A Contrastive Study on Image Repair Strategies in Chinese and American Corporate Apologies

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Abstract

Nowadays, frequently-happening wrongdoings have seriously damaged the corporate image and threatened the survival of corporations. For companies in crises, an appropriate apology has become a vital strategy to repair corporate image. Remarkable achievements have been made in the contrastive study of corporate apologies, but there is still much to be explored about Chinese and American corporate apologies. Therefore, this paper investigates the differences of the image repair strategies employed in Chinese and American corporate apologies, in order to help corporations handle crises in a cross-cultural context. With AntConc 2019, the paper first analyzes the major linguistic devices in 100 Chinese and American corporate apologies, and then finds out the differences of image repair strategies and the underlying factors through qualitative analysis, based on Benoit's image repair strategies and Adaptation Theory. The results show that (1) Chinese companies show their solemnity and sincerity in the crisis through *person deixis* such as *company* and *customer* and *strengtheners* such as *again*, *seriously* and *first time*, while American companies use more *demonstrative pronouns* like *this*, *these* and *it*, and *politeness words* like *please*, *hope* and *thank* to mitigate crisis conflicts. Meanwhile, when providing compensation and follow-up services, American ones would use *if-conditionals* to control the cost of the apology. (2) *Reducing offensiveness* and *Mortification* are the two most commonly used strategies, respectively accounting for 37.7% and 36.3%. In *mortification*, asking for forgiveness is

often used in American corporate apologies (11.3%), while *accepting the blame* is more common in Chinese corporate apologies (11.1%). When *reducing offensiveness*, Chinese corporations would choose *bolstering* (20.9%) and *transcendence* (10.5%), while American ones prefer *compensation* (17.6%) and *valuing the customer* (13.9%). (3) Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism and high-power distance, while American culture emphasizes individualism and low-power distance, which accounts for the difference of image repair strategies in Chinese and American corporate apologies. This paper can act as a complement to the contrastive research on American and Chinese corporate apologies and provide references for corporate communication in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: Chinese and English corporate apologies, Image repair strategies, Contrastive study, Adaptation Theory

1. Introduction

Organizations frequently face accusations or suspicions of wrongdoing (Benoit, 2014). Facing crises, an appropriate apology is often regarded as a vital tool to alleviate the emergency and repair the damaged image. However, an appropriate apology is exceedingly complicated in the organizational context, in which many intricate elements need consideration, such as costs and benefits, corporate image, rapport with customers, etc. Therefore, corporate apology, as an important and complicated object of research, attracts people's attention and is worth exploring.

With the frequent occurrence of corporate crises and the increasing importance of corporate apologies, many studies on corporate apologies have been conducted from different disciplines, in which the studies of pragmatics and crisis communication, two of the major fields, share several areas of concern and act as complementary perspectives. (Page, 2014) The pragmatic research has set a solid foundation for the categorization and employment of apology strategies, while scholars in the field of crisis communication also achieve greatness in research on corporate apologies, which is usually regarded as an effective strategy to respond to crises and repair corporate images. Therefore, the researchers mainly focus on the exploration of apology efficacy and the influencing factors of apology efficacy in crises, with reference to classic theories. From a comprehensive perspective, cross-disciplinary research is critical to analyzing corporate apologies.

Moreover, with increasingly fierce competition in international trade, cultures have more effects on corporations' behaviors, including the choice of apology strategies and apology efficacy. Therefore, the contrastive study of corporate apologies in the context of different cultures is crucial. However, there is still much room for contrastive research on corporate apologies, especially in a particular industry in China and America. Nowadays, given the great importance put on health and quality, as well as the explosive growth of social media, many high-profile crises about low-level services and poor quality of goods have triggered arguments within a short time and further have affected the existence of the retailing industry. Therefore, apologies of the retailing industry are worthy of contrastive study.

As a complement to the contrastive studies of corporate apologies, this paper will make a

contrastive analysis of the employment of image repair strategies by Chinese and American corporations, finding out the underlying factors of differences between Chinese and American corporate apologies. Therefore, this paper, as a cross-disciplinary research, has enriched the research on corporate apologies and provided references for corporate managers to make effective apologies and facilitate corporate communication in a cross-cultural context.

In this paper, three questions are to be answered: 1) What different linguistic devices are employed in Chinese and American corporate apologies? 2) What are the differences in image repair strategies in Chinese and American corporate apologies? 3) What accounts for the differences of strategies and linguistic devices in Chinese and American corporate apologies?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Corporate Apology

Apology, taken as one of the primary strategies for corporations in crises, has been studied in a wide array of scholarly discourses. Different researchers have focused on different aspects of corporate apology and constantly improved research methods, accordingly leading to great achievements, whether in the theoretical development of corporate apology and apology strategies or the research on employment and effectiveness of apology strategies.

2.1.1 Apology and Apology Strategies

Since the 1980s, as apologies have come to be recognized as a common and effective tool to facilitate interpersonal communication, scholars have defined and operationalized apologies in many ways to optimize the use of apologies in communication. In speech act theory, Searle (1979) found out the expression of feelings behind an apology, accordingly attributing apologies to the speech act category of expressives which convey the speaker's feelings, for example, by thanking, praising, or apologizing, while Holmes (1990) described the form of apologies as "remarkably formulaic speech acts: a very small number of lexical items and syntactic patterns account for the great majority of the explicit apologies". Despite various definitions, a common view has been taken that at a minimum, apologies require an offender to accept responsibility for an offensive act and express regret to the offended party. (Benoit, 1995; Lazare, 2004; Bentley, 2015)

Moreover, apology strategies, as one of the directions of apology research, has been explored in pragmatic studies, to find out the optimum use of strategies in various situations. (Fraser, 1981; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Trosborg, 1987; Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989) Among them, Fraser (1981) first classified apology strategies into six categories: 1) Announcing that you are apologizing 2) Stating one's obligation to apologize 3) Offering to apologize 4) Requesting that the hearer accept an apology 5) Expression of regret 6) Requesting forgiveness for the offence.

However, following Fraser (1981), scholars have realized that apology is a far more complex object than the mere expression of apology, regret, forgiveness, etc. Therefore, more scholars

related apology to face work (Goffman, 1959), politeness (Haugh & Chang, 2019; Murphy, 2019), and rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Moreover, benefiting from contrastive studies between different cultures, experiments supported by technology, empirical studies facilitated by the Internet, etc., more and more objective and accurate results and analyses have constantly developed people's thoughts about apologies. Murphy's experiment (2019) has challenged scholars' thinking about politeness or impoliteness. He examined how 78 native British English speakers respond to various instances of "I'm sorry" in an experimental setting, unexpectedly finding that the examples of "verbal formula mismatches" are treated as being "proper" apologies.

With long-term development, it is believed that a solid foundation has been established in theoretical studies of apology and apology strategies, acting as a helpful reference for later research. Therefore, with reference to the previous views about apology strategies, acting as a complement to image repair strategies, this paper attempts to establish a theoretical framework combining apology strategies and image repair strategies, to provide a clearer view of their characteristics.

2.1.2 Corporate Apology and Its Effectiveness

Given its complexity, apologies may occur in different ways and accordingly achieve various functions, although it appears ubiquitous in different contexts (Page, 2014). Corporate apology tends to be distinct and intricate, resulting from costs and profits, corporate image, rapport with customers and other elements worth considering. Therefore, corporate apologies have attracted significant attention from several disciplines.

Pragmatic research on corporate apologies mainly explored how apology strategies were employed by corporations in public contexts, through examined data from spoken discourse or written discourse with the help of software. (Page, 2014; Shariati & Chariani, 2010) Based on the corpus study, Page (2014) made a contrastive analysis between corporate apologies and ordinary apologies from members of Twitter, finding that corporate apologies were different from apologies in other contexts, as they combined *offer of repair* (as a type of corrective action) with apologies.

In the field of crisis communication, it was generally held that organizations could serve their reputations and deal with crises with apologies. (Dens et al., 2015; Kim, Avery & Lariscy, 2009) However, as for the effects of corporate apology in dealing with crises, no common view has been reached. Many researchers questioned the positive roles of apology for corporations, regarding it as an implication of acknowledging service failure, which could be detrimental to corporate reputation. (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Lee & Song, 2010) Besides, some scholars explored the optimum employment of apology, advocating the combination of apology and other strategies to upgrade the effects. (Van Hooijdonk & Liebrecht, 2021)

Besides the effects of corporate apologies in crises, the factors affecting apology efficacy have also been emphasized in the field of crisis communication, helping corporations tailor effective apologies according to different situations. Firstly, from the customer's perspective,

crisis involvement is thought to affect apology efficacy by influencing consumers' cognitive and affective processes (Choi & Lin, 2009) and one's motivation in acquiring crisis-related information (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Then, from the company's perspective, brand image, as a critical element, affect the acceptance of corporate apologies. (Dawar & Lei, 2009; Lee & Atkinson, 2019) Moreover, it was held that the more closely a crisis is related to a brand's main attributes, the more serious the crisis is perceived to be. (Dawar & Lei, 2009) At last, message appeal type, as a critical factor affecting apology efficacy, has been researched by a large number of researchers (Moon and Rhee, 2012; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005), which is critical and should be carefully investigated to best assess how the content and form of the message influence the efficacy of an apology message. (Coombs, 2014)

Above all, the effectiveness of corporate apologies is a complex topic of high value in various disciplines. Scholars of different fields have their focuses on corporate apologies--- pragmatic studies mainly focus on the employment of apology strategies; research in crisis communication shows interest in the effectiveness of corporate apologies in dealing with crises and the factors affecting apology efficacy. Therefore, a comprehensive study on corporate apologies, including employment, efficacy and influencing factors, will provide a complete and direct reference for corporations in crisis.

2.1.3 Contrastive Study of Corporate Apology

In the contrastive study of corporate apologies, many scholars have demonstrated the influence of values or beliefs on corporate apologies or changed the conventional perceptions in their studies.

Firstly, many scholars made contrastive studies on corporate apologies of different countries, offering evidence that differences in corporate apologies arise from different values and beliefs. (Okumura & Wei, 2000; Nahyun, 2017) Nahyun (2017) conducted quantitative research to identify the semantic components of apology between the United States and South Korea when facing data breaches, finding that there are significant differences in the frequency of responsibility admittance, offer of excuse, compensation and reassurance.

Moreover, many scholars have changed the conventional perceptions in our daily life, through the contrastive study of corporate apologies of different cultures. (Li & Wu, 2018; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018) For example, contrary to the common perception that the Japanese apologize more than the English, Morrow and Yamanouchi (2020) found considerable similarities in the frequency of apologies in English and Japanese communications when they made a rhetorical move analysis of hotels' apologies in English and Japanese communication-mediated communication.

Besides, corpus study was also taken as an effective research method in contrastive studies on corporate apologies. (Van Hooijdonk & Liebrecht, 2021; Manika, Papagiannidis & Bourlakis, 2015) Van Hooijdonk and Liebrecht (2021) conducted a corpus study to examine how apologies occurred in 480 airline webcare conversations and then investigated the effectiveness of apologies. Similarly, the effectiveness of apologies was also examined through a self-administered online internet survey, developed by Manika, Papagiannidis and

Bourlakis (2015), in order to show how CEO YouTube apologies affect satisfaction with the company after an apology.

Contrastive studies have been constantly enriched, along with more communications and connections among different cultures. Despite those great achievements, there is still much room for exploration. For example, since each specific industry has its unique business model, their apologies need to be studied in order to identify their communication characteristics.

2.2 Corporate Image Repair

Concerning corporate image repair, Benoit's image repair strategies have always been taken as the dominant model for analyzing responses to image-related crises. (Burns & Bruner, 2000; Hearit, 2006; Rowland & Jerome, 2004; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007) Benoit (1995, 1997) developed image repair strategies, consisting of five general categories of response strategy with fourteen tactics, which provide helpful options for corporations to repair their images.

Taking Benoit's image repair strategies as a foundation, many researchers contributed to enriching the strategies for repairing corporate images. (Len-Rios, 2010; Sanderson, 2008; Smithson and Venette, 2013) Sanderson (2008) has taken a *suffering* strategy as a temporary tactic of repairing image, involving the accused stating that self-defense is difficult because the court of public opinion has already condemned the accused; Len-Rios (2010) has found a *disappointment* strategy, which differentiates the values of the organization from the action of its members through acknowledging bad judgment by the athletes; moreover, Smithson and Venette (2013) have described a *stonewalling* strategy as offering superficial responses, refocusing (or redirecting) attention, and denying the accuser access to certain information. All of them have enriched the image repair strategies and provided useful references for future research. Therefore, this paper refers to Benoit's image repair strategies, to analyze the differences in the employment of image repair strategies by Chinese and American corporations.

2.3 Corporate Apology and Corporate Image Repair

Scholars in crisis communication have always debated whether an apology is the best strategy to repair corporate image, and how to achieve the optimum effectiveness of an apology for image repair.

Several early researchers claimed that apologies could be the best strategy for protecting the corporate image (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Dean, 2004;). However, in later research, some scholars were against the overpromotion of apology as a response strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Coombs and Holladay (2008) have found that the previous studies failed in persuasiveness, as the researchers compared the apology strategy with less accommodative strategies such as *giving no comment, denial, excuse, or justification*, rather than other accommodative strategies such as *compensation* and *expression of sympathy*. Therefore, Coombs and Holladay (2008) designed empirical research with 167 undergraduates to examine the effectiveness of apology response strategies, finding that there shows a high similarity in reactions of respondents to *sympathy, compensation* and apology response

strategies.

Many researchers have designed questionnaires to examine the effectiveness of apology strategies in crisis management. Xu and Han (2018) made an ANCONA analysis to show the effect of apology strategies on public forgiveness and corporate reputation; McClure and Seock (2020) focused on the purchase intention of consumers, designing a questionnaire to examine the influence of consumer brand familiarity and the information quality of social media content on their involvement with a brand on the brand's social media pages; Bentley and Ma's study (2020) used an experimental design (N = 1,630) to test stakeholder reactions to four apology elements in two data breach scenarios.

Moving beyond case studies and empirical research, recent research has begun to systematically examine how organizations improve apology efficacy when repairing their images through experimental designs (Van Hooijdonk & Liebrecht, 2021; Lee & Chung, 2012; Lee & Atkinson, 2019; Verhoeven et al., 2012). Through an online experiment with a 2*2 factorial design, Lee and Chung (2012) have found that an apology statement with active responsibility is more effective in relieving public anger than one with passive responsibility. Similarly, based on the data from the corpus study of airline webcare, Van Hooijdonk and Liebrecht (2021) investigated the effectiveness of apologies separately and combined with a defensive and/or accommodative strategy, through an experiment with a 2*2*2 between-subjects design, finding that the combination of defensive and accommodative strategies can save the corporate image.

2.4 Critical Evaluation

As reviewed above, the previous researchers have established a solid foundation for later studies, whether the theoretical studies on apologies, including apology strategies and image repair strategies, or the studies on the employment of apology strategies and the effectiveness of apologies. Meanwhile, research methods are constantly improved, following the development of technology, such as corpus study, experiment, empirical research, etc. The improvement of research methods leads to the enrichment of apology research.

Despite many great achievements, contrastive studies of apology in a specific industry should be conducted, as the industries hold their distinctive characteristics. Therefore, with Benoit's image repair strategies, this paper will take the apologies of the retailing industry as a sample, to analyze the employment of image repair strategies in Chinese and American corporate apologies, acting as a complement to the contrastive study of corporate apologies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Image Repair Strategies

Benoit's image repair strategies, as a classic theory contributing to a better understanding of various strategies for corporate image repair, have been always adopted in later research. Benoit has put forward five major image repair strategies, including *denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events, corrective action* and *mortification*, and

twelve tactics under the strategies. As Benoit (1995) recognizes that *mortification* can include an explicit acceptance of blame, expression of regret and remorse, or a request for forgiveness, the theoretical framework in this paper will concretely represent these three tactics to more clearly analyze the differences in the use of *mortification* by Chinese and American companies. (see Table 1)

Table 1. Categorization of Image Repair Strategies

Strategies	Description	
Denial	Simple denial	Outright denial of committing the act or outright denial that anything occurred at all
	Shift blame	Blaming another party for the act
Evade responsibility	Provocation	The wrongful act is justified given an earlier provocation by another entity
	Defeasibility	The act occurred because of a lack of information
	Accident	The act did not occur purposefully
	Good intentions	The act was executed with the desire to bring about positive results
Reduce offensiveness	Bolstering	Emphasizing positive traits and beneficial past actions to counter current act/ occurrence
	Minimization	Describe the current act/occurrence as insignificant
	Differentiation	Position the current act/occurrence in relation to some other more damaging acts committed elsewhere or at another time
	Transcendence	Position the current act/occurrence within a broader context where more positive values pervade
	Attack accuser	Questioning or challenging the credibility of the accuser
	Compensation	Offering to compensate victims of the act
	Appreciation	Showing thanks to public criticism or the audience to reduce offensiveness
Corrective action		Offering to fix the damage and/or taking steps to ensure the act does not occur again
Mortification	Directly apologize for act	Offering an outright apology for the wrongful act, such as "apology", "apologize"
	Show remorse	Expressions like "regret", "unhappy"
	Ask for forgiveness	Expression of requesting forgiveness, like "pardon me"
	Explicit acknowledgment of responsibility	Expression of taking responsibility
	Accept the blame	Expression of admitting the mistakes or accepting the consumers' criticism

3.1.2 Adaptation Theory

Adaptation Theory, as a new perspective for people to understand and interpret pragmatics, was proposed by Verschueren in his masterpiece *Understanding Pragmatics*. It provides good guidance in comprehensively exploring the meaning of discourse. In this theory, he has introduced the three characteristics of language and four perspectives of study on language. In the four perspectives, contextual correlates of adaptability mean all ingredients affecting the linguistic choices in the communicative context and the linguistic context, in which the communicative context includes the physical world, the mental world, and the social world.

This paper will analyze the difference between Chinese and American corporate apologies from the perspective of communicative context. Moreover, as apology statements do not involve the temporal and spatial elements or the physical characteristics of communicators, this thesis does not include the analysis of adaptation of physical world. Therefore, a detailed introduction of adaptation to mental world and social world is provided. Firstly, mental world includes "belief patterns, emotions, personality characteristics, desires or wishes, motivations or intentions, and so on" (Verschueren, 2000). Therefore, the adaptation of mental world refers to the choices, which are consistent with the people's personalities, beliefs, emotions and other factors. Secondly, social world refers to the principles and customs defined by society, which are followed by language users. Therefore, the adaptation of social world for language users means the requirements of social occasions and rules, which may include cultural context, religious belief and social relations.

3.2 Data Processing

In this paper, Chinese and American corporate apologies are represented by the apologies of the retailing industry. Therefore, the data all come from the apology statements posted by the top 100 corporations in the retailing industry at home or abroad, to guarantee the comparability of Chinese and English corporate apologies, based on the data from the National Retail Federation (NRF) and China Chain Store & Franchise Association. Moreover, the official company websites and Weibo are the two main channels to collect apologies.

Some standards are set when selecting apology statements and letters. Firstly, the apology statements and letters should include at least 200 words to guarantee analyzability. Secondly, the Chinese discourses of transnational supermarkets must be published by the local stores to guarantee the characteristics of Chinese expression. At last, the reasons for apologies can be mainly classified into three types---inappropriate promotion, poor services and poor quality of goods. Based on the above standards, 50 Chinses corporate apologies and 50 American corporate apologies of supermarkets, respectively exceeding 10,000 words, have been collected and carefully analyzed.

4. Linguistic Devices for Image Repair in Chinese and American Corporate Apologies

Since the strategies and functions of corporate apologies are realized through linguistic features, this part first gives a micro investigation of the linguistic devices of Chinese and American apologies. It is found that five salient linguistic features present significant differences and play a large role in Chinese and American apologies.

4.1 Person Deixis

Person deixis is a symbolic reference to the participant or relevant role encoded in a speech event (Levinson, 1983), which can indicate the relationship between the semantic reference of the person and the role of the participant. Therefore, Deixis can clearly show the close relationship between language and context, so the choice of deixis is important in message transmission. The table shows the three most used personal deixis in the Chinese and American corporate apologies, and it is found that there are great differences in the use of person indicators between Chinese and American companies. (see Table 2)

Table 2. Frequency of Personal Deixis

Personal deixis	Chinese	American	Total
We	102	258	360
you		175	175
Customer(s)	113	76	189
Company	150		150
Total	365	509	874

Table 2 shows the frequency of the three most used person deixis in the collected apologies. American corporations prefer to use we, the first person deixis in plural form, to refer to themselves, while Chinese companies would use the third person deixis *company* to address themselves. Moreover, the pronoun *you* is frequently used to address the customers or the public in American corporate apologies, while the singular form and the plural form of *customer* are more frequent in Chinese corporate apologies. *We* and *you* are not so formal as *customer* and *company*, therefore they can shorten the social distance between the corporation and the companies, while the latter two make the tone of apology formal and serious, improving credibility.

(1) 我们将进一步加强供应商管理，更好地保证消费者权益。

(2) 公司对出现的食品安全问题向广大消费者、投资者和监管部门致以真诚的歉意，管理层对该事件自查自纠，深刻反省。

(3) 在此期间对消费者造成的不便，深表歉意。

(4) We apologize and want you to understand that we are experiencing unprecedented call volume.

(5) Thank you for your patience and loyalty to Target.

(6) We value and respect all of our customers and we will continue to undertake measures to help safeguard against this type of incident in the future.

4.2 Demonstrative Pronouns

Demonstrative pronouns mainly indicate instruction, distinction and substitution, as an important role in information transmission. Demonstrative pronouns are often used in Chinese and American corporate apologies to refer to conflicting events, avoiding repetition of the conflict and thus reducing offensiveness. The following table shows the use of demonstrative pronouns in Chinese and American corporate apologies.

Table 3. Frequency of Demonstrative Pronouns

Demonstrative pronouns	Chinese	American	Total
those	1		1
This	40	118	158
these	2	20	22
it		37	37
Total	43	175	218

As Table 3 shows, American companies use far more demonstrative pronouns in their apologies than Chinese companies. *This*, used as a demonstrative pronoun, is often followed by the words *problem, event*, etc., to indicate the crisis. At the same time, the use of demonstrative pronouns, avoiding direct references to the crisis again, can reduce offensiveness to a certain extent, further controlling the damage to the corporate image.

(1) 三是提高食品供应商进入超市的质量门槛，即使拥有法定资质，对于那些注册资本低，业务经验少、信用级别低的企业坚决清场。

(2) 感谢媒体的监督，这件事属于我们工作的失误，我代表超市向顾客道歉。

(3) 尽管超市设有自己的食品检验室，但一般是检查所售食品的新鲜度、是不是过期这些问题，所售羊肉卷的具体成分超市并没有能力去检测。

(4) As an apology for the inconvenience this has caused you, we will be sending you a separate email within the next 5 business days with a $20 electronic gift card to use on any future purchase.

(5) We are trying our best to limit these delays and we will make products available in store as soon as possible.

(6) I am truly sorry this incident occurred and sincerely regret any inconvenience it may cause you.

4.3 If-Conditionals

If-conditionals are a highly valued resource in discourses, which can manage interaction with

the addressee. According to the collected apologies, *if-conditionals* are mostly used for companies to offer compensation or provide follow-up services.

Table 4. Frequency of If- conditionals

	Chinese	American	Total
If- conditionals	16	25	41

As shown in Table 4, American companies use more *if-conditionals* than Chinese companies, which may be due to the fact that American companies use more *compensation* in their apologies. When providing compensation and follow-up services, the use of *if-conditionals* with certain restrictions can not only express the company's attitude of apologizing and maintain the corporate image, but also control the cost of apologizing to a certain extent.

(1) 如果再次发现价格误差，公司将严格执行五倍差额的赔偿政策。

(2) 如果你选择继续履行合同，则最终供货时间必须延至疫情结束之后。

(3) If you no longer want this item, you can return it for a full refund.

(4) If we may be of further assistance in this matter, please do not hesitate to contact our Customer Care department.

4.4 Hedges

Brown and Levinson (1987) viewed the use of hedges as a politeness strategy, distinguishing between *strengtheners* and *weakeners*, which influence and limit the meaning of words, reduce negative effects and save face. According to this view, the author counted the hedges and selected the three most frequently used *strengtheners* and *weakeners* in the apologies of Chinese and American companies respectively. (See Table 5)

Table 5. Frequency of Hedges

Hedges		Chinese	American	Total
Strengtheners	very		12	12
	truly		9	99
	again	23	24	47
	seriously	22		22
	First time	22		22
	Total	67	45	112
Weakeners	Will	103	50	153

May		32	32
can		21	21
Total	103	103	206
Total	170	148	318

As shown in Table 5, the number of hedges used in Chinese corporate apologies is much higher than that of American corporate apologies. At the same time, compared with American companies, Chinese firms use more *strengtheners* to strengthen the tone of their apologies, reflecting the importance they attach to crises, thus making their apologies more sincere. On the other hand, American companies use more types of *weakeners* than Chinese companies, which makes the tone more moderate and can better avoid conflicts.

(1) 我们深刻意识到这次错误的严重性，对于所有信赖和信任我们的顾客以及所有人造成的感情伤害，我们再次深表歉意。

(2) 我们将就这一个别事件立即展开认真调查，并坚决严肃处理，以实际行动向消费者致歉。

(3) 今后将严格按照公司的相关制度，当日出清问题商品，不再发生累积事件。

(4) Thank you again to everyone who reached out.

(5) I am very sorry for this experience and I do hope you give us another chance to earn back your business.

(6) we will make products available in store as soon as possible.

4.5 Politeness Words

In corporate apologies, companies also express friendly relations through politeness words, thus alleviating consumer anger and reducing conflicts and clashes. Politeness words include *politeness markers*, such as *please* and *thank*, and *politeness formulaic chunks*, such as *I hope*, *I wonder*, and *I wish*. The author has separately identified the most used politeness words in corporate apologies in China and America. (see Table 6)

Table 6. Frequency of Politeness words

Politeness words	Chinese	American	Total
Please	3	29	32
hope	9	15	24
thank	20	29	49
Total	32	73	105

As shown in Table 6, compared to Chinese companies, American companies use more *politeness words* to express their hopes, requests or thanks, making their apologies more

sincere and their language more euphemistic, avoiding verbal conflicts.

(1) 在此<u>感谢</u>社会各界对永辉超市的关心与监督。

(2) 感谢广工师生的及时指正，也<u>希望</u>大家一如既往地监督支持苏宁。

(3) <u>请</u>继续关注我们，我们必将带给您更好的品牌与体验。

(4) <u>Thank</u> you for your patience and loyalty to Target.

(5) I'm sorry to know about the delayed delivery of your recent order. <u>Please</u> accept my sincere apologies on this occasion.

(6) I sincerely <u>hope</u> we have the opportunity to continue to serve you in the future.

4.6 Summary

Person deixis, demonstrative pronouns, if-conditionals, hedges and *politeness words* are the most salient linguistic features in Chinese and American corporate apologies. However, there are clear differences in the use of linguistic devices in corporate apologies between America and China. Firstly, American companies use more demonstrative pronouns and *politeness words* to alleviate public anger and thus mitigate conflicts. At the same time, when providing *compensation* and follow-up services, they use *if-conditionals* to show the sincerity of the apology while controlling the cost of the apology. Chinese companies, on the other hand, use more *hedges*, especially *strengtheners*, to intensify the tone of the apology and make the company more sincere in crises. In addition, Chinese companies use *personal deixes* such as *company* and *customer* instead of *we* and *you*, which are more commonly used in American companies' apologies, in order to make the apology more solemn and show that the company attaches importance to the crisis and thus reduce the conflicts.

5. Image Repair Strategies Employed in Chinese and American Corporate Apologies

Based on the differences in linguistic devices, this part further analyzes the differences in the employment of image repair strategies in Chinese and American corporate apologies. To keep the analysis as objective as possible, two other partners conducting pragmatic studies on corporate apologies, are welcome to participate in the statistical process. Table 5-1 shows the frequency of image repair strategies employed by Chinese and American companies, followed by a detailed analysis of differences between Chinese and American apologies.

Table 7. Descriptive statistical characteristics of image repair strategies

strategy		Chinese	American	Total
Denial	Simple denial	0	0	
	Shift the blame	6 [100%]	2 [100%]	
	Total	6 [100%]	2 [100%]	8 (1.6%)
Evasion of responsibility	Provocation	6 [18.8%]	4 [16.7%]	
	Defeasibility	14 [43.8%]	2 [8.3%]	
	Accident	9 [28.1%]	2 [8.3%]	
	Good intentions	3 [9.4%]	16 [66.7%]	
	Total	32 [100%]	24 [100%]	56 (10.9%)
Reducing	Bolstering	18 [20.9%]	10 [9.3%]	

offensiveness of event	Minimization	7 [8.1%]	8 [7.4%]	
	Differentiation	5 [5.8%]	8 [7.4%]	
	Transcendence	9 [10.5%]	3 [2.8%]	
	Attack accuser	1 [1.2%]	2 [1.9%]	
	Compensation	10 [11.6%]	19 [17.6%]	
	Appreciation	25 [29.1%]	30 [27.8%]	
	Value the customer	2 [2.3%]	15 [13.9%]	
	Explanation	9 [10.5%]	13 [12.0%]	
	Total	86 [100%]	108 [100%]	194 (37.7%)
Corrective action		45	25	70 (13.6%)
Mortification	Directly apologize for act	65 [72.2%]	70 [72.2%]	
	Show remorse	8 [8.9%]	10 [10.3%]	
	Ask for forgiveness	2 [2.2%]	11 [11.3%]	
	Take responsibility	5 [5.6%]	2 [2.1%]	
	Accept the blame	10 [11.1%]	4 [4.1%]	
	Total	90 [100%]	97 [100%]	187 (36.3%)
Total		259	256	515 (100%)

From Table 7, it can be seen that *reducing offensiveness* has been used most frequently among the image repair strategies, accounting for 37.7%, which is followed by *mortification*, with 36.3%. On the contrary, *evasion of responsibility* and *corrective action* are less employed, with 10.9% and 13.6%. Moreover, *denial* is scarcely used in the apologies having been collected, accounting for 1.6%. However, Chinese and American corporations put importance on different strategies. Comparatively speaking, Chinese corporations pay more attention to *corrective action* and *evasion of responsibility*, while American corporations emphasize *mortification* and *reducing offensiveness*. Next, different emphases of companies on tactics when employing image repair strategies are analyzed.

5.1 Reducing Offensiveness of Event

According to Table 7, *reducing offensiveness of event* is the first-ranked strategy for corporations, to mitigate the negative effect of acknowledging responsibility and abate some ill feelings of the audience. In this strategy, Chinese corporations prefer *bolstering* (20.9%) and *transcendence* (10.5%), to stress good traits and show the more important consideration, further building a responsible and active image, while American ones, compared with Chinese corporations, focus more on compensation (17.6%) and *valuing the customer* (13.9%) to offset the negative feeling of customers and repair images. There is a difference of more than 6% in the frequency of these four tactics employed by Chinese and American companies.

(1) 华润万家一直以来都经营老百姓放心的商品，是广大顾客信得过的超市。(China Resources Vanguard [CR Vanguard] has always been operating goods that the people can be assured of, and is a supermarket getting the majority of customers' trust.)

(2) 自疫情防控以来，中百超市克服重重困难，坚持做到"保供应、稳物价、惠民生"，主动担当社会责任，我们也希望在大家的监督与关怀下，在这个特殊时期，同舟共济，共克时艰。(Since the prevention and control of the epidemic, Zhongbai Supermarket has insisted on "protecting supply, stabilizing prices, and benefiting people's livelihood", taking the initiative to assume social responsibility.)

(3) We are extending a 10% discount to guests who shop in U.S. stores on Dec.21 and 22.

(4) Because we value you as a guest and your trust is important to us, Target is offering one year of free credit monitoring to all Target guests who shopped in U.S. stores.

Extracts (1) and (2) are from Chinese corporate apologies, in which *bolstering* and *transcendence* are demonstrated. Chinese corporations stress good traits and social responsibility of the company to mitigate the customers' anger, which further reduces the offensiveness of events. Extracts (3) and (4) are from American corporate apologies, showing *compensation* and *valuing the customer*. Through these tactics, American corporations reduce the severity of the events and build a moderate and sincere corporate image. Moreover, providing discounts or gifts is also a tactful strategy to maintain the consumers, encouraging them to go shopping again.

5.2 Mortification

Mortification, accounting for 36.3% of all strategies, is the second most common strategy. It is found that apart from a direct apology for the act, Chinese corporations prefer *accepting the blame* (11.1%) to build a responsible image, while American corporations tend to *ask for forgiveness* (11.3%) to limit the damage.

(1) 就国家发改委认定的价格欺诈行为，向受到影响的顾客表示歉意，并将严肃处理问题案例。(We apologize to affected customers for the price fraud identified by the National Development and Reform Commission, and will deal with problematic cases seriously.)

(2) 网友提及的关于门店销售环节的培训追踪等，确实是我们门店管理中所存在的潜在问题。(The training and tracking of store sales mentioned by the netizen is indeed a potential problem in our store management.)

(3) On behalf of Walmart Stores, the sincerest apologies are again extended to Professor Gilbert Kalonde and his family for this incident.

(4) I do hope you'll give us another chance to earn back your business.

Extracts (1) and (3) are respectively from Chinese and American corporations' direct apologies, which shows the corporation's apology to the consumers and the attitude of taking responsibility on its own initiative as well as its respect for the consumer. Extract (2) demonstrates that Chinese corporations will accept the blame of customers in their apologies, to build a responsible image and avoid the extension of crises. Extract (4) shows the different emphasis of American corporations, which is *ask for forgiveness*. Direct expressions of

showing emotion help to regain the customers' trust.

5.3 Corrective Action

Corrective action means the plans to solve or prevent the problem. Based on the data, Chinese corporations (45 times) prefer much to this strategy, which is almost two times of American corporations (25 times). In other words, Chinese corporations, facing the crisis, tend to promise to solve and prevent the problems to regain the customers' faith.

(1) 对于该事件，我们将展开深入调查，严格审查门店标牌、标签的审核流程，加强员工培训，以杜绝类似事件的发生。(We will conduct an in-depth investigation into the incident, strictly review the review process of store signs and labels, and strengthen staff training, in order to prevent similar incidents from occurring.)

(2) 超市将加强企业内部管理，提高管理水准和基层员工的素质，避免类似事件再次发生。(The supermarket will strengthen internal management, improve management standards and the quality of grassroots staff to avoid similar incidents from happening again.)

(3) We are working to update the account sign-up process to ensure that something like this doesn't happen again.

Extracts (1), (2) and (3) show that Chinese and American corporations will make plans in their apologies to prevent the crises from happening. It usually shows the determination of avoiding similar problems in the future, followed by the promise of being committed to providing better services. Those tactics help to build a responsible corporate image, win the trust of consumers, and accordingly create more chances for the development of corporations.

5.4 Evasion of Responsibility

Evasion of responsibility is employed when corporations cannot deny their performance but tend to evade their apparent responsibility. Therefore, the employment of *evading responsibility* may arouse the anger of the audience. According to Table 5-1, American companies are more likely to stress *lack of intention* (66.7%). On the contrary, Chinese corporations prefer *defeasibility* (43.8%), pleading lack of control over important factors in the crises or lack of ability.

(1) 对于此次思虑不周，我们已深刻反思，痛定思痛，引以为戒。(We have reflected deeply on this ill-considered event, and have learned from the painful experience.)

(2) 我们对直播活动引发流量值的激增评估不准，系统出现了故障，导致部分用户订单取消。(We misjudged the surge of traffic value caused by the live event and there was a system failure, which caused some users' orders to be canceled.)

(3) The attitude and behavior you describe aren't consistent with our guest service philosophy.

(4) We never want to offend any of our guests.

Extracts (1) and (2) are from Chinese apologies, demonstrating that Chinese corporations will admit the lack of ability to control the crises when apologizing, which helps to avoid the direct responsibility of crises, while extract (3) and (4) shows that American corporations

prefer *lack of intention* when apologizing, to reduce their responsibility for the offensive act.

5.5 Denial

Denial is to directly or indirectly deny performing the wrongful act, including *simple denial* and *shifting blame*. This strategy is seldom employed in crises and is last-ranked in these strategies, as it shows a high risk of irritating the public. According to Table 5-1, Chinese companies tend to *shift blame* in some special situations to disperse public attention and save their images to some extent. This occurs three times more often in Chinese corporate apologies than in American corporate apologies.

(1) 此次由于个别门店管理人员的工作疏忽，给顾客造成了一定的麻烦，我们在向顾客道歉的同时也看到了门店对联营厂家监督管理存在一定的问题。(As this problem, due to the negligence of individual store managers, caused some trouble to customers, we apologize to them, at the same time, we also see certain problems in the stores' supervision and management on affiliated manufacturers.)

(2) 我司现场工作人员未能深刻理解公司招聘策略，在管培生引进来源、学校定位等方面存在误读。(Our field staff failed to deeply understand the company's recruitment strategy and misunderstood the sources of introduction of management trainees and the positioning of schools.)

(3) I apologize for an error made by a local employee who added up the cost of each individual bottle of water to come up with the price for the entire case.

In extracts (1), (2) and (3), the corporations *shift the blame* to a certain employee to disperse the public attention, and Chinese corporations use this strategy far more often than American corporations. The expression of apology is superficial, whose purpose is to reduce the apparent responsibility. As it may irritate the public, this strategy is only used on a few occasions.

5.6 Summary

Based on Benoit's image repair strategies, the author has analyzed the differences in corporate image repair strategies and tactics.

Firstly, *reducing offensiveness* is the first-ranked strategy for corporations to reduce offensiveness and build a good corporate image. Then, *mortification* is still a common strategy for corporations, which shows high sincerity. However, not all corporations realized their wrongful acts, so they would apply *evasion of responsibility* and *denial* strategies to evade responsibility or avoid punishment, although *denial* just takes effect in a few situations.

There are many differences between Chinese and American corporate apologies. Based on the strategies, Chinese corporations will resort to *mortification* first when facing crises, while American corporations prefer *reducing offensiveness* at first. Moreover, Chinese corporations pay more attention to stating *corrective actions*, which is almost two times of American corporations. Then, according to the tactics, great differences are still shown. Firstly, in the strategy of *reducing offensiveness*, Chinese corporations would emphasize *bolstering* and *transcendence* to build a responsible and active image, while American ones focus more on

compensation and *valuing the customer*. Secondly, in *mortification*, Chinese corporations prefer *accepting the blame* to build a responsible image and limit the damage to the corporate image, while American corporations tend to *ask for forgiveness* to limit the damage. Thirdly, when *evading responsibility*, American companies are more likely to stress *lack of intention*, on the contrary, Chinese corporations would choose *defeasibility*, pleading lack of control or lack of ability.

6. Reasons for Differences Between Chinese and American Corporate Apologies

Aspects of mental and social reality get "activated" by the utterer and interpreter in their respective choice-making practices (Verschueren, 2000). It is undoubted that corporations and the public in a crisis both make choices of language according to their thoughts or situations. Therefore, in terms of the communicative context of Adaptation Theory, especially the mental world and social world, this part aims to find out the social and psychological factors accounting for the differences in the image repair strategies employed by Chinese and American corporations. As apology statements do not involve the temporal and spatial elements or the physical characteristics of communicators, the analysis of the adaptation of the physical world was not included in this part.

6.1 Adaptation of Mental World

The mental world activated in language use contains cognitive and emotive elements. To be specific, language users' personality traits, emotions, patterns of beliefs, desires and wishes, motivations and intentions are all the ingredients of the mental world. Verschueren (2008) points out that just as the utterance needs to interadapt with the utterer's mental world, the choices made are always adapted to the utterer's assessment of what the mental worlds of the interpreters look like. Therefore, three main factors of the mental world have to be considered in corporate apologies, resulting in differences in the employment of apology strategies.

The emotive factor is mainly concerned with customers' intentions. In a crisis, the public would like to get an in-time response and an appropriate attitude from corporations. Therefore, when apologizing to customers in time, Americans, who are direct, are more inclined to *ask for forgiveness*, showing high sincerity in dealing with the crisis. However, Chinese people are indirect and courtesy-orientation, which means that Chinese corporations would *accept the blame*. With this tactic, Chinese corporations make consumers feel affirmed, thus alleviating their anger. Examples are the following:

(1) 经公司调查核实，确认该消费者披露的事情属实。

(2) We hope that we can regain your confidence in Best Buy and invite you back for more enjoyable experience in the future.

On the other hand, When showing their attitude of apology, Chinese corporations place more importance on how to correct the situation in the future, thus reassuring consumers. Therefore, they will list the *corrective actions* first in their apologies to show an active attitude and to avoid some mistakes of expression in their apologies, however, American corporations focus on how to compensate consumers now, so they will provide *compensation* to mitigate the

consumers' anger, further *reducing the offensiveness of events*.

(1) 公司<u>将超市食品安全制度及流程进行全方位核查，完善治理体系建设</u>，严格按照国家食品安全法规对超市经营者的相关要求，对采购进货执行查验供货商的合法资质证明及索证索票资料......

(2) Please find enclosed a <u>￡10.00 gesture of goodwill</u> for use in any Aldi store to thank you for bringing this matter to our attention and also thank you for your patience.

The cognitive factor is mainly patterns of beliefs. It is known that Chinese people are more inclusive, while Western people, would show exclusiveness when facing different beliefs. Therefore, Chinese people take the public interest prior to the individual interest, so they are easily persuaded when corporations show or promise their contribution in a social context. That's why more Chinese corporations choose *transcendence* than American ones. On the contrary, exclusiveness in beliefs makes westerners focus more on the interests of themselves or their group members and exclude those who have different beliefs or identities. Thus, it is better to focus more on the present situation and compensate for the damage, which accounts for the choice of *compensation* by American corporations. In a word, different patterns of beliefs lead to different tactics when Chinese and American companies use the strategy of *reducing offensiveness of events*.

(1) 沃尔玛深耕中国 22 年，并致力于 在中国长期发展，<u>肩负社会责任感</u>，与 10 万名中国员工一起通过更好的商品和服务，帮助人们生活得更美好。

(2) I'm enclosing a <u>$15 </u>Target Gift Card as our invitation to come back to Target for a better experience.

6.2 Adaptation of Social World

The social world refers to the social situation, social environment and the principles and norms that regulate the language users' speech acts. Social settings and institutions impose many types of principles and rules on how certain types of linguistic acts can be performed, or who has the right to perform them. They even determine the "performability" of certain acts under specified circumstances (Verschueren, 2000). Therefore, the adaptation of the social world for language users means the requirements of social occasions and rules. Two main factors of the mental world are analyzed.

The first factor is culture. There are many great differences between Chinese and Western cultures. According to the concept of individualism and collectivism in Hofstede's dimensions of culture (1980), Chinese people, with collectivism, put more importance on collective interest. Therefore, more Chinese corporations would like to use collective nouns like *company* and *customer*, rather than *I* and *you*, in their apologies, making the apology more sincere and more formal. Moreover, as China is a country with high power distance, Chinese corporations use more *company* and *customer*, to show the authority and formality of their apologies. On the contrary, American corporations, with low power distance, use more *I* and *you*, to close the distance with consumers, thus making the apologies more acceptable.

(1) 在此期间对<u>消费者</u>造成的不变，深表歉意。<u>我们</u>将即使公布进展情况，感谢<u>社会各</u>

界对永旺的关注与支持。

(2) 我们非常抱歉。5 月 27 日全家生活头条推文，引起您的不适，真的非常抱歉！对于此次思虑不周，我们已深刻反思，痛定思痛，引以为戒。

The second factor is corporate philosophy. There are different emphases on the content of corporate philosophy. The corporate philosophy of Chinese enterprises usually includes not only their future development goals, such as achieving economic benefits and enhancing their competitiveness, but also the realization of social values and bearing social responsibilities. Compared with the corporate philosophy of Chinese companies, American companies usually emphasize the benefits of the company itself. Therefore, American corporations would choose *if-conditionals* when providing compensations and following service, in order to limit the cost of apologies.

(1) If you have further questions, you may call us at 866-852-8680.

(2) If you prefer to receive a check, please also provide your mailing address.

6.3 Brief Discussion

This part has explored the underlying factors of the differences between Chinese and English corporate apologies under the framework of Adaptation Theory.

It is found that Chinese and English corporations follow the adaptation of mental world and social world when apologizing to consumers. In terms of mental world, corporations should adapt their apologies to customers' intentions and patterns of beliefs, that is, Chinese and American corporations, with different types of expressions, should offer their in-time response and appropriate attitudes in crises. As for the social world, culture and corporate philosophy have a great influence on the choice of image repair strategies. With an emphasis on collectivism and high power distance, Chinese corporations make an official and formal apology, while American corporations, with individualism and low power distance, tend to close the distance with consumers in their apologies.

7. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the differences of image repair strategies employed by Chinese and American corporations and then explored the underlying factors of those differences existing in Chinese and English corporate apologies. Based on the three questions formulated in the introduction section, there are three major findings.

First of all, there are great differences in the employment of linguistic devices for image repair. Chinese corporations put much more attention to *collective person deixis* like *company* and *customer* and *strengtheners* like *again, seriously* and *first time*, to intensify the tone of apology and show their solemnness and sincerity. However, American corporations use more demonstrative pronouns, such as *this, these* and *it*, to reduce the offensiveness and use *if-conditionals* to control the cost of apology.

Secondly, based on Benoit's image repair strategies, it is found that Chinese corporations will choose *mortification*, while American corporations tend to choose *reducing offensiveness*

when facing crises. Moreover, when sincerely apologizing to consumers, Chinese corporations would like to *accept the blame*, while American ones would directly *ask for forgiveness*. When *reducing offensiveness*, Chinese corporations prefer *transcendence*, while American corporations prefer *compensation*.

Thirdly, under the framework of Adaptation Theory, the underlying factors accounting for the differences have been analyzed. The differences in the employment of image repair strategy and linguistic devices have resulted from the adaptation of mental world and social world, where there are great differences between Chinese and American apologies. Firstly, corporations should adapt their apologies to customers' intentions and patterns of beliefs, therefore they need to offer their in-time response and appropriate attitudes in crises with direct and indirect expression respectively. Secondly, with an emphasis on collectivism and high power distance, Chinese corporate apologies are official and formal, while American corporations, with individualism and low power distance, tend to close the distance with consumers in their apologies.

Although this paper has tried to analyze the differences between Chinese and American corporations and further explored the reasons for differences, there still inevitably exist some limitations. Firstly, the data are insufficient, possibly resulting in the inaccuracy of findings. Secondly, although it is found that the severity of crises attributes to the different frequencies of apology strategies, the differences are not given a detailed analysis. Thirdly, the effectiveness of apologies is not evaluated. Therefore, given the limitations mentioned, several suggestions are presented. Firstly, more data on corporate apologies in specific fields should be collected by multiple means, in order to guarantee the accuracy of results. Secondly, future studies should pay more attention to the effectiveness of apology and the effect of the severity of crises on image repair strategies.

Acknowledgments

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