Research Note

A discursive analysis of crisis response strategies in CEO apologies: Drawing on linguistic insights from the appraisal framework

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Abstract

When corporations are confronted with a crisis, well-crafted CEO apologies can serve to repair, restore, and rebuild a damaged corporate image. In prior research, the use of linguistic resources exhibited in CEO corporate apology discourse for different crisis response strategies has not been sufficiently examined. Drawing on the appraisal framework and subsumed linguistic resources, this study analyzed the discursive construction of crisis response strategies in the corporate apology discourse of leading companies listed in the Fortune Global 2000. The findings revealed an integrated use of crisis response strategies in which *attitude* appraisal resources predominated, while different types of appraisal resources were deployed in various crisis response strategies to achieve rhetorical persuasion in corporate communication. The proposed framework integrating crisis response strategies in CEO apology discourse with appraisal resources could guide CEOs and crisis communicators to use the right words when composing corporate apologies.

Keywords

crisis response strategy; corporate apology; appraisal framework; discursive analysis

Introduction

Corporations are increasingly exposed to unpredictable crises that can endanger their reputation (Coombs, 2007). As corporate reputation is an invaluable asset (Barnett et al., 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2002), effective crisis responses from corporations are crucial in maintaining, protecting, and defending reputation (Benoit, 1995), particularly when new and social media allow crises to escalate rapidly (Austin & Jin, 2018).

When a corporation is involved in high levels of crisis responsibility, as in a preventable crisis posing a huge reputational threat to the corporation, a well-composed corporate apology could mitigate the negative effects of the crisis (Benoit, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Hearit, 2006). In fact, many studies have shown that CEOs' (Chief Executive Officers) apologies could signal the corporation's reparative behaviors and suggest greater authoritative accountability (Turk et al., 2012). Arguably, the acceptance of an apology is largely determined by the use of right words or strategically crafting the message through various textual linguistic devices to achieve rhetorical persuasiveness. As messages manifested in crisis response strategies can shape public perceptions of the crisis (Coombs, 1995), CEOs and public relations (PR) practitioners need to equip themselves with the right words to compose convincing apologies for crisis management. However, little research has examined how response strategies used in apologies are linguistically realized as previous studies have mainly focused on the form and content of response strategies (Fediuk et al., 2011). Drawing on the appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005) that relies on textual linguistic resources to negotiate evaluations and construct solidarity with the addressees, this study proposes a framework that integrates crisis response strategies with evaluative appraisal resources to achieve rhetorical persuasion. The framework provides conceptual tools for analyzing and explaining how CEOs negotiate and restore trust through the apology

discourse. It also provides insights into which linguistic resources could be strategically utilized in crafting effective apology statements for CEO crisis communication.

Conceptual Framework

Corporate apology discourse and image repair

When high-profile business crises (e.g., Samsung Galaxy Note 7 phone battery explosions) pose challenges to corporate reputation, apologies are often offered as part of the crisis response (Ma & Zhan, 2016). This study conceptualizes corporate apologies as discourse characterized by a corporation's acceptance of responsibility for a crisis and request for forgiveness, which are essential for repairing a corporation's image after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

Image Repair Theory (IRT) (Benoit, 1995; 2015) encompasses five response strategies for repairing corporate image from a crisis. These are denial (denial or shifting of blame), evading responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, or good intentions), reducing offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, or compensation), taking corrective action, and mortification. IRT has focused on image repair discourse, yet it is unable to inform crisis managers about responding with appropriate strategies to specific and predictable levels of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2010). Thus, the three crisis clusters (victim cluster, accidental cluster, and preventable cluster) outlined in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) have emerged to assist crisis leaders in responding with appropriate strategies, ranging from defensive strategies such as denial, to the accommodative ones such as issuing an apology (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Because apologies can minimize crisis-induced negative effects (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), especially when strong crisis responsibility is attributed to the corporation, scholars

have investigated the components of effective apologies (e.g., Bentley, 2018). This research has considered the ethics of CEO apologies (Koehn & Goranova, 2018), the relationship between the verbal content of CEO apologies and their acceptability (Pace et al., 2010), and how CEOs' emotions exhibited in apologies affect the sincerity of apologies (Ten Brinke & Adams, 2015). In addition, prior research has found that admission of responsibility, expression of remorse, and corrective action were the most useful strategies in CEO apologies for repairing the damaged image in high-crisis responsibility situations (Ngai & Jin, 2016; Benoit, 2018). Overall, these studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of deploying integrated strategies to earn forgiveness, though few have scrutinized how these strategies were discursively constructed in CEO apologies.

Linguistic approach for analyzing apology discourse

Corporate apologies might rely on the use of specific words to show the public that the corporation is sincere and committed, for words can change the perceptions of interlocutors (Erickson et al.,1978). One strand of linguistic research identifies features of apologies as speech acts for mitigating the damage stemming from the crisis (e.g., Shariati & Chamani, 2010) while another strand is concerned with the communicative styles exhibited in apologies (e.g., Rundquist, 2007). A third strand regards an apology as face work (Goffman, 1978), viewing it as a strategy to reestablish rapport with the public (Ogiermann, 2009). However, these studies do not reveal how the stance-taker (i.e., the CEO) negotiates his/her stance through linguistically demonstrating his/her evaluative attitudes towards the crisis. The appraisal framework, focusing on the expression of attitudes and values as an interpersonal semantic approach (Martin & White, 2005), may contribute to the understanding of discursive construction of CEO messages.

The appraisal framework, emanating from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994), comprises linguistic evaluative resources exhibited in discourse which negotiate one's

stance via attitudinal and evaluative expressions (Martin & White, 2005). The framework consists of three evaluative systems—*attitude, engagement*, and *graduation*—with each system constituted by its own subsystems. *Affect*, *judgment*, and *appreciation* resources constitute three subcategories of the *attitude* system. *Affect* encodes the emotional reactions of the appraiser to behaviors, texts/processes, or phenomena with positive and negative valence (Martin & White, 2005). Feelings such as contrition are tied to emotions, as reflected in this apology: "We are so sorry for the frustration this has caused our customers." *Judgment* resources make positive or negative ethical evaluations of human behavior (Martin & White, 2005), as exhibited in: "We've seen the video showing one of our couriers carelessly and improperly delivering a package the other day." In this sentence, the expressions "carelessly" and "improperly" indicate a negative judgment of the courier's behavior. *Appreciation* resources refer to aesthetic evaluations of objects, artifacts, and states of affairs. For example, in the expression, "We subjected you to unacceptable delays," the word "unacceptable" denotes a negative reaction to the experience encountered.

The *engagement* system, consisting of the subcategories of *monogloss* and *heterogloss*, is concerned with the voice(s) manifested in discourse (Martin & White, 2005). *Monogloss* reflects the subjectivity of language users in providing bare assertions without "reference to other voices" (p. 99), whereas *heterogloss* embodies the objectivity of language users that allows for "dialogistic alternatives" (p. 100). For example, the verb "prove" in the statement, "This has proven to be a good solution," wards off potential disagreement. By contrast, the word "know" in the expression, "We know we failed to deliver on this promise," opens the dialogic space of the text, suggesting the speaker's attempt to share what the public expects from the company: good quality service.

Graduation, entailing *force* and *focus* resources, is concerned with modulating the degree of evaluation (Martin & White, 2005). *Force* relates to intensity (intensification) and

amount (quantification) of the assessment while *focus* refers to grading according to prototypicality by which category boundaries are identified (Martin & White, 2005). Sharpening resources, as manifested in boosters, and softening resources, such as hedges, can be manipulated to strengthen or downgrade utterances. For example, utterances including "truly regretful" or "extremely sorry" indicate expressed contrition with upscale/sharpening features, whereas the expression "small likelihood of occurrence" suggests incidents with downscale/softening features.

The appraisal framework can shed light on the discourse mechanisms underlying CEO stance negotiations with stakeholders. For example, in this phrase, "we subjected you to unacceptable delays, flight cancellations, lost baggage, and other major inconvenience," the CEO expresses deep concern for the appalling experiences encountered by customers by relying on negative *appreciation* resources such as "unacceptable" and "inconvenience." This framework could potentially serve as a useful apparatus for the analysis of CEOs' endeavors to build interpersonal relationships with stakeholders.

In sum, the extant crisis communication research on CEO apologies has shown the pivotal role of corporate apologies in handling crises, but it fails to uncover how the right words can be used in apologies so that stakeholders will understand how sincere the corporation is. This study fills this gap and seeks to reveal the strategic deployment of linguistic resources in CEO crisis response strategies to restore trust. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How are appraisal resources exhibited in crisis response strategies used in CEO corporate apologies?

RQ2: How are the crisis response strategies discursively constructed by evaluative appraisal resources in the corporate apologies?

Method

Using the sentence as a unit of analysis, this study adopted content analysis to examine the use of evaluative appraisal resources in crisis response strategies (RQ1). To elaborate on the discursive construction of crisis response strategies (RQ2), textual analysis of the use of evaluative appraisal resources in these strategies was presented based on a framework integrating crisis response strategies with their corresponding use of appraisal resources.

Sampling

We used a purposive sampling method to collect CEO apologies released from high profile crisis management cases involving accidents brought on by humans (including out-of-control employees), product recalls caused by human errors, and organizational misdeeds. We conducted an online search of company websites, social media sites (i.e., Facebook, blogs, Twitter, YouTube), and media reports from 2007 to 2018 from leading companies listed in the Fortune Global 2000. The cases included in the sample attracted immense attention, and thus were mentioned by PR practitioners on Twitter, blogs, or Facebook and/or covered by prestigious or authoritative media, such as *Fortune*, *Forbes*, or *New York Times.* Then, we collected initial CEO apologies, mostly released within one week after the crisis had occurred. The first author and a native English speaker transcribed the apologies verbatim if video apologies were employed. In total, we gathered 20 corporate apologies covering a range of industries including banking, electronics, science and technology service, aviation, auto, and retail. To determine whether the apologies facilitated the corporations' crisis communication, we examined PR practitioners' online comments on the aforementioned media that provided highly positive comments regarding the apologies. Further, academic research articles confirming the contributing role of the CEO apology in handling the crisis were collected. Additionally, we checked the reputation institute rankings of a corporation in the year when the crisis occurred to provide evidence of the company's

effectiveness in managing the crisis. Table 1 shows the selected cases and length of the apology, and Appendix 1 provides the links of selected apologies and information of their contributive role in crisis management.

Table 1. Selected crisis cases with high crisis responsibility

Case	Company	Year	Crisis	No. of Sentences	No. of words
1	Alaska Air Group	March, 2011	Customer service disaster	16	378
2	Amazon	July, 2009	Misconduct of deleting E-books	17	322
3	Anthem	February, 2015	Massive data breach	18	357
4	Apple	September, 2012	Serious maps App problem	14	305
5	AT&T	September, 2013	Controversial 9/11 tweet	21	467
6	Barclay	September, 2016	The Libor scandal	17	379
7	Equifax	September, 2017	Massive data breach	9	220
8	Facebook	March, 2018	Cambridge analytical scandal	38	689
9	FedEX	December, 2011	Employee misconduct	22	536
10	General Motor	April, 2014	Defective ignition switch	5	75
11	JetBlue Airways	February, 2007	Operation breakdown	35	550
12	Netflix	September, 2011	Mishandling price charge	18	392
13	Samsung	November, 2016	Defective cellphone battery	12	164
14	Sony	May, 2011	Customer service disaster	9	174
15	Starbucks	April, 2018	Racial profiling and discrimination	5	155
16	Target	December, 2013	Massive credit card data breach	10	230
17	Tesco	January, 2013	Food safety	16	498
18	Toyota	February, 2010	Gas pedal problem	7	119

19	United airline	April 9, 2017	Mistreatment of customers	6	143
20	Wells Fargo	April, 2016	Fake account scandal	9	176

Coding scheme

Two coding schemes were developed based on the conceptual framework. To address RQ1, we employed a two-stage coding exercise. As Benoit's IRT (1995, 2015) offers the most comprehensive image restoration framework and is widely adopted in crisis discourse studies (e.g. Nekmat et al., 2014), we coded the presence of the crisis response strategies (i.e. denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, taking corrective action, and mortification) to reveal the CEOs' use in apologies in the first stage. A total of 315 sentences were collected from 20 corporate apologies. Only the dominant strategy used in each sentence was coded. Table 2 illustrates the strategies and examples from the collected data, and Appendix 2 provides illustrations of the coding of the dominant crisis response strategies.

Table 2 Coding Scheme for Crisis Response Strategies

Strategy		Example
Denial	Simple denial	Based on what we know now, there is ***no evidence*** that banking, credit card, medical information (such as claims, test results, or diagnostic codes) were targeted or compromised. (Apology from Joseph Swedish, President and CEO of Anthem, Inc., 2015)
Evading Responsibility	Defeasibility	Following the ***severe winter ice storm*** in the Northeast, we subjected you to unacceptable delays, flight cancellations, lost baggage, and other major inconveniences. (Apology from David Neeleman, Founder and CEO JetBlue Airways, 2007)
	Accident	This matter is ***an unfortunate exception*** to the outstanding service FedEx team members deliver every single day. (Apology from Matthew Thornton III, Senior Vice President of US Operations FedEx Express, 2011)
	Good intentions	As time progressed, ***we wanted to provide our customers with even better Maps*** including features such as turn-by-turn directions, voice integration, Flyover and vector-based maps. In order to do this, we had to create a new version of Maps from the ground up. (Apology from Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, 2012)
Reducing Offensiveness	Bolstering	Samsung has a ***long heritage of innovation*** and ***we have shown that we can and will learn from our mistakes***. (apology from YH Eom, President and CEO of Samsung Electronics Europe, 2016)
	Minimization	We want our guests to understand that just because they shopped at Target during the impacted time frame, ***it doesn't mean they are victims of fraud***. In fact, in other similar situations, ***there are typically very low levels of actual fraud.*** (Apology from Gregg Steinhafel Chairman, President and CEO of Target, 2013)
	Compensation	This will include, among other benefits, ***a month of free PlayStation Plus membership*** for all PSN customers, as well as an ***extension of subscriptions*** for PlayStation Plus and Music Unlimited customers to ***make up for time lost***. (Apology from Howard Stringer, CEO of Sony, 2011)
Mortification		That begins with my ***sincere apologies*** to everyone who has been affected by this recall. (Apology from Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, 2014)
Corrective Action		And we will work harder than ever with all our suppliers to ***make sure this never happens again***. (Apology from Dave Lewis, CEO of Tesco, 2013)

In stage two, by drawing on the appraisal framework, we coded a typology of three subsystems of *attitude* resources (*affect, judgment, and appreciation*) and their tonality (positive and negative), one subsystem of *engagement* resources (*heterogloss*), and two subsystems of *graduation* resources (*force, focus*) on a sentence basis. We excluded *monogloss* in *engagement* resources because *monogloss* that rejects dialogue is inapplicable given the interactive nature of apology discourse with the public.

To reveal the use of appraisal resources in different crisis response strategies, we examined the lexical/phrasal verb indicators (Blum–Kulka & Levenston, 1987) of the appraisal resources in each sentence. Table 3 illustrates the appraisal resources and the related lexical/phrasal verb indicators in our data. It should be noted that sentences in the response strategies not employing any appraisal resources were not included in our findings. Further, we noticed that many sentences employed multiple lexical/phrasal verb indicators of various appraisal resources categories and sub-categories. Therefore, double coding was allowed to exhaustively code the use of appraisal resources in the subsystems. See Appendix 2 for the illustration of double coding of the use of appraisal resources in CEO apologies.

Table 3. Appraisal Resources adopted and Lexical/Phrasal Verb Indicators identified

Appraisal Resources		Lexical Indicators	Examples
Attitude			
Affect	positive	dear, confident, satisfied, pleased, grateful, pride, wanting	We are ***confident***, as a result of these actions, that JetBlue will emerge as an even more customer responsive airline than ever before. (Jetblue)
	negative	sorry, apology, regret, remorse, embarrassed, saddening, upset, fear, disappointed, outrage, anger, woefully, anxiety	I am deeply ***sorry*** for any accidents that Toyota drivers have experienced. (Toyota)
Judgment	positive	take seriously, patient, work hard, work non-stop, loyal, reliable, honest, dedicated, capable, work around the clock, unwavering	Under the leadership of Kazuo Hirai, we have teams ***working around the clock*** around the world to restore your access to those services as quickly and as safely as possible. (Sony)
	negative	mess up, make mistakes, let down, fail to fulfil, fall short of, not live up to, fail	We recognize we ***fell*** far ***short of*** our service commitment to you. (Alaska Air Group)
Appreciation	positive	firmly, comprehensive, better, timely, positive, valued, best-in-class, effective, new, heartfelt, great, top, clear, free, long-standing, rapid, world-class, sincere, right, huge, lovely, full and safe, proactive, thorough, strong, important, swiftly, safely, carefully, innovative, high standard, secure, safe, best, leading, actively, tirelessly, transparently, outstanding, state-of-the-art	To rebuild trust and to build a ***better*** Wells Fargo, our first priority is to make things right for our customers. (Wells Fargo) At Apple, we strive to make ***world-class*** products that deliver the best experience possible to our customers. (Apple)
	negative	worst, severe, unacceptable, inconvenient, scarce, frustrating, wrong, tragic, disheartening, bad, horrific, awful, reprehensible, time-consuming, disruptive, stupid, painful, serious, difficult, poor, improperly, carelessly, unfortunate, sophisticated, thoughtlessly, complex, terrible, confusing, out of line	By now, you may be aware of a ***disheartening*** situation in one of our Philadelphia-area stores this past Thursday, that led to a reprehensible outcome. (Starbucks)
Engagement			
Heterogloss	think, will, probably, possibly, say, recognize, may, know, show, while, no, never, not, nothing, in fact, however, but, though, must, may		I ***know*** you ***recognize*** that this absolutely does ***NOT*** represent the professionalism and dedication of the 290,000 FedEx team members worldwide. (FedEx)
Graduation			
Force	extremely, very, more, a lot, fully, always, absolutely, all, everything, low, just, totally, nearly, even, wholly, deeply, completely, incredibly, highest, deepest, every, small, large, a few		While the FSAI has said that the products pose no risk to public health, we appreciate that, like us, our customers will find this ***absolutely*** unacceptable. (Tesco)

Focus	really, truly, genuinely, typically, nearly	The ***truly*** horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. (United Airlines)

Coding procedure and intercoder reliability

One coder, a full-time research assistant, was comprehensively trained to undertake half of the content coding of the apologies. The first author completed the other half of the coding. To ensure consistency in the interpretation of the coding scheme of response strategies and appraisal resources, both coders coded eight corporate apologies (40% of the total number of apologies studied) to check on intercoder reliability. All disagreements were discussed prior to the comprehensive implementation of the coding exercise. For all categories, the average pairwise percent of agreement was greater than 0.88, and the average pairwise Cohen's Kappa was greater than 0.8, indicating an almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977; Hallgren, 2012). See Appendix 3 for the summary of the IRR statistics of the coding items.

Findings and discussion

Regarding RQ1, our results were consistent with previous studies (e.g. Ngai & Jin, 2016; Benoit, 2018; Holdener & Kauffman, 2014), indicating an integrated use of crisis response strategies in 34% of sentences (106 out of 315) of the apologies. Table 4 summarizes the use of appraisal resources in the sub-systems of the appraisal framework for the corresponding crisis response strategies.

As seen in Table 4, *attitude* resources were the most preferred resource type. These resources index the CEO's evaluation of the crisis, the corporation's involvement in the crisis and its commitment to crisis rectification. Additionally, *appreciation* (e.g., first-class, disruptive) predominantly occurred in strategies (except mortification) deploying *attitude*

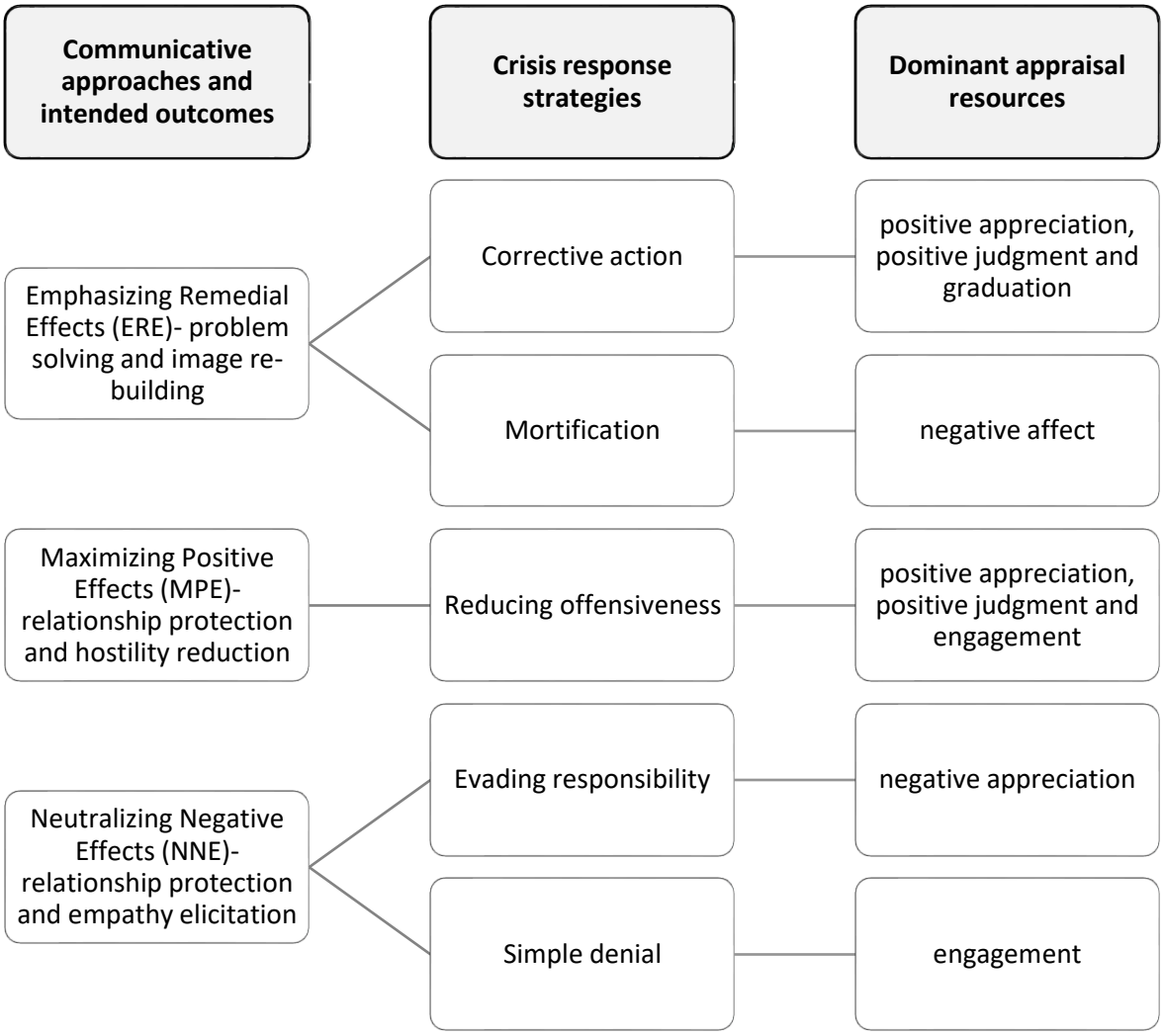
resources. Furthermore, negative *affect* (e.g., sorry) resources were salient in the mortification strategy, together with the use of the intensified *force* (e.g., very).

Table 4. Summary on the use of appraisal resources in the sub-systems of the appraisal framework for the corresponding crisis response strategies

Crisis response strategies / Appraisal resources		Attitude			Engagement	Graduation	
		Affect	Judgment	Appreciation	Heterogloss	Force	Focus
Strategies	Total no. of sentences	No. of sentences (%)	No. of sentences (%)	No. of sentences (%)	No. of sentences (%)	No. of sentences (%)	No. of sentences (%)
Corrective Action	45	3 (7%) (POS-1, 33% vs NEG-2, 67%)	27 (60%) (POS-21, 78% vs NEG-6, 22%)	38 (84%) (POS-34, 89% vs NEG-4, 11%)	15 (33%)	17 (38%)	4 (9%)
Mortification	34	34 (100%) (POS-0 vs NEG-34, 100%)	6 (18%) (POS-2, 33% vs NEG-4, 67%)	9 (26%) (POS-2, 22% vs NEG-7, 78%)	29 (85%)	22 (65%)	7 (21%)
Reducing Offensiveness	17	1 (6%) (POS-0 vs NEG-1, 100%)	6 (35%) (POS-3, 50% vs NEG-, 50%)	12 (71%) (POS-8, 67% vs NEG-4, 33%)	12 (71%)	6 (35%)	4 (24%)
Evading Responsibility	8	1 (13%) (POS-1, 100% vs NEG-0)	4 (50%) (POS-3, 75% vs NEG-1, 25%)	7 (88%) (POS-4, 57% vs NEG-3, 43%)	4 (50%)	1 (13%)	0
Denial	2	0	0	0	2 (100%)	0	0

Informed by these results, we propose a new framework to integrate the strategies with their corresponding use of dominant appraisal resources to address RQ2. As shown in Table 5, crisis response strategies are presented in descending order according to their frequency of occurrence in the data.

Table 5. An integrated framework on the use of dominant appraisal resources in the corresponding crisis response strategies



1) Emphasizing Remedial Effects

The ERE approach which was predominant in corporate apology discourse emphasizes the company's commitment to preventing the crisis from escalating and ensuring that similar wrongdoings will not recur. It intends to rebuild a positive image of sincerity by expressing sympathy, taking preventive measures, and providing compensation.

Corrective action, as the most preferred restorative strategy in apologies, focuses on actions taken to repair the damaged image (Lazare, 2005). As suggested, expressions of regret alongside a changed attitude or policy can add credibility to the request for forgiveness (Koesten & Rowland, 2004). This strategy is discursively constructed by the predominant use of positive *appreciation*, followed by positive *judgment* and *graduation*. See example 1 and 2 below.

(1) The company ***dramatically increased [positive Appreciation]*** the number of customer service representatives at the call centers and the website has been ***improved [positive Appreciation]*** to handle the large number of visitors. (Apology from Richard Smith, CEO of Equifax, 2017)

In example 1, the positive *appreciation* resources "drastically increased" and "improved" project the company's confidence and competence to tackle the crisis and redress the unfavorable situation. Moreover, these resources emphasize positive outcomes because of corrective behavior.

(2) I am ***extremely [Graduation] sorry [negative Affect]*** and it is something we will ***never [Heterogloss]*** forget and it is something we are ***utterly [Force] determined [positive Judgment]*** will never be repeated. (Apology from Kevin Johnson, CEO of Starbucks, 2018)

As can be seen in example 2, the CEO conveys his regret and promise for a change as instantiated in the expression of "determined will never be repeated," whereby actions adopted by the company are probably viewed positively by the public and help rebuild the image of the company. The repeated emphasis on the positive influence brought by the company's actions facilitates the repair of the tarnished image and elicits forgiveness (Worthington, 2006).

Mortification strategies include a predominant use of negative *affect* resources. As a function of the "emotional framing of persuasive appeals," *affect* (also termed as "pathos" in Aristotle's rhetorical triangle) could contribute to persuasiveness (DeSteno et al., 2004, p. 43). As suggested by Coombs and Holladay (2005), strong feelings of sympathy could assist an organization in engendering potential supportive behavior from stakeholders. Consider the following example 3.

(3) That begins with my sincere ***apologies [negative Affect]*** to everyone who has been affected by this recall…especially to the families and friends of those who lost their lives or were injured. I am ***deeply [Force] sorry [negative Affect]***. (Apology from Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, 2014)

In Example 3, GM's CEO expresses contrition for the defective ignition switch problem through negative *affect* "apologies" and "sorry" with the boosted *force* "deeply." Negative *affect* resources present the CEO as a caring person who seeks forgiveness due to misconduct. Furthermore, the prevailing use of intensifiers in expressing sincere remorse is effective because the tone of voice reflects sincerity in interpersonal communication (Afifi, 2007). Empathy and remorse help build solidarity with the public through which a deeper level of bonding can be achieved. Because a close personal relationship can contribute to repairing a damaged relationship (Lewis et al., 2015), the apology is viewed as more acceptable when relational outcomes are nurtured.

2) Maximizing Positive Effects

Strategies to reduce offensiveness—like bolstering—were more employed in the MPE approach, aiming at emphasizing the company's good image of prior self (Kiambi & Shafer, 2016). This strategy can be linguistically realized using positive *appreciation, engagement,* and positive *judgment*. Consider example 4 below.

(4) The ***hard work [positive Judgment]*** of regaining the ***trust [positive Appreciation]*** of the American people that was developed over the course of the company's 118 year history is ongoing and I ***know [Heterogloss]*** it ***must [Heterogloss]*** be sustained. (Apology from Richard Smith, CEO of Equifax, 2017)

In example 4, the CEO, drawing on the positive *appreciation* "trust" and positive *judgment* "hard work," boasts about the company's long-term diligence and willingness to rectify the misdeed. In addition, the CEO employs the *engagement* "know" to seek common ground with the public and indicate that the company shares the public's expectations of an excellent service standard while he uses "must" to emphasize his work commitment.

3) Neutralizing Negative Effects

In this approach, evading responsibility strategies (i.e., defeasibility) ascribe the crisis situation to some external factors beyond the company's control, which can be realized through negative *appreciation* as illustrated by example 5.

(5) I wish we could have gotten the answers we needed sooner, but ***[Heterogloss]*** forensic analysis is a ***very [Force] complex [negative Appreciation]***, ***time-consuming [negative Appreciation]*** process. (Apology from Howard Stringer, CEO of Sony, 2011)

To neutralize the bad consequences induced by the crisis, the CEO uses the *heterogloss* "but" alongside the negative *appreciation* "complex" and "time-consuming," with the boosted *force* "very" to justify the failure to provide timely customer service.

The strategy of accident—which occurred infrequently—can be discursively constructed by manipulating positive and negative *appreciation*, as illustrated in example 6.

(6) This matter is an ***unfortunate [negative Appreciation]*** exception to the ***outstanding [positive Appreciation]*** service FedEx team members deliver every single day. (Apology from Matthew Thornton III, Senior Vice President of US Operations FedEx Express, 2011)

When communicating the message that the courier's delivery behavior is a rare case, the Senior VP of FedEx uses the negative *appreciation* "unfortunate" to express his regret for the incident while using positive *appreciation* "outstanding" to stress the shared evaluation of the company's service commitment to the public.

Simple denial rarely occurred in corporate apology discourse as it generates an unfavorable impression of corporations regarding avoiding responsibility if used improperly. Denial can be constructed via the use of *engagement*, as shown in example 7 below.

(7) Based on what we ***know [Heterogloss]*** now, there is ***no [Heterogloss]*** evidence that banking, credit card, medical information (such as claims, test results, or diagnostic codes) were targeted or compromised. (Apology from Joseph R. Swedish, CEO of Anthem Blue Cross, 2015)

The CEO uses the *heterogloss* "know" to signal the shared expectations with stakeholders that the investigation has been conducted, and the use of "no" indicates that the crisis was not as severe as had been previously perceived.

Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

As one of the first attempts to examine corporate leaders' crisis communication through the lens of the appraisal framework, this study's findings advance our understanding of what makes CEO apologies more acceptable with respect to the use of appropriate words or linguistic devices for different crisis responses. Crisis leaders can be made more knowledgeable of which linguistic resources to draw on to compose convincing apologies for crisis management. For example, CEOs can utilize positive *appreciation* in *attitude* resources to reduce hostility and rebuild corporate image, and negative *appreciation* to elicit empathy and neutralize negative effects induced by the crisis.

Another noteworthy contribution of this research is that by categorizing all CEO crisis response strategies into three approaches to reflect their distinct communicative goals—namely *Emphasizing Remedial Effects*, *Maximizing Positive Effects*, and *Neutralizing Negative Effects*—we have illustrated when and how evaluative appraisal resources can be linguistically deployed to compose apologies for different crisis response strategies. Finally, this study has added a new perspective to research on corporate apologies by proposing an integrated model of the IRT and appraisal framework. This model offers insights into how preferred crisis response strategies are manifested through linguistic devices to enhance the acceptability of apologies and achieve the goal of repairing relationships with the public. Regarding practical implications, the findings provide value to crisis leaders, PR practitioners and corporate communicators, and have pedagogical implications for instructors of PR writing courses on how to compose well-written apologies through the strategic use of evaluative appraisal resources.

In terms of limitations, the small size of the corpus and use of purposive sampling limit the generalizability of the results. The proposed framework also requires further testing via empirical research through the use of experiments and interviews to investigate the public's

perceptions of the effectiveness of appraisal resources in apologies. Undertaking research on the effectiveness of handling crises in a timely manner on social media would lend additional focus to how instant CEO messages to crises are received.

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