person pronoun,

showing a preference for talking *about* the host, to an imagined primary audience of fellow Airbnb users, in a ‘one-to-many’ form of communication. In contrast, when hosts return the compliment, they tend to address the guests directly (i.e. speaking *to* them rather than *about* them), using second person pronoun subjects; thereby, engaging in a ‘one-to-one’ mode of communication – even though the audience reading both texts is the same. This asymmetrical pattern of addressivity demonstrates how compliment realization vary on the platform (at least syntactically) depending on the role and perspective of the author – an example of what Tagg et al. (2017) refer to as “context designed” communication. In addition, these differences may be related to the fact that each post represents a different text type. In other words, in this space guests are writing reviews of hosts, whereas the platform frames hosts’ texts as responses to those reviews – their texts are not intended to be actual reviews of guests. Furthermore, hosts’ preference for second person pronoun constructions may represent an additional strategy to address the face wants of the guests. In hosts’ responses, embedded compliments are the second most recurrent category of syntactic realizations. Of these, 16/20 of the embedded compliments are realized within a thanking speech act. Thanking the guests is a very common communicative move found within the hosts’ responses, and, as we can observe in (30) above, hosts often adopt the strategy of combining the expression of gratitude and the compliment within the same sentence.

Prior studies focusing on compliments on SNSs also included implicit realizations of compliments. In particular, Eslami et al. (2019) found several examples of implicit compliments on Facebook. Implicit compliments have been defined as “compliments where hearers need to infer the intended illocution for their interpretation” (Eslami et al. 2019: 83) – and are often discussed in terms opacity in meaning, which results from humor, creativity, and/or unconventional expressions. In reviewing our data, we did not find any instances of implicit compliments. The lack of implicit compliments in our data may be due to their potential for misinterpretation, which is likely dispreferred in a professional, commercial context such as our own. In general, business communication tends to be more straightforward than opaque – and puts a premium on clear, intelligible expression.

Moreover, earlier research on Facebook and Instagram (e.g., Eslami et al. 2019; Placencia and Lower 2013; Placencia 2019) found that elliptical constructions were the most common syntactic form used to express compliments online. However, this is not the case in our dataset, where elliptical compliments were found to be infrequent (4%–6%). Whereas elliptical forms (as other abbreviated forms) are preferred in informal online interactions (Placencia and Lower 2013), which typically take place among prior acquaintances, friends, or family, in contrast, the business-orientation of our context (i.e., compliment exchanges between

consumers/guests and service providers/hosts) appears to promote a less informal communicative style, resulting in a very limited use of elliptical or abbreviated constructions.

3.4 Intensification strategies

Intensification mechanisms have been described as reinforcing elements that enhance the impact of a speech act, adding emphasis and affective meaning to the utterance (Blum Kulka et al. 1989; Placencia and Lower 2013). As the final dimension of our analysis, we investigated the patterns of intensification associated with the compliments in our dataset.

Table 8. Intensification strategies, frequencies in guest reviews and host responses

Intensification	Reviews	Responses
Intensified	115 (57%)	64 (66%)
Exclamation mark(s)	28 (14%)	32 (33%)
Adverbs	75 (37%)	26 (27%)
Adjectives	8 (4%)	1 (1%)
Hyperbole	2 (1%)	0 (0%)
Expressive orthography	2 (1%)	2 (2%)
Emoji	0 (0%)	3 (3%)
Unmarked	88 (43%)	33 (34%)
	203	97

As shown in Table 8, the majority of the compliments included an intensified form (57%–66%), and we identified six intensifying strategies used to upgrade the illocutionary force of the compliments. Exclamation marks and intensifying adverbs were the most frequently-used strategies in both reviews and responses (32–34), whereas the remaining four categories (i.e., intensifying adjectives, hyperbole, expressive orthography and emojis) occurred very infrequently.

- (32) Jerry!!!! You are a wonderful personality... your podcast is great!!!
- (33) You did really great and had such nice energy.
- (34) Your artwork was truly awesome!!

Once again, our results highlight some interesting differences in patterns of compliment intensification found in this more professional online context when compared to what has been observed on Facebook and Instagram (e.g., Eslami et al.

2019; Placencia 2019). First of all, although compliments are intensified in a slight majority of the cases in this Airbnb OE context, the overall percentage of intensified compliments is much lower (especially in guests' reviews) when compared to previous findings about compliments in CMC contexts, in which nearly all compliments include some form of intensification (e.g., 93% of compliments in Eslami et al. 2019; 91% in Placencia 2019). Furthermore, regarding different intensification strategies, hyperbole was found to be a pervasive intensification strategy on social media (Eslami et al. 2019; Placencia 2019) – most typically, in compliments responding to a post including a photo. However, we found only two instances of hyperbole in our dataset (which comprised 440 unique texts). The widespread use of overstatements and hyperbole attested in the other digital contexts has been interpreted as a sign of closeness between the speakers and as a sign of the high emotional import of compliments exchanged among friends and family (Eslami et al. 2019). The differences in relationships among the participants interacting in these very different types of online contexts – along with differences related to their communicative goals – may account for the near-absence of hyperbole in compliments found on the Airbnb platform compared to other digital platforms.

Along similar lines, whereas prior research identified use of emojis as a recurrent strategy – both in compliments and compliments responses, as a type of acceptance token (Placencia and Lower 2013; Placencia et al. 2016; Placencia 2019), the use of emojis was considerably lower in our dataset, occurring in only three host responses. Others have interpreted emoji use in online compliments not only as tool for promoting further affiliation between the participants, but also as a signal of high degree of informality in communication (Eslami et al. 2019). Once again, the very limited emoji use in our data might reflect users' notions of what is/is not appropriate in more professional forms of online communication. When combining these findings with those regarding the syntactic realizations of compliments (see Section 3.3, above), the more professional orientation of consumer reviews and hosts' responses seems to play a role in how compliments are expressed. Indeed, it is possible to perceive the intensification strategies used frequently in other SNS context (i.e., hyperbolic exaggeration and prolific use of emojis) as being too informal in this specific type of professional CMC and as potentially harmful to the author's credibility.

4. Conclusions

OEs, introduced by Airbnb as a digital alternative to in-person tourism experiences in response to the travel restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, provide a new venue for online interactions. Providing an analysis of

complimenting behavior on Airbnb, by examining OE data that were collected one week after the launch of this new online service, our goal with this study was to consider CMC compliments in digital spaces other than SNSs, which to date, have received the most attention from pragmatics scholars. Because Airbnb's platform provides an opportunity for guests and hosts to interact publicly after the OE has taken place – in the form of guest reviews and hosts' responses to those reviews – we focused also on reciprocal complimenting behavior, considering both guests' compliments to hosts and hosts' compliments to guests.

One of the main contributions of our work is that it extends knowledge about compliment behavior in online settings, by providing one of the first linguistic studies on compliments found in a professional/service-related digital context. As discussed above, most existing research about online compliments has relied on data from SNSs such as Facebook and Instagram, among participants who have some pre-existing ties, which may also be 'anchored' in prior offline relationships or encounters (Placencia 2019). In contrast, compliments occurring in (and as a result of) online business-oriented interactions involve not only different platform affordances but also different types of interpersonal relations among participants, who typically have no prior social connections or pre-existing relationships.

In the present study of compliments – which has considered the distributions of compliments in guest reviews and hosts responses to those reviews, as well as their content, syntactic realizations and associated intensification strategies – we found some similarities with, as well as differences from, complimenting behaviors discussed in prior work on CMC compliments. Similar to previous research, we found that compliments also occurred frequently in this digital environment, appearing proportionally at a somewhat higher rate in guest reviews than in hosts' responses. However, our findings also pointed to reciprocal complimenting behavior in this specific digital context, with hosts explicitly returning a compliment in 36% of the cases, displaying a much higher level of reciprocal complimenting behavior than what has been previously observed on other digital platforms. This finding may be related to participants' interactional goals (i.e., enhancing rapport between the interlocutors), as well as perhaps to more transactional goals related to self-promotion (i.e., showing one's personality as a caring, attentive and interested host to other prospective consumers) in this specific commercial digital setting.

Regarding the content of compliments, our results confirmed the presence of some of the same compliment topics commonly found on social media – topics such as the personality and skills of the addressee. However, compliments on possessions and appearance – popular topics on SNSs – did not appear in our data. Instead, hosts and guests were most often complimented on their performances

in their respective context-specific roles as “teachers” and “students,” with hosts being complimented on characteristics such as patience, encouraging attitude, and clear explanations, and guests being complimented on their questions, active participation and engaged attitudes. In addition, hosts were also often complimented for their charisma as well as their ability to entertain others during a virtual interaction. Beyond extending knowledge related to complimenting behavior online, our findings also reveal additional information about OEs as a virtual tourism service. More specifically, both the educational and entertaining dimensions of OEs are vitally important, and the host plays a significant role in ensuring consumer satisfaction where both dimensions are concerned. Prior research on tourism and hospitality has emphasized the significant role of the Airbnb host in consumer satisfaction; our findings related to this new Airbnb service – in which we have identified additional aspects of hosts’ personality and disposition to be the topics of compliments – reveal the more multifaceted expectations from the OE guests about their hosts.

Similar to previous research on compliments in SNSs, our study also identified a restricted set of syntactic realizations. Specifically, we found that guests, in their reviews of hosts, favored third person subject constructions, adopting in the vast majority of their compliments a ‘one-to-many’ strategy of online communication. In contrast – and even though their texts appeared in the same virtual space alongside guest reviews – hosts showed a preference for direct compliments realized through second person subject forms of address, applying a more personalized, ‘one-to-one’ mode of interaction and thus, potentially, a more face-enhancing strategy. Additionally, our study found very few instances of abbreviated forms and elliptical constructions as compared to their widespread use in SNSs as attested in other studies. Similarly, implicit compliments, which have been identified as a recurrent realization in other platforms, especially on Facebook (Eslami et al. 2019), were absent in our dataset.

An analogous trend emerged with patterns of intensification: like other studies of CMC compliments, we observed that the majority of the compliments in our Airbnb OE data were intensified (though proportionally less frequently than in SNSs, e.g. Eslami et al. 2019), yet the specific intensification strategies adopted in the Airbnb context were very different. Specifically, our data included almost no hyperbole or emoji use, among the most frequently-occurring compliment intensification strategies identified by researchers in other digital contexts.

These results confirm the observation that the specific digital context in which compliments occur plays a significant role in their linguistic realizations (Placencia and Lower 2017). Focusing on compliments produced in consumer reviews and responses from service providers, the business orientation of this CMC genre may be one of the major factors motivating more formal patterns

of communication, compared to those found in other online settings, such as SNSs. Given the pervasiveness of online communication in our daily lives, and the multiplicity of CMC genres in the current digital landscape, the study of online compliments should not be limited to social media platforms as Facebook or Instagram, but should continue to be expanded to encompass more professional and business oriented platforms.

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