

# The Influence of Corporate Apology Strategies on Consumer Forgiveness Intentions in Chinese Social Media

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## Abstract

This study explores the impact of various external corrective actions embedded in corporate apologies on consumer forgiveness, thereby contributing to effective crisis management. During corporate crises, companies often issue apologies to mitigate the damage and restore trust. However, not all apologies are equally effective. Motivated by the desire to understand what elements of an apology can increase its efficacy, the study sought to determine what specific measures can lead to greater consumer forgiveness. Utilizing a controlled experimental design, this research evaluates the effectiveness of apologies by creating hypothetical scenarios based on the 4R model (regret, reason, reparation, and reaffirmation). Three distinct apology letters were crafted to test variations in external corrective actions proposed by corporations. The results reveal that the structure and content of reparation actions significantly influence consumer response. Letters containing clear, proactive, and precise solutions were perceived as more favorable and led to higher levels of forgiveness. The study highlights the importance of carefully considered letters of apology, including clear corrective actions. It provides theoretical insights into successful crisis communication mechanisms while providing practical guidelines for public relations practitioners. By highlighting the importance of practical and proactive measures, this study contributes to better management of corporate crises and promotes enhanced public trust.

**Keywords:** corporate crisis, apology strategies, consumer forgiveness, social media

## 1. Introduction

In the realm of crisis management, organizations confront the pivotal task of devising measures that augment public forgiveness, ultimately aiming to rejuvenate public trust. Studies conducted by Coombs (1999) and Brazeal (2008) have shown that apologies have a significant impact on maintaining a company's reputation. Over the past decades, numerous crises have posed formidable challenges to businesses, prompting them to adopt diverse strategies to solicit forgiveness from stakeholders impacted by these occurrences. Given the gravity of crisis impacts, which no organization can afford to overlook (Lee & Atkinson, 2019), it is imperative to ascertain whether crisis response initiatives ameliorate negative consequences or exacerbate the situation.

In this context, apology letters have emerged as a pivotal communication instrument for managing organizational crises. Due to the role of their structure and function in influencing public forgiveness, they have gained considerable attention in corporate crisis response. Notably, John's (2007) 4R model, encompassing remorse, responsibility, resolution, and reparation, offers profound insights into the constituents of an efficacious apology. This model underscores not only the significance of apology letters in crisis management but also serves as a foundational framework for understanding how apologies can restore trust and alleviate negative perceptions. Apology letters guided by this model are powerful tools in crisis management to rebuild trust and mitigate negative perceptions by fostering compassion, transparency, accountability, and proactive change. This approach mitigated immediate crises and strengthened the organization's overall brand image and ethical stance.

Despite advancements in this field, the interplay between apology strategies and their efficacy in diverse crisis scenarios remains an ongoing area of investigation. For instance, Suman and Surin (2012) emphasized the significance of active versus passive responsibility in apology letters, shedding light on one dimension of this complex interplay. Other critical factors have also come under scrutiny, including the level of crisis participation and the influence of brand image. Lee and Atkinson (2019) further elucidated that informational and emotional apologies exert differential effects

on brand attitudes and purchase intentions, particularly in scenarios of low crisis engagement. Prior studies have categorized the measures employed in apology letters into internal and external measures (Coombs, 2007; Dugas & Papadopoulos, 2015). However, there persists a notable gap in understanding the impact of external measures on public forgiveness.

This study endeavors to devise and implement varied apology strategies tailored to different crisis participation virtual events, grounded in the 4R model framework. Through the development of questionnaires, this study will gather public opinions on diverse reparation to gain a deeper understanding of which measures most effectively enhance consumers' propensity to forgive. With a specific emphasis on the role of timely and consumer-centric reparation (such as product recalls, financial compensation, health services, etc.) in improving consumer sentiment, the study delves into the "reparation" component, categorizes specific reparation, and examines their relevance to consumer forgiveness to assess their effectiveness. This study not only directly mitigates the adverse effects of the crisis but also provides guidance for future businesses to take swift, direct, and transparent action to meet consumer expectations, thereby contributing to the rebuilding of trust.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Corporate Crisis and Public Apology

Over the past few years, the topic of the effectiveness of corporate apologies has been widely discussed in the research literature. Numerous studies have examined different aspects of corporate apologies at a holistic level, such as the types of apology strategies used by the company, the attribution of responsibility for the crisis, and the level of perceived remorse conveyed (Suman & Surin, 2012; Lee & Lucy, 2019; Effrosyni, 2023). Moreover, researchers have delved into how these elements act on consumer empathy, which in turn affects the overall effectiveness of apologies in restoring trust and reputation.

The allocation of responsibility for a crisis is a pivotal factor in determining the efficacy of corporate apologies, given the numerous influential factors at play. As Verhoeven et al. (2012) have observed, preventable crises have the potential to inflict greater harm to an organization's trust and reputation than unanticipated ones. The public's perception of the organization's role in a crisis has been found to influence their response to apologies (Lim & Brown, 2023). While crises can impact an organization's reputation, spokespersons such as the CEO are less likely to be held personally accountable if they address the situation proactively. The decision of companies to take responsibility is a salient factor. Initiative responses have been shown to positively impact an organization's image, gain public favor, and alleviate tension (Lee & Chuang, 2012). Furthermore, expressions of sympathy alone do not alleviate public anger, emphasizing the significance of substantive responsibility-taking actions over mere expressions of remorse.

Previous research has emphasized the critical importance of sincerity and corrective action in corporate apologies. It has been posited that sincere apologies, when accompanied by tangible corrective actions, are efficacious in the reconstruction of consumer trust (Xie & Peng, 2021). Moreover, the implementation of a swift and transparent communication strategy is imperative for the minimization of reputational damage during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Nevertheless, extant research has yet to delineate the various forms of corrective measures and their distinct consequences. In this regard, this study offers a more refined definition of the term "corrective measures" by distinctly distinguishing between internal and external measures.

### 2.2 Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Corporate Apology

The language used in an apology can influence its perceived effectiveness. Wang et al. (2021) found that attitudinal appraisal resources were predominant in the crisis response strategies of the top 2,000 companies' CEOs, highlighting the importance of carefully crafting apology language for trust and image rebuilding. Intensive apologies have been found to be more effective in crisis communication as they acknowledge mistakes, express remorse, and suggest remedies (Iedema et al., 2009). In the context of social media, particularly Twitter, strategic communication in crises is of paramount importance. A correlation has been observed between perceived corporate remorse and public forgiveness (Davis & Gold, 2011).

The efficacy of apologies is contingent upon the level of crisis involvement, the image of the brand, and the type of appeal conveyed in the message. Lee & Atkinson (2019) observed a notable interaction among these factors when crisis involvement was minimal. For functional brands, informational apologies were found to be more effective than emotional ones, highlighting the necessity for customized apologies (Kuthari, 2022). The medium through which apologies are conveyed has been shown to influence their effectiveness, highlighting the necessity for caution when utilizing social media as a medium for apologies (Manika et al., 2017; Lee & Atkinson, 2019). Kraig et al. (2022) emphasized the pivotal role of perceived sincerity in the effectiveness of apologies. Utilizing neurophysiological data, their study demonstrated that electrodermal activity (EDA) can predict dispute resolution following an apology with

61.3% accuracy, thereby suggesting that an apology that appears insincere may nevertheless be perceived as sincere. However, a significant research gap remains in assessing and enhancing perceived sincerity in real-world and diverse contexts (Kinsky et al., 2014).

While extant research offers insights on apology aspects, a significant gap remains regarding remediation. There is a paucity of empirical research on the incorporation of external and internal measures into apology letters and the assessment of their impact on public forgiveness (Chung & Lee, 2012). The present study aims to address this research gap by undertaking a comprehensive examination of corporate reparation in apology letters, distinguishing between external and internal measures, and analyzing their impact on public forgiveness.

### *2.3 Internal and External Measures in Apology Letters*

In the domain of corporate crisis management, the strategic utilization of apologies constitutes a pivotal subject in both academic and practical discourse. Coombs (2007) distinguished between external and internal company measures in apology letters. External measures, via public statements or press releases, address stakeholders' concerns, involving issue acknowledgment, regret expressions, and commitments to rectify the situation (Benoit & Pang, 2008). In contrast, internal measures concentrate on implementing organizational changes to prevent recurrence, such as revising policies, conducting staff training, or implementing restructuring (Coombs, 2007). Research undertaken hitherto demonstrates that external measures are efficacious in the restoration of corporate reputation; conversely, internal measures have been shown to engender long-term damage mitigation, trust, and loyalty cultivation (Kim & Park, 2019).

The effectiveness of apology letters has been examined in terms of responsibility attribution and sincerity. However, a research gap exists concerning the specific corrective measures employed in apology letters. Furthermore, the impact of apology letters on consumer forgiveness is contingent on incident severity (Xiao, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2020), thereby rendering a direct comparison of the impact of external and internal measures on forgiveness unfeasible. While extant research posits that intensified apologies are more effective in crisis communication (Georgiadou, 2023), it did not analyze the reparation specifically.

This study aims to create an event, control variables, and write apology letters with 4R elements (remorse, responsibility, resolution, reparation) based on John's study (2007). The reparation component will entail the categorization of external reparation and the composition of corresponding apology letters. The effectiveness of these measures will be evaluated by collecting subjects' attitudes and ranking them. The study's dual objectives are twofold: firstly, to identify the most effective apology remedy, and secondly, to provide guidance for corporate apologies.

## **3. Method**

### *3.1 Preliminary Experiment*

A preliminary experiment was conducted to explore the impact of internal and external measures on consumers' forgiveness of food safety incidents. The study analyzed consumer comments on eight notable food safety incidents on Weibo over the past five years. These incidents were categorized into two groups based on the type of corrective action taken: four involving internal measures and four involving external measures (Cui et al., 2018). The comments were categorized into four sentiment levels: positive, somewhat positive, negative, and somewhat negative. A cross-scoring method was used to evaluate the sentiment, achieving a high reliability rate of over 96%.

The main objective was to compare consumer sentiment across different types of corrective actions. However, the results showed that the severity of the incident had a more significant impact on consumer attitudes than the type of corrective measures implemented. This suggests that the severity of the crisis, rather than the apology measures, plays a primary role in shaping public sentiment, indicating a need for further research on the variables influencing consumer forgiveness in food safety incidents (Xiao, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2020). This preliminary experiment provided the research ideology and research methodology for this study. Based on this, this study designed three apology letters for the same severity event as control variables in order to investigate the effects of different measures on consumer forgiveness.

### *3.2 Questionnaire Design*

To investigate the public's forgiveness of apology letters in the food industry, this study designed three apology letters, each incorporating resolution measures as a control variable. The questionnaire was created to assess the effects of different remedies in apology letters on consumer forgiveness, aiming to explore how these remedies impact crisis management, restore consumer trust, and rebuild corporate reputation. It consisted of four sections: background information, satisfaction survey, overall forgiveness assessment, and public evaluation of the crisis management measures. Basic respondent information, such as age, occupation, and food safety concerns, was collected to ensure a diverse and representative sample for later analysis.

The satisfaction survey was central to the questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale (1=very dissatisfied, 5=very satisfied) was used to measure respondents' subjective evaluations (Gosavi, 2015). This section also categorized the reparations mentioned in the apology letters, including customer service measures, legal and regulatory measures, and public interest measures. Building on the satisfaction survey, the questionnaire included an overall forgiveness assessment to estimate consumers' general agreement with the reparation taken by companies. This approach allows a broader analysis of how different combinations of measures impact consumer forgiveness—consumers may find a single measure less satisfying but more effective when combined with others (Chun et al., 2021). The final section included multiple-choice and open-ended questions to capture potential consumer demands beyond quantitative analysis, adding a more human element to the study.

The questionnaire of this study was designed with scientific and practicality in mind in general. The language of the questionnaire is simple and easy to understand without causing ambiguity, and the structural arrangement is hierarchical and logical. The questionnaire also used standardized scales to provide a consistent measure of the data. These design concepts made this study efficient in the collection of data and subsequent analysis.

A detailed description of the procedures employed for the selection of participants is required. This description should include the following elements: (a) the sampling method utilized in the event that a systematic sampling plan was employed; (b) the percentage of the sample that was approached and participated; and (c) the number of participants who self-selected into the sample. A comprehensive account of the settings and locations in which the data were collected is also necessary. This should include any agreements and payments made to participants, agreements with the institutional review board, the ethical standards that were met, and the safety monitoring procedures that were implemented.

### 3.3 Procedure and Measures

For the main study, 80 volunteers were recruited through questionnaire sampling. The majority of the participants were college students aged 18-25 who had a history of following news and events related to food safety issues. This demographic was chosen due to their active engagement with social media and their heightened awareness of food safety concerns.

To ensure the objectivity and impartiality of the experiment, remorse, responsibility, and resolution were considered fixed factors, while reparation was treated as independent variables. Consumer attitude towards the apology and the incident was the dependent variable.

Subjects were asked to respond to a series of questions based on the dependent variable, and their responses were analyzed to determine the correlation with the independent variables by SPSS (Zhang & Luo, 2024). This analysis aimed to identify the specific reparations that were most effective in improving consumer attitudes and fostering forgiveness. By employing this rigorous methodology, the study aimed to provide valuable insights into the factors that influence consumer forgiveness in the context of food safety incidents (Zhang et al., 2019) and to offer practical recommendations for businesses and policymakers seeking to improve their crisis management strategies.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Analysis of Consumer Satisfaction with Remedies

Following a thorough and exhaustive analysis of 90 valid samples obtained from the questionnaires, a series of significant findings emerged from the study. The results demonstrated that consumers exhibited substantial differences in their responses and evaluations regarding the various remedies presented in the three apology letters.



Figure 1. Proportion of satisfaction level

Among these letters, *Apology Letter 1* was found to be the most effective in achieving the desired level of satisfaction, as indicated by the survey results. Specifically, a notable trend was observed in relation to the reparation of “full refund and \$500 voucher”. The reparation was considered “satisfactory” or “very satisfactory” by over 75% of respondents, who were selected to represent a diverse range of consumers. This finding suggests that consumers placed a high value on the tangible and significant financial compensation offered by this option (Lee & Chuang, 2012), which not only reimbursed them for the initial cost but also provided an additional voucher that could be utilized for future purchases or services. In a similar vein, the “free health check-up service” was met with a high level of approval from over 75 percent of respondents. This finding suggests a heightened awareness among consumers regarding the significance of maintaining their health, particularly in circumstances where crises could have repercussions for their well-being.

In contrast, the reparation in *Apology Letter 2* is moderate in terms of satisfaction, with the measure of “donating 500,000 RMB to the Food Safety Foundation” receiving a relatively low level of satisfaction, with only 41.11% of respondents expressing satisfaction. This shows that although public welfare measures can enhance the social image of enterprises to a certain extent, their direct attraction to consumers is weak. When consumers are more concerned about their own rights and interests, indirect public interest inputs may be perceived as unrelated to personal interests, thus weakening the effectiveness of the measures.

The level of satisfaction among consumers with the reparation outlined in *Apology Letter 3* was found to be disappointingly low. This was particularly evident in relation to specific initiatives mentioned within the letter. For instance, the “Food Safety Campaign” appeared to lack resonance with the surveyed respondents. In comparison with *Apology Letter 1*, the rationale behind the comparatively diminished level of consumer satisfaction with this measure can be reasonably inferred to be that it does not pertain to the immediate interests of consumers. A similar observation can be made regarding the “Open Day” activities, which also did not meet expectations. Despite being designed to promote transparency and facilitate closer observation of operations and processes, it received a satisfaction rate of just 43.33%. It can be hypothesized that this was due to the respondents expecting more in-depth interactions, more detailed explanations of the inner workings, or more concrete actions that would directly impact their perception of the company’s reliability in ensuring food safety.

Respondents generally believe that these publicity measures have a limited effect on the actual resolution of the incident in the short term. This study argues that consumers prefer direct action to symbolic measures in crisis situations. Therefore, companies’ promotional activities need to be combined with actual reparation in order to better win consumers’ understanding and support.

#### 4.2 Comparison of Overall Forgiveness

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact of different remedies on consumers’ attitudes, significance tests were conducted specifically for the satisfaction and forgiveness levels associated with the various reparations presented in the different apology letters. The outcomes of these tests were noteworthy and held substantial ramifications.

Specifically, the satisfaction and forgiveness levels associated with the remedies in *Apology Letter 1* were found to be significantly higher than those observed in the other two apology letters. This discrepancy was found to be statistically significant with a p-value less than 0.05, a commonly accepted threshold in research to denote a meaningful and reliable distinction. Furthermore, the inquiry into the potential of the apology to revive trust in the business revealed an optimistic trend. The survey results, which were based on a sample of consumers selected to represent a broad spectrum of views, revealed that over 74% of respondents either “completely” or “partially” agreed that the apology and the associated remedies in *Apology Letter 1* had the capacity to revive their trust in the business. The distribution of responses across the various categories is illustrated in Figure 2.

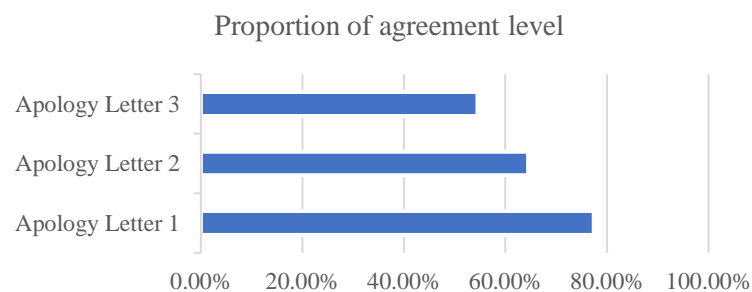


Figure 2. In response to the reparation in *Apology Letter 1/2/3*, do you think they will help the business to rebuild its reputation?

In contrast, *Apology Letter 2*'s rating of forgiveness is more mixed, with only 64% of respondents agreeing. *Apology Letter 3* has an even lower overall approval rating, with less than 55% of respondents agreeing that it is effective in restoring a company's reputation. This result highlights that the feasibility and direct benefit relevance of reparation is key to regaining consumer trust.

It is important to emphasize the characteristics and impacts of *Apology Letter 2* and *Apology Letter 3*. An analysis of *Apology Letter 2* reveals a notable emphasis on the concept of social responsibility, which can be evidenced through various means. These include the expression of commitment to environmental protection, community development, and ethical business practices. However, despite this emphasis on social responsibility, the letter's capacity to elicit consumer forgiveness is found to be limited. This is primarily due to the indirect nature of the measures outlined, which do not directly address the specific harm or inconvenience experienced by consumers. Instead, they adopt a more circuitous approach, making it difficult to elicit immediate forgiveness.

To illustrate this point, in the event of a product recall due to a quality issue, the apology letter might address long-term plans to enhance product quality or invest in research and development to expand the product line. While these measures are undoubtedly valuable in the broader context, they offer limited immediate relief to consumers who have experienced tangible losses or inconvenience. Consequently, consumers may acknowledge the company's broader social consciousness; however, when it comes to forgiving the company for the immediate incident, they may be less inclined to do so.

In the case of *Apology Letter 3*, the objective of fostering transparency through public engagement is evident. The execution, however, falls short of the mark in a crucial aspect: namely, the absence of a direct response to tangible consumer benefits. That is to say, the letter fails to offer concrete rewards or compensations that consumers can immediately perceive as valuable to them. This issue is similar to that of *Apology Letter 2*.

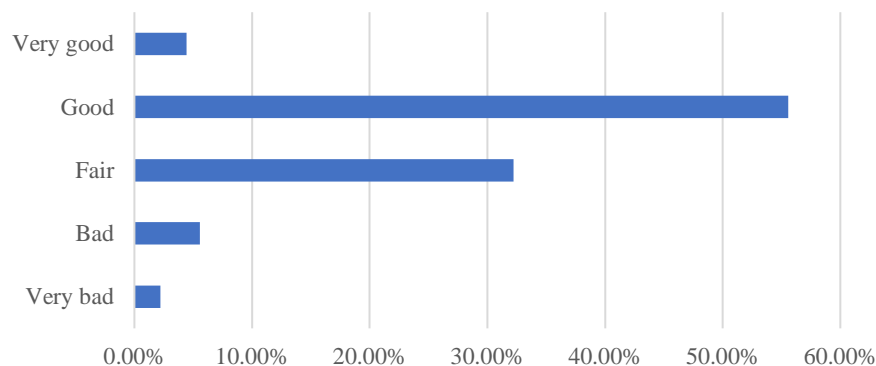


Figure 3. How would you evaluate this company's overall handling performance in the face of a food safety crisis?

In terms of the public's assessment of the crisis management performance of the companies fabricated for this study, the majority of respondents had a "good" or "fair" attitude towards the companies' performance. Only less than 10 percent of the respondents considered the performance of the enterprises as "bad" or "very bad" (Figure 3).

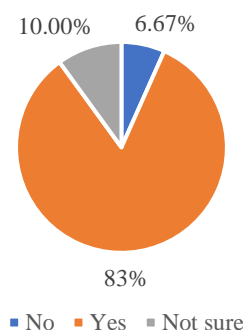


Figure 4. Do you think the effectiveness of the implementation of remedies is positively correlated with corporate sincerity?

Meanwhile, 83.33% of respondents believe that the effectiveness of remedies implemented is positively correlated with the sincerity of companies (Figure 4). This result suggests that consumers' forgiveness attitude depends on the content

of the specific measures and is also closely related to the sincerity and sense of responsibility shown by companies in the implementation process. Therefore, this study concludes that companies need not only to carefully design reparation in crisis management but also to win public trust through efficient and transparent implementation.

#### *4.3 Reliability and Validity Analysis*

The validity of the questionnaire in this study is systematically assessed by factor analysis and correlation tests. The suitability of the data for factor analysis is verified by KMO and Bart's Spherical test. As a result, the KMO value was 0.774, which is close to the excellent level, indicating a high correlation between the variables and suitability for factor analysis. Bart's Spherical test further supported this with a chi-square value of 759.650, a degree of freedom of 171, and a p-value significantly less than 0.05. Therefore, this study conducted factor analyses.

In the factor analysis, five factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted, with a total variance explained of 66.05%, indicating that these factors can effectively summarize the main information of the variables measured in the questionnaire. After rotation, the factors were more evenly distributed, explaining 20.44%, 15.14%, 13.67%, 10.08%, and 6.72% of the variance, respectively, indicating that the structure of the five factors was stable and had a clear division of labor. The factor eigenvalues before rotation show that the first factor has an eigenvalue of 5.08 with a contribution of 26.75%, while the fifth factor has an eigenvalue of 1.07 with a contribution of 5.62%. Collectively, the cumulative variance explained exceeds the psychometric benchmark value of 60 percent, validating the comprehensiveness and structural soundness of the questionnaire content.

The factor loading matrix shows that the questionnaire items generally loaded high on the corresponding factor and differed significantly from the other factor loadings. This demonstrates that each item better reflects the characteristics of the factor to which it belongs. For example, "Recall all contaminated products and disclose the information on the official website and social media" has a loading of 0.83 on Factor 2, which is much higher than the loadings on the other factors, indicating that this item is mainly used to measure the characteristics of Factor 2. Similarly, "Introduce a customer monitoring program to encourage customers to make suggestions and monitor" had a loading of 0.77 on Factor 1, further demonstrating the representativeness of this item in Factor 1. Such a distribution of factor loadings suggests that the questionnaire in this study has strong discriminative power and measurement accuracy in different dimensions.

The validity of the questionnaire was further verified by the covariance analysis, with most of the items having a covariance value of more than 0.6. This value indicates that the items in question have a strong explanatory power relative to the underlying factors. Overall, the performance of the questionnaire items in the commonality analysis proved that they were able to accurately capture the public's evaluation of the remedies and their effects.

Evidently, the validity of the questionnaire in this study is high and can provide reliable data to support the study.

In this study, a reliability analysis was also carried out on the questionnaire encompassing 19 items with the aim of assessing its internal consistency. The sample size amounted to 90, and the resultant Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was computed as 0.743. In accordance with the widely acknowledged criteria, a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient ranging from 0.7 to 0.8 is typically regarded as indicative of good internal consistency.

Consequently, the questionnaire exhibited a relatively satisfactory level of reliability within the sample. Specifically, there was a substantial degree of correlation among the individual items, enabling it to effectively gauge the constructs under investigation. Nevertheless, even though the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient has attained a favorable level, it is imperative to bear in mind that it might be subject to the influence of sample characteristics as well as the quantity of items.

For future research endeavors, it would be advisable to contemplate expanding the sample size and conducting further item analysis on the questionnaire. By doing so, the structure and content of the questionnaire could be optimized, thereby facilitating the enhancement of both its reliability and validity.

## **5. Discussion**

### *5.1 Mechanisms of Reparation Actions on Consumer Forgiveness*

This study found that comprehensive customer service quality measures included in the first apology letter (such as product recalls, posting information through websites and social media, full refunds and vouchers to affected customers, and free three-month health screenings) significantly increased consumers' willingness to forgive. This effect can be attributed to several potential mechanisms that are consistent with existing literature.

First, the perceived sincerity of an apology is one of the key factors for its success (Kraig et al., 2022). In the first letter of apology, the company not only acknowledged the mistake but also quickly took substantive steps to remedy it, directly responding to consumer concerns. This immediate and concrete response enhances the sense of sincerity, which

promotes greater consumer trust and forgiveness. For example, recalling contaminated products and releasing information through multiple channels demonstrated the company's concern about the problem and determination to solve it, alleviating consumers' unease and doubts (Verhoeven et al., 2012).

Secondly, the provision of full refunds and vouchers compensated for the financial loss and rapidly increased consumer satisfaction (Lee & Chung, 2012). In addition, offering free health check-ups for three months goes beyond basic compensation and demonstrates the company's deep concern for consumers' health. These remedies, which exceed expectations, are particularly effective in winning the understanding and trust of consumers (Kim & Park, 2019).

### *5.2 Comparative Analysis and Theoretical Implications*

Comparing the effects of different apology letters reveals important insights. Although the second and third apology letters also contained various remedies, they were not as effective as the first in increasing consumer forgiveness. The second letter emphasizes legal/regulatory measures, customer service, and social responsibility, and while demonstrating corporate responsibility, may not appear urgent enough or directly address immediate consumer needs, such as financial compensation and health protection. The third letter is more focused on raising public awareness and enhancing corporate transparency, which contributes to the long-term image but has less impact on consumer forgiveness in the short term (Lee & Atkinson, 2019).

These findings are consistent with the 4R model, where the "reparation" component plays a key role in restoring trust. Experimental data strongly support this theoretical framework, especially when remedies are specific and timely. This consistency underscores the importance of practical and immediate measures in crisis communication strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Xie & Peng, 2021).

Specifically, direct measures (such as full refunds and health services) received higher satisfaction and forgiveness scores than indirect public-good measures. This suggests that consumers value specific benefits that address their immediate concerns. Direct remedies are effective because they have an immediate impact on consumer rights and interests. Full refunds and wellness services directly mitigate financial and health losses for consumers, thereby restoring trust more effectively. In contrast, indirect measures such as donations to foundations or awareness campaigns are perceived by consumers as less relevant to individual needs, leading to lower levels of satisfaction and forgiveness.

### *5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions*

Although the controlled experimental design used in this study provided reliable quantitative data that enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the results, there are limitations. Controlled environments may not fully reflect the complexity of real-world crises, where multiple factors interact and can lead to different consumer responses. One notable limitation is the potential impact of uncontrolled variables, such as consumers' pre-existing brand attitudes and media depictions of the crisis, that may mediate the effectiveness of remedies. Future studies should consider these variables to enhance the ecological validity of the study findings. In practice, companies should consider implementing brand loyalty programs to reduce the risk of consumer trust fluctuations and thus improve the effectiveness of crisis response measures. In addition, this study focuses on short-term effects and fails to delve into the long-term impact of brand loyalty. Longitudinal studies can assess the long-term effects of different types of remedies on brand loyalty and consumer behavior. Combined with a cross-cultural perspective, the study can also examine the differences in consumer responses to apology letters under different cultural backgrounds, providing valuable guidance for multinational enterprises.

The results are of great significance to both theory and practice. They provide a solid foundation for developing more effective crisis management strategies and emphasize the importance of quick, direct, and targeted remedies to core concerns. Future research could explore the cultural dimensions of consumer responses to apologies and incorporate advanced analytical methods to better understand consumer perception. Moreover, this study focuses only on the food industry, limiting the wide application of the results to other industries. Future research should explore the applicability of these measures in different industries to verify their universality. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how companies rebuild trust through strategic communication efforts.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study examines the effect of external remedies in corporate apology letters on consumers' willingness to forgive. By categorizing specific reparation, the study found that direct and substantive measures (such as full refunds and health services) increased consumer trust and willingness to forgive more than indirect public good measures. The study highlights the importance of timely and consumer-focused remedies in crisis communication, providing practical advice for businesses to respond quickly and transparently to crises. The findings provide valuable insights for optimizing crisis management strategies and help rebuild public trust. However, there are limitations to this study, including the possibility that the experimental design of the control environment may not fully reflect the complexity of reality and



the focus on the food industry only, which requires broader industry exploration. In summary, this study deepens businesses' understanding of how to rebuild trust through strategic communication efforts by systematically evaluating specific remedies. The research results provide a solid theoretical basis and practical guidance for enterprises to formulate more effective coping strategies in crisis.

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### **Authors contributions**

Luo and Li were responsible for the study design and revising. Both authors were responsible for data collection, coding, and drafting the manuscript. Luo and Li wrote different parts of the manuscript, respectively. Both authors read, revised, and approved the final manuscript.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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## Appendix A

### *Apology Letter 1*

Dear Customer,

We apologize for the recent food safety incident and regret any discomfort caused to you. Following an investigation, we have confirmed that the problem originated from a batch of cream that was contaminated with bacteria. We take responsibility for this and will take steps to ensure that such an incident does not happen again.

Reparation includes:

1. Recall all contaminated cream and publish the information on our official website and social media. (Customer service measures + publicity measures)
2. Provide full refunds and \$500 vouchers to affected customers. (Customer service measures)
3. Provide free health check-up service within three months. (Customer Service Measures)

We hope these measures will help rebuild your trust. Thank you for your understanding and support.

Yours Sincerely,

Gourmet Paradise International Foods, Inc.

Chief Executive Officer

[Name]

[Date]

*Apology Letter 2*

Dear Customer,

We deeply regret the recent food safety incident and sincerely apologize for the inconvenience and health risk caused to you. This incident occurred as a result of a contaminated batch of cream, for which we take responsibility and are committed to strengthening our food safety management.

Reparation includes:

1. Work with third-party experts to conduct an independent audit and make the results publicly available. (Legal/Regulatory Measures)
2. Set up a 24-hour customer service hotline to provide assistance to affected customers. (Customer Service Measures)
3. Donate \$500,000 to the Food Safety Foundation to support food safety education and research. (Social Responsibility/Community Interest Measures)

We hope these measures will help rebuild your trust. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Yours Sincerely,

Gourmet Paradise International Foods, Inc.

Chief Executive Officer

[Name]

[Date]

*Apology Letter 3*

Dear Customer,

We apologize for the recent food safety incident and we are deeply guilty of causing you health concerns and inconvenience. Following an investigation, we have confirmed that this was a lapse in our food safety management. We take responsibility for this and will take proactive measures to prevent a recurrence.

Reparation includes:

1. Conduct food safety publicity campaigns to raise public awareness. (Publicity Measures)
2. Organize “Open Days” to invite customers and the media to visit our production process. (Publicity Measures)
3. Launch a “Customer Monitoring Program” to encourage customer suggestions and monitoring. (Customer Service Measures)

We hope these efforts will help rebuild your trust. Thank you for your support and tolerance.

Yours Sincerely,

Gourmet Paradise International Foods, Inc.

Chief Executive Officer

[Name]

[Date]

## Appendix B

Table 1. Validity Analysis

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Communality
Have you ever followed news or events related to food safety issues?	-0.12	-0.09	0.38	0.12	0.19	0.214
Recalling all contaminated products and disclose the information on official website and social media	0.24	0.83	-0.08	0.06	-0.03	0.755
Full refund and \$500 voucher for affected customers	0.14	0.85	0.03	-0.03	-0.07	0.751
Providing free health check-up within three months	0.42	0.71	-0.13	0.08	-0.22	0.751
Working with third-party experts to conduct independent audits and make the results public	0.72	0.26	-0.17	-0.01	-0.23	0.672
Setting up a 24-hour customer service hotline to provide assistance to affected customers	0.76	0.31	-0.11	0	-0.12	0.707
Donating \$500,000 to the Food Safety Foundation	0.74	0.1	0.15	-0.18	-0.12	0.632
Conducting food safety campaigns to raise public awareness	0.72	0	0.35	-0.25	0.27	0.784
Organizing “Open Day” to invite customers and media to visit the production process	0.69	0.11	0.22	-0.21	0.36	0.71
Launching the “Customer Monitoring Program” to encourage customers to make suggestions and monitor the situation	0.77	0.22	0.09	-0.18	0.24	0.734
Regarding the reparation in Apology Letter 1, do you think these measures can help the company rebuild its reputation?	0.18	-0.49	0.34	0.54	0.32	0.768
Regarding the reparation for Apology Letter 2, do you think these measures will help rebuild the company’s reputation?	-0.17	-0.03	0.13	0.86	0.07	0.799
Regarding the reparation for Apology Letter 3, do you think these measures can help the business to rebuild its reputation?	-0.33	0.07	-0.17	0.75	-0.11	0.714
Which of the remedies in the apology letter do you think is the most sincere and will help restore public trust?	0.31	-0.34	0.59	0.06	-0.21	0.606
Which of the reparation in the apology letter do you think is most likely to prevent a similar incident from happening again?	0.01	0.17	0.67	0.12	0.12	0.515

Continued Table 1. Validity Analysis

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Communality
If the company goes ahead with the launch of a new product, which version of the company's product under the apology letter would you be most willing to consider?	0.08	-0.07	0.78	-0.14	0.06	0.651
Combining the three versions, which version of the remedy do you prefer to consider the most effective?	0.12	-0.18	0.75	-0.06	-0.17	0.645
Eigenvalues (pre-rotation)	5.08	3.43	1.71	1.27	1.07	-
Explained Variance % (pre-rotation)	26.75%	18.03%	8.99%	6.66%	5.62%	-
Cumulative Explained Variance % (pre-rotation)	26.75%	44.78%	53.77%	60.43%	66.05%	-
Eigenvalues (post-rotation)	3.88	2.88	2.6	1.91	1.28	-
Explained Variance % (post-rotation)	20.44%	15.14%	13.67%	10.08%	6.72%	-
Cumulative Explained Variance % (post-rotation)	20.44%	35.58%	49.25%	59.33%	66.05%	-
KMO		0.774				-
Barthes Spherical		759.65				-
df		171				-
p		-				-