

Trust-repair Strategies in Corporate Crisis Public Relations Apology Statements

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Abstract—Trust is vulnerable. For business organizations, releasing corporate Public Relations (PR) statements is the primary method to restore their trustworthiness once adverse events occur. This paper explores the apology strategies employed in Chinese official corporate PR statements from Weibo, one of the biggest social media platform in China. Totally 18 statements from eight different organizations, with 8255 Chinese characters, were selected. By combining Bataneh's and Sugimoto's apology strategies, the paper proposes six types of apology strategies that are more responsive to the specificities of Chinese corporate apology statements: describing event, assessing responsibility, offering redress, making promises, expressing integrity, and motivating emotion. Then, by integrating these strategies into causal attribution model, this paper aims to investigate the feasibility of these strategies and their effectiveness. The results show that all six strategies were adopted in the statements, which contribute to the causal ascription in both superficial and deep level, thereby trying to achieve trustworthiness.

Keywords—apology strategies, trust repair, corporate public relations, social media, e-commerce context

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, numerous corporate crises, impacting companies' images and social statuses negatively, have been observed. Corporations facing crises span various sectors, including the food industry, engineering, and media, and their social influences vary. As stated by Lee and Atkinson [1], "in the era where social media permeates every facet of life, no corporation or brand can consider itself immune to crises". Ingenhoff and Sommer [2] also regard trust as the golden thread that weaves together the fabric of customer relationships, which is indispensable and invaluable for business organizations. It's dynamic with the ongoing of social and communicative interaction [3], which means trust is vulnerable. When a crisis strikes, a company's trustworthiness may crumble, leaving it scrambling to salvage its reputation and mend the broken bonds with its stakeholders. Therefore, taking steps to repair trust becomes a pressing task for corporate. Those repair strategies can be divided into verbal response and substantive response. While an increasing number of companies in crisis turn to apologies to restore their image [4], the application of corporate apologies in repairing trust during crisis communication remains understudied.

Since Kim *et al.* [5] take apology as one of the most effective strategies for companies to repair its corporate trust, its significance should be further explored. Hence, this paper attempts to examine how companies in crisis repair trust and restore image by employing apology.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Trust

The concept of Trust was introduced in the 1950s. It is pervasive in our social life, serves as a basic element in our interpersonal relations. Candlin and Crichton [6] divide trust into two types: institutional trust (also named organizational trust) and interpersonal trust. The former usually occurs in the institutional context [7], for example, a corporate statement. While the latter is an individual's expectancy that other individuals, organizations, or systems can be relied on [8].

Trust has long been the subject of extensive scrutiny across diverse academic disciplines. Economists like Williamson [9] typically classify trust into either calculative or institutional categories. Psychologists like Tyler [10] commonly analyze trust through the attributes of trustors and trustees, focusing on various internal cognitions stemming from personal attributes. Sociologists, like Zucker [11] and Granovetter [12], often identify trust within the socially embedded properties of relationships among individuals or institutions. The definition of trust also varies. Hewett *et al.* [13] defined trust as the "Trustor's confidence in the trustee's professional competence, judgement and motivations." Yang [14] argued that trust is "a relational condition in which the trustor believes that the trustee will be able and willing to care for the trustor's interests." Among scholars, "willingness to be vulnerable," proposed by Mayer *et al.* [15] is the most frequently cited definition. As social relations are subject to change, trust is a dynamic interpersonal construct, which is constantly negotiated and renegotiated through social and communicative interaction.

B. Trust in Corporate Crisis PR

For business organizations, trust is a valuable asset [16]. Earning the trust of consumers can enable a company to establish itself in a competitive market. Conversely, losing the trust of consumers, often resulting from violations of social norms, values, and expectations, can undermine a company's image and reputation. In such cases, the company, or the trustee, needs to take strategies to repair trust in order to restore its social status and alleviate the negative effects of the crisis. Apology, as a widely employed strategy, is an effective way to rebuild both institutional and interpersonal trust.

Once a company forfeits the trust of consumers and experiences a tarnished corporate image, in other words, the institutional trust is damaged, it can be regarded that the company is in crisis situation. Huang and Yi [17] mentioned that crisis Public Relations (PR) is a common measure used by companies and business organizations to restore the trust

of stakeholders in such situations. Besides, Coombs and Holladay [18] proposed that releasing crisis PR statement is the primary method to express regret and offer apologies, it can serve as the discourse carrier through which companies express their attitudes and actions, responding to crisis event, to stakeholders and the public. According to Huang and Yi [19], The main content of a crisis PR statement revolves around responding to and elaborating on the crisis event, which typically includes expressing clear and firm viewpoints, proposing follow-up solutions, and making commitments for the future.

C. The Apology Strategies in Trust-repair Work

To make an apology effective and make trust-repair work successful, one or more apology strategies should be employed. Fraser [20] proposed two kinds of strategies, the direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include announcing the apology, stating one's obligation to apologize, offering to apologize, and requesting acceptance, while indirect strategies are expressing regret, requesting forgiveness, acknowledging responsibility, promising forbearance, and offering redress. Olshtain and Cohen [21] and Olshtain [22] put forth two general strategies (using an illocutionary force indicating device, and expressing responsibility) and three situation-specific strategies (explanation, offer of repair, and promise of forbearance). Trosborg [23] found seven types of apology strategies to appease the offended: acknowledgement of responsibility, promise of forbearance, minimization of the degree of offence, explanation or account, expression of apology, offer of repair and expression of concern for the hearer. And then, Bataineh and Bataineh [24] revised those seven into five types, namely expression of apology, explanation or justification of the situation, acknowledgement of responsibility, promise of forbearance and expression of concern for the hearer. Holmes [25] argued that there are four main strategies, namely explicit expression of apology, explanations, acknowledgement of responsibility, and promise of forbearance. Yang [26] found that in live-streaming, hosts can combine two strategies to rebuild public's trust, which are the apology-related metalanguage labels and apology-related supportive moves. The former one can be regarded as explicit expression of apology, and the latter include offering explanations, taking responsibility, making promises, showing empathy, and expressing integrity.

Among these various apology strategies proposed by different researchers, Sugimoto [27] divided her strategies of apology into three types: primary, secondary and seldom used strategies. The primary used strategies include accounts, description of damage, and reparation. The secondary used strategies include compensation and promise not to repeat offense. The seldom used strategies include explicit assessment of responsibility (divided into positive and negative assessment of responsibility), contextualization, self-castigation, and gratitude.

The paper will integrate apology strategies from Sugimoto and Bataineh, revising and adapting these strategies to the context of Chinese corporate apology statements. It aims to identify the strategies employed by Chinese business organizations to rebuild trust and restore a positive corporate image.

D. Previous Studies on Trust-repair Work

In the realm of linguistics, the study of trust repair predominantly adopts an interdisciplinary approach. Researchers primarily employ qualitative analysis methods to investigate the influence of apology and denial strategies on trust repair. The resultant research findings chiefly contribute trust-repair strategies and theoretical models through a synthesis of literature reviews and discourse analysis. And the model of trust-repair discourse proposed by Fuoli and Paradis [3] attempts to employ two strategies, Neutralize the Negative (NN) and Emphasize the Positive (EP) to eliminate distrust, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for subsequent research on trust-repair discourse.

Studies have found linguistic strategies play pivotal role in repairing trust. For instance, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain [28] studied how people from eight different countries give apologies to others, and found that using Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) is the most direct way to apologize. Besides, Takaku [29] noticed that polite utterances can yield trust from others. Gillespie and Cornish [30] analyzed the communicative actions applied by a British bank in regaining public's trust. Wang [31] investigated how the Chinese local government employ different discursive practices in two stages of the public crisis. Yang [32] mentioned that non-verbal resources (e.g., emojis) can also be useful for e-commerce store owners in rebuilding trust. Lutzky [33] investigated the customer service interactions between an airline company and its passengers via social media, which revealed that in dealing with customer's complaints, different linguistic and communicative feature of the company's replies can significantly influence customers' attitudes.

Recent studies on trust repair in China have delved into the impact of individual strategies or certain factors on trust repair (see Wang *et al.* [34]; Sun *et al.* [35]; Yang *et al.* [36]; Bai [37]), the public trust repair of non-profit organizations (see Liu [38]; Liu [39]), and trust repair strategies involving multiple interactive agents (see Yang [26]; Xie & Liu [40]). Additionally, the effectiveness of trust repair strategies following misconduct by for-profit organizations has been examined (see Yang [26]; Zhang & Wang [41]; Duan *et al.* [42]). These studies encompass a wide range of disciplines, predominantly in administrative management, economics, psychology, and media studies. Within the field of linguistics, research on trust repair is emerging but not very extensive, including the application of systemic functional linguistics' meta-functional theory [17] and meta-discourse theory [19]. This paper attempts to adapt previous apology strategies and integrate them with Tomlinson and Mayer's causal attribution model of trust repair [43]. The goal is to measure the rationality of the apology strategies and to propose pragmatic suggestions that can aid Chinese enterprises in the process of trust repair.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Apology Strategies

In Section 2, various apology strategies have been introduced. This paper will adopt the taxonomy of Bataineh and Bataineh's [24] and Sugimoto's [27]. Bataineh and Bataineh's classification is based on Trosborg's [23] research

on apology strategies. However, some researchers like Yang [26] found that there may be some overlaps in his classification. For example, “minimization of the degree of offence” can be realized when “explanation or account” and “acknowledgement of responsibility” are employed simultaneously. Therefore, they revised Trosborg’s seven types of apology strategies into five, which are: **Expression of apology** (the trust-breaker—TB’s expression of regret or remorse directly to the offended party), **Explanation or justification of the situation** (the TB provides a reason or context for the behavior that led to the need for an apology), **Acknowledgement of responsibility** (The TB admits fault and takes ownership of the mistake or behavior that was wrong), **Promise of forbearance** (The TB’s commitment to change the behavior that led to the offense, to prevent it from happening in the future), **Expression of concern for the hearer** (The TB’s empathy and concern for the feelings and well-being of the victim). Besides, Sugimoto’s categorization covers a broad range and is more suitable for making certain adaptive modifications to specific data, which includes **Accounts** (The TB tells of the offense), **Description of damage** (The TB describes what changes have been inflicted on the object in discussion or the repercussions of a certain deed on others), **Reparation** (The TB attempts to repair the damage he/she has inflicted on others and offers words that may cause the harm done to be forgotten), **Compensation** (The TB offers to compensate for the physical or material damage for which he/she is apologizing), **Promise not to repeat offense** (The TB does his/her utmost to assure the victim that what has taken place will not occur again), **Negative assessment of responsibility** (The TB’s claim that someone or something caused the injury), **Positive assessment of responsibility** (The TB’s admission of responsibility for the offense), **Contextualization** (The TB gives the whole context of the offense in order to make the victim see the whole picture).

However, we still need to revise both taxonomies of strategies. Firstly, in Sugimoto’s classification, “gratitude” will not be considered in the paper. The corpus selected for this article, which will be detailed in subsequent chapters, pertains to the first statement issued by a company following a tarnishing of its social image, named as the “first thread” [33]. In the manual screening and processing of the corpus, it is noteworthy to point out that, according to Sugimoto’s definition of “gratitude”: “The TB (Trust-Breaker) shows how grateful he/she is that the injured person is even giving him/her time to speak and finding it in his/her heart to forgive,” the majority of Chinese corpora do not employ this strategy in the initial thread. In other words, the purpose of the initial thread is to explain, take a stance, seek forgiveness, and gauge public opinion and attitudes, without hastily expressing “thanks for the opportunity to explain and speak,” without knowing whether public trust has been reestablished. Conversely, “gratitude” is more likely to appear in the second or subsequent threads, which are not included in the corpus of this paper. Therefore, “gratitude” is omitted in this study. Besides, in Bataneh and Bataneh’s classification, “promise of forbearance” means “The TB’s commitment to change the behavior that led to the offense, to prevent it from happening in the future.” However, many data show that, some business organizations only make promises about the improvement of

their management and regulation, they will not directly express they will prevent the possible misbehaves in the future (once they make the same mistakes again, their ability, one of the factors of trustworthy identity, will be greatly damaged, and it will be much more difficult for them to rebuild public’s trust). Therefore, in this paper, “promise of forbearance” will be revised into “making promise”. It’s also worth pointing out that, in some cases (e.g. the whole incident was a personal tragedy), many companies’ statements will include expressions of concern for the individuals involved, appeals to social values, or attempts to use some ancient Chinese poetry with distinctive Chinese characteristics to evoke emotion, in order to resonate emotionally with the public. Hence, the paper introduces a new strategy: motivating emotion.

Then, the rest strategies of both scholars will be re-integrated into “describing event,” “assessing responsibility,” “offering redress,” and “expressing integrity”.

The apology strategies employed in this paper will be shown in chapter four.

B. Causal Attribution Model of Trust

Based on Weiner’s [44] causal attribution theory, Tomlinson and Mayer [43] proposed the causal attribution model of trust repair for the cause of a negative outcome in a trusting relationship explain when trustworthiness is in need of repair and how trustworthiness may be repaired by the trustee’s efforts. The model is shown in Fig. 1.

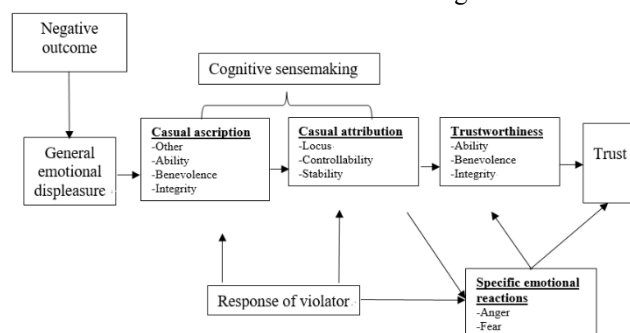


Fig. 1. Casual attribution model of trust repair.

According to the model, after trustor’s perception of the trustee’s trustworthiness identity is damaged, the trustor will engage in a process of discerning the underlying causes that led to this outcome. At this level of attribution, the trustor’s attribution of the trustee’s behavior can be primarily categorized into four major classes: the trustee’s ability, benevolence, integrity, and other reasons. The “other reasons” refer to causes unrelated to the trustee, whereas ability, benevolence, and integrity constitute the three dimensions of the trustee’s trustworthiness [15]. Liu and Gao [45] introduced that Specifically, ability denotes the innate talents and skills in a particular aspect of the trustee’s individual capacity; benevolence indicates that the trustee’s motivational intent behind actions is not for personal gain but for the realization of the trustor’s interests; integrity refers to the adherence to a set of behavioral norms that are acceptable to the trustor.

Then, the trustor will further engage in a deeper level of attribution regarding these factors. Attribution at this level primarily encompasses three dimensions: locus of causality, controllability, and stability. The locus of causality can be

divided into internal sources and external sources, which is similar to “assessing responsibility”. In other words, the locus of causality refers to the individual or situation that is held accountable for the outcome, controllability refers to the degree to which an individual can exert control over the consequences of actions, and stability refers to the likelihood of a specific outcome recurring under similar circumstances.

Tomlinson and Mayer also elaborate the trust-rebuild strategies for TB. (1) When TB’s ability is damaged, he/she can demonstrate the uncontrollability or instability of the ability factors that caused the negative outcome. (2) When TB’s benevolence is damaged, he/she can provide that the result was caused by an unstable internal ability factor or an occasional behavior with a lower degree of benevolence. (3) When TB’s integrity is damaged, he/she can prove that the negative outcome was caused by an unstable internal factor of their own, thereby being able to fully or partially restore trust.

Besides, the model also highlights the role of emotional factors playing in the process of restoration and their impact on the effectiveness of trust repair. It’s the negative emotion (e.g. anger and fear) the trustors have due to the unwanted outcomes that drive them to make attribution. Anger usually related to controllability, while fear have the direct relation to stability. It’s worth pointing out that, those negative emotions will impact on the trustor’s cognition to the TB’s trustworthiness identity, so appeasing the trustor should be the first steps to ensure the effectiveness of the trust-rebuild work.

With the basis of the causal attribution model, this paper attempts to integrate the model with apology strategies, as shown in Fig. 2, aiming to explore how these strategies help to rebuild business organization’s trustworthiness identity. However, due to the limitation of data, emotional factors are omitted. The paper only focuses on how apology strategies employed in the apology statements affect the cognitive sensemaking process of the public, and then how to rebuild the trustworthiness in terms of ability, benevolence and integrity.

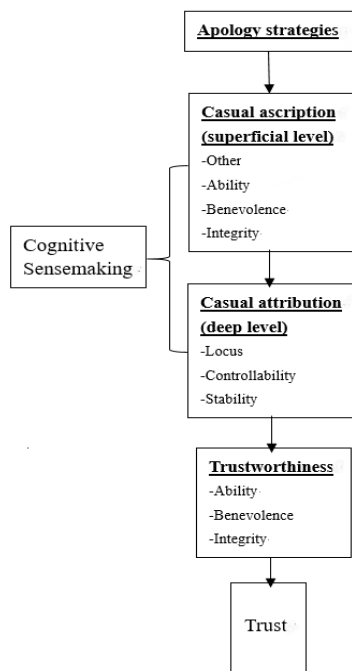


Fig. 2. An integrated model of trust-building discourse.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How these six apology strategies in Chinese corporate apology statement contribute to rebuilding trust?
2. What apology strategies do Chinese corporate prefer to take in their apology statements to rebuild trust?
3. How effective are these strategies in rebuilding trust?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Collection

The data was collected from Chinese corporate PR apology statements, extracted from Weibo, one of China’s biggest mass media, due to its accessibility to both original versions of statements and relatively reliable netizen comments. The author used “致歉(apology)” and “声明(statement)” as keywords for searching. The data was compiled from January 2022 to July 2024, after manually screening for the company’s visibility, the type of negative event, and the social impact, this paper has collected a total of 20 PR apology letters, a total of 8909 Chinese characters. Then, these letters were translated into English and checked by two volunteers (postgraduate students majoring in MTI) for ensuring the accuracy of translation. For the privacy issue, all the corporate names will be replaced with letters (e.g., Company A, Company B, etc.). Besides, the comments below the statements were also collected for assessing the effectiveness of the trust-rebuild work in the apology statements by analyzing netizens’ attitudes, which regard as the paper’s sub-corpus. Information about the apology statements is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Introduction of data

Number	Context introduction
1	Advertisement contains inappropriate references.
2	Advertising agency engages in fraud
3	Altering food best taste period labels.
4	Controversy in images and copywriting.
5	Food supplier uses substandard ingredients.
6	Food supplier uses substandard ingredients.
7	Food supplier uses substandard ingredients.
8	Food supplier uses substandard ingredients.
9	Food supplier uses substandard ingredients.
10	Foreign objects found in food.
11	Kitchen hygiene issues.
12	Product violates serving standards.
13	Product violates serving standards.
14	Product violates serving standards.
15	Product violates serving standards.
16	Product weight is insufficient.
17	Service staff has a conflict with a customer.
18	Software experiences system failure.
19	Tampering with ingredient expiration labels.
20	Use of expired raw materials.

B. The Revised Apology Strategies

In chapter four, Sugimoto’s and Bataineh’s taxonomy of apology strategies have been introduced, and also the rationale of the revision. Hence, after combining and revising both scholars’ classification, the revised apology strategies are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The framework for identifying apology strategies

Strategy	Definition
Describing event	The TB provides a reason or context for the behavior to help the public understand what led to the need for an apology.
Assessing responsibility	The TB assesses the main responsibility lies with other parties, or states that itself takes the main responsibility.
Offering redress	the TB attempts to repair the mental or physical damage that has inflicted on others.
Making promise	The TB's commitment to improve its management and regulation, for providing better service in the future.
Expressing integrity	The TB's effort to construct an authentic and competent image, pertains to an individual's or organization's honesty, fairness and sincerity.
Motivating emotion	The TB expresses concern for the party involved, appeals to social values, or cites poems with Chinese characteristics for evoking emotional resonance.

C. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the paper mainly relied on qualitative methods. The research procedure is as follows. First, based on content analysis and textual analysis methods, each apology strategy is identified in those apology statements. At the same time, we will also explore the dual causal attribution (superficial-level causal ascription and deep-level casual attribution) achieved by these strategies to explain how these apology statements reconstruct trust. Then, the frequency and proportion of each strategy's use in the 20 statements will be calculated, and the frequency of strategies appearing in different statements will be analyzed to reflect the preferences of these strategies in corporate public relations statements. Besides, we will examine the linguistic resources and non-linguistic resources (e.g. emoji) used by netizens in the related comments because of their evaluative functions, in order to explore how are the netizens' mainstream attitudes towards certain statement, so as to measure the effectiveness of the trust rebuild work.

V. FINDINGS

The research findings will be presented from two perspectives. First, the paper will illustrate the various apology strategies employed in the apology statements, showing their types and frequencies. Then, the effectiveness of these strategies will be discussed.

A. Types and Frequencies of Apology Strategy

After the processing of the data, a total of 151 apology strategies among the 20 collected apology statements were identified (the same apology strategy was used more than once in the same apology statement). The types, amount, and frequencies are shown in Table 3.

At the same time, the paper also presents the general

employ ratio of these strategies, which shows each strategy is adopted by how many of these 20 statements, and is shown in Table 4.

Table 3. Frequency of different apology strategies

Types	Amount	Ratio
Describing event	22	14.57%
Assessing responsibility	27	17.88%
Offering redress	38	25.17%
Making promise	19	12.58%
Expressing integrity	36	23.84%
Motivating emotion	9	5.96%

Table 4. General employ ratio of strategies

Types	Appeared in how many statements	Ratio
Describing event	20	100.00%
Assessing responsibility	20	100.00%
Offering redress	18	90.00%
Making promise	12	60.00%
Expressing integrity	18	90.00%
Motivating emotion	5	25.00%

1) Describing event

“Describing event” means the TB provides a reason or context for the behavior to help the public understand what led to the need for an apology. It often starts with “in response to...”, “concerning... / regarding...”, and generally appears at the beginning of the entire statements, with the intention of elucidate the themes of the relevant adverse event(s) to the public at the earliest opportunity.

Example 1: “In response to media reports of ‘xxx company’ allegedly using meat with lymph nodes in violation of regulations...”

Example 2: “Regarding the issue with ‘xxx’ that have been brought to our attention...”

In addition, some apology statements provide a more detailed account of the entire situation, allowing the public to understand the full context of the event, which is similar to Sugimoto's (1997) “contextualization”.

Example 3: “On April 3rd, our social media account “xxx Official Flagship Store” posted a product showcase video featuring xxx. The video contained inappropriate references to an IP character...”

In 20 apology statements, the adoption rate of describing events is 100% (20/20). This indicates that companies place great emphasis on investigating and reporting incidents in their apology statements. Additionally, describing the adverse events to the public demonstrates the company's transparency, honesty, attention to the issue, and willingness to take responsibility (it should be noted that “willingness to take responsibility” here is not the same as “assessing responsibility”). This strategy helps reflect the company's moral and ethical values [3], thereby building integrity, which is acknowledged as one of the essential foundations of trustworthiness and is a pivotal precursor of trust [15].

2) Assessing responsibility

“Assessing responsibility” means the TB assesses the main responsibility lies with other parties, or states that itself takes the main responsibility. It can be divided into “negative assessment of responsibility” and “positive assessment of responsibility” [27]. The former often directly uses some negative terms, such as “is not...”, “is no longer...”, etc., or

identifies the true responsible party, such as “it is... that... / is...” to deny their primary responsibility.

Example 4: “The seller corresponding to the “XXX” we are reselling is XXX Development Co., Ltd.”

Example 5: “Our livestream room is the promoter of this product, not the manufacturer or the direct seller.”

The latter, “positive assessment of responsibility”, often by use affirmative words like “is”, and action verbs like “reflect”, “violate”, adjectives like “anger” (usually when the headquarters is apologizing for the misconduct of a branch) to express that there was a management failure on their part and a willingness to take primary responsibility.

Example 6: “This incident reflects a management mistake on our part.”

Example 7: “We also express our sincere apologies for the problems at individual brand stores and engage in profound self-reflection.”

In 20 apology statements, the adoption rate of describing events is also 100% (20/20). The reason for such a high adoption rate is that for companies, the allocation of event responsibility in the apology statement plays a crucial role in the trust repair of the company. This directly affects the public’s positioning of the Locus in the company’s adverse events (which will be further explained in the discussion section). In addition, this apology strategy can build both integrity and ability. For a negative assessment of responsibility, if a company can reasonably and fairly explain to the public in the apology statement that the adverse event was due to a third party’s problem, and is not identified as shirking responsibility, it can reflect the company’s professional level, thus building ability. At the same time, for a positive assessment of responsibility, if a company can take the primary responsibility proactively after analyzing the situation, rather than evading responsibility, this can reflect the company’s honesty, fairness, and sincerity [46], thus building integrity.

3) *Offering redress*

“Offering redress” means the TB attempts to repair the mental or physical damage that has inflicted on others, including economic compensation for those affected by the event, or other remedial actions (such as recalling products with quality issues from the market). When offer redress, corporate should elaborate what steps they have done or will do. However, simply stating “We have adopted relevant strategies” does not constitute an ideal “offering redress”. There must be a detailed description of specific actions, otherwise it can easily be perceived as insincere behavior, which may further deepen the public’s distrust.

Example 8: “We immediately started the consumer registration and advance refund processes that evening.”

Example 9: “We also took immediate steps to meet with the head of XXX Company, sealed all the affected sauerkraut bag products, and are conducting quality inspections with the Market Regulatory Bureau.”

In Example 8, the corporate took two methods: consumer registration and refund, which ensured the redresses was genuinely implemented. Besides, an integrity indicator “immediately” was used in the apology statement. In Example 9, “meet with the head of the company”, “sealed all the affected products”, and “conducting quality inspections” were the steps the corporate took. And another integrity

indicator “immediate” also appeared. The explicit measures corporate took can be identified as integrity-related sentences. The integrity indicators and integrity-related sentences together construct the corporate’s integrity. In 20 apology statements, the adoption rate of “offering redress” is 90% (18/20).

4) *Making promise*

“Making promise” means The TB’s commitment to improve its management and regulation, for providing better service in the future. It can neutralize corporate’s negative aspects and emphasize its positive aspects [26]. Many scholars will give this kind of strategy other names, like “promise for forbearance” (see [20–22]; [25]) or “promise not to repeat offense” (see [27]). Both indicate that the company will promise never to let the same mistake happen again. However, in most cases, corporations are reluctant to make such promises. If they make a promise and the same mistake occurs in the future, they would be identified as dishonest, damaging the speaker’s trustworthiness [3]. While the promise enhances the reception of the conveyed message, it carries a caveat: The more substantial the promise is, the greater the expense incurred by the live-streaming host if the message turns out to be untrustworthy. Instead, corporations prefer to promise improvement, indicating that they will do their utmost to avoid the mistake, without claiming absolute success. “Offering redress” can often be identified through the modal verb “will”, as it indicates the actions the company commits to taking in the future.

Example 9: “In the future, we will establish more stringent product selection standards.”

Example 10: “We will work to optimize store operations to reduce customer wait times and improve service satisfaction.”

In 20 apology statements, the adoption rate of “making promise” is 60% (12/20). In Examples 9 and 10, the two companies promised to “establish more stringent product selection standards” and “optimize store operations,” expressing the future improvements they would undertake. Besides, “Making promise” can construct TB’s benevolence, because it demonstrates care for the offended party. By promising improvements, they can allow the affected parties to enjoy better service, focusing not just on their own interests.

5) *Expressing integrity*

“Expressing integrity” means The TB’s effort to construct an authentic and competent image, pertains to an individual’s or organization’s honesty, fairness and sincerity. It’s one of the three factors that construct trustworthiness, which has the crucial meaning to corporate’s trust rebuild work. In the apology statements, companies will demonstrate this by emphasizing its own corporate values, criticizing the adverse event for violating these values, or engaging in self-castigation (its actions contravened moral standards, etc.).

Example 11: “We will take this as a lesson and reflect deeply across the entire company. We are committed to making comprehensive corrections and will continue to strive to ensure excellent service and support.”

Example 12: “We will always adhere to the principle of “product comes first, service as the core,” diligently selecting and vetting our products to genuinely repay everyone’s support with high-quality goods!”

In 20 statements, the adoption rate of “expressing integrity”

is 90% (18/20). In Example 11, “reflect deeply” expressed self-castigation, for their really understand their fault and will strive to ensure better service. Example 12 highlighted the principle of the company, saying that they will stick to it and will provide better products.

6) *Motivating emotion*

“Motivating emotion” means The TB expresses concern for the party involved, appeals to social values, or cites poems with Chinese characteristics for evoking emotional resonance. In our data, it only takes 25% (5/20). The reason is that, “motivating emotion” is somewhat related to the type of incident and the severity of the negative event, and has a certain thematic specificity. This strategy often appears in incidents where the background involves the tragedy or helplessness of a particular protagonist or group. By appealing to emotions, companies can, to some extent, align with the public’s values and achieve mutual understanding, thereby neutralizing negative perceptions and demonstrating their lack of malice.

Example 13: “The departed are gone, but we can still pursue the future. Let us face life’s hardships together.”

Example 13 told the story of a boy who, overwhelmed by emotional issues, tragically chose to commit suicide (unrelated to the corporate issuing the apology statement). In this statement, the phrase “The departed are gone, but we can still pursue the future” serves to comfort and soothe the public, reflecting a Chinese philosophical perspective. Meanwhile, the statement “Let us face life’s hardships together” personifies the company, bringing it closer to the public and conveying a positive value of perseverance in the face of difficulties.

Example 14: “The departed have left us, may he rest in peace; the living continue on, and must cherish life.”

Examples 14 and 13 are from two different company’s apology statements, but their adverse incidences are the same. Similarly, Example 14 tried to mourn the boy first by using “may he rest in peace”, trying to stay at the same attitude with the public, then with an appeal tone, “must cherish life”, the company conveyed a positive and uplifting set of value.

“Motivating emotion” can successfully contribute company’s benevolence, for it shows the TB’s care and goodwill to the trustor, like the extent to which the TB is believed to have the trustor’s interests at heart, beyond egocentric concerns [3].

B. Effectiveness of Apology Strategies

In the aforementioned content, six apology strategies that Chinese enterprises would use in their apology statements have been explored. Now, the effectiveness of these apology strategies will be correspondingly discussed. And in this section, we will use the sub-corpus, which are the relevant comments below the statements.

Currently, there is limited research in the field of pragmatics on the effectiveness of trust repair strategies. Yang [26] adopted questionnaires to collect the participants’ opinions about the extracted relevant apology-related sentences, and visualized the data using Paired T-analysis. But this measurement to some extent neglected the significance of context.

Therefore, the paper tries to explore the effectiveness from the comments. However, it is worth noting that interactions

and comments on social media do not always fully represent the public’s true opinions. Additionally, these comments can be influenced by factors such as policy regulations, corporate public relations efforts, and advertising intentions. Hence, only comments that are in the top three to five by the number of “likes” and clearly express positive or negative attitude will be considered. But not all the statements’ comments will be collected, for some of them has been deleted from the official account, or some of the apology statements have a few comments with a few “likes”, which can’t be enough for quantitative analysis. Besides, only the statements that involves the same adverse event will be collected in order to mitigate the impact of unstable factors involving different interests and varying severity levels associated with different types of incidents.

The attitudes (positive/negative) towards the statements will be identified manually, the amount and the ratio of the two kinds of attitudes will be shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Ratio of two attitudes (Product violates serving standards.)

Statement Number	Amount and Ratio of positive attitudes	Amount and Ratio of negative attitudes
12	18120 (93.80%)	1196 (6.19%)
13	308 (66.23%)	157 (33.76%)
14	138340 (78.39%)	38133 (21.60%)
15	0	24753 (100%)

The total ratio of the positive attitude comments is 238.42%, while the negative attitude’s is 161.55%. Therefore, in response to the incident “Product violates serving standards,” the apology strategy adopted by the company in its apology statement is effective.

Table 6. Ratio of two attitudes (Food supplier uses substandard ingredients.)

Statement Number	Amount and Ratio of positive attitudes	Amount and Ratio of negative attitudes
5	0	147371 (100%)
6	0	1962 (100%)
7	755 (32.79%)	1547 (67.20%)
8	0	36 (100%)

The total ratio of the negative attitude comments is 367.20%, while the positive attitude’s in only 32.79%. Besides, it’s worth noting that, although employed apology strategies, some statements (e.g., number 5, 6, 8) even gets no positive comments among its top 3 to 5 by the number of “likes”.

However, the statistic cannot be construed as those strategies are lack of effectiveness. One reason which can explain this phenomenon is that, in some cases, netizens will neglect the statement itself, but to make comments on the title. For example, when an adverse event about food supplier uses substandard ingredients happened, netizens will give comments like “That’s too gross! I will never buy it again!”, regardless how the corporate explains in the statement, only notice the keywords in the title.

VI. DISCUSSION

Among six apology strategies, “Describing event”, “Offering redress,” “Expressing integrity” can construct TB’s integrity, “Making promise” and “Motivating emotion” can construct TB’s benevolence, and “Assessing responsibility” can construct both ability and integrity.

In apology statements, these strategies can help public to

do the causal attribution. “Assessing responsibility” can demonstrate the uncontrollability or instability of the ability factors that caused the negative outcome. “Making promise” and “Motivating emotion” can provide that the result was caused by an unstable internal ability factor or an occasional behavior with a lower degree of benevolence. “Describing event”, “Offering redress”, “Expressing integrity”, and can prove that the negative outcome was caused by an unstable internal factor of their own, thereby being able to fully or partially restore trust. In that way, corporate can rebuild trust through their apology statements.

Table 4 shows that, every statement in our data adopted “Describing event” and “Assessing responsibility” for elaborating and illustrating what happened, and which party should take the responsibility. Besides, “Offering redress” and “Expressing integrity” were also preferred, for the corporate to express that their lack of intention to do harm, and to show that they are willing to take some action for this adverse outcome, even if sometimes they are not the main party responsible. “Making promise” accounts for not a particularly large proportion, which demonstrates the company’s sincerity and confidence in future improvements. However, in our data, 40% of companies would choose to apologize for the current undesirable consequences while avoiding making commitments for the future. In our data, “Motivating emotion” only accounts 25%, the reason is that this strategy is generally highly related to the nature of the event itself. Using this strategy in tragic stories can resonate with the public, thereby better demonstrating one’s benevolence.

In Table 1, the preference of the employment of the strategies can be further revealed. “Offering redress” emerges as the most frequent element in apology statements, constituting a principal component of the discourse. Subsequently, “Expressing integrity” also occupies a significant proportion, often recurring within the same apology statement, serving as a means for corporations to underscore their possession of sound values and the absence of malevolent intent. “Describing event” and “Assessing responsibility” are also utilized with considerable frequency within corporate apologies. The intent is to elucidate the sequence of events to the public while simultaneously demonstrating the company’s capability to delineate responsibility clearly, identifying the party genuinely responsible for the adverse outcomes.

In summary, Chinese corporate prefer to repair trust by showing its integrity and ability, while in some certain cases, benevolence can also be chosen.

In terms of the effectiveness, this paper tried to analyze in the perspective of netizen’s comments. However, we found that the comments can be impacted by various factors, including the nature of the event, the reputation of the company, or even the policies. Besides, many comments with lots of “likes” are not focusing on the apology statement itself, but on the event. For example, “We should support our national enterprises, but then some of these enterprises specifically deceive their own people.” This comment gained the most “likes” among the comments under the statement number 8. This kind of comment actually skips the content of the apology statement, merely venting dissatisfaction about the incident or the topic. Hence, the paper tried to analyze the

effectiveness of the apology statement under the same topic in order to minimize the unstable factors.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to identify the strategies employed by Chinese business organizations to successfully rebuild trust and restore a positive corporate image. Six apology strategies are identified according to our data: Describing event, Assessing responsibility, Offering redress, Making promise, Expressing integrity, and Motivating emotion. These apology strategies can help companies rebuild three facets of their trustworthiness: ability, integrity, and benevolence, and can also positively affect the public’s causal attribution. This paper attempts to facilitate the understanding of the apology speech act in the corporate-public context, which has been discussed and explored by many scholars, and the proposed linguistic strategies can also enhance the trust relationship between the company and the public.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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