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May O. LWIN

Nanyang Technological University

Augustine PANG

Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg

Jun-Qi LOH

Nanyang Technological University

Marilyn Hui-Ying PEH

Nanyang Technological University

Sarah Ann RODRIGUEZ

Nanyang Technological University

See next page for additional authors

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Author

May O. LWIN, Augustine PANG, Jun-Qi LOH, Marilyn Hui-Ying PEH, Sarah Ann RODRIGUEZ, and Nur Hanisah Binte ZELANI

Is saying 'sorry' enough? examining the effects of apology typologies by organizations on consumer responses

May O. Lwin, Augustine Pang, Jun-Qi Loh, Marilyn Hui-Ying Peh, Sarah Ann Rodriguez and Nur Hanisah Binte Zelani

Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

Apology has been found to be the most effective strategy in times of crises. However, there is a dearth of research on the kinds of apology used and how primary stakeholders, in particular consumers, received them. This study aims to examine consumer responses to the types of apologies offered post crises against the levels of attribution of responsibility. We also assess the potential mediating role of ethical concerns by developing the Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response. An experiment was conducted to ascertain consumers' impression of the organization post-apology. The results showed that the attribution of crisis responsibility significantly influences complaining, withholding and negative word-of-mouth behaviors. However, a very high degree of apology issued by the organization does not necessarily translate to reduced negative responses from consumers in light of the large attribution of responsibility. Finally, the Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response suggests that ethical concerns can mediate negative behavioral intentions from consumers.

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1. Introduction

To mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in August 2015, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reiterated his country's 'profound grief' (Hanna & Karimi, 2015) for the millions killed. 'Japan has repeatedly expressed the feelings of deep remorse and heart-felt apology for its actions during the war,' he said (Hanna & Karimi, 2015). He offered no new apology but acknowledged earlier ones uttered by previous leaders. Political observers noted that the apology could have been more sincere. An editorial in *The Straits Times*, a prestige newspaper in Singapore and a keen Asian watcher, opined that his echo of an old apology was not going to appease the world ("Why echoing old apology isn't enough", 2015). Jean-Pierre Lehman, emeritus professor of international political economy at the International Institute for Management Development business school in Lausanne, Switzerland who had been a visiting professor at Japanese universities, described the apology as 'tatema'e'. 'Tatema'e' is what is said for the public to hear; it is for decorum, and not meant to be sincere. To the public, Mr Abe did not express 'honno,' meaning what he really felt.

Since the speech was ‘*tatamae*’ (Lehmann, 2015) countries that suffered most during the war refused to accept it as it did not come across as sincere.

Issuing an apology is arguably the highest form of acceptance of responsibility (Weiner, 1995). Organizations also apologize to diffuse the anger and hostility directed at them (Hearit, 1994). Though apology is the most effective crisis strategy (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009), there is scant research into the typologies of apology used and how primary stakeholders receive them.

The objective of this study is, first, to examine the effects of the types of apology statements that organizations can offer and the responses from consumers. Second, this study examines the potential of stakeholders’ post-apology ethical concerns towards the organization mediating its consumer responses. Third, it furthers our understanding of stakeholders’ post-apology reactions, focusing on consumer responses such as complaining, withholding, and negative word-of-mouth (WOM).

This study is significant on several fronts. First, while current studies have often recommended apologies as the best response (Hargie, Stapleton, & Tourish, 2010), they are often examined from the lens of the sender rather than the recipient. This study builds on the call to understand audience reactions to organizational messages (Coombs, 2010). Second, Frandsen and Johansen (2010) had introduced the concept of ‘meta-apology’ (p. 362) where the accused goes beyond the need of one’s socio-cultural order to apologize – for the negative effects that offensive act may have caused because it is the right thing to do. If an apology is regarded as the accepted universal order, what then is the value of an apology to the stakeholders? Third, this paper identifies the ways in which an organization can atone for its transgressions to a level of acceptance by stakeholders so that it can move forward. The findings will help organizations be better informed in shaping their apology statements to elicit desired responses and repair their image effectively after a crisis.

2. Literature review

2.1. Apology in crisis theories: the strategy of last resort

The two dominant theories on organizational response are the Image Repair (IR) Theory and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010; Dardis & Haigh, 2009). The IR Theory contends that the reputation and credibility of an organization depends on stakeholders’ perceptions. Therefore, the image of an organization plays a critical role in building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders and when threatened, requires the organization to repair it (Benoit & Pang, 2008). To protect reputational assets, SCCT offers 10 crisis response strategies, categorized into 3 postures. According to Coombs (2008), each posture represents a set of strategies that share similar communicative goals. It is recommended that an apology be used in situations where the organization is responsible for misdeeds. Bradford and Garrett (1995) found that apology is the most preferred message strategy desired by the stakeholders. Stakeholders expect conciliatory statements after wrongdoing and anything less could influence perceptions about the organization.

2.2. What constitutes a good apology?

2.2.1. Manner and content

Hearit and Borden (2006) argued that for an apology to be effective, the manner and content should be appropriate. Manner pertains to how the apology is carried out and it comprises five key components – *truthfulness, sincerity, voluntary, addresses all stakeholders* who are directly and indirectly affected by the crisis – and delivers the message on a platform that all stakeholders have *access* to. There are various components to the content. The message should *explicitly acknowledge the wrongdoing*. Then, it should encompass an *expression of regret* that demonstrates sympathy for the predicament of affected parties while *seeking forgiveness* and conveying one's hope for *reconciliation*. It should also *identify with injured stakeholders* by showing empathy. The message should contain a *full disclosure* of all information regarding the wrongdoing and *address the expectations of stakeholders*. This includes releasing information that addresses the cause and effect of the wrongful actions. It should also *communicate willingness to engage in corrective action* and *offer appropriate compensation*.

2.2.2. Discursive strategies to deflect blame

In the analysis of public apologies, Hargie et al. (2010) identified four types of discursive strategies. One can *express regret* or *align with others affected by the crisis* by conveying empathy, using phrases like 'we share your pain' and 'we know what you are going through'. One can also *disassociate from wrongdoing* by using passive speech such as 'the distress that has been caused', with no acknowledgement of culpability. Lastly, statements that *express willingness to apologize* in place of a direct apology are also a means of deflecting responsibility.

2.2.3. Attribution of responsibility and degree of apology

The SCCT articulates the connection between crisis types and crisis response strategies. The central assumption is that the crisis situation guides the organization in their selection of appropriate crisis responses (Coombs, 2010). It follows that the greater the attributions of organizational responsibility, the greater the threat posed to the organization's image. Based on SCCT, crises are categorized into three types, depending on crisis attributions – (1) victim (low attributions of organizational crisis responsibility); (2) accidental (medium attributions of organizational crisis responsibility); and (3) preventable (strong attributions of organizational crisis responsibility). The SCCT also suggests that crisis history and prior reputation can intensify attributions. Stakeholders attribute greater organizational crisis responsibility when there is either a history of past crises or an unfavorable prior relationship reputation, and this is called the Velcro Effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

To restore an organization's reputation, SCCT suggests that as attributions of organizational crisis responsibility become stronger, organizations must use more accommodative crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2010). Stakeholders' perceptions affect their actions, including their purchase intention, investment in stocks and word of mouth, or what Coombs (2015) called outcome variables. Coombs (2015) argued that the challenge facing organizations is in connecting strategies to the outcome variables. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine all outcome variables, the aim is to focus on consumer's negative relational behavioral responses, namely, through complaining,

withholding and negative WOM. Consumers are key stakeholders of the organization in a crisis. They are part of what Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2012) defined as primary publics, and they share the characteristics postulated by the authors: (a) they are most affected by the crisis; (b) they have shared common interests; and (c) they have long-term interests and influences on the organization's reputation and operation (p. 270). The three responses discussed above have been identified as subsets of the behavior of individuals expressing dissatisfaction with an organization through forms of retaliatory action. These can include complaints to third parties such as consumer watchdogs or panels, newspaper forums, and actions like 'flaming' (an online retaliation that is highly negative); spreading negative WOM through the Internet; and instant messaging (Wirtz & Lwin, 2009).

2.2.4. Complain

Customer complaint is related to stakeholders' dissatisfaction with the organization (Day, 1980; Landon, 1980). Understanding complaining behavior and its consequences could explain and predict a consumer's repurchase intentions and loyalty towards the organization (Day, 1980).

2.2.5. Withhold

Withholding behavior measures the extent respondents shy away from interacting with the organization because of trust and safety concerns (Lwin, Wirtz, & Williams, 2007), and it manifests in defensive actions or refusal to have any relationship with the organization. Phelps, Nowak, and Ferrell (2000) suggest that stakeholders' purchase intention is reduced.

2.2.6. Negative WOM

Negative WOM is the extent respondents will report the incident and share their bad experiences with their friends and relatives (Lwin et al., 2007). The greater the amount of dissatisfaction, the greater is the likelihood of stakeholders sharing with others their experiences (Sharma, Marshall, Reday, & Na, 2010).

Building on studies discussed above, we investigate the interaction effects between levels of responsibility attributed to an organization and the degree of apology. The following research question is proposed:

RQ: How do attribution of responsibility and degree of apology interact in influencing stakeholder tendency to (a) complain (b) withhold and spread (c) negative WOM about the organization after a crisis event?

2.3. Apology types and attribution

There are five levels in the degree of apology developed mainly from frameworks posited by Hearit and Borden (2006) and Hargie et al. (2010). For instance, the lowest level of apology is pseudo-apology. An exemplar is John Lennon's apology after he implied that The Beatles was more prominent than Christianity. He later apologized, saying, 'I apologize if that will make you happy. I still don't know quite what I've done' (Wallop, 2009). The statement was deemed insincere and unwilling (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Hargie et al., 2010; Hearit & Borden, 2006). At the other end of the spectrum is the highest level of

apology, for instance, JetBlue Airways' apology following the grounding of flights. The airline's CEO David Neeleman, said, 'Words cannot express how truly sorry we are for the anxiety, frustration and inconvenience that you, your family, friends and colleagues experienced. ... We know we failed to deliver on this promise' (Neeleman, 2007).

Another important factor to consider is the attribution of responsibility, which is based on Coombs' (2010) SCCT classification of low, modest and strong attributions. When an organization experiences a low level of attributed crisis responsibility, damage to its reputation is minor while a higher level of responsibility to the organization results in more reputational damage (Pace, Fediuk, & Botero, 2010). While the two variables – attribution of responsibility and degree of apology – have been separately examined in past studies, this is arguably the first study that investigates their combined effects.

2.4. Development of the Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response

To examine how stakeholders' post-crisis ethical concerns and likeability towards the organization post-apology mediate their behavioral responses to the organization, we develop the Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response (Figure 1). The model links the effects of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology to stakeholders' perceptions of the organization, which affects stakeholders' behavioral responses.

Stakeholders' concerns of an organization's ethics can affect their behavior (Brunk & Blümelhuber, 2011). Ethical concerns relate to stakeholders' apprehension and uneasiness over the organization's behavior. Therefore, we propose that ethical concerns of an organization will mediate stakeholders' behavioral responses. The following hypothesis is posited:

H1: Ethical concerns will mediate the relationships between the independent variables (attribution of responsibility and degree of apology) and the consumer behaviors of (1a) complain, (1b) withhold, and (1c) negative WOM.

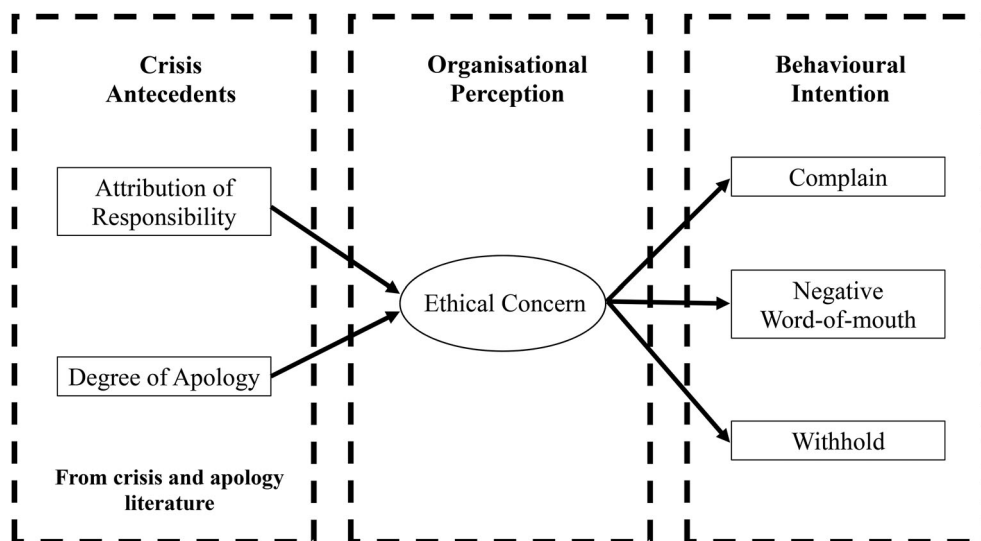


Figure 1. Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response.

3. Method

3.1. Experiment

To determine the effects of crisis responsibility attribution and apology on stakeholders' perceptions and behavioral intentions, the experimental method was used. An experiment enables us to establish causality; it also overcomes the limitations of other methods like a survey by allowing us to have more control over the environment. A total of 342 undergraduates and graduates (170 males, 172 females), aged between 21 and 27 years old from a research-intensive university participated in the experiment. The sample had an almost equal distribution of gender (49% males; 51% female) with a good representation of students from various faculties within the university, which we argue as analogous to drawing insights from the public people of similar age group. Young people have been described as being cynical about apologizing and apologies, so it is timely to study this group (Wiseman, 2014). As a study design, the use of student subjects offers several benefits that are difficult to garner from the public. First, as a paid university lab task, subjects were motivated to share their perspectives. Each participant was given a monetary incentive equivalent to US\$5. Second, we sought to ensure that the answers are direct responses to stimuli. This helps to preserve the sanctity of the data. Studies have also established that for experiments, student samples can provide a good degree of generalizability (Gordon, Slade, & Schmidt, 1987). The study is approved by the Institutional Review Board.

3.2. Experiment design

To create a scenario-based stimulus to mimic a real-life crisis, a fictitious organization, Tevana Pharmaceutical, a leading manufacturer of medicinal supplements in the health industry, was created. It had developed a new drug, Nitrax, to treat heart disease, but this has caused patients to develop conjunctivitis upon consumption. A between-subject factorial design (degree of apology \times attribution of responsibility) was utilized. The three levels of crisis responsibility attribution and the five degrees of apology accounted for 15 unique conditions. The level of responsibility attribution was manipulated through descriptions of the organization's actions (proactive vs. passive) and its relationship with its overseas manufacturer (e.g. a situation where one is kept in the dark about production fault by the overseas manufacturer compared with another situation of having knowingly engaged a manufacturer with unhygienic production practices). We used a random-number generator to assign each participant to 1 out of 15 possible conditions, denoted by a different video stimulus. To ensure the scenarios were realistic, news clips modeled after a television news program were shown. Participants were briefed prior to watching the news clip twice and presented with a transcript of the video for their reference.

Each participant was assigned to a pre-determined seat to reduce any form of communication during the course of the experiment. At the end of the video screening, the participants were given a questionnaire to measure their perception of the organization's reputation, behavioral intentions and the overall impression on the handling of the crisis by the organization. [Table 1](#) shows the experimental set-up.

Table 1. Experimental group assignment of 15 conditions.

Attribution of responsibility	Degree of apology				
	1	2	3	4	5
Low	Group 1	Group 4	Group 7	Group 10	Group 13
Medium	Group 2	Group 5	Group 8	Group 11	Group 14
High	Group 3	Group 6	Group 9	Group 12	Group 15

3.3. Manipulations and stimuli

A total of 15 unique video episodes were designed to fulfill the manipulated conditions. Care was taken to ensure that extraneous variables were kept constant across all videos.

3.3.1. Attribution of responsibility

Three levels (low, medium and high) of attribution of responsibility were simulated for this experiment. Under *low level of attribution of responsibility*, Tevana Pharmaceutical immediately suspended the overseas plant from manufacturing Nitrox and voluntarily initiated a drug recall as a way of initiating corrective measures to handle the crisis. At *medium level of attribution of responsibility*, the overseas manufacturing plant failed to inform Tevana Pharmaceutical about the drug contamination. After learning about the chemical contamination, Tevana Pharmaceutical waited a number of days before acting upon their consumers' complaints. Lastly, under *high level of attribution of responsibility*, Tevana Pharmaceutical had outsourced production of Nitrox to an overseas manufacturer with a previous record of unhygienic production practices and had launched the product despite being aware of the health complications resulting from consuming Nitrox.

3.3.2. Degree of apology

As discussed above, at the lowest end, the apology was considered insincere and delivered only because the spokesperson was pressured to do so. At the other end of the spectrum, the highest degree of apology constitutes full disclosure and willingness to engage in corrective action.

3.3.3. Scales, factor and reliability analysis

The scale items used are listed in Appendix. To check for data reliability, Cronbach's alpha test was conducted on all scale items. All measure scales used attained alpha scores greater than 0.7. Factor analysis was conducted on all the questionnaire scales, and items that reduced the reliability loading to less than 0.7 were eliminated. For the dependent variables (complain, withhold, negative WOM) we ensured that each of the questions was loaded primarily on the key variable of measurement. The *complaint* scale was trimmed to three items to increase the validity of the measurement. The likeability dimensions consist of likeability, friendliness, kindness and helpfulness (Moon, 2000), while the dimensions of ethical concerns consist of the organization's morals, ethical standpoint, and whether the organization was engaging in correct behavior (Lwin et al., 2007).

3.4. Pre-tests and expert checks

Five public relations experts from the government and private sectors were consulted in crafting the crisis scenarios and apology statements. The experts provided feedback for

the scenarios and apology statements to improve realism and believability, and to help determine the hierarchy of degrees of apology statements and attribution levels.

3.4.1. Apology statements

A pre-test was conducted to establish the correct order of the degrees of apology and levels of attribution of responsibility. We recruited 18 participants through convenience sampling. Each participant was exposed to three scenarios and asked to rank them in order, from lowest to highest attribution of crisis responsibility. *T*-tests found that the means were statistically different ($p < .05$) from one another (low: $M = 1.33$, $SD = 0.485$; medium: $M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.707$ and high: $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.383$). The same participants were asked to rank the five apology statements, from the least to the most apologetic. *T*-tests conducted found that the level means were statistically different ($p < .05$) from one another (Level 1: $M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.323$; Level 2: $M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.752$; Level 3: $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.707$; Level 4: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.686$ and Level 5: $M = 4.78$, $SD = 0.428$). We conclude from the pre-test that the designed levels of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology were valid.

3.4.2. Video stimuli

A total of 45 participants were invited to watch one video clip each (from a selection of 15, randomly assigned, as shown earlier in Table 1). Respondents were asked to provide feedback on clarity, ease of understanding and realism of the clips. Running descriptive statistics, the results showed that respondents were generally receptive to the video stimuli (clarity: $M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.609$; ease of understanding: $M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.475$ and realism: $M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.539$).

4. Findings

4.1. Manipulation check

Manipulation checks were conducted on the independent variables. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the means of the levels of attribution were statistically different (low: $M = 1.4000$, $SD = .54772$; medium: $M = 2.8000$, $SD = .83666$ and high: $M = 4.4000$, $SD = 0.89443$) suggesting that the manipulation was successful.

The manipulation check on the degrees of apology suggests that some of the apology levels were not statistically different from one another. There were no statistically significant differences between apology levels 2 and 3, 3 and 4 as well as 4 and 5. (Level 1: $M = 1.00$, $SD = 0.000$; Level 2: $M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.894$; Level 3: $M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.837$; Level 4: $M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.837$ and Level 5: $M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.548$). Consequently, apology levels 2, 3 and 4 were excluded from the analyses. Apology level 1 is retained as low degree and apology level 5 is retained as high. Thus, the experimental set-up was modified into a 3 (low, medium and high attribution of responsibility) \times 2 (low vs. high degrees of apology) factorial design. Collapsing data findings that yielded no significant difference between independent and dependent variables with post-manipulation checks is an accepted practice (Buck, Gray, & Nuñez, 2012; Kivetz, Netzer, & Schrift, 2011).

4.2. Assessment of research questions

To answer the research questions and proposed hypotheses, we conducted a 3×2 between-subjects ANOVA on the dependent variables – complain behavior, withhold behavior and negative WOM behavior. An alpha threshold level of 0.10 was adopted for tests of statistical significance. A summary of the ANOVA results is presented in Table 2, showing the interaction effects between attribution of responsibility and degree of apology. Results showed interaction effects of attribution of responsibility and degree of responsibility for all the response variables – complain ($F = 2.302, p < .1$), withhold ($F = 2.136, p < .1$) and negative WOM ($F = 2.501, p < .1$).

4.3. Interaction effect of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on complaining behavior

RQ(a) examines possible interaction effects between attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on stakeholders' complaining behavior (Figure 2). A significant two-way interaction effect on complaining behavior ($F = 2.302, p < .1$) was found (see Figure 3). In the high attribution of responsibility condition, complaining behavior increased as the apology delivered became more profound ($F = 5.797, p < .1$). In comparison, there were no significant differences in the low and medium responsibility attribution conditions. As expected, at low and medium attributions of responsibility, the greater the degree of apology, the less likely respondents would complain. However, at high level of crisis responsibility attribution, when the organization issues a high degree of apology, the likelihood to complain drastically increases ($M = 4.073, SD = 1.589$). Issuing a profound apology when an organization has high crisis responsibility attributed may result in greater complaining behavior towards the accused.

Table 2. Summary of ANOVA scores: complain, withhold and negative WOM.

	Complain		Withhold		Negative WOM	
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
Attribution of responsibility	5.165	<0.1**	28.284	<0.1**	1.132	>0.1
Degree of apology	1.238	>0.1	1.971	<0.1*	0.030	>0.1
Responsibility \times apology	3.804	<0.1*	2.136	>0.1	4.400	<0.1*

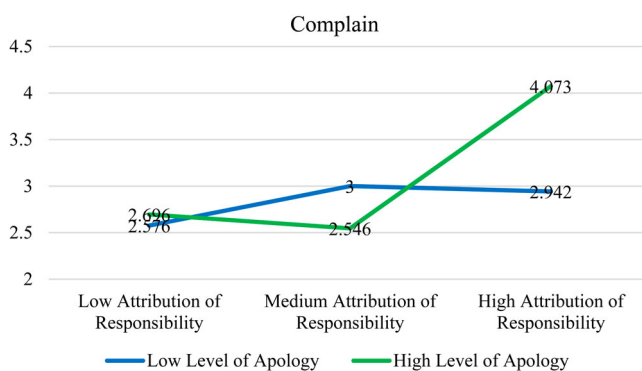


Figure 2. Interaction effect on complaining behavior.

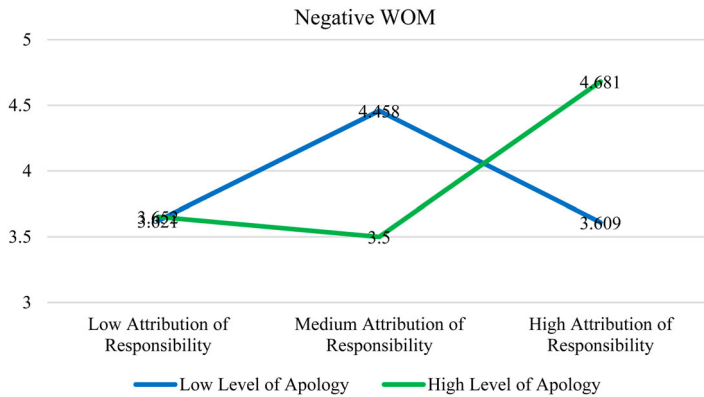


Figure 3. Interaction effect on negative WOM behavior.

4.4. Interaction effect of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on withholding behavior

RQ(b) seeks to investigate the interaction effect of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on withholding behavior in stakeholders. Table 3 shows that there was no significant two-way interaction effect on withholding behavior ($F = 1.812, p > .1$) but one-way effects of attribution ($F = 14.253, p < .1$) and apology type ($F = 3.624, p < .1$) on withholding were evident. An organization with higher attribution of responsibility is more likely to face withholding behavior ($M = 6.1054$) from consumers as compared to an organization with lower levels of attribution of responsibility ($M = 4.8696$). Lower levels of apology result in greater withholding behavior ($M = 5.5710$) as compared to higher levels of apology ($M = 5.2147$).

4.5. Interaction effect of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on negative WOM behavior

RQ(c) investigates the interaction effect of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on negative WOM behavior in stakeholders. The two-way ANOVA results in Table 3 showed a significant two-way interaction effect on negative WOM behavior ($F = 4.40, p < .1$). At low attributions of responsibility, there were no differences in negative WOM across the two levels of apology. At medium attribution of responsibility, there was likelihood of greater negative WOM with a lower level of apology. However, at high attribution of responsibility, the likelihood to engage in negative WOM was greater with higher levels of apology.

Table 3. Summary of ANOVA scores with ethical concerns as co-variate.

	Complain		Withhold		Negative WOM	
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
With ethical concerns as co-variate						
Ethical concerns	9.178	<0.1*	49.365	<0.1**	20.93	<0.1**
Attribution of responsibility	4.496	<0.1*	17.893	<0.1**	0.335	>0.1
Degree of apology	1.803	>0.1	3.424	<0.1*	0.022	>0.1
Responsibility × apology	2.018	<0.1*	2.284	<0.1*	1.911	>0.1

4.6. Examining the mediating effects

To address H1, ethical concerns and likeability were introduced into the experiment as covariates (see Table 3). Using two-way ANOVA, the interaction effects of attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on the two mediating variables were proven to be significant ($p < .1$). To further study the effects of ethical concerns on the relationships between the two independent variables (attribution of responsibility and degree of apology) and three dependent variables (complain, withhold and negative WOM behaviors), an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used. The test aimed to detect any mediated outcomes on main effects, as well as the interaction effects between the attribution of responsibility and degree of apology on the three behavior variables.

4.6.1. Ethical concerns

ANOVA shows significant main effects of ethical concerns for complain ($F = 9.178$), withhold ($F = 49.365$) and negative WOM ($F = 20.930$) behaviors. With ethical concerns introduced as a covariate, there were two significant changes to the results. First, the main effect of the degree of apology on complaining behavior in stakeholders turned insignificant ($F = 1.803$, $p > .1$). Second, the interaction effect of attribution of responsibility and the degree of apology on stakeholders' likelihood to spread negative WOM about the organization also became insignificant ($F = 1.911$, $p > .1$). Partial mediation of ethical concerns on the relationships between attribution of responsibility and the degree of apology of complain and negative WOM variables were concluded. H(b) was rejected while H(a) and H(c) were partially supported.

5. Discussion

Our findings show a positive direct effect of higher levels of apology on reducing consumer withholding behavior, as well as interaction effects between crisis attribution and apology levels on complain and negative WOM behaviors.

5.1. The effects of crisis attribution

In crisis situations where stakeholders attribute low level of responsibility to the organization, there is less likelihood of negative consumer behavior regardless of the type of apology issued as compared to when a higher level of responsibility was attributed to the organization. This finding is supported by Weiner's (1986) Attribution Theory, which argues that the amount of responsibility attributed to an organization is directly proportional to the threat to its reputation. Consumers would be less motivated to display negative behavior because their perceptions of the organization had not been exacerbated. McDonald, Sparks, and Glendon (2010) found that stakeholders' reactions are more influenced by the cause of the crisis than of the organization's account of the crisis. When stakeholders attribute a high level of responsibility to the organization, the results suggest that consumers are more likely to engage in complaining behavior and spread negative information even when the level of apology increases. Notably, a large increase in likelihood of complaining behavior is observed when the organization is perceived to be largely responsible for the crisis, and issues a high degree of apology. This

suggests that when stakeholders perceive organizations to be highly responsible for the crisis, the high degree of apology serves to further confirm the attribution leading to such a response.

Several reasons are proffered. First, the apology may be seen as insincere and manipulative (Hargie et al., 2010; Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). Second, McDonald et al. (2010) found that controllability of the crisis is one of the key factors predicting anger and negative attitude towards the transgressor. The high attribution of responsibility meant that the organization could have avoided the events, and this could have motivated stakeholders to spread negative information regarding the organization. Third, the apology issued may not be consistent with past actions, leading the stakeholders to distrust the organization (Kauffman, 2008). Further, if the one who apologizes appear insincere and arrogant, it would negate the effects of the apology, particularly given the high level of responsibility ascribed, no matter how semantically profound an apology it may be. Fourth, the results illustrate that when a high level of responsibility is attributed to the organization, the apology issued has the potential to stimulate more complaining and negative WOM behaviors among stakeholders. It provides a platform for stakeholders to vent and to legitimize their frustrations. Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2012) described this as part of the stakeholders' conative coping, which is driven by action tendency, the feeling that one must do something about the situation, in this case, by complaining and spreading negative WOM behavior.

5.2. Divergent findings between apology and attribution

The divergent findings between medium and high attributions of responsibility suggest a tipping point in behavioral responses. The study proposes that the organization's culpability in the crisis is the defining factor that determines whether the stakeholder partakes in negative behavior or not, and this could render an effective apology detrimental to the organization. This presents implications for further research in the use of apology in crisis communication.

5.3. Review of the Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response

The Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response (Figure 1) postulates that ethical concerns and likeability affects consumers' behavioral responses. However, some proposed relationships of the model were not found. The partial mediation of ethical concerns of the relationship between apology and attribution suggest that ethical concerns can explain some of the effects on stakeholder behavior. Evidently, stakeholders respond adversely when they have ethical concerns with the accused company and this can interfere with the way they react to crisis attribution and apology from the organization (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). An organization's unethical conduct could incite in stakeholders the feelings of being taken advantage of, disappointment and anger (Krapfel, 1985). Likeability was found to be a very weak mediating variable in this study. The model has been modified to reflect our findings (Figure 4). The revised Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response presents a framework for future studies in apology and crisis attribution.

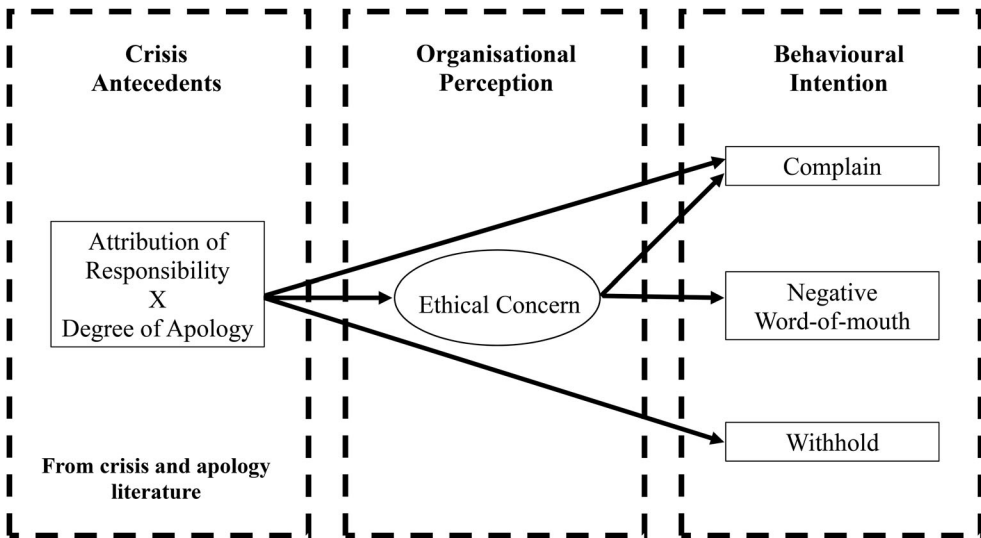


Figure 4. Revised Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response.

6. Conclusion

The study unearthed several key findings. First, a higher degree of apology does not necessarily result in reduced negative consumer responses. Second, the attribution of crisis responsibility greatly influences complain and negative WOM behaviors as compared to the degree of apology. Third, the Perception-Behavioral Model of Crisis Response suggests that ethical concerns can mediate stakeholders' negative behavioral intentions towards the organization.

Our findings yielded several insights that can contribute to further discussion in the literature. First, literature has recommended that organizations should always apologize when at fault (Benoit & Pang, 2008). The research findings show that a high degree of apology is certainly important as it directly reduces consumers' withholding behavior. However, under high attribution of crisis responsibility, the organization issuing profuse apology should also be prepared for other negative consumer responses such as complaining and negative WOM. The level of apology can be adjusted and used in conjunction with other strategies. When used with other strategies, apology, sympathy, and compensation have been found to be effective in mitigating anger and negative WOM intention (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). While apology remains recommended, sympathy and compensation can be just as effective in producing a favorable reaction from stakeholders.

Future studies could investigate stakeholders' reactions in real-life crises to test the rigor of the proposed model. In addition, a longitudinal study can also observe how stakeholders' perception of an organization changes with time post-crisis. Furthermore, researchers can investigate if prior relationship with the organization (Schwarz, 2008) could also play a significant role in influencing consumer responses. There are several limitations in this study, including the deployment of university students, which could raise concerns about the external validity of experimental results (Kam, Wilking, &

Zechmeister, 2007). Nevertheless, the authors believe that the strong internal validity (Onwuegbuzie, 2000) and the use of statistical methods ensured considerable credibility to the study's findings and its implications.

The research findings suggest that there isn't a 'one-size-fits-all' apology. A high level of apology does not necessarily translate into desirable stakeholders' response especially when the responsibility attribution is large. Apologizing may only give critics more ammunition to attack the organization (Arends, 2014). Our findings suggest that care is needed to ascertain crisis responsibility and to calibrate the apology strategy accordingly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix. Measure scales

Construct	Item code/scale item	Response scale	Cronbach's alpha
Complain	(C1) Complain to a consumer agency to ensure Tevana Pharmaceutical takes care of the problem	1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely	0.873
	(C2) Report to the media regarding Tevana Pharmaceutical		
	(C3) Complain to the relevant authorities regarding Tevana Pharmaceutical		
	(C4) Take legal action against Tevana Pharmaceutical <i>Adapted from (Singh, 1988)</i>		
Withhold	(W1) Decide not to consume Tevana Pharmaceutical's products in future	1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely	0.920
	(W2) Boycott Tevana Pharmaceutical's products		
	(W3) Be reluctant to purchase products from Tevana Pharmaceutical		
	(W4) Avoid Tevana Pharmaceutical		
	(W5) Convince your friends and relatives not to consume Tevana Pharmaceutical's products (Lwin et al., 2007)		
Negative word-of-mouth	(WOM1) Use online social media tools to share what you know about this incident	1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely	0.937
	(WOM2) Use Twitter to share what you know about this incident		
	(WOM3) Use Facebook to share what you know about this incident <i>Adapted from (Singh, 1988)</i>		
Ethical Concern	(E1) I am concerned about Tevana Pharmaceutical being morally upright	1 = not at all concerned, 7 = extremely concerned	0.915
	(E2) I am concerned about Tevana Pharmaceutical's ethical standpoint <i>Adapted from (Lwin et al., 2007)</i>		