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Did BP Atone for its Transgressions?

Expanding Theory on ‘Ethical Apology’ in Crisis Communication

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#### **Abstract**

Ethical communication during crisis response is often assessed in terms of the perceptions of the organization's intentions, rather than an assessment of the organization's communicative behaviors. This can easily lead researchers to draw editorial conclusions about an organization's ethics in crisis response rather than accurately describing its communicative behaviors. The case of BP's 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico provides a prime example for the importance of accurately assessing the ethical content of an organization's crisis response because the ethics of BP's response have been discussed in news and academic sources; yet little direct examination of the ethical content in BP's response has occurred. The paper compares BP's owned-media responses to the crisis (i.e., press releases, Facebook posts, and Tweets) with an expanded view of ethical apology in order to develop a relational model of ethical apology. Our intent is to enable researchers and practitioners to have a stronger mechanism so that an organization's behavior and its persuasiveness are not conflated when evaluating its response to crises as ethical or socially responsible. These data suggest that a deepened understanding of ethical apology allows us to more accurately describe the content of BP's response to the 2010 spill, it is likely that other ethical messaging factors such as message source, context, timing, and the totality of BP's response strategy may have all provided content-based reasons why BP's response strategies may have produced negative reactions to BP's response strategies. The findings have implications for communication ethics, social media engagement, and crisis communication more generally.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, apology, ethics, BP, atonement, stakeholder relationship management

## Did BP Atone for its Transgressions?

## Expanding Theory on 'Ethical Apology' in Crisis Communication

'Sorry' used to be the hardest word to say during crises for fear of legal liability (Patel & Reinsch, 2003). Today, however, organizations and prominent individuals who are accused of wrongdoing increasingly face pressure to apologize to stakeholders in order to maintain a good image, because it is "morally the correct action" (Benoit & Pang, 2008) and to diffuse some of the anger and hostility directed at them (Hearit, 1994). Research has found that although apology is the most effective crisis strategy (Kim, Avergy, & Lariscy, 2009), sympathy and compensation can be equally effective as apology (Choi & Lin, 2009). Additionally, apology is often accompanied by affirmative statements such as those where the organization accepts responsibility (Pace, Fediuk, & Botero, 2010), demonstrates corrective action (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002), and can work to atone for the transgression (Jerome, 2008). Yet these factors are seldom considered together as a form of ethical apology. Therefore, drawing on research and theory related to atonement, ethics, and apology (see, e.g., Bauman, 2011; Hearit & Borden, 2006; Koesten, 2004; Simola, 2003) as well as crisis response strategies, this study endeavors to develop a more nuanced understanding of the structure of ethical apology as representing an organization's communicative behaviors emphasizing its relationships and responsibilities to stakeholders (Bauman, 2011).

Unfortunately, as Bauman (2011) argues, research exploring ethical approaches to managing crisis response is not well developed. Perhaps this is because, as Coombs and Holladay (2008) argue – apology has been over-promoted as 'the' response (p. 252). However, Xu and Li (2013) argue, the two most dominant theories in crisis communication – Benoit's image repair theory and Coombs' situational crisis communication theory – are limited because the theories are instrumental; effectively identifying 'playbooks' for organizations to follow instead of focusing on relational factors, like ethics, as important components to crisis response. Therefore, by adopting a stakeholder relationship management perspective instead of an instrumental perspective, the ethical components related to apology and atonement may be more actively integrated into theory building and application. With an increasing body of research suggesting that 'authentic' corporate social responsibility is a critical factor in not only minimizing the impact of crises on organizations (e.g., Kim, 2013; Lacey, Kennett-Hensel, & Manolis, 2014; Xu & Li, 2013), but also as an important approach to responding to crises themselves (e.g., Diers, 2012; Haigh & Brubaker, 2010; Piotrowski & Guyette, 2010), the centrality of evaluating the ethical content of crisis response as an integral component to evaluating crisis response is important. Certainly, this resonates with the demands from a modern public relations environment that requires organizations to more ethically engage with many different stakeholder groups (Botan, 1997; Jerome, 2008; Kim, 2013; Shepard, 2009; Xu & Li, 2013).

In his evaluation of ethical approaches to crisis leadership, Bauman (2011) directly critiqued BP's crisis response to the 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico stating, "The perceived callousness of their response along with a few CEO gaffes have hurt BP's reputation" (p. 293). In this critique of BP, Bauman also suggests that future research should categorize organizational crisis response as a way to evaluate the concept of ethical approaches to crisis management. Using a controversial case, like the 2010 BP spill, to directly examine the structure of ethical apology affords us an opportunity to better develop theory and explore its practical implications because there is a difference in evaluating message impact and the ethics of the message itself so that we are not merely recommending strategy based on what will have the greatest influence, but an ethical response strategy (Xu & Li, 2013).

Second, the BP case is also important because of its magnitude (Black, 2010). As more details emerged, it became clear that it was not merely an accident but a major organizational transgression (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Diers & Tomaino, 2010; Pearson & Clair, 1998). The scope of the Gulf disaster also meant relentless media coverage receiving an estimated 22 percent of the US news coverage from the initial explosion through July, 2010 (*Pew Research Center*, 2010). Thus, when addressing the largest oil industry gathering after taking over, the first thing new BP CEO Bob Dudley did was to apologize: “BP is sorry. BP gets it. BP is changing” (Hargreaves, 2011). Finally, the BP case is analytically and theoretically rich because whereas most longitudinal studies emphasise image recovery process after a crisis, the opportunity to examine an organization’s messaging during a prolonged crisis should be seized (Reiersen, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2009).

Consequently, this study extends Frandsen and Johansen’s (2010) discussion of “meta-apology” (p. 362) to explore the ethics of crisis response itself, rather than explore its effect on public opinion or politics. As such, our goal is to join together a disparate literature all trying to answer the same question – how can we evaluate the authenticity or ethical sincerity of an organization’s demonstration of remorse after a major transgression without considering how the apologies are perceived? In so doing, we will join the ethics of care, atonement theory, and the apologetic ethics framework in a relationship-based framework in order to propose a model of ‘ethical apology’ that will be examined through the analysis of BP’s response to the Deepwater Horizon crisis.

### **A Relationship-Based Ethical Apology Framework**

In her analysis of public evaluations of BP one year after the 2010 Gulf spill, Diers (2012) proposed a relational model of corporate image assessment, arguing that we can better assess the degree to which an organization’s efforts to communicate corporate social responsibility have been successful. In the case of BP, Diers (2012) found that while its message strategy had limited positive effects on stakeholder assessments of BP as a ‘socially responsible’ organization, the company did seem to “open the lines of communication between stakeholders and the company” (p. 178). Additionally, instead of being callous as Bauman (2011) suggested, previous analysis of BP’s crisis response strategies (see Diers-Lawson & Donohue, 2013) found that BP’s response to the crisis centred on messages of corporate social responsibility with a particularly a strong emphasis on communicating caring about the people and environment affected by the spill. Thus, adopting a stakeholder relationship perspective lays a stronger groundwork for analyzing the ethics of crisis communication compared to other more instrumental perspectives (Xu & Li, 2013).

However, we must begin with a conceptualization of ‘apology’. Though most studies focusing on apology apply a specific conceptualization of apology which may be: a ‘direct acknowledgement of guilt and an expression of remorse’ (Tyler, 1997 p. 53); provide specific elements like transcendence and differentiation (e.g., Ware & Linkugel, 1973); or remediation, repentance, and rectification (e.g., Coombs, 2000) our goal is to better understand the overall structure of ethical apology. So, we view apology as direct communication of contrition – that is some form of ‘We are sorry’ – (e.g., Benoit, 2004; 1997; Mohamed, et al., 1999) in the face of the crisis. We suggest that approaching analyses of apology by including as many possible tactics to accompany apology will help us to better evaluate whether the content of an organization’s apology is, in fact, ethical. Therefore, in this literature review, we develop a relationship-based ethical apology framework based on joining three theoretical perspectives: the ethics of care, atonement theory, and the apologetic ethics framework.

## Ethics of Care Perspective

Our intention is not to develop a mechanism for judging the ethics of intent, but to suggest how ethical apology could be structured. We begin by adopting an the ethics of care perspective (Simola, 2003; 2005), which defines ethical action in crises as doing what is right for those affected by the crisis (Simola, 2003). In comparing the ethical approaches leaders of organizations may use, Bauman (2011) argues that an ethics of care perspective is best for evaluating ethical crisis management because it balances stakeholder relationships with the emotional and the economic costs of a crisis. In a modern public relations environment that values relationship management, direct engagement, and social responsibility (see, e.g., Hong, et al., 2010; Pang & Cameron, 2011), Simola (2003) argues that that adopting an ethics of care approach during a crisis is central to the maintenance and enhancements of relationships in post-crisis contexts.

In the ethics of care approach, it is necessary for an organization to acknowledge the harm, apologize, and act to resolve the problem; however, it must also show that it cares about those affected (Bauman, 2011) by: (1) communicating responsibility for those affected (Simola, 2003); communicating that its actions are voluntary – they *want to* act (Simola, 2003); and it must engage in dialogue that communicates an interest in hearing, understanding, and being directly responsive to the voices, experiences, and situations experienced by affected community members (Carroll, 2009; de Brooks & Waymer, 2009; Simola, 2003).

## Atonement Theory

Across analyses of corporate social responsibility, ethics, and crisis response, the question of an organization's ethical authenticity often means making a judgment as to whether the organization's messages and behaviors are motivated by genuine interest (e.g., Botan, 1997; Bauman, 2011; Kim, 2013; Koesten, 2004; Lacey, et al., 2014; Shepard, 2009). The problem with determining whether an organization's actions are 'authentic' or efforts to merely improve their image is that it can include supposition about an organization's intent. Research suggests there are a host of factors that can influence these kinds of judgments and that they are seldom 'objective' (Kim, 2013).

In the case of BP, we have evidence of the difficulty in making this kind of distinction in academic research. For example, in Smithson & Venette's (2013) analysis of BP's use of stonewalling during Congressional hearings, the authors conclude that BP's use of stonewalling tactics may have hurt its image recovery. However, some of their conclusions and indictment of the ethics of BP's response were included such subjective supposition:

BP obviously wanted to silence Abbott because the employee was laid off after voicing his concerns to the company about their unsafe practices. Presumably the company had everything to lose by taking responsibility for the Deepwater Horizon failure and admitting to a culture of carelessness. Thus, the company denied access to information and controlled the conversation by stonewalling (p. 406)

For an analysis demonstrating evidence of a stonewalling strategy during Congressional hearings, this kind of a statement would seem to be a poor application of the study's key findings and contributions. As such, evaluating the ethics of crisis response must be based in an approach that focuses on the content of response. Therefore, the second element in developing a model of ethical apology is to identify a mechanism to more objectively evaluate message ethics. In this literature review, the theory of atonement is discussed as a

key mechanism for assessing an organization's ethical apology because it is built on measurable conceptualizations of authenticity in apology (Jerome, 2008; Koesten & Rowland, 2004; Shepard, 2009).

As an example of a unique type of apologia, atonement's conceptual roots certainly come from a religious tradition where the 'sinner' accepts responsibility for wrongs and seeks to make just retribution to those wronged (Koesten & Rowland, 2004); however, it is distinctive from typical apology because while atonement may result in long-term image restoration its shorter term goal is to gain forgiveness and begin to restore the relationship with those 'wronged' (Jerome, 2008; Koesten & Rowland, 2004; Shepard, 2009). Koesten and Rowland (2004) describe atonement as, "a means of accepting guilt in order to create a new image as a redeemed individual or nation" (p. 70).

Atonement theory (see, e.g., Jerome, 2008; Koesten & Rowland, 2004) identifies five features of atonement where the transgressor: (1) acknowledges wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness; (2) demonstrates an attitude of change and relationship renewal; (3) specifically identifies the steps that will be taken to develop a 'different' kind of present and future; (4) demonstrates the authenticity of apology; and (5) conducts the atonement – that is the specific actions to correct the problem and renew the relationship – in public. Atonement must be supported by distinctive and measurable actions. From a crisis response perspective, this suggests that part of responding to a crisis will be to demonstrate specific actions that the organization is taking in order to correct the negative impact of the transgression.

### **Apologetic Ethics Framework**

Finally, we must address the specific content and other contextual factors influencing the authenticity of ethical apology in order better understand how to differentiate between other types of apologia and ethical apology. Certainly, the ethics of care and atonement theory provide effective insights on the content of apology; however, they do not fully explain ethical apology's content. Hearit and Borden's (2006) apologetic ethics framework expands 'apology' from merely saying 'We're sorry' to a complex multi-layered approach atonement approach supporting other descriptions of a broadly 'accommodative' crisis response strategy (see, e.g., Diers, 2007). Frandsen and Johansen (2010) described Hearit and Borden's (2006) framework as a "more practically oriented model which puts forward a normative standard for ethically correct crisis communication..." (p. 353). There are two components to the framework: the manner of apology and the apology's content.

**Manner of apology.** Hearit and Borden (2006) argue that an apology's manner if organizations are interested in both communicating ethically and image recovery. Sincerity, in this case, communicates good faith and desires to reconcile versus merely manage their image. For example, the timing of the apology matters; it should be articulated as soon as an organization recognizes its transgression. If an apology is only articulated after stakeholders demand it, the strength of the apology would be diminished and the apologist would be perceived as not being voluntary or sincere. Apologies must address all stakeholders including anyone affected and offended by the apologist, not just strategic stakeholders. Finally, apologies must be appropriate in context, suggesting that the site, location and medium of communication selected to communicate the apology all must be appropriate to the situation.

**Content of apology.** Hearit and Borden's (2006) conceptualization of apology suggests the manner in which the apology is conducted would be compromised if the content of the apology was insufficient. Thus, they argue that there are several characteristics that the

content of an apology should have. Initially, apologies must explicitly acknowledge wrongdoing and without pointing fingers at others nor dissociating or distancing themselves or their organization from the transgression. Second, the apologist must communicate identification with injured stakeholders by demonstrating empathy with the way in which stakeholders have been hurt thus communicating an understanding of “the depth and effect of the offense in a way that honors the experience of those who have been wronged” (p. 70). Additionally, the apologist must ask for forgiveness. Third, once they ask for forgiveness, the apologist must seek reconciliation; working to restore its relationship with stakeholders. Fourth, the apologist must fully disclose information related to the offense. Fifth, the apologist must also provide explanations that address legitimate concerns and expectations of the stakeholders. Finally, it is not enough to merely apologize, the content of the apology must also provide assurances that the offense will not be committed again and demonstrate a commitment to voluntarily provide appropriate compensation for those affected.

Drawing together ethics of care, atonement, and the apologetic ethics framework, we propose a model of ethical apology (see Figure 1). Based on the manner and content of the apology, we can then draw conclusions about its ethical content. From a theoretical perspective, the most important element is the content – in order for crisis response to be an example of ethical apology, it should have the elements of acknowledgment, empathy, and action.

As previous research has found that source, context, and timing are all important factors that can affect the ethical appropriateness of apology, these must also be evaluated. However, the specific influence of these factors is still unclear and must be more thoroughly investigated. In addition, because this model represents a new conceptualization of ethical crisis response, the question of what it might look like during a crisis is yet unclear. For these reasons and because the concept of ethical apology as a meaningful part of crisis response remains underdeveloped, we propose the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** To what degree does BP’s response in owned sources demonstrate the qualities of ethical apology?

**RQ 1A:** To what degree did BP acknowledge responsibility?

**RQ 1B:** To what degree did BP demonstrate empathy?

**RQ 1C:** To what degree did BP demonstrate corrective action?

**RQ 2:** To what degree did BP’s response demonstrate an ethical manner?

**RQ 2A:** Did context influence BP’s communication of ethical apology?

**RQ 2B:** Did timing influence BP’s communication of ethical apology?

## Methods

In the context of organizational crises and crisis response tactics, quantitative content analysis is a strong method to employ, particularly when analyzing different media outlets (Andsager & Smiley, 1998; Molleda, Connolly-Ahern, & Quinn, 2005).

### Coding

The unit of analysis was operationalized as a single message (i.e., a single press release, post, or tweet) because previous studies of crisis response messages (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Elsbach, 1994; Greer & Moreland, 2003; Henderson, 2003; Kauffman, 2001) emphasize that when studying crisis communication, examining the interplay of tactics within a message employed affords researchers more information about an organization's strategy.

The coding scheme was based on manifest content for each variable with operationalization from previous research (see Diers, 2007; Diers & Tomaino, 2010). Primary issues (i.e., those in the headline of a release or the primary focus of a post or tweet) were derived using a process of grounded theory causal coding, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The analysis of the emergent issues during the Gulf of Mexico revealed 12 unique issues across the five-month crisis (see Table 1).

Members of a graduate course in Organizational Communication coded portions of the data as a part of a class project. The coders were each assigned data from a single channel. Each coder received a codebook and a 50-minute training session with coding examples. Ten percent of the sample was randomly selected and independently coded by the project leader. An overall intercoder reliability analysis was conducted finding the coding scheme to be reliable ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

### Sample

In order to analyze research question one, identifying the structure of BP's apology in the Gulf crisis, all official press releases which were posted on its website during the crisis, all Facebook posts, and all Twitter tweets were used for several reasons. First, press releases have traditionally reflected the driving messaging strategy for organizations (Bivins, 2011; Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Second, the influence of social media is undeniable (Moore, 2004) because it represents an interactive (or two-way) platform for organizations to manage both crises and the surrounding issues (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Additionally, because this research focuses on the structure of BP's atonement, it was most appropriate to begin with BP-owned messaging because the media typically select and frame the information (or direct quotations) that they use from organizations during crises to serve their commercial and/or political ends (Aalbert, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; An & Gower, 2009; Andsager & Smiley, 1998; Berger, 2009; Crider, 2010; Duhe & Zoch, 1994; Iyengar & Curran, 2009). Thus, for research question one, all messages from BP-owned media including some component of accommodation ( $n = 1482$ ), including corrective action, apology, compassion for those affected, offering reassurances about the future, eliciting sympathy for the organization, transparency about the situation, and asking or referring to stakeholders volunteering to help redress the situation were included (see Diers, 2007). In addition to contextualize BP's apology, we also examined other factors such as message subject, the influence of time – measured by the date of the response, and method of communication – all factors identified in the literature review as influencing the communication of atonement.



The duration of the crisis was operationalized from the explosion on April 29, 2010 until the well was declared ‘officially killed’ on September 21, 2010. While the coverage of the crisis and its lasting implications certainly warrants an extended timeline, because our interest was crisis response during the crisis, this was the most inclusive but clear delineation of the crisis possible.

### **Data analysis**

In order to answer research question one, factor analyses with Varimax Rotation and Kaiser Normalization were conducted comparing the structure of apology for each of the three BP-owned channels to identify similarities and differences in each. Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, and McCroskey (2008) identify the primary functions of factor analysis indicating that it: (1) is a tool to establish construct validity that identifies mutually exclusive highly correlated concepts; (2) allows us to know if the correlations between concepts are meaningful; and that (3) exploratory factor analysis allows researchers to determine how many concepts the ‘scale’ is measuring. Therefore, while factor analyses are typically used to establish the relationship between survey questions, they are appropriate in identifying the unique message strategies emerging from a set of tactics because the goals in identifying strategies align with the goals of exploratory factor analyses. Factors emerging with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 were included as primary strategies communicated by BP for each source. Further, correlations were performed comparing dominant apology structures and other ‘accommodative’ tactics as were Chi-square tests to determine the degree to which tactics emerged at greater or less than expected levels.

In order to evaluate the factors influencing BP’s accommodation tactics, we used a 3 (Source) x 12 (Primary Contexts) x 6 (Message Month) MANOVA design with Scheffe post hoc analyses. MANOVA is appropriate when we have several dependent variables which all measure different aspects of some cohesive theme (i.e., ‘accommodation’ tactics) and situations where there are likely moderate correlations between dependent variables, thus reducing error.

### **Results**

Overall, these results demonstrate that the structure of BP’s apologies during the 2010 spill can be described as ‘ethical’ apology.

### **Research Question One**

The first research question examined the structure of BP’s atonement. By examining BP’s owned media, we find a clear evidence of the ethical apology structure. Across all messaging which included some element of accommodation, BP focused on corrective action as their dominant single tactic ( $n = 985$ ). In fact, messaging focusing on how BP would correct the situation in the Gulf of Mexico exceeded all groupings of routine communication ( $n = 617$ ), anti-social or defensive ( $n = 384$ ), and efforts to emphasize interorganizational relationships ( $n = 584$ ). BP’s emphasis on corrective action cut across all other efforts to apologize and was significantly greater than expected ( $X^2(1) = 36.65; p < .00$ ).

Press releases offered the richest atonement detail integrating six different accommodative tactics into three types of atonement for the crisis (see Table 2 for representative examples of tactics). The dominant type of atonement in press releases was a compassionate apology (Eigenvalue = 1.82, accounting for 25.95 percent of the variance) pairing their communication of compassion for those affected (.78) with apology—or

recognizing their transgression (.75). BP also used a challenged transparency (Eigenvalue = 1.40 accounting for 19.95 percent of the variance) approach to communicate their atonement combining their efforts to elicit sympathy for the difficulty of their task (.68) with their efforts to be transparent during the crisis (.76). Third, BP tried to emphasize a community building (Eigenvalue = 1.27, accounting for 18.16 percent of the variance) effort in their long-term commitment to restoring the Gulf by combining their efforts to offer assurances about their future work in the region (.65) with soliciting and recognizing stakeholder collaborations in the work to restore the Gulf and its residents (.89). Each of these types of atonement were correlated with the others and message date revealing three significant correlations. Compassionate apology positively correlated with community building ( $r = .24$ ), challenging transparency negatively correlated with message date ( $r = -.29$ ), and community building also negatively correlated with message date ( $r = -.41$ ).

BP's messaging on Facebook also demonstrated a compassionate apology structure (Eigenvalue = 1.18, accounting for 16.84 percent of the variance) pairing compassion (.64) and apology (.64). However, its two dominant atonement strategies incorporated soliciting and recognizing volunteers in its recovery efforts (Eigenvalue = 1.40, accounting for 20.06 percent of the variance) and offering reassurances about BP's work in the Gulf for the near future to ensure recovery (Eigenvalue = 1.25, accounting for 17.90 percent of the variance), both as single-tactic types of atonement. Each of these was correlated with the remaining accommodative tactics and message date revealing seven significant correlations. Offering assurances was positively correlated with volunteering ( $r = .10$ ) and message date ( $r = .10$ ) and negatively correlated with corrective action ( $r = -.19$ ) and transparency ( $r = -.10$ ). Volunteering was negatively correlated with both compassionate apology ( $r = -.10$ ) and transparency ( $r = -.31$ ). Compassionate apology was also negatively correlated with transparency ( $r = -.15$ ).

Like Facebook, BP's response Twitter also demonstrated compassionate apology (Eigenvalue = 1.07 accounting for 15.24 percent of the variance) pairing compassion (.71) with apology (.61). Like with Facebook, seeking and recognizing volunteers was BP's primary atonement strategy on Twitter (Eigenvalue = 1.41, accounting for 20.08 percent of the variance). While BP also offered assurances (.70) on Twitter, they paired with efforts to illicit sympathy (.69) about the challenges they faced in moving forward to create a challenging assurances (Eigenvalue = 1.39, accounting for 19.84 percent of variance) type of apology as well. Each of these apology types was correlated with the remaining accommodative tactics and message date revealing seven significant correlations. Volunteering was negatively correlated with transparency ( $r = -.29$ ) and message date ( $r = -.17$ ). Challenged assurances was positively correlated with compassionate apology ( $r = .09$ ) and negatively correlated with corrective action ( $r = -.21$ ) as well as transparency ( $r = -.10$ ). Compassionate apology was also negatively correlated with corrective action ( $r = -.19$ ) and transparency ( $r = -.25$ ).

## Research Question Two

Research question 2 examined the factors – source (i.e., press release, Facebook, and Twitter), primary context (i.e., the 12 described in methods), and message month (i.e., April, May, June, July, August, and September) – that influenced the structure of BP's apologies. The multivariate (see Table 3) test reveals a significant three-way interaction between source, primary context, and message month on BP's use of apology accounting for a total of six percent of the variance. While seemingly small, it does suggest that BP's structure of apology was somewhat sensitive to the situation allowing them to adapt their message across channels, contexts, and time.

Because the multivariate test was significant, the results for the between-subjects tests for each of the dependent variables are also relevant. These also reveal significant three-way interactions for apology, compassion, and eliciting sympathy (see Table 4); offering assurances had three significant two-way interactions for source and month, source and primary context, and primary context and message month; transparency had a significant two-way interaction for source and month; and volunteering had a significant main effect for source.

**Primary Context.** These data reveal a significant but limited impact of message context on atonement messages from BP (see Table 5). Though 12 different contexts emerged and nine of them had some influence on at least one of the tactics measured only status updates, BP response to criticism, BP leadership, environmental impacts, and compensation for those affected consistently influenced BP's use of different messages. These data indicate that when it comes to apology, BP used apology widely.

**Message Timing.** These data reveal a significant and seemingly strategic use of different atonement messages across the duration of the crisis (see Table 6). With the exception of September where apology was used more than in August, apology was consistently used more often earlier in the crisis – first emerging on April 24 and being used weekly through June and a drop off in its use in August. In fact, messaging changed sharply in August with a substantially greater use of offering assurances in August than June, July, or September and with BP asking for sympathy substantially less in August than in both May and June. Additionally, in September, we saw BP communicate messages focusing on transparency substantially less than in June, July, or August. These data indicate that as major events occurred, such as the capping of the well at the end of July and anticipating the killing of the well in September that BP adapted their messages to match major shifts in the nature of the crisis.

## Discussion

Taken together, BP's structures of atonement in their apologetic-based response to the Gulf of Mexico spill communicated more than a simple apology; BP's crisis response demonstrated a multi-media communication of 'ethical apology'.

### Stakeholder-Centered Atonement

These data suggest that BP's communication behaviors emphasized stakeholder-centered atonement strategy in its owned media. With its press releases, we found an integrated structure of atonement focusing first on compassionate apology—a communicated emphasis on the people and local environment affected by the spill. Early in the crisis, BP's responses also incorporated community building by inviting participation with BP and recognizing their collaborative efforts with the community and other agencies or individuals who could help them address the problem. As time continued, BP began to focus on its willingness to commit to the challenge (i.e., eliciting sympathy and offering reassurances) of rebuilding the communities and industries affected. Consistent with other research on BP's response in the Gulf more broadly examining BP's response strategies (Diers-Lawson & Donohue, 2013), these data suggest that the press releases most emphasized this ethical apology framework. However, instead of parroting the press releases, BP's apologetic Facebook posts reflected a stronger emphasis on volunteer engagement and offering assurances that BP would be involved with these communities for the long-term. Similarly, BP's apologetic tweets centered on community-building with volunteers and the future, but

the tweets painted those assurances with a theme that BP would sacrifice to atone. Though BP's crisis response was largely criticized, it was also praised for effectively using social media (Shogren, 2011). Yet, in that praise, Steve Marino of Ogilvy and Mather suggested BP was wise to *just* use social media as a forum for people to vent (Shogren, 2011). Our analysis suggests that instead of merely being a place for people to vent, BP's messaging on Facebook and Twitter seemed to emphasize dialogic engagement and real-life collaborations with members of the Gulf Coast community because its posts and tweets emphasized acknowledgment, empathy, and action. These data support previous research highlighting the strength and opportunities in using social media as an opportunity for two-way engagement (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009), but extend that research by demonstrating that social media messages can expand an organization's use of ethical apology in response to a crisis.

### **The Content of BP's Atonement**

Taking these findings together, there are five ways that we can describe BP's messaging as ethical apology. First, BP's messaging emphasized various stakeholders across sources and contexts espousing concern for all of those affected. Second, its emphasis on collaboration and community building communicates efforts to reintegrate the organization as a part of the community. Third, as evidenced in other research (e.g., Diers-Lawson & Donohue, 2013; Smithson & Venette, 2013), BP clearly endeavored to shift some responsibility of the blame – particularly to its operational partners Transocean and Halliburton. However, these findings suggest that BP separated its efforts to apologize from any shifting of blame; instead when the company apologized, it consistently and explicitly recognized its accountability for the crisis. Fourth, by communicating transparency throughout the crisis, BP's messaging shows evidence of an espoused commitment to correcting the wrong, its willingness to sacrifice its well-being in order to atone and reconcile with its stakeholders. Finally, BP's messaging focused on the future as the company made assurances it would make 'things' right and be involved in the Gulf for the long-term. Each of these reflects the core attributes of the content of ethical apology (see Table 2).

### **The Manner of BP's Atonement**

By taking a step back from the content of the apology to evaluate the manner of the apology, we may better assess the communication of BP's remorse as well as the factors that might have limited its success in communicating remorse. While only accounting for a relatively small amount of the total variance, the context and message timing reveal important characteristics of BP's efforts to atone for the Gulf crisis. The small eta could indicate other factors influenced BP's atonement or that they chose a 'stay the course' approach, which seems to be a more consistent conclusion based on these findings. Ultimately, this could damage perceptions that the company was genuinely responsive to the voices, experiences, and contexts of community members.

**Context.** BP did not tailor its efforts to atone to each of the 12 primary contexts for this crisis; however, it did tailor its response to a particular subset in this crisis demonstrating some sensitivity to the nuances of the situation. Based on the emergent issues (see Table 1), there were two types of crisis within the BP Gulf crisis—the material crisis stemming from the oil spill and a series of reputational crises emerging from gaffes. Thus, in contexts where BP was responding to criticism, discussions about their leadership, and bad public relations where the company's practices were directly confronted, BP emphasized compassion for

those affected, apology, and offering assurances about their role in correcting the crisis. We believe that while BP's messages demonstrated contrition and focused on correcting wrongs, the manner of the apology may explain why its apology was not viewed as sincere in many evaluations of its crisis response.

**Time.** These data suggest the structure and messaging surrounding BP's apology-based messaging changed across the five-month crisis. These data indicate shifts in atonement messaging shifted with major events within the crisis supporting a conclusion that BP communicated remorse in its response to the crisis. However, that remorse may not have been convincing. This is the delicate balance in crisis response that previous research (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Hearit & Boden, 2006; Kauffman, 2008) suggests a company must strike in order for an ethical response to be perceived as also authentic.

While their frequency of apology early in the wake of a mega-damage transgression may have provoked negative reactions, its timing was generally consistent with recommendations for ethical apology – initial apologies should occur very quickly. Across the crisis changes in BP's atonement messages indicate an effort to be sensitive to the evolving situation. Evidence of this was their consistent use of corrective action as a tactic throughout the crisis—that no matter what, they emphasized actions they were taking to address the problem they created. Yet, it was in the adaptation of their atonement messaging in August that demonstrates a shift in their efforts to communicate compassion and build community to a more definitive effort to move beyond the crisis and emphasize their commitment to long-term recovery.

## Conclusions

Based on all of BP's press releases and its engagement on Facebook and Twitter, we conclude that the content and manner of BP's apology demonstrated ethical apology. However, the company's communication of remorse may have been less believable because in the first ten days of the crisis, they apologized too often and focused on empathy later. This may suggest that for ethical apology to be credible, a transgressor should communicate acknowledgment, empathy, and action together rather than in phases across a crisis. In addition, the contexts for apology including Congressional Hearings, responses to criticism, and the broader crisis response strategy that did include defensive strategies – even stonewalling (see Diers-Lawson & Donohue, 2013; Smithson & Venette, 2013) may have structurally weakened the possibility for the ethical apology to be believable. These findings offer a strong indicator about the obstacles that transgressing organizations face if they are to ethically apologize and be believed. More directly, communicating ethical apology may be insufficient for the apology to be credible; factors like effective timing, context, and source influence the believability of the content; regardless of whether its content is ethical.

Theoretically, this research also demonstrates that developing an ethics-based evaluation of an organization's crisis response helps to separate the substance of an organization's response to a crisis from the perceptions of that response. In this way, we can not only better understand the construction of ethical crisis response but also more effectively evaluate the whether an organization is successful in maintaining or enhancing its relationships after crises. We argue the separation of the content and manner of apology, using the ethical apology framework, is meaningful to avoid confusing unethical responses to crises with unsuccessful ones.

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**Table 1**

**Primary Contexts for the BP Gulf of Mexico Crisis**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>
Status Updates	This refers to updates on the status of the spill including technical issues, physical problems, progress, and any impact of weather. For example, announcing delays, successes, and failures.
BP Response to Criticism	This refers to statements, releases, etc. that are directly responding to accusations, gulf-related litigation, fines, rebukes, etc. <i>directly related to the BP Gulf Oil Spill</i> . Criticisms of BP related to other topics coded elsewhere.
Spill Impacts on People	This refers to BP's responses that address situations related to the economic, human, or social costs of the Gulf spill.
BP Leadership	This refers to BP's responses that address the company's leaders, where the company's leaders are specifically criticized, or changes in the company's leadership. This context is specific to addressing issues of leadership, not merely where the leader is quoted, rather where they are the topic of conversation.
Compensation for those Affected	This refers to BP's responses that directly address the financial compensation for people and businesses negatively impacted by the Gulf spill. This includes references to the \$20 billion fund, fraudulent claims, BP's willingness to pay claims, and any other corrective actions taken (or desired) by BP to those affected.
Other BP Issues	This refers to BP responses that are in the context of other issues affecting the company that are UNRELATED to the Gulf oil spill. For example, if BP responds to the Lockerbie Bomber accusations, North Sea drilling, or old cases.
Bad Public Relations	This refers to BP statements that are framed in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of BP's public relations in light of the Gulf oil spill.
Politics	This refers to BP statements that are framed in the context of American or British politics. For example political elections, political leaders, international diplomacy, etc.
Government Response & Regulation	This refers to BP statements in the context of official government rebukes of BP, drilling bans, new regulation on the oil industry, the MMS, their own coordination with the US or British governments.
BP's Financial Cost of Cleanup	This refers to BP statements in the context of how much the cleanup efforts are costing, will cost, or have cost. This is different from their compensation of those affected. This can also include actions BP is taking to finance the cost of cleanup (e.g., canceling dividends or selling oil interests in other places).
Environmental Impacts	This refers to all BP statements in the context of the environmental damage, environmental research, environmental recovery, etc. This may range from animals affected to wetlands, etc.
Congressional Hearings	This refers to all BP statements in the context of US Congressional Hearings or British Parliament inquiries.

**Table 2**  
**Representative Examples of BP’s Atonement Strategies**

Strategy	Representative Example of Strategy	Ethical Apology Category(ies)
Compassionate Apology	“Everyone at BP is heartbroken by this event, by the loss of life and by the damage to the environment and to the livelihoods of the people of the Gulf Coast. It should not have happened and we are bound and determined to learn every lesson to try and ensure it never happens again.” Tony Hayward, 3/6/2010	Acknowledgment Empathy
Challenged Transparency	“This event is unprecedented; no company, no one, has ever had to attempt to deal with a situation such as this at depths such as this before. BP, the Unified Command, the federal authorities and the hundreds of companies and thousands of individuals engaged on this effort, are doing everything we can to bring it under control and make it good.” Doug Suttles, 29/5/2010	Action
Community Building	“The enhancements announced today will further strengthen the Vessels of Opportunity program, getting the right vessels into the fight in the fairest way possible. We've listened carefully to those working on this important effort, and we appreciate the changes they've recommended. This program is an important piece of our efforts to make things right in the Gulf of Mexico.” Doug Suttles 5/7/2010	Empathy Action
Corrective Action	“I'm focused on the response. I'm focused on trying to eliminate the leak, trying to contain the oil on the surface, defending the beaches, clean up the spill and restore the lives of people on the Gulf Coast. That's what I intend to do.” Tony Hayward 17/6/2010	Acknowledgment Action
Apologia	“We failed to wrestle this beast to the ground. We understand the importance of this. We are deeply sorry.” Bob Dudley, 20/6/2010	Acknowledgment Empathy
Compassion	“We appreciate that there is a great deal of stress and anxiety across the region and as part of our determination to make things right for the people of the region, we are providing this assistance now to help make sure individuals who need help know where to turn.” Lamar McKay, 16/8/2010	Empathy Action
Offering Reassurances	“We are determined to learn the lessons for the future and we will be undertaking a broad-scale review to further improve the safety of our operations... to ensure that a tragedy like this can never happen again.” Bob Dudley, 8/9/2010	Acknowledgment Action
Eliciting Sympathy	“Whether it is fair or unfair is not the point. I became the public face and was demonised and vilified. BP cannot move on in the US with me as its leader. Life isn't fair ... sometimes you step off the pavement and get hit by a bus.” Tony Hayward 29/7/2010	Acknowledgment Action
Transparency	“BP confirmed its continuing commitment to co-operate with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in facilitating access by the US Government and the public to sampling/monitoring data on the Deepwater Horizon spill response.” BP Press Release 21/5/2010	Action
Volunteering	“I want to thank everyone for their tremendous commitment to lead and support the response and cleanup efforts. I really cannot say this enough: BP wants all individuals to feel free to share their thoughts and experiences with journalists, if they so choose.” Doug Suttles, 1/7/2010	Empathy

**Table 3**

**Multivariate Tests**

Effect	$\Lambda$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i> <sub>1</sub>	<i>df</i> <sub>2</sub>	Partial $\epsilon^2$
Source	.76	7.14	56	10010	.04
Primary Context	.89	2.21	77	8540.65	.02
Message Month	.96	1.70	35	5992.66	.01
Source *	.57	2.09	399	9914.62	.08
Primary Context					
Source * Msg.	.71	2.41	203	9728.66	.05
Month					
Primary Context	.74	1.73	259	9824.03	.04
* Msg. Month					
Source *	.64	1.67	399	9914.62	.06
Primary Context					
* Msg. Month					

**Table 4**

**Significant Between-Subjects Tests**

Effect	Dependent Variable	MS	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial $\epsilon^2$
Source	Volunteering	1.02	8	5.68	.000	.03
Source * Month	Transparency	.29	29	1.50	.04	.03
	Offering	.36	29	2.09	.001	.04
	Assurances					
Source *	Offering	.28	57	1.62	.003	.06
Primary Context	Assurances					
Primary Context	Offering	.28	37	1.60	.01	.04
* Message	Assurances					
Month						
Source * Month	Apology	.09	57	2.84	.000	.10
* Primary						
Context	Compassion	.21	57	1.35	.04	.05
	Eliciting	.08	57	2.44	.000	.09
	Sympathy					
Error			1430			

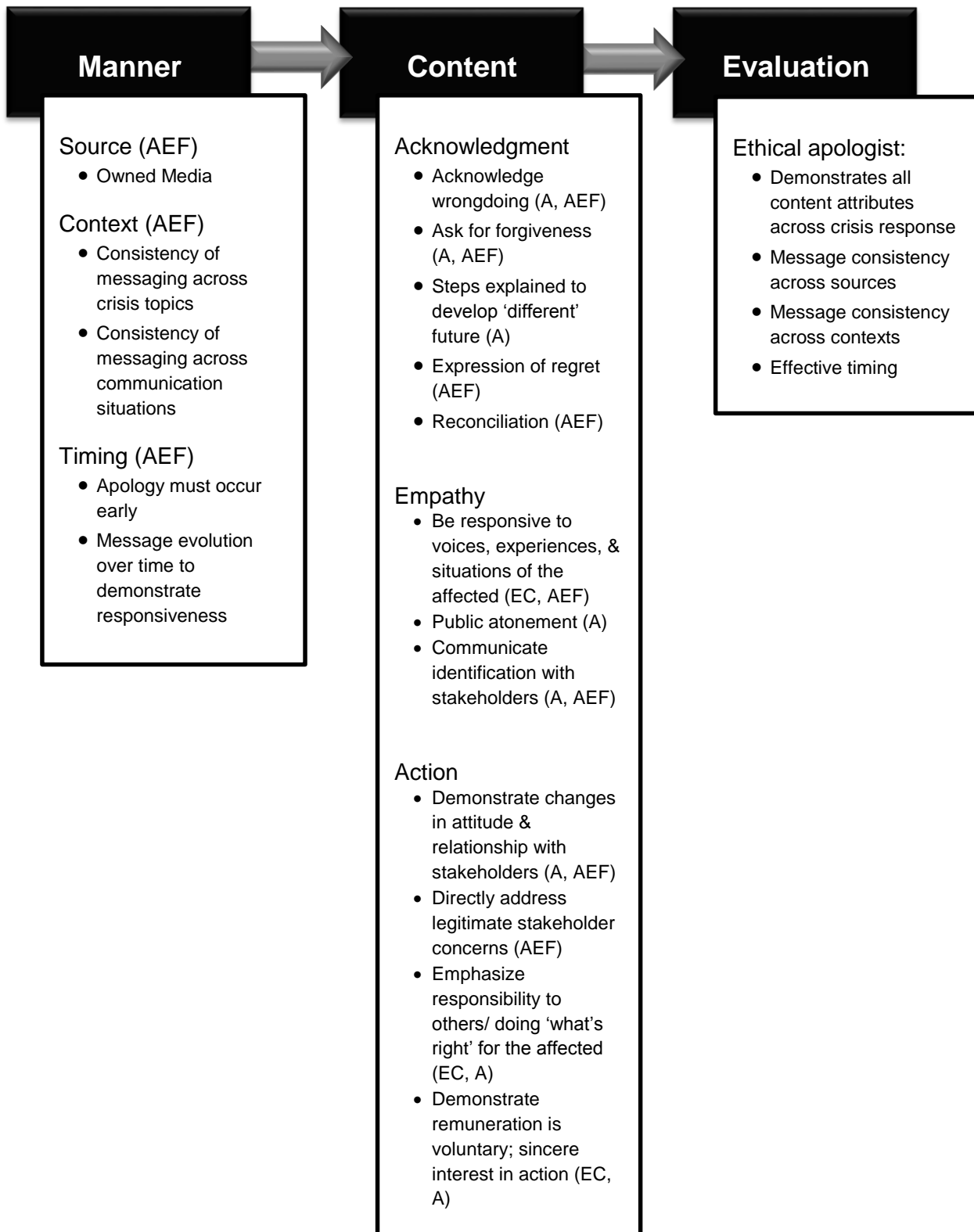
**Table 5**  
**Significant Scheffe Results for Primary Context**

Dependent Variable	Test (I)	Test (J)	Mean Difference (I- J)	Significance	
Apology	Status Updates	BP Response to Criticism	-.17	.000	
		BP Leadership	-.20	.000	
		Bad PR	-.24	.000	
	BP Response to Criticism	Spill Impacts on People	.18	.000	
		Compensation for Those Affected	.18	.000	
		Environmental Impacts	.19	.000	
	Spill Impacts on People BP Leadership	Bad Public Relations	-.24	.000	
		Compensation for Those Affected	.21	.000	
		Government Response & Regulation	.16	.02	
	Compensation for Those Affected	Environmental Impacts	.22	.000	
		Bad Public Relations	-.24	.000	
		Bad Public Relations	.25	.000	
Compassion	Status Updates	Environmental Impacts	.25	.000	
		BP Response to Criticism	-.26	.000	
		Spill Impacts on People	-.26	.000	
Offering Assurances	BP Response to Criticism Spill Impacts on People	Environmental Impacts	.25	.008	
		Environmental Impacts	.25	.000	
		Status Updates	BP Leadership	-.27	.008
Eliciting Sympathy	Status Updates	BP Leadership	-.27	.000	
		Spill Impacts on People	BP Leadership	-.35	.000
		BP Leadership	Compensation for Those Affected	.34	.000
	BP Response to Criticism	Status Updates	Environmental Impacts	.27	.02
			BP Leadership	-.24	.000
			Spill Impacts on People	.11	.007
		BP Response to Criticism	BP Leadership	-.16	.000
			Compensation for Those Affected	.10	.01
			Spill Impacts on People	BP Leadership	-.27
		BP Leadership	Compensation for Those Affected	.26	.000
			Government Response & Regulation	.22	.000
			BP's Financial Cost of Clean Up	.26	.000
Environmental Impacts	Environmental Impacts	.25	.000		
	Congressional Hearings	.28	.000		

**Table 6**

**Significant Scheffe Results for Message Timing**

Dependent Variable	Test (I)	Test (J)	Mean Difference (I- J)	Significance	
Apology	April	May	.17	.03	
		July	.22	.001	
		August	.26	.000	
		September	.20	.005	
	May	August	.08	.005	
		June	July	.06	.000
			August	.11	.000
	July	August	.04	.04	
	August	September	-.06	.008	
	Compassion	August	September	-.13	.02
Offering Assurances	June	August	-.19	.000	
	July	August	-.21	.000	
	August	September	.23	.000	
Eliciting Sympathy	May	August	.07	.04	
	June	August	.05	.002	
Transparency	June	September	.15	.01	
	July	September	.17	.003	
	August	September	.14	.02	



**Figure 1. Model of Ethical Apology**

Notes: A – Atonement theory  
AEF – Apologetic Ethics Framework  
EC – Ethics of care