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Exploring the Effects of Linguistic Elements of Social Media Corporate Apologies on Consumer Responses

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Generally, corporate apologies are regarded as effective corrective action after a service failure, though exploration of the topic remains relatively limited in the marketing literature. Researchers have examined apologies of varying media richness, from CEO video apologies to routine textual online apologies from customer service representatives (Chung et al., 2019; Page, 2014). Done well, corporate apologies can reduce negative social media posts, spur positive attitude change, and renew purchase intentions (Chung et al., 2019; Lee & Atkinson, 2019).

To protect brand reputation from the escalating tendencies of social media, scholars recommend companies use their social media accounts as official crisis communication channels (Chung et al., 2019). Twitter affords companies certain advantages to build rapport as a text-based media, offering one-on-one and one-to-many communication opportunities and thus is often the subject of apology research (Page, 2014). Twitter has also become a major platform for consumers to reach out to brands; brand mentions on Twitter for customer service purposes have increased 250% since 2018 (Fontanella, 2021).

Though much work explores apology elements in personal apologies, there is a lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of various apology elements in the corporate context. This study explores the effect of a corporate apology's inclusion (or exclusion) of a personal greeting and closure as well as the use of directives on apology success; A personal greeting occurs when a brand spokesperson calls a complainant by name in the apology, while a personal closure consists of an employee's name or initials serving as a "signature" for the message (Page, 2014). Page (2014) posits that a company attempting to use personalization to rebuild rapport may backfire, resulting in the apology appearing impersonal and insincere to the consumer. Directives are a request for action on the part of the consumer (Page, 2014), and place the burden of future communication on either the complaining consumer or the company. The perceived sincerity of the apology is thought to be a driving force in subsequent relationships with the transgressor, which signals the importance of testing the effects of apology elements on perceived sincerity (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018), as well as exploring the effects of perceived sincerity on consumer's subsequent behaviors towards the organization.

Through exploration of these elements of apology, the major research questions for this piece are:

RQ1. What (if any) effect will the inclusion of a personal greeting and closure in a social media corporate apology and/or the future responsibility placed by a directive have on the perceived sincerity of that apology?

RQ2. How does perceived sincerity of the apology affect consumer forgiveness of the corporation?

RQ3. What is the effect of apology sincerity and forgiveness on a consumer's future intentions towards the organization (specifically repurchase intentions and advocacy)?

An experimental design will explore the research questions by utilizing hypothetical scenarios to manipulate elements of Twitter apologies from a fictional airline. The 2 (greeting/closure vs. no greeting/closure) X 2 (consumer-responsible directive vs. company-responsible directive) design will involve approximately 350-400 US adults with experience in air travel. Respondents will be randomly assigned to a condition and will evaluate the apology using previously developed scales to measure perceived sincerity (Wenzel et al., 2017), forgiveness (Forster et al., 2020), repurchase intentions (Manika et al., 2017) and advocacy (Melancon et al., 2011). ANOVA will be used to test differences across the various conditions.

Potential Contributions
- Social media crises are increasingly prevalent, and companies must learn how to prevent and deescalate firestorms though effective apologies to protect brand reputation.
- Employees interacting with consumers through social media should be equipped for apology construction as a part of an ideal customer service strategy.
- Constructs proposed here have not yet been tested in the marketing literature for their effectiveness in a corporate apology setting.

Keywords: *social media, corporate apologies, brand reputation, social media crisis, forgiveness, purchase intentions, service failures*

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