

Linguistic Redemption: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Brand Apologies on Social Media in the Age of Cancel Culture



Lubna Khalil ^a Iram Sagheer ^b Ahmad Sohail Lodhi ^c

Abstract: *In a social media-driven world where sentiments quickly form and spread online, the corporate apology has become an essential tool for safeguarding the brand's reputation and mitigating a crisis. This study examines the impact of the "cancel culture" movement on multinational corporations by examining public apologies made over the past six years on X and Instagram platforms. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis and Media Affordance Theory to examine the language of these apologies in terms of tone, structural options, and the manifestation of blame and responsibility. It also highlights the impact on the brand's accountability and public trust. The research emphasizes the public's construction and interpretation of each platform in light of the affordances it offers. In the study, the researchers identify a recurring set of rhetorical strategies that are employed to restore consumers' trust in the following four cases of apologies drawn from distinct industries. This study explores the linguistic strategies and the engagement of the audience and shows that there's a core tension between the need of the public to demand accountability and the need of the company to minimise damage. Overall, the research is able to strengthen the understanding of the corporate discourse on social media by highlighting specific communicative strategies that help to build a meaningful user engagement in order to maintain in a world of online reactivity.*

Keywords: Brand Apologies, Crisis Communication, Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Affordance Theory, Social Media Discourse, Digital Reputation Management

Introduction

Social media plays a key role in creating public opinion and can impact the reputation of brands in today's digital world (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). In case of a mistake or a mishap, a brand gets blamed in a very short amount of time, and organisations then usually seek out apologies in the public sphere in order to advance their reputation. However, audiences do not respond to apologies in the same manner. Some see them as being honest, having a moral compass. Others are dismissed as 'PR stunts' to deflect the criticism (Denisova, 2023). The communicative process of these apologies, particularly those posted on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, is highlighted in this study. The researchers employ critical discourse analysis to examine the effect of language choices on trust in the public. It also highlights the shift in perception of a brand in a cancel culture.

Recently, the cancel culture has become a major factor in shaping public opinion and societal perspective as brands are increasingly being judged for their actions. Most importantly, social media plays a pivotal role in this phenomenon. In the case of backlash or a failed campaign, apologizing becomes an essential means of communication for crisis management and strategic recovery. The aim of the research is to examine the methods used by brands to apologize online. It is concerned with linguistic means of expressing regret and how these affect responsibility and trust when brands find themselves in a liable position for their actions, measures, and initiatives.

^a PhD Scholar, Riphah Institute of Languages & Literature, Riphah International University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

^b PhD Scholar, Riphah Institute of Languages & Literature, Riphah International University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

^c Assistant Professor, Department of Business Education, Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

This research addresses a critical gap by intersecting organisational communication and the socio-political phenomenon of cancel culture. Though traditional crisis management often focuses on logistics, this research offers a discourse-centred critique. It provides insights for brand advisors, digital communication specialists, and social media analysts. The study examines the audience's response to different platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, because each has its own rules and communication styles.

This research targets 4 brand apology cases selected from different industries, so this small sample might not be representative of all responses or industries, which limits generalizability. It mainly focuses on Twitter and Instagram, and excludes other platforms that may have diverse audiences and different linguistic conventions. The study is limited to the timeframe 2020-2024.

Literature Review

Social media has provided brands with a communication platform to interact with the public, and it exposes corporations to heightened scrutiny and prompt retaliation. This happens notably within the mob culture known as cancel culture. When brands make mistakes, they often turn to online apologies to mitigate the damage. Social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter have redefined the role of organisations in communicating with the public during a crisis. It shows the audience's responses and reactions immediately, objectively, and thoroughly. This explains both forgiveness and protest through public commentary.

Nowadays, the popularity of *cancel culture* is capturing the audience's attention for a better understanding of how brands repent when they make a mistake. One of the important aspects in these apologies is whether businesses genuinely accept responsibility or shift the blame. There is no guarantee of a positive outcome, with all apologies. For instance, some apologies appear more genuine and sincere, while others are based on ambiguous lexical grounds. There is existing research that has explored organisational responses to crises, but there are limited studies analysing the actual discourse of these apologies. This study is on the selection of words, tone, and structure that mould the perception of society. It also delves into how these apologies are interpreted by audiences, and what effect they have on the brand's reputation.

The brand apology on the Internet has emerged as an important field of crisis communication. There are various language strategies used by businesses, such as blame mitigation, regret, and indirect admission of fault. These strategies are all deployed by the brands to control public perception and to safeguard their brand image (Georgiadou, 2023). These are also used to reframe comments and to re-establish trust using language. The response from the public, however, is not simply about an acceptance or rejection of the apology, but it causes a reaction that is happening on social media. They frequently determine the outcome of the crisis, dependent on their reactions. For instance, viral memes can easily circulate and contribute to turning apologies into jokes or sources of support. This serves as proof that the online users are active and can attribute meanings that the brand did not anticipate (Williams & Stroud, 2024).

Likewise, for influencer marketing and cancel culture, authenticity is crucial to gaining brand forgiveness and reducing backlash. A fast and sincere response is the best way to prevent long-term reputational damage, according to data from 254 consumers as revealed by a study by Dolan et al. (2026). This emphasises the need for rapid communication in mitigating negative brand engagement.

Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be used to gain insight into the mechanisms of power and ideology at play in corporate apologies. He believes that language is political and ideological, and that this makes apologies more than just words of apology, i.e., they are acts of power. Brands employ certain language to shape the story and make themselves appear responsible for the error and deserving of forgiveness. This supports larger ideas about corporate power and the public's willingness to forgive. CDA shows that brand apologies do more than respond to mistakes as they also help maintain or question existing social power structures. (Falco, 2021). Zhang et al. (2025) found that corporate companies on Chinese social media usually apologise for staff mistakes or faulty products, using different ways to say "sorry", but most people still do not accept such apologies, showcasing that the problem itself and how the apology is given

really matter (Zhang et al., 2025). Similarly, Songyan studied how Chinese beauty brands use different corporate apology strategies on Weibo, which affect their public engagement, offering insights into managing corporate image and handling public criticism on social media more effectively (Songyan, 2025).

In the past, we have had examples of failed and successful apologies made by the brands. Fearn-Banks (2007) has stated the successful apology by Tylenol in 1982 during the Cyanide crisis. This crisis occurred when seven people lost their lives due to the consumption of cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules. The company had a massive risk of losing its customers due to the lack of trust in its leading pain relief brand. However, Johnson & Johnson efficiently managed the crisis with a quick response and took corrective actions. The company recollected 31 million bottles across the whole country and paused its advertisements. They communicated directly with the audience. They also issued tamper-evident packaging. The CEO of the company prioritised the safety of their consumers over profit. This crisis is remembered as the model for how brands should communicate and apologise, which can help them to regain the public trust. On the other side, we have the example of a failed apology in front of us. (Fearn-Banks & Kawamoto, 2024).

Meister (2019) has stated that the failed apology of United Airlines in 2017 was after the passenger-dragging incident. The airline had to face the severe anger of the audience when the passenger, Dr. David, was forcefully dragged off the flight in Chicago, as the flight was overbooked by the airline, so they had to excuse the passengers for the accommodation of crew members. However, Dr. David declined to give up his seat, which resulted in violence. The CEO of United Airlines shifted the blame to the passenger instead of directly apologising for the incident. He defended the violence by stating that they were just re-accommodating the passengers. This statement led to severe anger in the audience for the airline that had pressurised the CEO to apologise again with more sincerity and humility. However, it did not benefit the airline to get back its image (Meister, 2019).

Nakamura (2020) explained cancel culture as a social boycott. When any public figure, community, or brand does something unethical and harmful that is against cultural and social norms, the public decides to punish that entity informally by refusing to engage, promote, and financially support the offender. This way of punishment is adopted by those people who are not powerful enough to hold the elites accountable. There are two conflicting opinions about cancel culture. Some believe that it is the best way for social justice, while others find it to be against free speech. (English, 2021).

It is also found that when a company sincerely admits fault, it can lower public anger and help repair its reputation. This study draws attention to the fact that the language of apology should meet the expectations of the public, especially when the public image of the company is at risk. (Kim & Cameron, 2011). So, research is helping brands learn about apologies in ways that feel more authentic as cancel culture continues to evolve. For instance, admitting collective responsibility helps build trust with customers (Coombs, 2007). Similarly, social media pressure brands to manage public perception, and brands must balance sincerity with strategic communication to survive in the cancel culture era (Page, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The study includes both descriptive and analytical approaches to analyse the language and structure of brand apologies. The study will aim at identifying and analyzing the illocutionary forces of language acts. It contains expressions of regret, acceptance of responsibility, and requests for forgiveness (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Austin's speech act theory explains that this aids in comprehending the purpose of brands' apologies (Austin, 1975).

This study adopts the perspective of Fairclough because the understanding of the relationship between power and language in a society is created (Fairclough, 2013). With the help of CDA (critical discourse analysis), it can be explored how the brands' language is being used to manage the image of the brands. The study also explores the brand's role in taking accountability and the crisis of cancel culture. The study examines brand apology through a brand-linguistic approach, analyzing the language and tone used to

apologize to marketers, to uncover the full picture of the complex dynamics between brands and audiences in the digital sphere.

The technological and social affordances of each media platform also influence the reactions of the audience to a brand apology. Media Affordance Theory (MAT) accounts for the affordances of the platforms, which invite or influence communication behaviours. For instance, Twitter's rapid text-based communication makes it possible to find apologies in viral conversations and hashtag conversations. Instagram, on the other hand, is all about the images and videos, which promote storytelling. It can help to make apologies more sincere and personal. The differences in platforms can create a situation where an apology that works on one platform doesn't work on another. Media Affordance Theory is used to understand how digital apologies are perceived, interacted with, and experienced by web users (Evans et al., 2017).

Research Methodology

Research Method

This research is based on a qualitative method to analyse public apologies from renowned brands. Primary sampling techniques have been used by the researchers to select standardised brands because specific kinds of apology cases are required that reflect the problem and how brands react to call-out cultures. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth examination of the language, tone, and behaviour of brand apologies.

Sampling Techniques

The researchers have selected some specific brands because they want specific kinds of apology cases that clearly illustrate the issue and how brands respond to cancel culture. Researchers carefully selected apologies from those brands that fit the research goals. The criteria for brand selection are:

1. Brands that issued apologies on Twitter and Instagram between 2020 and 2024
2. Brands that have apologised in response to social and reputational controversies.

The researchers have purposefully selected four apology cases that meet the following criteria:

- 1) They received extensive press coverage
- 2) They involved issues on formal digital networking platforms, and
- 3) They were directly connected to public indignation over religious, ethnic, or moral issues.

Data Collection

The data on apologies from 5 brands was gathered through social media, the press, and the brands' official websites, particularly in response to cancel culture incidents. The data collection process includes:

- Identifying posts from social media platforms (Twitter and Instagram)
- Collecting screenshots or transcribing apology posts and public responses.
- Analysing the language, tone, and behaviour of brand apologies

Data Analysis

Data analysis is based on three interconnected theoretical frameworks, i.e., Speech Act Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and Media Affordance Theory.

Balenciaga's Teddy Bear Controversy (2022)

Balenciaga faced backlash in November 2022 for a holiday campaign. It featured the children with teddy bears in bondage-style accessories, which were accused by the critics. The brand showed inappropriate messaging that led to swift apologies and legal action. This imagery sparked widespread backlash, and the brand removed the campaign alongside issuing apologies. They also went for legal action against the production team, but the controversy left a lasting impact on the reputation of the brand.

Textual Analysis

Balenciaga chose not to get involved in the controversy and stated that the photos were never intended to be used to support child exploitation. In Image Restoration Theory, it is called dissociation. It is a linguistic technique to differentiate a brand identity from a crisis. The organisation tries to avoid giving the incident the serious attention it deserves by trying to make it look like an isolated incident. In official statements, the brand expressed words such as "deeply regret" and "strongly condemn." The language that they used highlighted their disapproval of how the campaign was experienced. It strongly denies the offensive interpretations, and it does not take full responsibility. Formulations such as 'The images should not have been featured' redirect the focus from the active decision makers and do not commit to an explicit responsibility.

To regain trust, Balenciaga noted its commitment to child safety and ethical fashion. The brand acted quickly by pulling the campaign and issuing an apology. They also took action against their collaborators through legal action. These actions were portrayed as a major step to address this issue and to reassure its audience that it will not happen again. The company wanted to avoid any repercussions and reduce the extent of any damage to its reputation in the long term.

Discursive Practice

Social media was used to disseminate the campaign, and the team shared photos of childhood innocence combined with adult themes. The images were never accompanied by any explanation of what they were or why, which resulted in an outbreak of outrage. The public saw these images as child exploitation and reacted with anger, compelling Balenciaga to apologize, along with launching legal action against collaborators.

Social Practice

Based on the power dynamics analysis, it can be summarized that the global brand has symbolic power to influence cultural taste. However, the consumers regained their power through public uproar. This leaves one to ponder the moral of the brand. The reason is the brand's apology, which addresses damage only after exposure.

Audience Response Analysis

Audience responses varied from critical to neutral. The critical responses questioned the justification for the campaign and expressed moral outrage over the perceived exploitation of children. At the same time, neutral responses emphasised that no apology would be sufficient. This reflects emotional amplification and frustration over child protection issues. Some supportive comments express cautious support for the brand. They acknowledged their apology and corrective actions.

Interpretation Using Theoretical Frameworks

Speech Act Theory acts as a performative speech, e.g., we sincerely apologise, but uses weak language, e.g., any offence. This minimises their responsibility. Critical Discourse Analysis was the agency that used passive voice, e.g., should not have been featured. They used passive construction to avoid blame and preserve the brand's reputation. According to Media Affordance Theory, Balenciaga lost control of the scandal despite deleting content due to public outrage amplified through social media sharing and memes.

Zara's Apology in "The Jacket" Controversy (2023)

In 2023, Zara launched a campaign called "The Jacket" that showed models in a studio with covered mannequins and messy things on the floor. The campaign was made in July, but the photos were taken in September. They finally came out in December at a time when there was a war and suffering in Palestine. Many people thought the photos looked too much like the miserable scenes from Gaza, which led people to get upset. Zara said sorry on Instagram on December 12, 2023, in response, and removed the pictures.

Textual Analysis

Zara was interested in the public's perception of the images. They did not take direct responsibility for their creation and found a way to distance themselves from the controversy. The apology includes phrases such as "Unfortunately," "Regrets," and "Misunderstanding." However, Zara avoids using strong or harsh words to condemn what happened directly by maintaining a soft, neutral tone. In the statement, Zara says, "Zara regrets that misunderstanding, and we reaffirm our deep respect towards everyone." Although they spoke about respect, they failed to clearly define the values that they spoke of. Zara also claims that "These images have now been taken down." This indicates they reacted to the backlash, but the action they took was simple and not a deeper corrective action. The note "Zara regrets that misunderstanding" takes no responsibility for the problem. Rather than stating that they had made a mistake, they termed the problem a misunderstanding. There seems to be no justification for the production of the campaign, as they indicate that it was conceived in July and photographed in September, when the latest events began.

Discursive Practice

The apology was made by Zara's lawyers on Instagram after the campaign garnered a lot of criticism. Zara apologized in a simple text post, but did not add any emotional photos or additional story. The main message was about the initial concept of the campaign, with the assertion that the controversial images had been removed.

Social Practice

Brands are expected to respect all cultures and human rights in today's world. In the event of a negative event, people would like companies to rectify the situation quickly. Many people listen to what Zara said because it is a worldwide brand. However, rather than admitting it was wrong, Zara said it was a "misunderstanding" in order to shield its image. "Zara is a respectful company and believes in unbiasedness," said Zara. The company seemed to be more concerned about its public image than the fix.

Audience Response Analysis

People's reactions went from intense criticism to neutral ones. Many people said the apology did not feel honest and felt that the brand was not taking full responsibility. Others were distraught and even thought Zara's actions were deliberate. Some people supported Zara, saying the public is too sensitive and that the photoshoot was just a piece of art. They thought that not everything should be seen as offensive unless people decide to take it that way. Some people criticised Zara for using political issues for attention and not viewing their campaign as others would. A few people were sarcastic, saying the campaign was planned deliberately to compare these two events.

Interpretation Using Theoretical Frameworks

In Zara's apology, Speech Act Theory is evident in phrases like "Zara regrets," but polite phrases like "any offence" are used to avoid taking full responsibility. Critical Discourse Analysis is presented in the passive voice, using the term "misunderstanding" instead of plain "fault," thus making it difficult to directly blame the fault on the students; this shields the brand's image from fault accusations. Media Affordance Theory shows that Zara lost control of the situation as people shared their anger on social media and made memes about it.

Gemini AI's Historical Image Generation Controversy (February 21, 2024)

Google's Gemini AI faced severe backlash when users discovered that it refused to generate images of white people in historical contexts (like U.S. Founding Fathers or medieval Europe), while instantly generating diverse or wrongly represented imagery. This fueled criticism, especially from conservative commentators, accusing Google of being "woke" and putting forward revisionist history.

Textual Analysis CDA Stage 1

a) Denial of Alignment

"Google AI does not endorse revisionism or bias." This represents a strategy of detachment and creates distance between Gemini AI's outputs and Google's own values.

b) Condemnatory Language

"Unacceptable and harmful" reinforces Google's ethical take against bias in historical portrayals through ethos-driven rhetoric. "Upholding the principles of accuracy and inclusivity" appeals to corporate ethics and social accountability to illustrate a commitment to ethical and responsible AI.

c) Corporate Values

Google reaffirmed its commitment to responsible and moral AI responses, depicting its dedication to ethical transmission of information and respect for historical figures. By taking action according to these values, Google made an effort to regain its reputation as a socially and morally responsible brand.

d) Action Statement

"We have suspended the image-generation function with immediate effect" conveys a tone of seriousness and decisiveness, emphasizing the responsibility and necessary actions to take.

e) Passive Agents Omitted

"Not directly mentioned, "we apologise" in the statement" is a non-apologetic attitude, it does not apologise or take responsibility for anything.

f) Time Framing

"Following a detailed investigation into the controversy" justifies the delay by underlining the validity of timing and depth of response.

Discursive Practice CDA Stage 2

Google's PR/legal team makes an apology because of inaccurate information and seriously biased data, leading to loss of confidence in the market. The apology came out in official blog posts and on X. (or Twitter), which showed clarity of text, but lacked emotional depth and/or visuals that could have provided a more human element. The apology was met with mixed feelings by the audience as a damage control exercise by Google. Some were favourable to the corrective behaviour, while others were critical of the delay and the insufficient level of responsibility.

Social Practice CDA Stage 3

The ideology here is focused on emphasizing the importance of corporate responsibility with AI and growing concerns of algorithmic bias in public history narratives.

Google's dominance in the AI market was questioned ethically, and an apology was made with the intention of regaining the lost trust and balancing its powers with moral dilemmas.

The explanation aimed to address public values like involvement and correctness; however, the delay in making a statement made the audience doubt its sincerity and authenticity.

Audience Response Analysis

Supportive

Comments like "Good on Google for pausing the feature so quickly" showed satisfaction or praise. No one as such supported the AI for its responses.

Critical

Critical responses such as "They only apologised because of public backlash", coded under sincerity, questioned, and damage control.

Neutral/Sarcastic

Neutral or sarcastic remarks like "Sure, now they care about 'accuracy'—how convenient" suggested existing distrust and doubt.

Interpretation Using Theoretical Frameworks

Google's apology statement for the Gemini AI controversy functions as an action-driven speech act. The statement "We have paused the image-generation feature effective immediately" acts not only as words but also as a firm determination. However, the absence of a direct "we apologise" takes away the sincerity from the speech, indicating a withdrawal of complete acceptance of fault. This shows the strategies where corporations make seemingly heartfelt apologies while refusing to take full responsibility at the same time. Through CDA, Google's apology can be formulated as a power struggle. By saying "upholding the principles of accuracy and inclusivity Google associates itself with social values while refusing to take direct responsibility. The apology was made through blog posts and X., without any visual aids, reinforcing a formal corporate voice. This tactical handling of speech attempts to regain authority while taking criticism with the least damage. Google exploited the features of social media platforms, such as blogs or Twitter, to spread its word instantly and widely. However, the decision to opt for a highly formal and textual tone instead of engaging on an emotional basis or personalised messaging restricted the human touch. As a consequence, the message spread immediately but failed to develop an emotional impact on the audience, resulting in mixed responses ranging from praise to straight-up scepticism or sarcasm, like calling it too "woke".

Speech Act Theory demonstrates that the company's response was constative speech ("we have terminated") instead of a performative apology. It does not show overt illocutionary acts of contrition. In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), corporate language had power in a bureaucratic vocabulary ("procedures," "review"). The analysis also shows impersonal responsibility and calculated compliance by state or religious authorities in condemning this action. Media Affordance Theory exposes the deployment of image repair strategies such as corrective action (terminating the supplier) and compensatory action towards the victim (giving money), as well as evasive strategies of mortification and denial.

Thom Browne's Stripe Controversy (2023)

Thom Browne and Adidas Stripe Lawsuit

In 2023, Thom Browne faced a high-profile trademark action filed by Adidas. The disagreement centred on Browne's use of a four-stripe design. Adidas claimed it had recalled its iconic three-stripe trademark, allegedly leading to consumer confusion. Adidas demanded 7.8 million dollars in damages, but a New York jury eventually ruled in Thom Browne's favour. The jury asserted that there was no trademark violation. This action of the jury drew public attention to issues of brand identity and cultural freedom in the fashion industry.

Textual Analysis

Thom Browne, in response, argued that its four-stripe logo had nothing to do with Adidas's logo. The brand argued that its design was unique and was a design for a luxury request. Thom Browne's lawyers and public relations firm referred to Adidas' actions in legal and public statements as "unjustified" and "overreaching." These terms were used to discredit the blame, yet kept the professional tone. Thom Browne shared its dedication to creative freedom and adhering to the law. It opted to fight back in court instead of settling, strengthening the perception of the brand as an ethical, modern one in the process. They adopted the trial to publicize their values and their brand identity. The positive judgment was warmly embraced as a testament

to its authenticity and fair play. Phrases such as "always been different designs" didn't explicitly accuse Adidas. It latches onto the brand's own story as a way to hold on to political language and not trigger pressures. The brand described it as a "pure legal dispute. It highlights the fact that the design conflict was not like other conflicts. This enabled it to limit the hidden reputational damage for the difference of opinion.

Discursive Practice

This controversy played out in both mainstream and electronic media. This situation was reported in the major outlets, while social media platforms were used by reviewers and fans to show their support or give their opinion. Thom Browne is presented as an independent designer fighting back against the corporate world. Adidas was portrayed in this scenario as a big and powerful company that is trying to control the basic design features. It simply attempts to take hold of an aesthetic style that Browne maintained should be an issue of creative freedom.

This legal battle reflected broader pressures in the fashion industry between cultural expression and trademark enforcement. The Thom Browne case became a symbol of resistance against the aggressive policing of basic design elements. It sparked a broader debate, and public opinion sided with Browne. They viewed the legal victory as a win for independent creators over corporate control.

Audience Response Analysis

Public responses to the Thom Browne vs. Adidas trademark action showcased a variety of opinions. It reflected broader sentiments about creativity, commercial influence, and intellectual property in the fashion industry.

Interpretation Using Theoretical Frameworks

Thom Browne's legal defence and public messaging worked as performative speech acts. It asserts its originality by saying, "Our designs stand piecemeal." In CDA, the use of unresistant voice and non-confrontational language in public statements shifts the blame and avoids raising the conflict. This eventually maintains the brand integrity. Social media amplified the sacrifice narrative, with druggies celebrating Browne's defence of design autonomy and critiquing Adidas's perceived overreach.

Discussion

Both Zara and Balenciaga faced severe public backlash, but they managed their reputations using very different linguistic strategies. Balenciaga issued a multi-layered apology that utilised a wide range of speech acts, i.e., expressive, commissive, assertive, declarative, and directive. For example, they used "We apologise" and "I apologise to anyone offended" to show regret. They used assertive statements like "We take this matter seriously" and "We strongly condemn abuse of children" to reclaim some moral high ground. By announcing legal action (commissive acts) and stating "I take my responsibility" (declarative acts), the brand attempted to take control of the narrative and restore its ethical standing. On the other hand, Zara took a much more defensive approach. Instead of owning the mistake, the brand used vague language and indirect speech acts to distance itself from the controversy. Phrases like "Zara regrets that misunderstanding" or "Some customers felt offended" are used to shift the blame onto the audience. They managed to avoid making any real promises to change by framing the issue as a matter of interpretation.

The way these brands utilised social media platforms also significantly damaged public perception. Balenciaga's delayed response on Instagram backfired. By the time they posted a simple text apology, the anger had already gone viral. One major issue was keeping their comment section open, which actually created a space for public outrage. They missed the chance to use the platform's visual nature to convey real sincerity by confining themselves to plain text and avoiding graphics or a human spokesperson. Similarly, Zara's social presence felt equally flat. A simple text post is not really enough to bridge the gap with an angry audience, especially when the CEO stays silent. This lack of personal engagement made the apology feel low-effort.

Conclusion

The research focuses on how brands use linguistic strategies to apologise and to show sincerity. It uncovers the linguistic choices and textual tone that are considered more genuine, e.g., simple or direct messages. When the brands rely on complicated or defensive wording, the perception of the public suffers, and the brand is viewed as dishonest. A recurring theme across these four cases is the use of a passive tone that shifts the blame onto the viewer's perception and neglects the brand's action. Zara and Balenciaga were only making efforts to protect their brand's reputation because they recognised public reactions as elusive and fake. This led the public to raise different questions about their tone and timing. Their feedback began to vary from encouraging to supportive to doubtful and critical. Both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Speech Act Theory show that these apologies are often more about image repair than taking actual responsibility. Our research also suggests that brand advisors need to be realistic to write better apologies. A sincere apology is not about saying the right words, but it is about timing and the use of the right platform features to regain the trust of their consumers. The brands might also be able to fix their reputations by being more transparent and less defensive.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*. Sage.
- Denisova, A. (2023). The impact of negative media coverage, brand-hate, or consumer boycotts on the employer brand (in the example of Amazon).
- Dolan, R., Wilkie, D. C. H., Harrigan, P., Rao Hill, S., & Wastell, G. (2025). Please forgive me: A pathway to mitigating negative brand engagement after an influencer scandal. *Australasian Marketing Journal (AMJ)*, 14413582251374708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582251374708>
- English, M. (2021). *Cancel Culture: An Examination of Cancel Culture Acts as a Form of Counterspeech to Regulate Hate Speech Online* [The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill].
- Evans, S. K., Pearce, K. E., Vitak, J., & Treem, J. W. (2017). Explicating affordances: A conceptual framework for understanding affordances in communication research. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, 22(1), 35-52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12180>
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.
- Falco, G. (2021). WHAT CONSUMERS REALLY FEEL ABOUT CORPORATE APOLOGIES: A Discourse Analysis of Reactions to Apologies on Economic and Financial Scandals in Tweets. *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 44. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i22390359v44p143>
- Fearn-Banks, K., & Kawamoto, K. (2024). *Crisis communications: A casebook approach*. Routledge.
- Georgiadou, E. (2023). How sorry are you? Intensified apologies and the mediating role of perceived remorse in corporate crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 49(4), 102356. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2023.102356>
- Kim, H. J., & Cameron, G. T. (2011). Emotions matter in crisis: The role of anger and sadness in the publics' response to crisis news framing and corporate crisis response. *Communication Research*, 38(6), 826-855. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650210385813>
- Meister, A. R. (2019). *The Power of Apology: How Crisis Communication Practices Impact Brand Reputation* [Senior Theses]. https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses/280
- Page, R. (2014). Saying 'sorry': Corporate apologies posted on Twitter. *Journal of pragmatics*, 62, 30-45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.12.003>
- Williams, K., & Stroud, S. R. (2024). The Dark Side of Memes for Brands and Society. In *Corporate Cancel Culture and Brand Boycotts* (pp. 197-222). Routledge.
- Zhang, C., Ye, P., & Li, X. (2025). A corpus-based analysis of corporate apologies and public responses on Chinese social media. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 240, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2025.02.008>
- Zheng, S. (2025). "Sorry? Anything else?": How corporate apology strategies influence Chinese social media engagement. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 20(5), 167-181. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v20n6p167>