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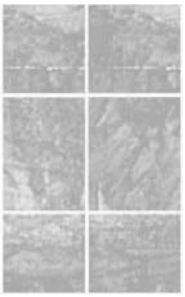

A comparative multimodal analysis of restaurant reviews from two geographical contexts

ALICE CHIK
School of Education, Macquarie University, North Ryde, NSW, Australia

CAMILLA VÁSQUEZ
Department of World Languages, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors offer a comparative approach to the analysis of a popular internet genre – user-generated restaurant reviews – sampled from two different websites (*OpenRice* and *Yelp*), which have emerged from two different geographic contexts (Hong Kong and the US). Their investigation reveals both similarities and differences of in terms of review format, content discussed and the use of several semiotic resources, such as the posting of photographs, the use of emoticons and emoji, and the expressive use of orthography and punctuation. The authors demonstrate that, while many of the formal properties of the genre are quite similar, some variations in review content may reflect underlying cultural differences. Furthermore, they show not only how the website's architecture can either constrain or encourage the use (or non-use) of particular semiotic resources, but also suggest that other variables (i.e. orthographic systems, review community norms) may interact with medium factors.

KEYWORDS

multimodality • online reviews • restaurant reviews • user-generated content • website interface

INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years, engagement with digital media has grown at an unprecedented rate. Various forms of digital media are now pervasive around the

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world, resulting in online sites and online interactions that are increasingly multilingual. This trend is reflected in scholarship which has begun to attend to languages other than English in analyses of online discourse (Danet and Herring, 2007; Seargeant and Tagg, 2014). In addition, digital media have also given rise to forms of communication that include more opportunities for multimodality. Recent calls for research have suggested that analyses of online discourse should take multimodality – as well as site architecture – into account. For example, Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) remind us that all communication makes use of multiple modalities, and they suggest that analysts of digital media should also pay attention to 'the ways users overcome (or capitalize on) the genre-defining affordances of the medium' (p. xxxii). In an effort to contribute to our understanding of these under-researched areas – i.e. analysis of user-generated content created in languages other than English, a focus on multimodality and a consideration of the medium affordances – in this article, we provide a comparative multimodal analysis of user-generated online reviews from two different geographic (and linguistic) contexts: Hong Kong and New York. To our knowledge, this comparative perspective is one that is not commonly found in research on digital media, or on reviews more specifically (Tian, 2013, being a recent exception on hotel reviews).

Today, there are many online review sites available, which serve very different geographical contexts and readerships. A comparative analysis of reviews written for different audiences has the potential to provide insights into cross-cultural differences that appear in review texts, as well as information about how reviewing as an activity differs according to the local context in which it is produced. Online reviews are textual manifestations of social practices, which are in turn, related to larger socio-historically specific, material activities. In our analysis, we consider these larger cultural differences, as well as differences related to the particular affordances and constraints of the two sites in which our sample of review texts are embedded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant amount of the user-generated content that is found online appears in the form of some type of review. A recent estimate places the genre of online reviews as comprising 2–4 per cent of the searchable internet (Egbert and Biber, 2013). Although professionally-written consumer product reviews have been available in mass media venues for decades, this more recent ability for any consumer to publicly share his or her experiences and reactions to a product or service – and to reach a wide, global, interested audience in the process – is a digital practice for which there is no precise analog precedent. Over the last 15 years, online user-generated consumer reviews, also known as 'eWOM' (or 'electronic word of mouth'), have emerged as a new media genre (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). No longer restricted to a handful of elite reviewers (e.g. professional travel writers, celebrity film reviewers, or

food critics), reviews can now be written by anyone about anything – which means that anyone with an internet connection and an opinion can claim to be an 'expert'.

This extends to restaurant reviews as well. A restaurant review is 'a description and evaluation of the experience of eating in a restaurant' (Blank, 2007: 45). Reputedly originating in 18th-century France, restaurant reviewing became even more widespread in the early 20th century, with the advent of restaurant ratings in popular guide books, such as the Michelin guide. The Michelin guide is one of the oldest restaurant guides, awarding stars to recognize excellent restaurants around the world. Previously, the exclusive domain of a highly-specialized professional cadre of restaurant reviewers, today, sites like *OpenRice* in Hong Kong and *Yelp* in the US and elsewhere enable consumers to give voice to their dining experiences in a very public way, via a mass-distributed platform. Blank argues that contemporary reviews are comprised of two components: the subjective opinion (the 'connoisseurial review') and the informative rating system (the 'procedural review'). Restaurant reviews tend to focus on three components: food, service and décor (Titz et al., 2004); but ultimately, value or 'what you get for what you pay' is the guiding principle of reviewing (Blank, 2007: 59). User-generated reviews can be considered the latest development in the genre of restaurant reviews, but their contents and structure might still be very similar to traditional printed media reviews (Watson et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2010). In analysing online comments on London restaurants, Pantelidis (2010) shows that customers prioritized food over service and ambience in their evaluation. However, using a computational approach to *Yelp* restaurant reviews, Jurafsky et al. (2014) show that it is more likely to find narratives in negative reviews and sensual descriptive writing in positive reviews for high-end restaurants. There is a growing body of work on online restaurant reviews analysing the linguistic features, but multimodal reviewing is still an understudied area.

Literacy practices in digital environments

Reviews represent a specific genre, recognizable from certain moves and structures (Skalicky, 2013; Vásquez, 2014). It is possible that, due to their availability, consumers today are reading more online user-generated reviews than professionally written reviews found in traditional print media. Online reviews are different from print reviews simply because of the difference in the medium and the mode of communication. Martinec and Van Leeuwen (2009: 1) argue that the new media are different from language as a resource for communication in three ways: (1) they are multimodal, made up of different semiotic resources; (2) they are non-linear with spatial and temporal patterns; and (3) they are new and awaiting the historical distillation of thinking that shapes them. New media and language might be two different resources for communication, but as Barton and Lee (2013) suggest, language is still

central in understanding online communication. It therefore makes sense to view communication in new media as 'language-plus'.

The question of how to understand literacy practices in digital environments has generated multidisciplinary interests. Barton and Lee (2013) identified three main approaches: (1) identification and description of the structural features of computer-mediated communication, which includes looking at the linguistic features; (2) social variation of computer-mediated discourse, for instance, on looking at the contextual variations of one particular genre of communication (e.g. blogging); and (3) language ideologies and metalanguage, especially in association with critical analysis of the representation of language. In particular, the first approach of identifying the new linguistic features of computer-mediated communication has attracted the most attention. The new linguistic features combine semiotic resources with a creative mesh of spoken and written forms. Scholars have theorized multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000), 'textspeak' (Crystal, 2008), superdiversity (Blommaert, 2013) and more, all of which address different dimensions of the interdependence between computer-mediated communication and everyday literacy practices. Barton and Lee (2013) identified the critical analysis of ideologies and metalanguage of digital literacy practices as a more recent development, and the examination of the interaction between language and other multimodal semiotic resources while often advocated, is rarely addressed.

When examining multimodal digital texts, instead of focusing on how new media designs impact on literacy practices, there is a tendency to focus on the affordances available to users. By affordances, we mean the possibilities and limitations that users perceive in their online literacy practices. For example, an online reviewer may perceive uploading visual materials as technically challenging, resulting in no photograph or video being included with the review. It is clear that affordances are closely related to design, but it is not clear whether it is the technical design of the reviewing site or the technology know-how of the reviewer that deter the incorporation of visual materials. Barton and Lee (2013: 29) argue that the taking up (or not) of an affordance is more of a personal choice, regardless of a user's cultural and linguistic background. However, Martinec and Van Leeuwen (2009) view website design as driven by communicative purposes and by their target audiences. Using corporate websites as an example, Martinec and Van Leeuwen suggest that the communicative purposes of the companies will dictate the structural design of the corporate websites.

Since there are not many published studies which compare multimodal representations in online reviewing environments, it is instructive to consider the exploration of multimodality in another area: online or print news media. Knox's (2007) examination of the home page of news websites demonstrates an emerging grammar of visual design in English-language online newspapers across nations. Knox implies that the development of visual grammar is linguistic based, and thus the visual design for non-English language newspapers

would be different. In a cross-cultural multimodal comparison of Chinese- and English-language newspapers in Hong Kong and the UK, Kong (2013) provides a starting point of the cultural differences in multimodal representation in media discourse. Kong suggests that multimodality is not only limited to visual realizations, but also to the typographic presentation (including capitalization and bolding in English) and stress patterns of the spoken languages.

Most studies on online reviews tend to focus on describing and analysing linguistic phenomena from data that were drawn from only one site. The present study seeks to expand the current scholarship by examining online reviews as multimodal texts and comparing and contrasting multimodal texts that were produced in different linguistic and cultural contexts. The research question guiding our study is as follows: What are the similarities and differences found in restaurant reviews posted on two different sites (one in Hong Kong, one in the US) in terms of review format, content discussed and use of semiotic resources?

METHODS

We begin this section with brief descriptions of the two review sites that are the source of our data for this analysis: *OpenRice* and *Yelp*. For each of these, we provide some background about the history of the site. We also describe the sites' interfaces, both from the perspective of a user reading reviews on the site, as well as from the perspective of a member posting a review on the site. *OpenRice* and *Yelp* both require individuals to establish an account before posting a review. Following our general descriptions of the two sites, we describe our dataset, and explain our procedures for sampling reviews from each site. We end with an explanation of how we analysed our data.

Data set

In order to examine differences in restaurant reviews from two different contexts, we sampled reviews posted on two popular review websites designed for local audiences: *OpenRice* in Hong Kong, and *Yelp* in New York city. So that our two data sets would be as comparable as possible, we further imposed two parameters: Michelin star rating and cuisine style. To ensure comparability of food quality, restaurants must have received a 1-star Michelin rating. Also, in order to keep the type of food as consistent as possible, only restaurants serving 'Asian' cuisines were included. While there was a bit more ethnic diversity in the New York restaurant sample (e.g. Korean, Japanese, Chinese and 'fusion' cuisines), the Hong Kong sample mainly reflected regional Chinese cuisine styles (e.g. Cantonese, Sichuan, Shanghainese).[1]

Yelp and *OpenRice* include both connoisseurial and procedural review mechanisms on their website (Blank, 2007). We used procedural reviews (i.e. the rating) to guide us in review selection. Guided by the two parameters, an equal number of 'average' and 'negative' reviews on Michelin 1-star restaurants

serving Asian-style cuisine published between late 2012 and early 2013 were collected from both sites, until a dataset of 120 reviews (60 from each city) was created. *OpenRice* uses a 3-level rating system, expressed by an emoji of 'Smile' (good), 'Ok' (average), and 'Cry' (bad); in contrast, *Yelp* uses a 5-star rating system. We sampled twice as many negative reviews as average reviews, to reflect the general proportions of each type of review found on the sites.[2] This yielded a total of 40 average reviews (i.e. 20 Ok reviews from *OpenRice* and 20 3-star reviews from *Yelp*), and a total of 80 negative reviews (40 'Cry' reviews from *OpenRice* and 40 1-star reviews from *Yelp*). Positive reviews were excluded from our sample because they are quite similar on both sites, in that they tend to be homogeneous, consisting of detailed descriptions of individual dishes. Furthermore, some scholars have asserted that negative reviews are more influential, in that they make more of an impact on readers than positive reviews (Heyes and Kapur, 2012). In our data set, the 60 *OpenRice* reviews were contributed by 60 unique reviewers, of whom 10 were elite members and 5 were non-members.[3] Half of the *OpenRice* reviews were written only in Chinese (30/60), and 30 included English words or phrases. However, code-mixing in these 30 reviews was restricted to the word level, with 22 reviews containing only one English word (e.g. *book*, *order*, *waiter*) and 8 including a single short phrase (e.g. *Oh my goodness!*). All *Yelp* reviews were written by 60 unique reviewers of whom only 3 reviewers held *Elite* status, and all were published in English. We accessed each site through its computer interface, and not through its mobile application.

ANALYSIS

The selected 120 reviews from *Yelp* and *OpenRice* were downloaded, and information from each review such as subject line, user name and date of posting, was recorded onto a database. *OpenRice* accepts reviews in Chinese and English, but the number of English reviews remains relatively small. The *OpenRice* reviews selected were written in Chinese, with a mix of Standard Written Chinese and Cantonese, and code-mixed in English. The mixed use of Cantonese, Standard Written Chinese and English is a common literacy practice among Hong Kong internet users (Lee, 2007). In order to generate comparable texts, the *OpenRice* reviews were translated from Chinese into English by the first author. Prior to the translation process, a bilingual vocabulary table of frequently used terms was compiled to provide consistency in the translation. In our translation, original words or phrases in English were underlined in the transcripts. Each review was then examined and the connoisseurial and procedural sections of each review were coded separately. For the procedural reviews, all rating categories were coded. For the connoisseurial reviews, we coded a number of features including photographs, emoticons/emoji, references to particular dishes, overall taste, service, price, evaluation, word counts, forms of orthographic emphasis (punctuation,

capitalization, etc.). We conducted close and repeated readings of data. Each of the two authors coded half of the data independently, and the first author coded the Chinese data before the translation. A sample of the coding (including the translated texts from *OpenRice*) was checked and compared to provide inter-rater reliability and to confirm interpretations. Graphic representations of the two websites (Martinec and Van Leeuwen, 2009) were created to allow comparison of the composition path for reviewers.

Website descriptions

Although *OpenRice* operates in five East Asian countries, it is the definitive social network site for sharing dining reviews and restaurant information in Hong Kong. *OpenRice* Hong Kong is reported to have about one million members and 730,000 restaurant reviews, and has accumulated more than 100 million website visits (*OpenRice*, 2014). *OpenRice* Hong Kong is operated as a bilingual (Chinese and English) website and mobile application, and members can upload reviews, photographs and videos. For this study, we focus only on the web-based interface, since the mobile app was only made available in late 2013, after our data collection was complete.

Launched in 2004, *Yelp* features reviews of a wider variety of business types; however, one of the most important categories on the site is restaurant reviews (Luca, 2011). As the company began to add features of social networking to the site (including a designation of 'Elite Status' for its most prolific reviewers, who were also provided with exclusive invitations to local events), *Yelp* quickly grew in popularity. *Yelp* is reported to have over 40 million user reviews, and the site receives over 100 million visitors per month. Despite recent controversies about its rating and filtering systems, *Yelp* remains one of the most popular review sites in the US. *Yelp* features predominantly English language reviews and, in November 2012, the company reported that 45 per cent of its web traffic came from mobile devices. Similar to *OpenRice*, since fall 2013, *Yelp* members are now able to post reviews directly from their mobile devices.

To offer an idea of the reading experiences of *OpenRice* and *Yelp* users, we randomly chose a restaurant page from both sites for demonstration (Figures 1 and 2). The two websites share many common features: user-generated photos and reviews, self-promotion and connectivity to other social network sites. *Yelp* features a third-party text-only advertising banner, which is not too conspicuous between reviews. *OpenRice* features a pop-up restaurant coupon banner on the right-hand side as visitors scroll down to read reviews. On both websites, food photos drive the reading. However, it should be noted that on *Yelp* the food photos are not connected to associated reviews, only to the users who uploaded the photos. On *OpenRice*, visitors can follow the links to the photos directly to the reviews.

While the reading experiences of both websites are quite similar, the writing of reviews is dramatically different. In order to post a review, both

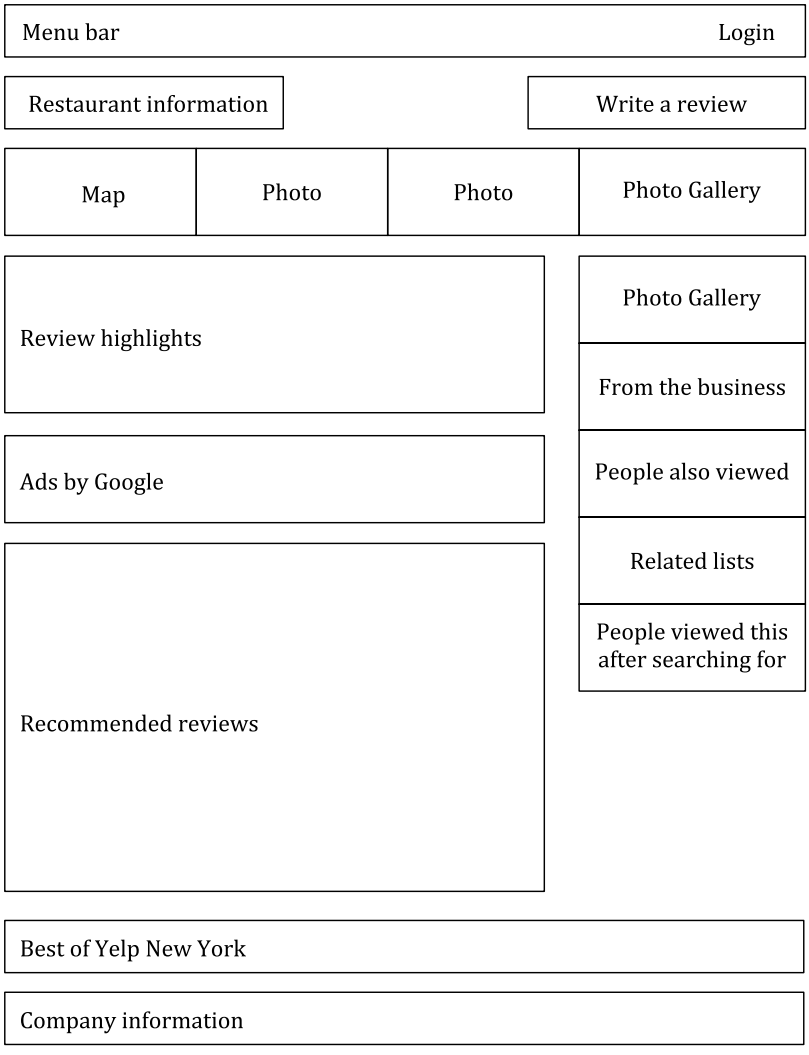

Figure 1. *Yelp* user interface.

OpenRice and *Yelp* require membership registration. Both websites operate like other social network sites and feature a profile page for members to follow others. For their personal profile, members on both websites can input as much or as little information as they deem appropriate. Members of both websites can leave public or private messages for reviewers and can rate the quality of the review through a star system.

Reviews on *OpenRice* must be approved by the website editors prior to their publication. *OpenRice* members are levelled according to the number of published reviews and editor recommended reviews. The levelling limits the number of photos permitted for each review: while a junior member can only upload up to 8 photos to one review, elite members can upload up to 12 photos.

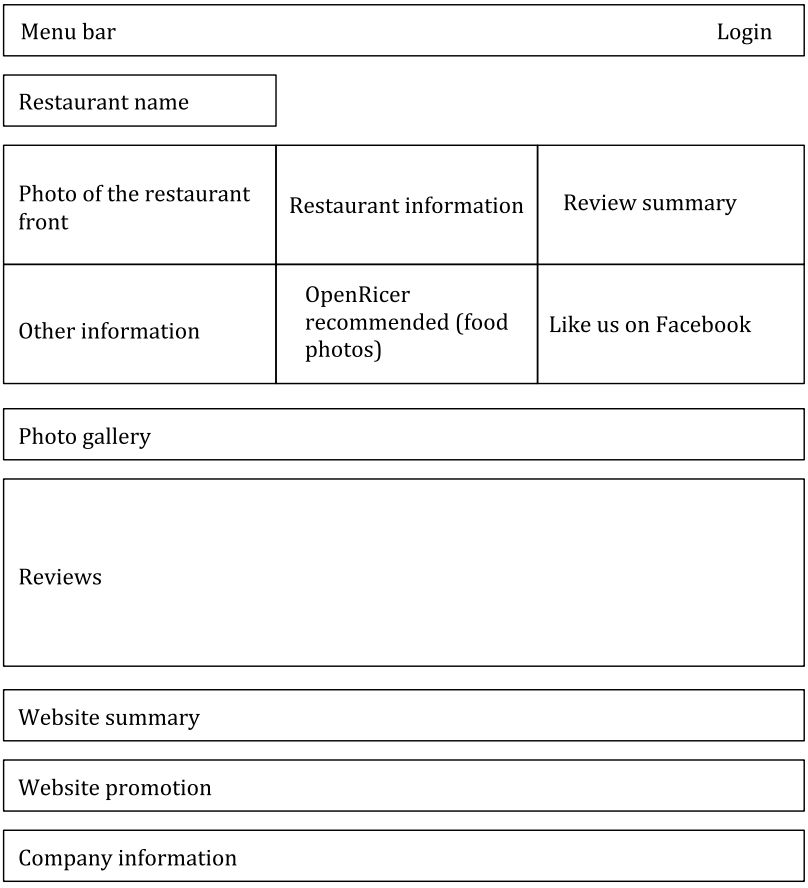

Figure 2. *OpenRice* user interface.

When submitting a review, *OpenRice* members must complete the procedural review sections: overall rating, other ratings on taste, décor, service, hygiene and value for money (Figure 3). The connoisseurial review text must contain at least 80 characters. The interface provides easy-to-use word-processing functions and is similar to many online writing platforms; a smiley button is placed next to other word-processing icons. Reviewers can also insert photos and YouTube videos. When inserting photos, members can input cuisine, dish name, thumbs up or down to recommend or not recommend, and a caption. The attention to details as prescribed by the website inevitably prompts members to provide more detail in their reviews. The website can reject the publication of any review based on 'insufficient information on how food tastes and looks' (*OpenRice*, 2013).

Compared to *OpenRice*, *Yelp* has a much simpler review-writing interface (Figure 4). *Yelp* reviewers must assign a star rating to their review, and they are provided with a text box to write their review. Reviewers can click on a link for detailed reviewer guidelines, which include general guidelines (e.g.

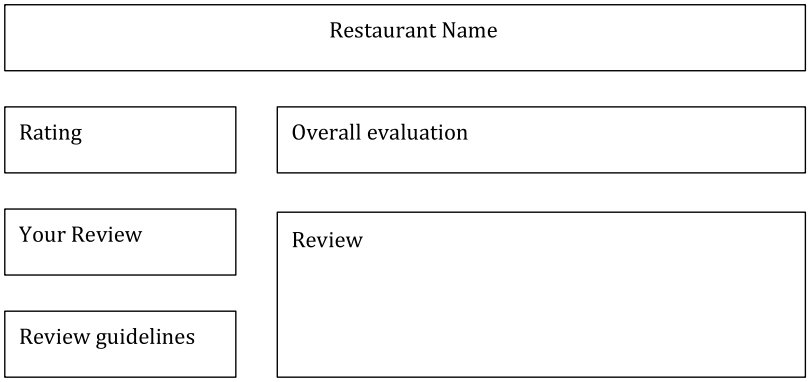

Figure 3. Yelp reviewer interface.

information about appropriate content, conflicts of interest, privacy) as well as more specific guidelines (e.g. 'The best reviews are passionate and personal. They offer a rich narrative, a wealth of detail …'). No links are included for uploading photos and how this is believed to impact on *Yelp* reviewers' multimodal practices will be discussed in more detail below.

Reviewing as linguistic practice

Chinese and English use different orthographic systems, making it impossible to produce a truly equivalent comparison of review length. However, our analysis indicates that the Chinese reviews on *OpenRice* generally tend to be longer, with the average review approaching one full page in length. In contrast, reviews on *Yelp* tend, on average, to consist of around one paragraph. Perhaps even more informative than comparing character counts in Chinese to word counts in English, is a consideration of the overall descriptive statistics for each data set. The descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that the general distribution of character/word length is quite similar on the two sites. The descriptive statistics show that there is considerable variance in the word length and character length of reviews. For example, some *Yelp* reviews consist of only one or two short sentences (around 20 or 30 words), whereas at the other extreme, there are a handful of reviews consisting of more than 400 words. For the *OpenRice* reviews, the longest review is nearly 2,000 characters long, whereas the shortest review consists of only 70 characters.[4]

We analysed content categories of our review samples, examining which food characteristics and other restaurant features were included in review texts (Table 2). It shows that 83 per cent of the *OpenRice* reviews mention specific dishes in their reviews, whereas comparatively fewer (58%) of the *Yelp* reviewers name one or more specific dishes. *OpenRice* reviewers (85%) are also much more likely to provide a dish-by-dish description of a dining experience compared to *Yelp* reviewers. Moreover, *OpenRice* reviewers are also much more likely to include some description of the food taste, smell and appearance than

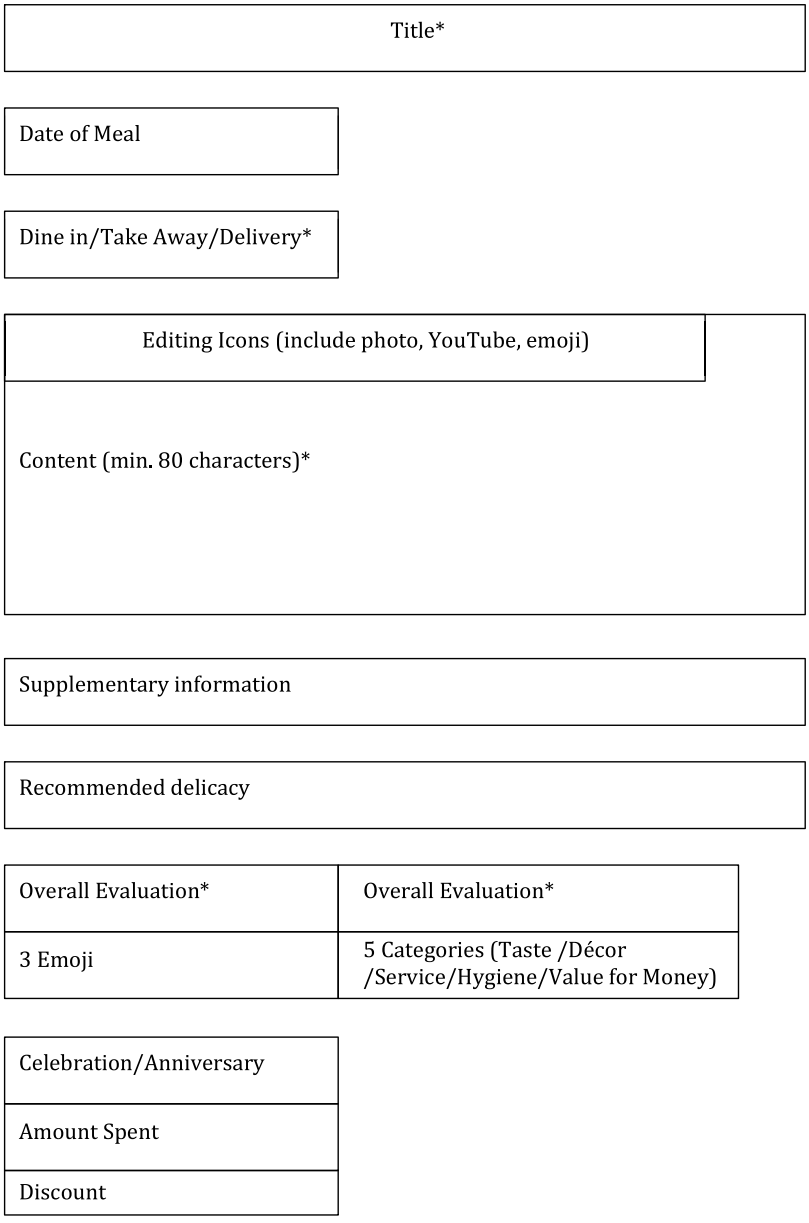

Figure 4. *OpenRice* reviewer interface.

their *Yelp* counterparts. Conversely, *Yelp* reviews tend to be much less specific about the food, with nearly half of the reviewers providing only very general overall evaluations of the food as (i.e. as *good*, *ok*, *not bad*), instead of going into details about its taste, texture, appearance (presentation), etc.

Service was an important factor for half of *Yelp* reviewers (i.e. 52%), followed by the value of the meal (43%). Although the rating of service, cost,

Table 1. Comparison of number of characters or words on each site.

	OpenRice (Hong Kong)	*Yelp* (New York)
Min	70	17
Max	1907 (about 2 pages)	646 (about 1 page)
Mean	538	171
Median	401	107
Mode	246	31
Standard Deviation	432	153
TOTAL	32,266	10,244

Table 2. Number and percentage of reviews to include content categories related to dining experience.

	OpenRice	Yelp
Mention of specific dishes	50 (83%)	35 (58%)
Very general food evaluation (*good, disgusting, decent, average*)	18 (30%)	24 (40%)
Taste	46 (77%)	20 (33%)
Texture	39 (65%)	8 (13%)
Temperature	14 (23 %)	8 (13 %)
Portion size	17 (28%)	6 (10%)
Smell	23 (38%)	2 (3%)
Presentation	15 (25%)	4 (7%)
Authenticity	12 (20%)	9 (15%)
Service	26 (43%)	31 (52%)
Cost	36 (60%)	21 (35%)
Ambiance (décor, music)	16 (27%)	17 (28%)
Wait/Timing	7 (12%)	6 (10%)
Hygiene	2 (1%)	4 (7%)

ambience and hygiene is already part of the mandatory procedural review on *OpenRice*, still, 60 per cent of the *OpenRice* reviews mentioned cost and 43 per cent mentioned dissatisfaction with the service. It is also worth pointing out that 8 of the 60 *Yelp* reviews (13%) included no mention of food at all, and 16 (27%) included only a very general mention of food. The examples below are not excerpts, but rather the entire review texts. The first example reveals an instance of a review with no discussion of the food eaten by the reviewer, but instead a primary focus on wait time and service. In the second example, the reviewer mentions food only in general terms (i.e. *very good food*) and seems to be just as concerned with the category of price (or value) as he is with the food quality.

Example 1 (No mention of food)

> Horrible service. I was seated at 730p and my order didn't arrive until 911p. Waiter says that the kitchen was busy while the table seated after me ate, paid and left. No accountability from staff. [*Yelp*]

Example 2 (General mention of food)

> very good food but i'm taking a star off because it's just way too expensive for what you get. [*Yelp*]

Similar to *Yelp* reviews, 9 *OpenRice* reviews (15%) did not discuss the food consumed, and instead focused on unsatisfactory service or the high price of the meal.

Example 3 (No mention of food)

> The waitress recommended the lamb shank, but we didn't say we wanted it. Suddenly two portions arrived, and it cost $400. When we pointed out we didn't order the dish, a woman came to cancel the order. It was a ridiculous attempt to scam, there is no next time for me!!!! [*OpenRice*]

Customers' higher expectations due to the restaurants' Michelin classification were found in both sets of reviews. Fourteen *Yelp* reviewers expressed feelings of being 'underwhelmed' (e.g. *unmemorable, underwhelmed, missing the wow factor, nothing special, can get the same kind of food for less money at* ___), with five of these comments specifically referencing the restaurant's Michelin star-rating: e.g. *good but not Michelin good*. And a slightly higher proportion (nearly one third, or 19/60) of the *OpenRice* reviews similarly commented on the respective restaurant being 'over-rated', due to the Michelin star category.

Reviewing as multimodal practice

In composing connoisseurial reviews, reviewers mainly utilized two multimodal resources: photographs and emoji (or emoticons). Although both sites have the capacity for reviewers to post photographs from their dining experience, our analysis shows that *OpenRice* reviewers are far more likely to exploit this affordance. The *Yelp* reviewer interface (Figure 3) prompts users to provide an overall star rating, and provides a text box for entering the written review, but does not provide icons or links for posting photos or video. This means reviewers interested in posting a photo must search elsewhere on the site to find the link for doing so. It appears that posting a photo on *Yelp* is such a complex process that there are other websites featuring visual instructions

Table 3. Reviewing as multimodal practice.

	Number of reviews
Reviews with photo(s)	*Yelp* 1
	OpenRice 32
Reviews with emoji/emoticon	*Yelp* 2
	OpenRice 22
Reviews with emoji/emoticon and photos	*Yelp* 0
	OpenRice 12
Reviews with capitalization or multiple emphatic punctuation marks	*Yelp* 13
	OpenRice 7
Reviews in monomode	*Yelp* 39
	OpenRice 10

for how to do it (e.g. WikiHow, 2013). Meanwhile, the website architecture of *OpenRice* (Figure 4) makes it very easy for reviewers to post photos, and two icons for uploading photos and videos are highlighted in red.[5] Reviewers are also prompted to provide captions for their photos. In our dataset, only one *Yelp* review included two photos, but 32 *OpenRice* reviews (53%) included a total of 231 photos. The number of photos attached ranged from 1 to 18, with only two collage photos in two unique reviews (see Table 3).

The two *Yelp* photos represented the general characteristics of most photos in the dataset: photos appeared to have been taken at the scene as the dining experience happened, with no additional professional staging or lighting; each photo featured a dish of yet-to-be-consumed food in the centre with the cutlery resting on the plate (or in a corner of the photo); and the photos were taken from an elevated position at a tilted angle as if to invite readers to enjoy the food. People are either absent or are only included accidentally and in fragments, such as an elbow in the corner. Most photos were high-resolution photos, but they did not appear to be filtered. The sequencing of photos usually reflected the chronological order of the meal served. A general observation can be stated that most reviewers thought about the composition, but did not carefully stage the food for the photograph.

There is a strong dissonance between the visual and textual representation in creating an overall evaluative review on *OpenRice*. First, when adding a photo, an *OpenRice* reviewer can add a caption and an evaluative thumb up or down, but about half of the photos were not given a caption or evaluation. Considering that all *OpenRice* reviews were either negative or average (OK) reviews, the proportion of photos that received a positive evaluation (thumbs-ups) outweighed negative evaluation (thumbs-downs) by 86 to 30. Second, only 47 out of 231 photos contained the dish names, compared to 52 out of 60 in the written reviews, which means that readers must guess the dishes in the photos. Third, as readers scroll from the top to bottom in reading the reviews,

Table 4. Analysis of *OpenRice* photos.

Caption and evaluation	Number of photos
No caption, no thumbs-up/down	103
Caption, no thumbs-up/down	22
Caption with thumbs-up	29
No caption with thumbs-up	47
Caption with thumbs-down	8
No caption with thumbs-down	22
Total	231
Placement of photos	
Photos at the end of textual review	21
Photos mixed with textual review	11
No textual reference to the photo	22
Include textual reference to the photo	10
Total	32

three types of compositions of photos and texts were found: photos bundled at the end of the reviews (8/32), photos preceding their evaluative texts (10/32), or evaluative texts preceding the related photos (14/32). Although there are 231 photos, only two instances of explicit references to the photos were found in the accompanying text (e.g. 'the dish on the left'). In most cases, regardless of the order of texts and photos, there was an implicit assumption that readers would understand that the dish being reviewed was shown in the photo either above or below the text, and the reviewer did not have to supply any textual linkage (see Table 4).

Among these 231 photos, the majority were unique photos of individual dishes being photographed in the order that they were served. Yet, two interesting exceptions also appeared: photos as a device for framing the review and micro-narratives conveyed through a sequence of images. Ten *OpenRice* reviewers used either a restaurant entrance or décor photo as the first photo to frame their reviews. Another 10 reviewers used 2 or more sequenced photos to create micro-narratives to their dining experiences. The usual sequence of these micro-events consisted of two or three photos depicting various stages of consuming a food item, for instance, the shot of a whole dumpling followed by a half-eaten dumpling displaying the ingredients. In another instance, a reviewer re-enacted the complaint of greasy spring rolls with two photos: spring rolls on a plate, and then a pair of chopsticks holding up an oil-dripping spring roll. These framing photos and micro-narratives are used by reviewers as extra-textual visual resources to share their past dining experience with their readers.

The most elaborated visual narrative was a bullet-point lunch review, in which the reviewer felt that 'the taste and the presentation of the food was

alright, but did not live up to the price …'. This particular review included 7 photos bundled at the end: (1) the restaurant receipt resting on a laptop keyboard; (2) a plaque (👍); (3) 4 steamed dumplings in a bamboo steamer (👍); (4) a bowl of dumplings in soup (👍); (5) 4 fried dumplings on a plate; (6) 1 sesame pastry on a plate (👍); and (7) a half-eaten sesame pastry in a spoon rested in a bowl (👍). The sequence of the photos suggested that photos 3 to 5 were taken as the dishes were served. But photo 6 and 7 showed a micro-narrative of one sesame pastry being consumed and evaluated. Interestingly, while the restaurant receipt in photo 1 framed a retrospective narrative, the plaque in photo 2 recreated an invitation to share an intimate dining experience.

Another visualization strategy was the use of emoji or emoticons, signs in electronic texts that portray facial expressions, which serve as 'emotion markers' in computer-mediated discourse (Baron, 2000: 242). In our data set, 22 (37%) *OpenRice* reviews included emoji, and this can be attributed to the architecture of the website. Again, the *OpenRice* review interface provides a selection of expressive emoji for easy and quick insertion. In our Hong Kong dataset, the number of emoji found within a single review varied from 1 to 22, and reviewers mixed, matched and repeated emoji to achieve their communicative purposes. Example 4 shows the review with the most emoji used (i.e. 21), in which the reviewer used multiple emoji in a single sentence, and code-mixed with an English phrase all in capitalization:

Example 4

Tofu with crabmeat – (VERY VERY BAD), the tofu was tasteless, felt like it was just put there, not cooked with the crabmeat 😡😡 and the orange colour was a bit strange 😟😟 [*OpenRice*]

Both emoji used in the above reviews were reduplicated to emphasize emotion. Among the *OpenRice* dataset, only 2 reviews were found to include 'traditional' Asian style emoticons (and one 'western' style O_o), which are probably considered 'old-fashioned' compared to the more current emoji that are provided by the *OpenRice* platform.

Example 5

the third dish: hairy crab…lots of roes…very fresh…*u*~ …but I liked eating crab at home more. [*OpenRice*]

In Example 5, it is only by context that readers might interpret '*u*~' as being happy; on its own, it may be more difficult to decode than an emoji.

No emoji were found in any of the *Yelp* reviews. In contrast to *OpenRice*, emoji are not part of the current *Yelp* review interface. Instead, on *Yelp*, the primary multimodal resource provided to reviewers is the star overall rating system, which contrasts with the emoji overall rating system on *OpenRice*.

Only two reviewers from the New York *Yelp* reviews used (Western-style) emoticons, for example:

Example 6

I was severely disappointed with [*name of restaurant*] :([*Yelp*]

Therefore, on both sites, more conventional text-based emoticons are used very infrequently. Perhaps this is because the expressive potential of 'conventional' emoticons is clearly more restricted than the emoji discussed above (Example 4).

The above examples showed that some reviewers used emoji and emoticons as multimodal resources to augment affective responses. It is worth pointing out that although *Yelp* reviewers were not presented with the same emoji options as *OpenRice* reviewers (and neither group relied much on traditional emoticons), users exploited other multimodal resources. For example, 13 *Yelp* reviewers used capitalized letters to emphasize outrage, anger or frustration:

Example 7

I was thinking in my head WTF, they placed their order the SAME time as us and there are PLENTY of empty tables in the restaurant. [*Yelp*]

It should be noted that no *Yelp* reviews contained bold type or underline, which is a compensation strategy to highlight the emotional state in spoken mode (Kong, 2013). A simple explanation is that the functionalities are not available on the *Yelp* or *OpenRice* review interfaces. Chinese orthography does not mark any distinction for upper case and lower case, but *OpenRice* reviewers bypassed this limitation with code-mixing, such as the use of 'VERY VERY BAD' in Example 4. Both sets of reviewers used emphatic punctuation, such as exclamation marks – either single or multiple:

Example 8

What a disappointment! [*Yelp*]

Example 9

Kani goma tofu gratin. burnt!!! [*Yelp*]

Example 10

 Steamed egg white with crabmeat and prawns … a must have dish!! [*OpenRice*]

Like *Yelp* reviewers, *OpenRice* reviewers (6/60) also reverted to using multiple exclamation marks to signal their satisfaction or dissatisfaction; however,

the proportion of such use is much lower than the use of emoji. Although the above examples have shown how some reviewers exploit multimodal resources, it is important to point out there are several monomodal reviews on each site as well (39 *Yelp* and 10 *OpenRice*). These employ one mode: letters or characters which appear in the default font and size provided by the website.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of online reviews collected from two websites and two different cultural contexts revealed some interesting similarities as well as differences. Although *OpenRice* reviews appeared to be slightly longer on average, the majority of both *Yelp* and *OpenRice* reviews tend to be around the same range of length, with a few outliers producing especially longer or shorter reviews. In other words, the overall variability in terms of review length on both sites is comparable. We also found a few instances of the same content categories in both contexts: for instance, similar proportions for characteristics such as ambience, wait, authenticity and service (Table 2). In addition, a similar proportion of reviewers in both sets expressed their expectations about their dining experiences based on the restaurant's Michelin rating.

Although the proportions of several content categories of the reviews are similar, we also found points of departure. Most obviously, it is apparent that *OpenRice* reviewers tend to not only mention specific dishes with greater frequency, but they also include many more details about the texture, taste and smell of those dishes, whereas far more general food descriptions are the norm in *Yelp* reviews. There are a number of possible explanations for this. From a cultural perspective, attention to the specific properties of food may be more common in Hong Kong than in the US, especially when reviewers were writing about familiar Chinese cuisines. In addition, the website's functional properties for detailed reviews could also be contributing to this difference. (As one of the authors experienced, *OpenRice* editors reject reviews that are not sufficiently informative.) Therefore, different writing norms and conventions about what is relevant to include in a restaurant review may have evolved over time on each site. While *Yelp* reviews that are underspecified or generic may end up in *Yelp*'s spam filter,[6] there is more variability in what kind of information about the restaurant is actually included in *Yelp* reviews, and there appears to be a near equal emphasis on service and food. In this way, in terms of content, it seems to be both the values and practices associated with dining in each local context – as well as the guidelines, expectations and functional properties established by the website – that account for some of the differences found in the content of reviews from the two sites.

One of the most striking differences between the two datasets was the use and manipulation of multimodal resources. Using capitalization and emphatic punctuation involves minimal effort in word-processing to enhance the visual communication of the reviews. Expressive orthography

like capitalization, for instance, is only available as a multimodal resource to English writers. Although it is not possible to capitalize a Chinese character to create emphasis, Hong Kong *OpenRice* reviewers bypassed this limitation by code-mixing English phrases in their reviews (Example 4). Another example is the use of multiple emphatic punctuation marks, which though available to both English and Chinese writers, is far more popular among *Yelp* reviewers. Capitalization and emphatic punctuation are included on both *Yelp* and *OpenRice* review interfaces, so it can be argued that reviewers use similar visual resources to communicate emphasis or affect.

The analysis of review photos shows a difference in approaching multimodal reviewing. Specifically, 231 photos appeared in a total number of 32 *OpenRice* reviews (53%), and only 2 photos appeared in only one of the 60 *Yelp* reviews (2%). The significant difference appears to suggest a cultural preference among Hong Kong reviewers in including food photography; however, we consider the website functional properties as the main driving force for the difference. Furthermore, most photos in the dataset shared positive aspects of the dining experience. The ratio of positive to negative evaluation in the photo captions was 2.8:1. Although all the reviewers in our dataset rated their dining experiences as average or negative, their photos strongly suggested positive experiences, if the photos were considered as separate texts. The dissonance between the visual and textual representation indicates that reviewers do not necessarily view adding photos as creating a coherent multimodal review text. During the reviewing process, reviewers are prompted to provide photos, so the dissonance might suggest that *OpenRice* reviewers were merely reacting to website architecture. In contrast, if *Yelp* reviewers want to post a photo, they must go to a different space from the review text interface itself. As a result, extra steps mean fewer photos. Therefore the difference in posting photos found on *Yelp* and *OpenRice* appears to be driven by differences in the website architecture multimodal rather than in cultural or community norms.

In multimodal reviewing, a final difference is the inclusion of emoji or emoticons. Over one-third of *OpenRice* reviewers included emoji in their reviews, while this feature was not found in any *Yelp* reviews. This too is clearly the result of differences in website architecture: *OpenRice* provides users with the option to use emoji, whereas *Yelp* does not. While we found that very few reviewers on both sites used traditional emoticons – in the few instances that they appeared, we found that the symbols used did reflect regional differences. *OpenRice* reviewers used Asian-style emoticons, while *Yelp* users used Western style emoticons, revealing well-established cultural differences with respect to this particular feature of computer-mediated communication (Dresner and Herring, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

The present study is a small-scale study in exploring the similarities and differences of online reviews, and our corpus is limited to average and unfavourable

reviews for high-end restaurants. One of the most interesting findings is that, regardless of their local context of origin, user-generated restaurant reviews share many characteristics and conventions, making them a recognizable genre of online communication. Although the reviews that we examined were based on experiences that happened in two different cultural contexts, were written in two different languages and were published on two different websites, the reviews from Hong Kong and New York both revealed similar expectations and concerns of restaurant diners. In particular, we observed that when both groups dined at a Michelin-rated restaurant, they had certain expectations about the overall quality of that experience. At the same time, our findings also point to some differences in local priorities among diners in the two cities: quality of food versus quality of service. Similar to online restaurant reviewers for London restaurants (Pantelidis, 2010) – as well as traditional media reviews (Titz et al., 2004) – Hong Kong reviewers prioritized the quality of food in their evaluation. In contrast, the New York reviewers in our dataset narrated negative encounters with service staff, which is consistent with the findings of Jurafsky et al. (2014) in their large-scale study of US *Yelp* reviews.

The textual connoisseurial reviews of *Yelp* and *OpenRice* suggest they were aligned with the general genre of reviews regardless of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, previous studies on online reviews have yet to discuss visual communication in online reviews. The present study found that multimodal reviewing practices, in addition to being a personal option as suggested by Barton and Lee (2013), are also highly constrained by language choice and website architecture. First, linguistic or orthographic options associated with specific languages frame semiotic possibilities. So while both *OpenRice* and *Yelp* reviews include expressive punctuation to underscore an affective statement, the use of letter capitalization for emphasis was only available to English-writing reviewers. Some Hong Kong Chinese-writing reviewers bypassed the orthographic limitation by code-mixing in capitalized English phrases. Second, multimodal composition is often highly dependent on the functional properties afforded by the website architecture. No emoji appear in any *Yelp* reviews because it is not an option on the review interface. There were more photos in the *OpenRice* dataset because photograph insertion is part of the review interface. Yet website affordances alone do not determine the use of a particular resource, because – as we have seen – not all *OpenRice* reviewers choose to use emoji or upload photos in the crafting of their review texts. Therefore besides the website's affordances, the use (or non-use) of this particular semiotic resource may also be the result of local conventions, norms and meanings that have emerged over time in a specific review community. Meanwhile, it should be noted that most *OpenRice* photos did not reflect the emotion conveyed in the textual reviews: when the reviews were average or negative, most photos suggested positive, if not very positive, dining experiences.

The findings of this study point to an important gap in scholarship on online reviewing: multimodal reviewing. While previous work on multimodal composition might have contributed multimodality as a cultural (Kong, 2013) or personal (Barton and Lee, 2013) preference, the findings from the present study suggested that website architecture facilitated or delimited multimodal composition by examining the photo and emoji posting functions of the two websites. Our analysis of reviews shows that both New York and Hong Kong reviewers used semiotic resources to amplify the emotive dimension, but the different visualization strategies were based primarily on website affordances rather than cultural norms. As a small-scale study, our findings point to further research in the scholarship. The present study is also limited by our selection of reviews for Michelin-starred restaurants, which might have created a skew to a certain type of reviewers and reviews. Whilst Jurafsky et al. (2014) identified the narrative properties in online reviews, we would suggest a pursuit in the compare and contrast of visual composition and coherence of online reviews. Furthermore, as *Yelp* is expanding photo-uploading functionality through their mobile app and *OpenRice* is encouraging reviewers to embed YouTube video reviews, we believe multimodal reviewing is the future of online reviewing, thus making further research in multimodal reviewing an especially timely matter.

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NOTES

1. One Japanese restaurant was awarded one Michelin star, but it only received three reviews in total, so it was discarded. The homogeneity of cuisine reflects the bias of the Michelin rating system for Hong Kong restaurants, rather than our selection criteria.
2. Research shows that online reviews tend to appear as a 'J-shaped distribution' with mostly 5-star ratings, some 1-star ratings and fewer ratings in between (Hu et al., 2009).
3. Before the revamping of the website in early 2013, non-members could upload reviews, but this privilege was revoked after the website revamp.
4. In 2013, *OpenRice* mandates that all reviews must be a minimum of 80 characters in length. In contrast, *Yelp* appears to have no minimum word length for reviews.
5. The most recent feature of *OpenRice* is the embedding of YouTube video, but video review was not found in our data set.
6. Unlike *OpenRice*, where the site's editors screen reviews before publications, *Yelp* uses an algorithm to separate 'legitimate' reviews from those that appear questionable.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

ALICE CHIK is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Macquarie University. Her research interests include narrative inquiry and popular culture in second language education. She is the co-editor of *Popular Culture, Pedagogy and Teacher Education: International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2014) and *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2015).
Address: Macquarie University, C3A 906, Balaclava Road, North Ryde, NSW 2109, Australia. [email: alice.chik@mq.edu.au]

CAMILLA VÁSQUEZ is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of World Languages at the University of South Florida. Her

research interests include narratives, social identities and online discourse. Her work on *TripAdvisor* reviews has appeared in *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Narrative Inquiry*. She is the author of *The Discourse of Online Consumer Reviews* (Bloomsbury, 2014).
Address: Department of World Languages, University of South Florida, 4202 E Fowler Avenue, CPR 419, Tampa, FL 33620, USA. [email: cvasquez@usf.edu]