



“We Are Deeply Sorry”: Chinese Corporate Apologies Posted on Weibo

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the components of Chinese corporate apologies by adopting both quantitative and qualitative methods. The investigation is based on 25 corporate apology statements posted on Weibo, one of the most popular social media platforms in China. The results indicate that two apology components, namely explicit apology and offer of repair, are more salient than others, and more than half of the apology statements contain the components of explanation and taking on responsibility, while the use of another two components, which include promise for forbearance and expression of sorrow, depends on the severity of the offensive act. In addition, apologies made by Chinese companies via Weibo are realized through various linguistic representations, such as IFIDs, commissives, appraisal resources, presuppositions and metadiscourse (attitude markers, boosters and code glosses). Hopefully, this study might provide insight into future research on corporate apologies and how to restore corporate images in crisis communication.

Key words: Apologies; Companies; Weibo

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1. INTRODUCTION

Apologies are generally post-event acts intended to compensate for an offense committed by the apologizer

(Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Olshtain, 1989; Márquez Reiter, 2000). The function of apologizing is to maintain harmony between the apologizer and the apology recipient (Goffman, 1971; Brown & Levinson, 1978). By apologizing, the apologizer is willing to humiliate himself or herself for the offence, and thus takes on responsibility and offers repairs (Olshtain, 1989). Therefore, an apology is face-threatening for the apologizer while at the same time it is face-saving for the apology recipient (Obeng, 1999). We are living in the “Age of Apology” when numerous apologies, realized in various forms, are offered by governments, companies, organizations and celebrities in order to make up for the mistakes they have made (Kampf, 2009, p. 2257). In recent years, corporate apologies, as a means of image restoration, have attracted ample attention of a large number of scholars in diverse fields (Lee & Chung, 2012; Page, 2014). How the companies deal with customers’ complaints about poor services, food issues, corruption and so on has something to do with their own images, reputation and trustworthiness. In addition, corporate apologies, unlike other types of apologies, are usually not issued face to face, but through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Weibo which are convenient, quick and interactive. By doing so, companies can apologize to the customers or the public, explain the causes of the offense, admit their mistakes and offer repairs in time, thus restoring their reputation and repairing consumers’ trust. Although a large number of studies on corporate apologies have been conducted (Koehn, 2013; Page, 2014; Lee & Atkinson, 2019), research on the components of Chinese corporate apologies posted on social media platforms is still rare. As such, this study attempts to conduct a component analysis of Chinese corporate apologies posted on Weibo. Theoretically, this research can enrich prior studies on corporate apologies by analyzing corporate apology statements posted on Weibo from the perspective of pragmatics. Practically, it would provide insight into how to help companies restore their images by apologizing in crisis communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Apology

Apologizing falls under the speech act of expressive which is used to convey the psychological state or mental attitude of the speaker (Searle, 1976). According to Goffman (1971), apologizing can be viewed as a remedy for an offense whose aim is to reestablish social harmony. In line with Goffman's definition of apologizing, Leech (1983) claimed that the goal of apologizing was to maintain harmony between the speaker and the hearer. Olshtain (1989) held that an apology was intended to provide support for the hearer who was affected or offended by a violation of X. Bergman & Kasper (1993) regarded apology as a compensatory action to an offensive act. Based on the above definitions, we can see that the functions of apologies mainly include compensating for an offensive act and restoring social harmony between the apologizer and the apology recipient.

Empirical studies on apologies have been widely examined in the area of cross-cultural pragmatics. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) conducted a cross-cultural study of requests and apologies. This study belonged to the an ongoing project named Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) whose goals were to compare the patterns of realization regarding requests and apologies across languages or varieties, and investigate the similarities and differences between native and non-native realization patterns of requests and apologies. In their study, discourse completion test (DCT) was adopted to collect data from both native and non-native speakers of eight languages or varieties. With regard to the speech act of apologizing, they summarized five realizations of apologies which encompassed explicit illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), taking on responsibility, explanation or account of cause, offer of repair and promise of forbearance (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 206-208). These five realizations of apologies together constituted what Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984, p. 207) called the "apology speech act set". Their research provided a theoretical framework for and insight into analyzing the speech act of apologizing. Later, Olshtain (1989) explored the similarities and differences of the realization patterns with regard to apologies across four languages, namely Hebrew, Australian English, Canadian French and German. The research results indicated that the four languages investigated demonstrated similarities in IFID and expression of responsibility preference. Apart from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) and Olshtain (1989), other scholars (Sugimoto, 1997; Suszczyńska, 1999; Huang, 2001; Tanaka, Spencer-Oatey, & Cray, 2008; Beeching, 2019) also conducted similar cross-cultural research on the speech act of apologizing, which shed light on cross-cultural communication and future studies on apologies.

What's more, research on monocultural apologies is also worth noticing. These studies usually focused on the

frequency, strategy type and combination of apologies in English (Fraser, 1981; Holmes 1990), Chinese (Kádár, 2007; Fu, 2010), Akan (Obeng, 1999) and Persian (Shariati & Chamani, 2010). Inspired by previous studies on apologizing, scholars began to explore apologies made by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. Related studies (Salehi, 2014; Jassim & Nimehchisalem, 2016) generally analyzed the apology strategies of EFL students, or made a comparison of apology strategies by EFL learners and native speakers of English, which contributed to EFL pedagogy and L2 (second language) pragmatic research. Besides, there were studies concerning the effects of apologies made by public figures, organizations and institutions (Kampf, 2009; Kauffman, 2012; Manika, Papagiannidis, & Bourlakis, 2015; Kádár, Ning, & Ran, 2018; Qi, Xiao, & Kádár, 2019). These studies pointed to the need for discussing not only the speech act of apologizing, but also the effects of apologizing (minimizing responsibility, winning customers' heart, etc.).

2.2 Corporate Apology

Corporate apology, as a means of restoring corporate reputation and images, has attracted the attention of scholars in different fields, especially crisis communication and linguistics. On the basis of reviewing literature on apologies, accounts and excuses from the perspective of rhetoric and sociology, Benoit (1995) proposed the theory of image restoration which can be adopted by companies faced with crises to restore their images, or by critics to evaluate messages produced by corporations during crises. This theory covered five general image restoration strategies, namely denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action and mortification (Benoit, 1977, p. 179). A close look at this theory would reveal that it overlapped with Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's (1984) apology speech act set to some extent. For instance, the strategy of corrective action was similar to the apology strategy of offer of repair established by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984). Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory provided a new perspective for analyzing corporate apologies. Instead of solely investigating corporate apology strategies, Yao, Chen, & Li (2011) examined the rhetoric strategies of the apologies, statements and promises made by five companies involved in the milk scandal in 2008, and the effect of these strategies. The results of this research revealed that the effectiveness of the rhetoric strategies depended on whether the strategies were in agreement with the nature of the incident and the interests of the audience. In order to test their hypotheses about the effect of corporate apologies, Lee & Chung (2012) constructed an online experiment on the effect of responsibility admittance and sympathetic expression on relieving public anger. The research found that a corporate apology statement with active responsibility was more likely to relieve public anger than that with passive responsibility,

while sympathetic expression was not an essential element to relieve public anger.

With the booming of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), some scholars started to explore corporate apologies occurring in CMC. For example, Page (2014) explored the distinctive components and the rapport building potential of corporate apologies posted on Twitter in response to customer complaints. The results demonstrated that a formulaic IFID may be combined with additional components which played a role in saving the apologizer’s face and building rapport between the interactants. Also, the component of offers of repair appeared more frequently than that of explanations, and corporate apologies were combined with follow up moves like questions and imperatives, which suggested that corporate apologies had its own distinctive features. Also, the “repeated, somewhat formulaic use of greetings and signatures” further presented the distinctiveness of corporate apologies (Page, 2014, p. 30). In the same vein, Morrow & Yamanouchi (2020) concentrated on a comparative analysis of apologies to hotel guests in English and Japanese within Spencer-Oatey’s (2008) rapport building framework, which expanded studies on corporate apologies in CMC.

Although research on corporate apologies is growing, it is still far from adequacy. For example, scholars probing into corporate apologies usually adopt the theoretical framework of apology strategies or components proposed by previous scholars (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) conducting cross-cultural studies on apologies, while the existing framework may not be applicable to the analysis of corporate apologies in that they are different from other types of apologies. What’s more, research on how these strategies or components are linguistically realized is rare. These research gaps need to be patched for a better understanding of corporate apologies. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the components and linguistic representations of apologies made by Chinese companies via Weibo.

3. DATA AND METHOD

Data for the present research consists of 25 corporate apology statements posted on Weibo (one of the most popular social media platforms in China) from 2016 to

Table 1
Apology component statistics

Case	Explicit apology	Taking on responsibility	Explanation	Offer of repair	Promise for forbearance	Expression of sorrow	Sum
1	○	○	○	○			4
2	○	○	○	○		○	5
3	○	○	○	○	○		5
4	○	○	○	○			4
5	○	○	○	○			4
6	○	○	○	○	○		5
7	○			○			2
8	○			○			2

To be continued

2020. The selected apologies or apology statements are made by Chinese companies in different industries such as catering (Haidilao; HEYTEA), education (Haixue; RYB), transportation (Didi), finance (Jingdong Finance), express (YTO), lodging (Rujia; Quanji), online entertainment (iQIYI), and so on. In respond to customers’ complaints, these companies posted apologies on their official Weibo accounts with the aim of winning back consumers’ trust and restoring corporate images.

A large number of scholars (Fraser, 1981; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Fasold, 1990; Page, 2014; Lewicki, Polin, & Lount Jr, 2016; Kádár et al., 2018; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020) have examined the strategies, discursive moves, components or structures of apologies based on their own data, which has contributed to the studies of apologies. Among the typologies of apologies established by previous scholars, Blum-Kulka & Olshtain’s (1984) classification of apologies (IFID, taking on responsibility, explanation or account of cause, offer of repair and promise of forbearance) is one of the most representative frameworks in that it has been adopted by many scholars to conduct either monocultural or cross-cultural research on apologies. Since the present study focuses on Chinese corporate apologies posted on Weibo, Blum-Kulka & Olshtain’s (1984) classification of apology components might not be totally suitable for this study. Thus, a component analysis of the data was conducted to identify the components of Chinese corporate apologies on the basis of the data and previous researchers’ typologies of apologies. Finally, six apology components were identified: (1) explicit apology; (2) taking on responsibility; (3) explanation; (4) offer of repair; (5) promise for forbearance; (6) expression of sorrow. Then, the quantitative research was conducted to calculate the statistics of apology components so as to describe the overall frequency of corporate apology components. After that, each apology component and its linguistic representation were analyzed with examples selected from the data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The statistics of apology components of 25 corporate apology statements posted on Weibo are demonstrated in **Table 1**.

Continued

Case	Explicit apology	Taking on responsibility	Explanation	Offer of repair	Promise for forbearance	Expression of sorrow	Sum
9	○	○		○			3
10	○			○			2
11	○	○	○	○	○		5
12	○	○	○	○			4
13	○			○			2
14	○	○	○	○	○		5
15	○			○			2
16	○		○	○			3
17	○			○	○		3
18	○		○	○			3
19	○	○	○	○		○	5
20	○		○	○			3
21	○	○		○			3
22	○	○	○	○	○		5
23	○		○	○			3
24	○	○	○	○	○	○	6
25	○			○	○		3
Sum	25	14	16	25	8	3	91

As is shown in **Table 1**, the apology components of explicit apology and offer of repair appear in all the data so these two components are more salient than others. In addition, more than half of the companies in our data either explain or take on responsibility for the offense, which indicates that most companies are willing to explain the cause of the incident or acknowledge their responsibility when apologizing. Moreover, the frequency of the last two apology components, namely promise for forbearance and expression of sorrow, is really low. It is also noteworthy that at least two apology components are employed by Chinese companies issuing apologies, and more often than not, most Chinese companies adopt more than two apology components when apologizing. On the whole, the statistics suggest that not all apology components occur in each Chinese corporate apology. In the following part, the apology components utilized by Chinese companies will be analyzed with examples.

4.1 Analysis of Corporate Apology Components

4.1.1 Explicit Apology

Explicit apologies demonstrate the companies' attitude towards the offence in an explicit way. Also, this category of apology components could let the readers or customers feel the sincerity of the apologizer. Explicit apologies are expressed through IFIDs which mainly cover six performative verbs: (1) (be) sorry; (2) excuse; (3) apologize; (4) forgive; (5) regret; (6) pardon (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 207). The noun forms of the performative verbs (apology; forgiveness) can also be used to express explicit apologies. In addition, an explicit apology can be intensified through an intensifier within the IFID.

- (1) ……我们表示非常抱歉。(海底捞)
 ...We are deeply sorry. (Haidilao)
- (2) ……希望能获得公众的谅解。(滴滴)
 ...We hope to receive forgiveness from the public. (Didi)

Example (1) is an apology made by Haidilao Hot Pot for hygiene problems. The use of "sorry" indicated that Haidilao was apologetic for the whole thing. Also, the intensifier "deeply" within the IFID "sorry" intensified the explicit apology. In example (2), Didi hoped that it could receive forgiveness from the general public. The use of "forgiveness" played a role in requesting the public to pardon Didi's offense.

(3) 在此，我们代表全季酒店，向当事人及社会公众表示深刻的道歉。(全季)

Here, we'd like to express our deep apologies to the person involved and the general public on behalf of the Quanji Hotel. (Quanji)

Example (3) is an explicit apology issued by Quanji Hotel for the incident that one of its cleaners cleaned the toilet with the towels used by the customer. The noun form (apology) of the performative verb (apologize) was employed to display Quanji's apology to the customer and general public. The apology also contained an adjective "deep" demonstrating Wanda's profound feelings, which may make the public feel its sincerity.

4.1.2 Taking on Responsibility

Taking on responsibility is an apology component employed by the apologizer to show his or her part in the offense (Lewicki et al., 2016, p. 183). By taking on responsibility, the apologizer recognizes his or her fault, thus creating the need to apologize. Therefore, this apology component is face-damaging for the apologizer but face-saving for the apology recipient. The degrees of acknowledging responsibility might differ, but they all indicate the apologizer's acceptance of responsibility.

(4) 作为平台，我们辜负了大家的信任，负有不可推卸的责任。(滴滴)

As a platform, we let you down, and therefore shall bear inescapable responsibility. (Didi)

(5) 首先，用户在查阅自己的支付宝年度账单时默认勾选“我同意《芝麻服务协议》”这件事，肯定是错了。(芝麻信用)

First of all, it is definitely our fault that the users automatically agree to the Zhima Service Agreement when checking their Alipay’s annual bills. (Zhima Credit)

The apologizer may directly take on responsibility, as in example (4). Or one can use expressions indicating explicit self-blame to acknowledge his or her responsibility. As is shown in example (5), Zhima Credit explicitly admitted its fault for default signup. When expressing its fault, Zhima Credit used the booster “definitely”, thus closing down alternatives and displaying its total responsibility for the incident (Hyland, 2008, p. 52). Although it was face-threatening for Zhima Credit to recognize its total responsibility, this behavior was face-saving for the users, which might contribute to repair users’ damaged trust of Zhima Credit.

(6) 这次的行为低级而且愚蠢……(盒马鲜生)

Our behavior is contemptible and stupid... (Fresh Hema)

The apology component of taking on responsibility can also be realized through expressions indicating self-deficiency of the apologizer. Due to regional discrimination during the recruitment process, Fresh Hema apologized to the public, saying that its behavior was “contemptible” and “stupid”. These two adjectives displayed Fresh Hema’s negative appraisal of its behavior, thus indicating its self-deficiency.

4.1.3 Explanation

The apology component of an explanation can take various forms. When apologizing to the public, companies could explain and specify the causes of the offense so that the public can know the “ins and outs” of the incident. In addition, they might attribute the cause of the incident to a third party or deny some inaccurate information by giving evidence, thus evading responsibility and restoring corporate images (Page, 2014, p. 37).

(7) 在得知抽查结果后,我们第一时间展开了内部调查,目前初步了解主要的原因是门店操作不规范造成的,如取冰时把使用过的冰铲直接放置在冰块上,制作饮品时冷藏牛奶放置在常温状态中时间太久等。(喜茶)

After knowing the spot test result, we conducted an internal investigation immediately. Based on our preliminary findings, the main cause is that the stores didn’t follow the standardized instructions. For instance, employees put used ice shovels directly on ices cubes, and kept refrigerated milk at room temperature for too long when making drinks. (HEYTEA)

The above example is part of the apology statement issued by HEYTEA, a Chinese tea drink chain. In example (7), HEYTEA gave an account of the offense by using the causal expression “the main cause is that”. By doing so, the general public can know the cause (non-standardized operation of the store) of the incident. However, the explanation was still vague. Then, the code gloss “for instance” was employed to supply additional information of the cause (Hyland, 2008, p. 52). In this way, a specific

explanation of the stores’ non-standardized operation was given so that the public can know exactly what resulted in the incident.

(8) 我们也想就“为什么没有第一时间将车主信息提供给家属”的问题做一点释疑。由于平台每天会接到大量他人询问乘客或车主的个人信息的客服电话,而我们无法短时间内核实来电人身份的真实性,也无法确认用户本人是否愿意平台将相关信息给到他人。所以我们无法将乘客和车主任一方的个人信息给到警方之外的人,希望能获得公众的谅解。(滴滴)

We also want to give further explanation about the question “Why didn’t we provide the car owner’s information for the passenger’s family members in the first place?” The platform receives a large number of customer service calls asking for passengers’ or car owners’ personal information every day, while we can neither verify the authenticity of the caller’s identity in a short time nor confirm whether the users are willing to let the platform give relevant information to others. Therefore, we cannot offer passengers’ or car owners’ personal information to others outside the police. We hope to receive forgiveness from the public. (Didi)

The apologizer may give further explanation about the offense by saying that it is out of his or her control to evade responsibility. A passenger was murdered by a driver of Didi Hitch, which has sparked public anger. The passenger’s family members requested Didi to offer information about the driver, while Didi didn’t do so. Later, Didi explained that it received lots of calls from people asking for information about the passengers or car owners, while the authenticity of the caller’s identity was out of its control so it was unable to offer relevant information to others outside the police, which was exactly the answer to the question “Why didn’t we provide the car owner’s information for the passenger’s family members in the first place?” In this way, what Didi had done was totally justifiable owing to its lack of control of the situation (Benoit, 1997, p. 180).

(9) 我们不可能也确实从未把地域作为招聘员工的要求。……盒马在北京的部分用工需求,是通过造成本次事件的当事方力伟公司这样的第三方劳务合作伙伴来解决的;在与合作伙伴一起工作的过程中,导致合作伙伴的工作人员在招聘过程中私自声称“不招北京人”。(盒马鲜生)

We never consider region as a requirement in recruiting employees. ...Part of Hema’s labor demand in Beijing was issued by the third-party labor outsourcing partner, Liwei, which directly caused this incident; during the collaboration, the recruiter, a staff member of Liwei, personally claimed that “We don’t hire Beijing residents” in the recruitment process. (Fresh Hema)

Denying false or inaccurate information is also a means of explanation. Fresh Hema was accused of recruitment discrimination because one of its staff members claimed that Beijing residents wouldn’t be hired. This incident has received widespread comment and criticism from

netizens. The company later posted an apology letter on its official Weibo account, saying that they never hold regional discrimination in recruiting employees. The use of the negation marker “never” plays a crucial role in directly rejecting other dialogic alternatives, thus denying the inaccurate information and protecting the company’s integrity (Martin & White, 2008; Fuoli & Paradis, 2014). Moreover, Fresh Hema also tried to attribute the cause of the offense to a third party. In example (9), Fresh Hema further explained that the recruiter was from its third party partner which directly caused this incident, thus shrinking its responsibility for the case.

4.1.4 Offer of Repair

Another apology component is an offer of repair which occurs in all the data. By offering repairs, the company makes clear that they are taking or will take corrective actions to deal with the offensive act. This apology component is really crucial in that the public do care about what the company will do to compensate for the damage the incident brings about. Taking corrective measures after the incident is conducive to winning back the public’s trust as well as restoring corporate reputation. Companies can offer either general or specific repairs.

(10) 我们2017年进入南京，三年来受到了市民的支持，针对此次出现的问题，我们一定会努力整改，重新获得大家的信任。(喜茶)

Since we opened stores in Nanjing three years ago (in 2017), we have enjoyed support from the Nanjing citizens. With regard to the issue, we will definitely endeavor to rectify in order to regain your trust. (HEYTEA)

With regard to the microbial contamination detected in drinks sold in Nanjing stores, HEYTEA offered a general repair, saying that it will rectify to regain the public’s trust. The action of rectification is actually general in that no specific corrective measure is provided. Moreover, the use of the booster “definitely” enables HEYTEA to express and emphasize its certainty of conducting rectification to address the issue (Hyland, 2008, p. 53). Although it is not specific, the repair at least displays HEYTEA’s promise of rectifying and improving its work.

(11) 公司决定，自即时起，所有门店的菜品价格恢复到2020年1月26日门店停业前的标准。(海底捞)

From now on, the food prices in all branches will be restored to pre-closure levels before January 26, 2020. (Haidilao)

Compared with general repairs, specific repairs are more effective as specific corrective measures can remedy the damage to a greater extent. Haidilao, a chain of hot pot restaurants, offered a specific repair when issuing an apology for coronavirus-related price hike. As is shown in example (11), Haidilao decided to restore the food prices in all branches to pre-closure levels. Since this repair restored the state of affairs existing before the offensive act, it can let the public feel the sincerity of Haidilao’s corrective action (Benoit, 1997, p. 181).

(12) 我们会继续积极配合警方，同时全力做好家属后续善后工作。(滴滴)

We will continue to actively cooperate with the police, and try our best to appease the family members and compensate for their loss at the same time. (Didi)

(13) 在专家指导下，与家长建立家园共育机制，尽最大可能开放透明办学。(红黄蓝)

Under the guidance of experts, we will establish a joint education system with parents and stay open and transparent to the greatest extent possible during operation. (RYB)

When offering repairs, companies might enlist third-party endorsement, recommendation and warranties to win back the public’s trust (Bourne, 2013). In example (12), Didi claimed that it would continue to cooperate with the police, which was a way of enlisting the help of a third party to increase the credibility of its corrective action. The adverb “actively” further straightens its positive attitude towards working together with the police to solve the problem, and the verb “continue” presupposes that the company has already cooperated with the police and will continuously do so. In the same vein, RYB Education, which was accused of child abuse, also tried to enlist the help of a third party (expert) to regain the public’s trust. For instance, example (13) demonstrated that RYB would follow the experts’ suggestions to build a joint education system with parents. Collaborating with the experts contributed to improving RYB’s professionalism, thus making its repair convincing.

(14) 嗨学特别工作组决议：

- 一、涉事子公司即日起立刻、全面停业整顿。
- 二、公司所有部门开展严格自查，一经发现，严肃处理。
- 三、请相关学员通过嗨学自去年开通的绿色直通车(tongdao@haixue.com)反映问题，嗨学将以最大诚意、最快速度予以解决。(嗨学)

The special working group of Haixue decides:

1. Shut down and rectify the subsidiary involved immediately and comprehensively.
2. Conduct strict investigations in all the departments. Once found, violations will be dealt with seriously.
3. For students related, please give us feedback about any problems through the Green Lane (tongdao@haixue.com) launched last year. Haixue will solve your problems as soon as possible with our greatest sincerity. (Haixue)

Usually, companies offer more than one repair when apologizing. Haixue, an online education platform, was involved in false publicity and exposed by China’s 3.15 (World Consumer Rights Day) gala. In order to address the issue, Haixue offered three corrective actions by using frame markers “1, 2, 3”, as is shown in example (14). Frame markers function to sequence, making the repairs clear to the people involved or customers (Hyland, 2008, p. 51). The two adverbs “immediately” and “comprehensively” demonstrated Haixue’s resolution to rectify the subsidiary involved. Moreover, Haixue

provided an e-mail address for students related so that they can give feedback about any problems by email. In this way, their problems can be dealt with as soon as possible. These corrective actions further presented Haixue’s sincerity to solve the problem.

4.1.5 Promise for Forbearance

When apologizing, companies may also promise not to repeat the offensive act (Lewicki et al., 2016, p. 183). This apology component displays the companies’ commitment to stop similar incidents from happening. More often than not, it co-occurs with the apology component of offering repairs.

(15) 即日起，德邦快递将在全国展开为期一周的整改培训，坚决杜绝此类事件再次发生！（德邦）

One week from now, Deppon Express will conduct rectification and training nationwide, and resolutely prevent such cases from happening again! (Deppon)

(16) 在此，我们再次向广大消费者表示深深的歉意，也非常感谢大家对上上谦的关注和严格要求，今后我们将继续努力完善提升标准给大家带来更好的体验，并杜绝此类事件的发生。（上上谦）

Here, we’d like to express our sincere apologies to customers again, and thanks for your concern and strict requirements. We will continue to improve our standards to provide better services, and avoid such cases. (Shang Shang Qian)

In example (15), Deppon Express held that it would rectify and resolutely prevent such incidents. In the same vein, Shang Shang Qian Hot Pot apologized to the customers and promised to improve its standards to avoid such cases. The speech act of commissives here committed the apologizer to some future course of action, thus increasing the sincerity of apologies (He & Ran, 2002, p. 191). It is also noteworthy that example (15) included an attitude marker “!” conveying Deppon’s resolution to prohibit similar cases (Hyland, 2008). In addition, the apology component of a promise for forbearance in the two examples co-occurred with the component of an offer of repair, which showed that different apology components might co-occur in some cases.

4.1.6 Expression of Sorrow

An expression of sorrow is also a category of apology components found in the data. By employing this component, the apologizer tries to reveal his or her emotional reactions to the offensive act. This apology component is mainly realized through affect resources. Affect is concerned with resources for construing the speaker’s positive or negative feelings (Martin & White, 2008).

(17) 对于乐清顺风车乘客赵女士遇害一事，我们感到万分悲痛。（滴滴）

We are deeply saddened by the death of Ms. Zhao who took a Didi Hitch car in Yueqing. (Didi)

(18) 发生这样的事件令我们感到非常的痛心，并为我们运营监管不力而深深的自责。（全季）

This incident makes us feel deeply sad, and we feel remorse for our inadequate operation and monitoring. (Quanji)

As is shown in example (17), the word “sadden” was used to express Didi’s emotional reactions to the death of its passenger. In the same vein, Quanji employed the adjective “sad” to convey its negative feelings of the incident. Both “sadden” and “sad” displayed the apologizers’ negative affect. It is also noteworthy that the intensifier “deeply” occurred in both examples, which intensified the apologizers’ affect. Using affect resources to express sorrow enables the apologizer to develop empathy with the apology recipient so that the sincerity of an apology can be increased.

4.2 Discussion

On the basis of the above analysis, we can see that some apology components are more salient while others are not, which is in accordance with Kádár et al.’s (2018) research on public ritual apology. In the present study, two apology components, namely explicit apology and offer of repair, appear in each corporate apology. The reason is that in apologizing, an explicit apology is a must, and since an apology is about responding to an offensive act, companies should offer some repairs to compensate for the offense so as to win back the public’s trust. What’s more, more than half of the Chinese companies are willing to take on responsibility or offer an explanation when issuing apologies. Acknowledging responsibility is a way to display the companies’ part in the offense, while explaining can let the public know that the companies do conduct investigations into the causes of the incidents. If used properly, these two components can contribute to restoring corporate images so as to make the apology successful. Furthermore, the apology component of a promise for forbearance is less salient, compared with the above mentioned four components. Once a promise is made, it cannot be canceled easily. Since some companies, like Didi, have apologized more than once for similar cases, they won’t risk employing this component which commits them to some future course of action while apologizing. The least salient component is an expression of sorrow as this component usually appears in apology statements addressing the death of passengers (Didi), employees’ misconducts (RYB) or hygiene problems (Quanji). Incidents like the death of people or staff members’ misconducts are infrequent and severe, and hygiene problems pose threats to human health. Consequently, companies are supposed to present their emotional reactions to the offensive acts in order to develop empathy with the people involved and increase the sincerity of their apologies.

The data in our study also reveals that not all apology components occur in each apology statement. To be specific, Chinese companies employ at least two apology components (explicit apology and offer of

repair) when issuing apologies, and more than two apology components are adopted in most cases, whereas only one case contains six apology components. Lewicki et al.'s (2016, p. 190) study on the structure of effective apologies indicated that an apology with more components was more effective than that with fewer components, and certain components (taking on responsibility, offer of repair and explanation) were viewed more important than others. The data of the present study is relatively small in that only 25 apology statements issued by Chinese companies are collected, so whether Lewicki et al.' (2016) findings are applicable to the present study still needs to be tested in future studies.

5. CONCLUSION

The study investigates the components of Chinese corporate apologies posted on Weibo, adopting both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data in this study reveals some apology components are more salient than others. To be specific, two apology components, namely explicit apology and offer of repair, occur in all the corporate apology cases, and more than half of the apology statements include the components of explanation and taking on responsibility, while the use of another two components, which consist of promise for forbearance and expression of sorrow, depends on the severity of the offensive acts. In addition, corporate apologies are linguistically realized through IFIDs, commissives, appraisal resources, presuppositions and metadiscourse (attitude markers, boosters and code glosses). The use of these linguistic representations helps to indicate and intensify the apologizer's attitude towards and feeling of the offensive act, thus making the apologies sincere. However, the present study neither examines corporate apology responses nor makes a cross-cultural study of corporate apologies, which points to the need for future research on these directions. In addition, future investigations into the similarities and differences of corporate apologies made by various sectors are still needed in order to have a better understanding of corporate apologies.

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