



**ISSN Online 2617-359X**



## **Performative Remorse and the Erosion of Trust: Rethinking Apology Rhetoric in Contemporary Brand Communication**

**Francis Wachira & Claudia Mumo**

**ISSN: 2617-359X**

# Performative Remorse and the Erosion of Trust: Rethinking Apology Rhetoric in Contemporary Brand Communication

<sup>1\*</sup>Francis Wachira & <sup>2</sup>Claudia Mumo

<sup>1&2</sup>Daystar University

Email of the Corresponding Author: [wachiraprof@gmail.com](mailto:wachiraprof@gmail.com)

*How to cite this article:* Wachira, F., & Mumo, C. (2026). Performative remorse and the erosion of trust: Rethinking apology rhetoric in contemporary brand communication. *Journal of Marketing and Communication*, 9(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t7084>

## Abstract

In contemporary brand communication, apologies are increasingly issued in the absence of actual wrongdoing, functioning as strategic and symbolic gestures rather than mechanisms of moral repair. This paper examines the rise of performative apologies and their implications for trust, authenticity, and accountability in organizational communication. Grounded in Situational Crisis Communication Theory and employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study analyzes five publicly posted mock apology messages that share similar structures, tones, and communicative intents. Using Fairclough's three-level CDA framework, the analysis explores how apology language is linguistically constructed, discursively circulated, and socially normalized outside crisis contexts. Findings reveal that these messages systematically imitate the genre of genuine apologies while avoiding responsibility, blending apology discourse with promotional narratives, and reframing accountability as performance. This normalization of simulated remorse contributes to apology fatigue, public skepticism, and the erosion of the moral authority of apologies. The paper argues that the strategic misuse of apology rhetoric undermines organizational authenticity and weakens the capacity of apologies to repair trust during genuine crises. The study contributes to scholarship on crisis communication, discourse, and organizational ethics by highlighting the need to restore proportionality, sincerity, and accountability in apology practices.

**Keywords:** *Performative apologies; Critical Discourse Analysis; organizational trust.*

## 1.0 Introduction

In modern communication environments, the apology has evolved from a solemn act of moral recognition into one of the most frequently deployed communication strategies across corporate, political, and digital spaces. Historically rooted in interpersonal morality, apologies were meant to address real harm, acknowledge wrongdoing, and facilitate relational repair. However, shifts in contemporary media culture, especially within the fast-paced ecosystem of social media, have significantly altered the expectations placed upon organizations and public figures. Today, brands are expected to demonstrate awareness, emotional intelligence, and responsiveness in real time. This heightened need for engagement has led to the proliferation of apology statements, many of which are issued in contexts where no genuine wrongdoing exists.

The emergence of performative apologies must be understood within this larger communication landscape. Performative apologies are those issued primarily for strategic, symbolic, or

impression-management purposes rather than to repair actual harm. Organizations frequently apologize for minor inconveniences, pre-emptively respond to anticipated criticism, or issue public apologies as branding tools meant to humanize the organization. This practice aligns with Bentley's (2024) description of the dilution of apology rhetoric, in which apology becomes a routine communicative device rather than a sincere moral act. As apologies become more detached from wrongdoing, they risk losing their moral weight and their ability to repair trust. Instead of enhancing credibility, performative apologies may cultivate skepticism and distrust in audiences who interpret them as manipulative rather than sincere.

This paper argues that the misuse of apology rhetoric has significant implications for brand authenticity, public trust, and crisis communication practice. Drawing on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) and integrating insights from contemporary research on apology effectiveness (Brooks, Dai, & Schweitzer, 2014; Pacheco et al., 2019; Yang, 2024), brand anthropomorphization (Puzakova et al., 2013), moral psychology (MacLachlan, 2015), and digital culture (Yadav, 2024), the paper examines how the overuse and strategic manipulation of apologies undermine the communicative purpose of remorse. Through this exploration, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of apology inflation, public fatigue, and the decline of apology sincerity in modern organizational communication.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Corporate apologies have become increasingly common as organizations face heightened public scrutiny and accountability (Coombs, 2013). Research demonstrates that public apologies are effective crisis communication tools for repairing damaged corporate reputations, with stakeholders preferring apology strategies to compensation approaches (Kiambi & Shafer, 2016). Organizations use apologies to restore social legitimacy by dissociating themselves from wrongdoing and reaffirming public values (Hearit, 1995). However, the effectiveness of apologies depends on multiple factors, including cultural context, timing, and audience willingness to accept them (George, 2020). While highly accommodative responses generally lead to better organizational impressions and trust levels (De Blasio & Veale, 2009), some critics argue that corporate apologies risk becoming ritualized, potentially diminishing their positive effects (Coombs, 2013). The ethics of corporate apologies also present unique challenges, as they differ significantly from interpersonal apologies and require attention to speaker credibility and audience reception (Koehn, 2013; Pace et al., 2010). Coombs (2007) formalized this practice through Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which posits that the effectiveness of an apology depends on the degree to which the organization is responsible for the crisis. SCCT recommends apologizing only in high-responsibility crises, as issuing an apology inappropriately can misrepresent the severity of the issue, confuse stakeholders, or damage credibility. Over time, however, the frequency and contexts of organizational apologies expanded significantly. Companies began apologizing not just for crises but also for service delays, unpopular decisions, and even humorous campaign executions. Rhodes (2016) observes that multinational corporations face additional complexity, as apology expectations differ across cultures. When organizations attempt to replicate interpersonal apology rituals without the emotional grounding required for sincerity, they risk appearing artificial or disingenuous.

## **2.0 Theoretical Framework**

<https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t7084>

This study is grounded in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the growing use of performative apologies in contemporary brand communication. SCCT posits that apologies are appropriate only when organizations bear clear responsibility for harm, as misuse can distort stakeholder perceptions and erode trust (Coombs, 2007). However, brands increasingly deploy apology rhetoric outside crisis contexts, thereby violating this principle and transforming apologies into impression-management tools (Bentley, 2024; Waseem & Kamal, 2024). Using Fairclough's CDA framework, this paper analyzes how linguistic choices, genre conventions, and discursive strategies are mobilized to simulate sincerity while advancing strategic goals, thereby weakening authenticity and undermining the moral function of apology (MacLachlan, 2015; Zhang, 2025).

## 2.1 Literature Review

Research on apologies reveals their complex role as moral rituals with varying effectiveness in maintaining social cohesion. Apologies function as neo-Durkheimian rituals that activate collective emotions of shame and guilt, potentially improving intergroup relations and supporting reparative behaviors (Páez, 2010). They serve as remedial exchanges that restore victims' dignity and acknowledge moral transgressions, requiring both genuine emotion and convincing performance (Fineman & Gabriel, 2010). However, the effectiveness of apologies depends significantly on their context and authenticity. While apologies are vital for maintaining social fabric and civil society (Vines, 2017), they can become "abortive rituals" when conditions deny genuine transformation (Trouillot, 2000). Three distinct types emerge: purification, humiliation, and settlement rituals, each serving different functions in global contexts (Kampf & Löwenheim, 2012). The moral and legal value of apologies lies in their restorative capacity (Pino-Emhart, 2020), though empty gestures may cause additional harm rather than healing (Smith, 2008). In interpersonal interactions, apologies acknowledged harm, demonstrated humility, and affirmed the dignity of the wronged party. MacLachlan (2015) argues that apologies carry symbolic moral weight because they represent a voluntary acceptance of responsibility. This acceptance is integral to social repair, as it signals a willingness to prioritize relational harmony over ego preservation. Importantly, the moral quality of apology is rooted in sincerity. When apologies are genuine, they convey remorse and foster forgiveness, helping relationships heal. Traditionally, apologies were inherently relational. Without a human agent capable of introspection, remorse, and emotional transformation, the apology loses its ethical grounding. This understanding becomes crucial when considering the transition to organizational apologies. Unlike individuals, corporations lack intrinsic moral agency. They cannot experience guilt or remorse in the human sense, which complicates the ethical import of their apologies.

The digital era has witnessed a proliferation of performative apologies across various contexts, from comedy to corporate communications. Research demonstrates that apologies are increasingly treated as strategic tools rather than genuine expressions of remorse (Bentley, 2024). Social media platforms have become central to this phenomenon, with companies such as Facebook using apology performances to strengthen brand identity rather than to facilitate genuine transformation (Hall, 2020). Platform apologies often employ individualist approaches to structural problems, distributing culpability while offering pseudo-empowerment through new tools (Cross & Hoffmann, 2021). The performative nature of apologies extends beyond digital platforms to entertainment (Goltz & Zingsheim, 2023) and movements such as #MeToo, where paratexts

surrounding apologies are crucial for meaning-making (MacArthur, 2019). Some apologies function as "half-performatives" that mask ongoing issues while gaining cultural capital (Spencer, 2021). This trend reflects broader cultural shifts in which apologies serve as symbolic actions for the diffusion of conflict and the establishment of political order (Borneman, 2005). Bentley (2024) describes how the saturation of apology rhetoric has weakened its moral significance. Brands now use apologies to align with trending issues, participate in public conversations, or project humility. Although these apologies may serve marketing goals, they compromise the moral integrity of remorse. Yadav (2024) notes that cancel culture and public pressure often force organizations to issue statements preemptively, even before verifying facts. As apology becomes a performance, it risks becoming a hollow gesture rather than a meaningful act of accountability.

A genuine apology comprises several components: acknowledgment of wrongdoing, expression of remorse, explanation of the cause, acceptance of responsibility, and commitment not to repeat the offense. Scholars such as Mehta et al. (2020) and Pacheco et al. (2019) emphasize that each component is essential for restoring trust. Acknowledgment validates the harm experienced by the affected party. Remorse demonstrates emotional understanding. Responsibility-taking shows accountability. Corrective action builds confidence in future behavior.

When these elements are present, apologies promote moral repair and encourage reconciliation. According to Brooks et al. (2014), even superfluous apologies in interpersonal settings can increase perceived empathy. However, this effect does not always translate to organizations. While individuals may forgive easily when personal emotions are involved, organizations must demonstrate structural, behavioral, or policy-based change to regain trust. When apologies fail to include essential elements, they weaken trust. Incomplete apologies that rely solely on emotional expressions without responsibility-taking may appear manipulative. MacLachlan (2015) argues that insincere apologies create moral contradictions because the apologizer appears to recognize wrongdoing while simultaneously evading accountability. Stakeholders often interpret such statements as attempts to minimize consequences or shift blame. Yang (2024) demonstrates that audiences are increasingly critical of apology statements that appear formulaic or disingenuous. Particularly in digital spaces, users scrutinize language, tone, timing, and the presence of symbolic gestures such as emojis (Yang, 2022). When organizations use apologies as communication shortcuts rather than sincere expressions of remorse, they undermine the integrity of the act and damage relationship trust.

## **2.2 Apologies as Strategic Communication**

Organizations increasingly use apologies for strategic reasons unrelated to wrongdoing. Apologies may be deployed to soften criticism, create emotional alignment, or reposition the organization during competitive campaigns. Waseem and Kamal (2024) note that apologies are frequently integrated into crisis communication toolkits as default strategies rather than contextual responses. Zhang (2025) explains that instrumental apologies function through strategic rather than relational trust pathways. Instead of addressing harm, they attempt to manage perception. When organizations rely on instrumental sincerity, their apologies lack emotional depth and moral grounding. This raises ethical concerns and practical risks because audiences can differentiate between genuine and constructed remorse.

Strategic apologies often backfire when stakeholders detect ulterior motives. Hornsey et al. (2024) find that audiences place greater value on reform signals than culpability signals. When apologies emphasize sympathy without providing a credible plan for improvement, audiences perceive them as public relations tactics. Such reactions weaken organizational integrity and strain stakeholder relationships. Another risk relates to anthropomorphized brands. Puzakova et al. (2013) illustrate that when brands are presented as humanlike, audiences apply human moral expectations. As a result, humanized brands that apologize insincerely face harsher moral judgment. Strategic apologies, therefore, create ethical responsibilities that organizations may be unable to fulfill.

Social media has transformed public expectations of organizational accountability. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram enable instantaneous communication, mass visibility, and participatory public opinion. Bentley (2024) observes that organizations face pressure to issue rapid responses even before they have gathered complete information. This environment fosters reactive apology practices that may lack sincerity or accuracy. Public users frequently demand apologies for perceived offenses that may not involve wrongdoing. Yadav (2024) highlights that cancel culture amplifies these demands, pushing brands to engage in performative remorse to maintain relevance or avoid backlash. As apologies proliferate without moral grounding, their symbolic weight diminishes. Apology inflation leads to apology fatigue. When audiences encounter too many apologies, they become desensitized. Spencer (2021) demonstrates that half-performative apologies, such as National Geographic's racial apology, create temporary sentiment improvement but fail to establish long-term credibility. Bentley (2024) argues that the saturation of apology rhetoric leads to cynicism, with audiences increasingly viewing all apologies as scripted or strategic. Repeated exposure to apologies diminishes their capacity to inspire forgiveness or signal moral repair. As a result, genuine apologies issued during real crises may be met with diminished trust, posing significant risks for organizations.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, focusing exclusively on publicly posted mock or performative apology messages. The study conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of a five-message, purposively selected sample of apology-style messages that share similar structures, tones, and communicative intents. These messages were selected because of their near-identical use of apology conventions despite the absence of actual wrongdoing. Using Fairclough's three-stage CDA framework, the analysis examines textual features, discursive practices, and broader social meanings embedded in these messages, enabling an in-depth exploration of how apology rhetoric is strategically constructed and normalized in contemporary brand communication.

### **4.0 Findings**

Applying Fairclough's three-level Critical Discourse Analysis framework to five publicly posted mock apology messages reveals a highly patterned and normalized form of performative remorse. Across all five texts, apology discourse is systematically detached from moral transgression and repurposed for strategic, promotional, and reputational ends. The consistency of linguistic choices, genre conventions, and ideological positioning suggests the emergence of a stable discourse practice rather than isolated communicative experimentation.

#### 4.1. Textual Level: Lexical Choice, Modality, and Apology Structure

At the textual level, all five messages closely imitate the formal genre of an apology statement. Each begins with markers typically associated with institutional accountability, such as “Official Apology Statement,” formal salutations, or authoritative openings that establish seriousness. However, this seriousness is undermined by the absence of core components of an apology, including explicit acknowledgment of harm, identification of affected parties, or acceptance of responsibility.

Lexically, the texts avoid verbs associated with culpability such as *caused*, *failed*, *harmed*, or *wronged*. Instead, they rely on euphemistic and positively charged language, for example:

- “We may have gone a little too far...”
- “We apologize for expanding beyond expectations...”
- “We are sorry for reaching more communities than planned...”

These constructions reframe positive organizational actions as pseudo-transgressions. The apology verb *sorry* is stripped of moral weight and redeployed to introduce achievements. This represents a clear case of semantic reversal, in which apology language functions to celebrate rather than to repair.

Modality is also strategically managed. The use of hedging phrases such as “*might*,” “*just*,” “*a little*,” and “*perhaps*” minimizes any suggestion of seriousness. Humor and irony are embedded directly into the text, often through playful closings or ironic warnings, such as rhetorical phrases equivalent to “*You’ve been warned*” or “*Forgive us for doing more.*” These elements signal to the reader that the apology is not meant to be interpreted literally.

Visually and structurally, all five messages retain corporate branding, official layouts, and polished design, reinforcing institutional authority while simultaneously neutralizing accountability. The apology appears official in form but hollow in content.

#### 4.2. Discursive Practice Level: Genre Mixing, Production, and Interpretation

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis reveals extensive interdiscursivity, particularly the blending of apology discourse with promotional and branding discourse. While the texts borrow heavily from the genre of crisis apology, they are produced and circulated as marketing content rather than corrective communication. Each message draws on recognizable apology conventions such as formal headings, institutional voice, and public-facing statements. However, these conventions are repurposed to function as attention-grabbing narrative frames. Instead of responding to a complaint or crisis, the apology format is used to introduce messages about growth, expansion, innovation, or market success.

For example, the discursive move follows a consistent pattern:

1. Invoke apology genre to establish seriousness and humility.

2. Subvert that genre by revealing there is no actual offense.
3. Redirect attention toward positive organizational achievements.

This genre mixing guides audience interpretation. Readers are positioned not as harmed stakeholders but as spectators invited to appreciate the organization's cleverness or boldness. The irony embedded in the messages encourages audiences to read them as humorous or playful, reinforcing the idea that the apology is symbolic rather than ethical. The repetition of this structure across all five messages suggests routinized production rather than spontaneous creativity. These apologies are not reactive but strategically premeditated, designed to circulate easily on digital platforms where novelty, irony, and relatability drive engagement.

#### **4.3. Social Practice Level: Ideology, Power, and Normalization**

At the level of social practice, the five messages collectively contribute to the normalization of performative remorse within contemporary organizational communication. By repeatedly deploying apology rhetoric in contexts devoid of wrongdoing, the texts reshape the social meaning of apology itself. Ideologically, these messages promote a performative view of accountability rather than a substantive one. Apology becomes a stylistic choice rather than a moral obligation. This aligns with broader digital communication norms that reward emotional performance, humor, and self-awareness over ethical responsibility. The apologies also reinforce corporate power by allowing organizations to control the narrative. By framing expansion or success as requiring forgiveness, the organization positions itself as simultaneously powerful and humble. This discursive strategy masks asymmetries of power and deflects critical scrutiny by inviting admiration rather than accountability.

Across the five cases, the repetition of mock-apology structures suggests that audiences are being socialized to accept apology rhetoric as routine branding practice. Over time, this normalization risks eroding the moral authority of genuine apologies, contributing to apology fatigue and increasing public skepticism. When apology language is continually used without consequence, its capacity to signal trustworthiness, remorse, or ethical commitment is significantly weakened.

#### **5.0 Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that performative apologies function less as mechanisms of moral repair and more as strategic discursive performances that reframe accountability as branding. By systematically imitating apology genres without acknowledging wrongdoing, responsibility, or corrective intent, these messages hollow out the ethical core of apology and turn it into a rhetorical device for attention and legitimacy. At the textual level, irony and euphemism neutralize culpability; at the discursive level, apology discourse is blended with promotional narratives; and at the social level, this repetition normalizes a culture of simulated remorse. This practice aligns with impression management rather than trust repair, contradicting the conditions under which apologies are effective in crisis communication. As apology rhetoric becomes routine and detached from the harm it addresses, its symbolic power erodes, fostering public skepticism and apology fatigue. Ultimately, performative apologies undermine authenticity and weaken organizations' communicative capacity to rebuild trust in genuine crises.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings challenge the normative assumptions of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which posits that apology is appropriate only when organizational responsibility is clear. The routine deployment of apology rhetoric outside crisis contexts represents a misalignment between theory and practice, revealing how strategic communication logics have overtaken ethical accountability. Viewed through a Critical Discourse Analysis lens, performative apologies illustrate how language is mobilized to manage impressions and reproduce institutional power while appearing humble and transparent. This discursive shift has significant implications for organizational authenticity, as audiences increasingly evaluate apologies not by their form but by their alignment with action. When apology becomes a performative signal rather than a moral act, it loses its capacity to repair trust, reinforcing skepticism toward institutional communication and narrowing the space for genuine accountability.

## 6.0 Recommendations

First, organizations should reserve apology rhetoric for situations involving actual harm or clear responsibility. Apologies should not be used as generic engagement tools or branding devices, as overuse weakens their moral force and undermines public trust. Communication strategies must distinguish between moments that require explanation, celebration, or clarification and those that genuinely require remorse. Second, organizations should separate promotional messaging from accountability discourse. When positive actions, such as expansion or innovation, are framed as apology-worthy events, the boundary between sincerity and performance blurs. Clear genre separation helps preserve the credibility of both marketing communication and crisis response. Third, apology statements should be grounded in accountability rather than tone. Effective apologies require explicit acknowledgment of harm, taking responsibility, and an indication of corrective action. Without these elements, apology language risks being interpreted as impression management rather than ethical commitment. Fourth, communication teams should institutionalize ethical review of apology messages, especially in digital contexts. This includes assessing whether an apology is necessary, proportionate, and aligned with organizational values. Ethical oversight can prevent the normalization of performative remorse.

## References

- Ashktorab, Z., Buccella, A., D’Cruz, J., Fowler, Z., Gill, A., Leung, K. Y., Magnus, P. D., Richards, J., & Varshney, K. R. (2025). Who's sorry now: User preferences among rote, empathic, and explanatory apologies from LLM chatbots. *arXiv.org*.
- Bentley, J. M. (2024). Devaluing public apologies in the age of social media.
- Brooks, A., Dai, H., & Schweitzer, M. (2014). I am sorry about the rain. Superfluous apologies demonstrate empathic concern and increase trust.
- Cai, Y., Chu, Y., Xu, Z., & Liu, P. (2025). To apologize or not to apologize. Trust repair after automated vehicles’ mistakes. *Transportation Research Record*.
- Chung, A. Y. (2018). Examining the effectiveness of using CSR communication in apology statements after bad publicity.

- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Situational Crisis Communication Theory.
- Fischer, Y. (2013). The effectiveness of company's response strategies to negative publicity in social media.
- Hornsey, M., Chapman, C., La Macchia, S. T., & Loakes, J. (2024). Corporate apologies are effective because reform signals are weighted more heavily than culpability signals. *Journal of Business Research*.
- Islam, Z. B. (2018). To apologize or not to apologize. How organizations should respond to executive employees' private life misconduct.
- Li, L. Z., & Soule, S. (2023). The power of public confession. Mobilization and reputation effects of disclosing socially irresponsible performance. *SSRN*.
- MacLachlan, A. (2015). Trust me, I am sorry. The paradox of public apology.
- Mehta, A. M., Tam, L., Greer, D. A., & Letheren, K. (2020). Before crisis. How near-miss affects organizational trust and industry transference. *Public Relations Review*.
- Pacheco, N. A., Pizzutti, C., Basso, K., & Vaerenbergh, Y. V. (2019). Trust recovery tactics after double deviation. Better sooner than later. *Journal of Service Management*.
- Paramitha, V., Tan, S. Z., & Lim, W. M. (2025). Undoing greenwashing. The roles of greenwashing severity, consumer forgiveness, growth beliefs, and apology sincerity. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*.
- Puzakova, M., Kwak, H., & Rocereto, J. F. (2013). When humanizing brands goes wrong. The detrimental effect of brand anthropomorphization amid product wrongdoings.
- Rhodes, E. S. (2016). Conceptualizing cross-border differences in MNC apologies as a strategic response to culture.
- Rhodes, E., Clarke, S., & Yamaguchi, M. K. (2025). The impact of proximity on trust restoration from an organizational apology. *Management and Economics Review*.
- Shao, W., Moffett, J. W., Quach, S., Surachartkumtonkun, J., Thaichon, P., Weaven, S., & Palmatier, R. W. (2022). Toward a theory of corporate apology. Mechanisms, contingencies, and strategies. *European Journal of Marketing*.
- Spencer, L. G. (2021). National Geographic's racial apology. A half-performative. *Western Journal of Communication*.
- Tsarenko, Y., & Tojib, D. (2015). Consumers' forgiveness after brand transgression. The effect of corporate social responsibility and response.

- Tong, Z., Feng, J., & Liu, F. (2022). Understanding damage to and reparation of brand trust. A closer look at image congruity in the context of negative publicity. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*.
- Waseem, M. A., & Kamal, M. F. (2024). Mending the image. The role of crisis communication and apology strategies in recovering from brand transgressions. *Journal of Asian Development Studies*.
- Yadav, T. (2024). Navigating cancel culture. PR and marketing tactics for brand reputation management.
- Yang, K. (2024). How to rebuild trust through apology. Evidence from public apology letters. *Journal of Pragmatics*.
- Yang, K. H. (2022). How sajjiao wins forgiveness. The effectiveness of emojis in rebuilding trust through apology. *Discourse and Communication*.
- Zhang, Q. (2025). Relational versus instrumental pathways of apology. The roles of performative sincerity, strategic presentation, and trust restoration.