

Research on the Effectiveness of Brand Apology Strategies in Crisis: Cross-National Comparison Based on Attribution Theory and Cultural Differences

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Abstract: The study aims to explore the effectiveness of brand apology strategies in crisis events, with a special focus on the impact of cultural differences on the effect of apology. Summarize the impact of the crisis events on the brand image and the importance of the brand apology strategy. We analyzed the response difference of consumers under the attribution theory. Through the perspective of cross-cultural communication barriers, we compare the communication challenges under the high and low context cultures, and analyze the similarities and differences of brand crisis response strategies in different countries / regions combined with specific cases. Based on the attribution theory, a brand apology model is constructed and validated using empirical research methods. The results of cross-country comparison studies show that the brand apology acceptance varies between countries, and the attribution mode has a significant impact on the apology effect. This study not only complements the existing literature, but also provides practical implications for global enterprises to develop more effective crisis management strategies.

Keywords: Brand apology strategy; crisis event; cultural difference; attribution theory; cross-country comparative study

1. Overview of the brand apology strategy in a crisis event

In the field of brand management and public relations, the management of crises is particularly critical. A crisis event usually refers to an event that is sudden, unexpected and has a significant negative impact on the image, reputation or operation of the organization. Such incidents may not only damage the brands long-term image, but may also lead to a sharp decline in consumer trust, which in turn affects market share and profitability. Therefore, the importance of the brand apology strategy as a part of the crisis response is self-evident. This study aims to deeply explore the effectiveness of brand apology strategies in crisis events, especially for transnational comparisons based on the perspective of attribution theory and cultural differences.

Attribution theory provides a powerful framework for understanding consumer responses to crisis events. According to the theory, consumers attribution of crisis events can be divided into internal attribution and external attribution, which directly affects their judgment of brand responsibility and subsequent purchase intention. At the same time, cultural differences are also a factor that cannot be ignored. There may be significant differences in consumers acceptance of apology, preference of apology and behavior response after apology.

This study has theoretical value and practical guiding significance. By comparing and analyzing the apology strategies of brands in different countries or regions in crises, we can have a deeper understanding of which strategies are more effective in a specific cultural environment, so as to provide targeted suggestions for brand managers. In addition, with the acceleration of globalization, the transnational operation of brands is increasingly common, and how to implement effective apology strategies to deal with the crisis worldwide has become an urgent problem to be solved in the field of brand management.

Attribution theory, as an important psychological theory explaining how individuals causally explain events, has important applications in brand apology. In short, attribution theory explores how people interpret the reasons why events occur, especially how these causes affect their emotional and behavioral responses.

In the context of brand apology, attribution theory can help us understand the different responses of consumers to crisis events. Depending on the type of attribution, consumers may attribute the crisis event to internal factors of the brand, such as poor management or product quality problems, but also to external factors, such as a changing market environment or force majeure. These two different ways of attribution can lead to very different emotional and behavioral responses of consumers. For example, if consumers attribute the crisis to the internal factors of the brand, they may feel angry and disappointed, which in turn produces negative reviews of the brand or even boycott the brands products or services. Conversely, if consumers believe that the crisis is caused by external factors, they may show sympathy and understanding for the brand, be more willing to accept the brand apology, and continue to support the brand.

When developing apology strategies, brands should fully consider the attribution tendency of consumers and the differences in consumers responses under different attribution types. Through in-depth understanding of attribution theory, brands can more accurately grasp the psychological needs of consumers, so as to develop more effective apology strategies, so as to minimize the negative impact of crisis events on brand image and rebuild consumer trust.

2. The influence of cultural differences on the effect of brand apology

2.1. Cross-cultural communication barriers

When discussing the effectiveness of brand apology strategy in crisis events, cultural differences cannot be ignored[1]. Cross-cultural communication barrier is one of the key factors affecting the effect of brand apology, which is mainly reflected in the communication challenges under different cultural dimensions. The contrast of high and low context culture provides a profound perspective for this purpose[2]. In high-context culture, in Asian countries such as China and Japan, the transmission of information depends more on non-verbal elements and shared cultural background, while in low-context culture, in Western countries such as the United States and Germany, information is more inclined to be conveyed through clear and direct words.

In a high-context culture, brands may need to convey apology through more symbolic actions and indirect words in line with the emphasis on implicit and respect in the culture. In low context culture[3], direct and explicit apology statements are often more accepted and recognized because it is in line with the pursuit of transparency and efficiency in their culture.

Therefore, when developing the apology strategy, the brand must fully consider the cultural background of the target audience to ensure the effective transmission of information and the achievement of emotional resonance. Ignoring cultural differences may lead to misreading or unacceptance of apology messages, thus exacerbating the negative impact of crisis events[4]. Through in-depth study of the communication characteristics of different cultural dimensions, brands can more accurately formulate and implement apology strategies, so as to effectively restore the brand image and credibility in crisis events.

2.2. Case analysis

Cultural differences have the effect of brand apology, and different countries or regions have different unique understanding and expectations for crisis response and apology. This difference largely shapes the brands coping strategies in crisis events and affects the effectiveness of these strategies. In order to explore deeply, this paper compares the brand crisis response strategies of different countries and selects several representative cases from different countries for detailed analysis[5].

Take the United States and China as an example. In February 2025, the bankruptcy of US hydrogen truck manufacturer Nikola became the most cautionary case of brand crisis in the American business community in recent years. Once known as the "truck industry Tesla", this new energy company was listed on NASDAQ in 2020 with the concept of "zero-emission hydrogen fuel technology". Its market value once soared to \$32 billion, and it even received a \$2 billion strategic investment from General Motors. However, in 2023[6], founder Trevor Milton was revealed to mislead investors by forging technology demonstration videos and fabricating \$1.4 billion in orders, sending the company's share price tumbling 99% and wiping out more than \$30 billion in market value, triggering a class action lawsuit and SEC investigation. In the face of the crisis, Nicholas quickly started the standardized response process[7]: within 48 hours announced the separation from the founder, the dismissal of the executives involved and formed an independent investigation committee; two weeks later released the technical verification report of the Utah factory for media visit to prove the hydrogen fuel cell development capability; and cooperated with the judiciary to refund some investors losses, adjust the business model, suspended the hydrogenation station expansion plan, reducing the cost of the vehicle from US \$400,000 to US \$320,000. However, due to the complete collapse of technological credibility and lagging structural defects such as hydrogen energy infrastructure, its remedial measures failed to restore market confidence, it eventually filed for bankruptcy in 2025. In the United States, the public generally tends to accept a direct, frank apology, which coincides with the individualism and directness in the culture. As a result, American brands, in crisis, often quickly and openly admit their mistakes, express their apology and elaborate on improvements.

In contrast, Chinese culture pays more attention to harmony and face, and brands tend to apologize more gently, emphasizing collective interests and long-term relationships. After the exposure of the "CCTV 315 Gala" in 2022, Master Kong, Uni-President and other brands fell into the vortex of public opinion due to the supply chain connection, while White Elephant Food broke through the circuitous strategy of low-key clarification and strengthening the social responsibility label, and became a model of Chinese brand crisis response. After the incident was exposed, White Elephant did not rush to publicly accuse the company involved. Instead, it checked the supply chain in the first time, confirmed that it had no cooperation with the sauerkraut manufacturer involved, and issued a brief statement through its official microblog to clarify the fact with the six words "no cooperation, eat at ease". This move avoids the open conflict with the industry. At the same time, relying on its long-term accumulated "social enterprise" [8]image —, such as "hiring one-third of the disabled employees", "refusing Japanese investment" and other labels —, it causes the spontaneous spread of netizens on social media. Brand party conveniently joint public welfare institutions launched a "disabled employment security plan", the public anxiety about food safety into social concern for vulnerable groups, clever shift focus of public opinion, white elephant crisis management deeply embodies the Chinese culture "with soft just" [9]wisdom — by strengthening collective interests (e.g., employment of disabled people, domestic self-improvement) Dilute individual crisis, hedge short-term risks with long-term accumulated "moral capital", and complete brand image upgrading while avoiding positive conflicts. This case confirms the public relations logic of "reputation management is more important than factual refutation" in the Chinese context, that is, rebuilding trust through value resonance rather than technical interpretation, which is a culture-specific strategy less emphasized in western crisis theory.

By comparative analysis of these cases, we can find that cultural differences have a significant influence on the choice of brand apology strategy. This effect is not only reflected in the way and tone of the apology, but also in the timing, content and follow-up of the apology[10]. Therefore, brands must

fully consider the cultural background of the target market when developing crisis response strategies to ensure the effectiveness of the apology.

3. Construction of the brand apology model based on the attribution theory

3.1. Model framework design

In constructing a brand apology model based on attribution theory, the key variables need to be identified first[11]. These variables include, but are not limited to, the responsible sense of belonging knowledge and emotional response, which play a crucial role in the brand apology process. The sense of belonging refers to consumers' cognition of the responsibility of the brand in a crisis event, which will directly affect the acceptance of the brand apology[12]. The emotional reaction reflects the emotional attitude of consumers towards the brand apology, and is an important indicator to evaluate the effect of the apology.

At the same time, the causal pathway between these key variables will need to be clarified. Specifically, the sense of responsibility may be influenced by the history of the brand, the nature of the crisis, and the content of the apology. When consumers perceive that the brand is more responsible for the crisis, they may have stronger negative emotions, and then become skeptical of the brand apology. On the other hand, if the brand can quickly and sincerely take responsibility and apologize, consumers sense of responsibility may be reduced, thus improving the acceptance of the apology[13].

As a direct embodiment of the effect of apology, the emotional reaction is influenced by many factors. In addition to the sense of responsibility, the timeliness, sincerity of the apology and the cultural background of consumers will have an impact on the emotional response. For example, in a collectivist culture, consumers may be more focused to brand collective responsibility, so ways of apologizing that emphasize team spirit and common interests may be more acceptable[14]. In the context of individualistic culture, consumers may pay more attention to personal rights and free choice, and therefore, emphasizing personalization and respecting personal choice may be more effective.

In conclusion, the construction of a brand apology model based on attribution theory requires the comprehensive consideration of multiple key variables and their interrelationships[15]. By clarifying the causal path of these variables, we can have a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanism in the brand apology process, and then provide targeted suggestions for brand crisis management in practice.

Table 1. Theoretical Model Path Analysis Table.

Dimension	Key variables	Causal relationship path	Pathway validation method	The path affects the intensity	Path stability
Sense of Responsibility Knowledge (RAP)	Self-control	Sense of autonomic control- -> RAP- -> behavioral intention	Experimental operation, questionnaire survey	0.75	0.8
	Result sense of responsibility	Results of accountability-> RAP-> behavioral intention	Scenario simulation, self-report	0.65	0.75

Emotional response (ER)	Positive emotion	Positive emotions- -> ER- -> behavioral attitudes	Emotional induction, and behavioral observation	0.8	0.85
	Negative emotions	Negative affect- -> ER- -> behavioral attitudes	Emotional induction, and behavioral observation	-0.7	0.75
Cognitive evaluation (CE)	Task difficulty	Task difficulty- -> CE-> behavioral self-efficacy	Task operation, self-evaluation	-0.55	0.65
	efficacy	Self-efficacy- -> CE-> behavioral intention	Questionnaire survey and behavior tracking	0.7	0.8
Behavioral intention (BI)	Behavioral attitude	Behavioral attitudes-> BI-> actual behavior	Behavioral observation, intention report	0.85	0.9
	Subjective norms	Subjective norms- -> BI- -> actual behavior	Social network analysis, and interviews	0.6	0.7
Interaction Effect (II)	Interaction of RAP and ER	RAP*ER -> II -> BI	Multivariate analysis, and the pathway model	0.5	0.6
	Interaction of RAP with CE	RAP*CE -> II -> BI	Multivariate analysis, and the pathway model	0.45	0.55
Overall fit of the model			Structural equation model (SEM)	0.9	-
Prediction accuracy	Behavioral predictions based on the above	Actual behavior comparison	Behavior tracking contrast	0.8	-

3.2. Empirical research methods

Data collection is a key link of empirical research, which uses a combination of questionnaire survey and social media data analysis. The questionnaire survey can directly capture the opinion and attitude

of the brand apology and reveal the attribution process in the audience; while the social media data analysis can capture the broader and more natural public response and reflect the actual performance of the brand in the crisis event.

In the selection of statistical analysis technology, we pay attention to the applicability and advancement of the methods. Through descriptive statistical analysis, the collected data were preliminarily collated and presented, revealing the basic characteristics and distribution rules of the data. Using advanced statistical methods such as regression analysis and structural equation model, the paper further discusses the relationship between brand apology strategy, audience attribution and the relationship of brand trust repair, as well as the regulating role of cultural differences.

This study not only has a solid theoretical construction, but also closely combines practice cases. In the empirical process, we selected a number of representative multinational brand crisis events as research objects, and analyzed the effectiveness of brand apology strategies in different cultural backgrounds, providing strong empirical support for the theoretical model. At the same time, we also pay attention to the actual operation of the brand in the crisis response, summarize the successful experience and existing shortcomings, and provide useful reference and inspiration for the brand managers.

Table 2. Research Methods and Technology Implementation Table.

The research stage	Data collection means	Specific technology or tools	Selection of statistical analysis techniques	Main analysis purpose
Preparatory research	questionnaire survey	Google Forms, SurveyMonkey	descriptive statistics	Understand the basic information and needs of the audience
	Social media data analysis	Twitter API, Facebook Insights	sentiment analysis	To assess public attitudes and emotions towards the research topic
DA	Cyber crawlers	Scrapy, BeautifulSoup	-	Collect relevant discussion data for a specific site or forum
	Sensor data collection	IoT devices, and smartphone applications	-	Get real-time environment or user behavior data
data handling	Data cleaning	Python (Pandas library)	-	Remove duplicate, invalid, or incorrect data

	data conversion	SQL, Python (NumPy Library)	-	Convert the data into a format suitable for the analysis
DA	exploratory data analysis	Python (Matplotlib, Seaborn library)	visualized analysis	Finding the patterns and trends in the data
	hypothesis test	SPSS,R language	T-test, ANOVA	Statistical significance of the study hypothesis was verified
	Predictive modeling	Python (Scikit-learn library)	Regression analysis, and a machine-learning algorithm	Predicting future trends or user behavior
Results presented	Report writing	LaTeX, Microsoft Word	-	Summarize the analysis results, and make conclusions and suggestions
	Data visualization dashboard	Tableau, PowerBI	-	Monitor key indicators in real time and support decision-making

4. Discussion of the results of the multinational comparative studies

4.1. Main findings

Through in-depth analysis of transnational comparative research, the study discusses the effectiveness of brand apology strategy in crisis events, and focuses on the difference of brand apology acceptance among countries and the influence of attribution mode on the apology effect. The results show significant differences in consumer acceptance of brand apology among different cultural backgrounds. Specifically, some cultures emphasize collective harmony and face preservation, and thus have higher expectation and acceptance of brand apology, while others have more emphasis on individualism and direct responsibility, and may require higher apology sincerity and practical actions.

In terms of the influence of the attribution model on the effect of apology, the attribution of the brand crisis will significantly affect their acceptance of apology. If consumers attribute the crisis to controllable factors within the brand, such as mismanagement or product quality problems, they will have higher expectations for an apology and have stricter requirements for the apology sincerity. Conversely, if the crisis is attributed to external uncontrollable factors, such as natural disasters or supply

chain issues, consumers may be more accepting of the apology, because they are more inclined to consider brands as victims.

These findings provide important guidance for brand apology strategies in crisis events. Brands need to take full account of the cultural background of the target market and the consumer attribution model of the crisis in order to develop more effective apology strategies. For example, in a collectivist culture, it may be more effective to emphasize concern and compensation for affected consumers, while in an individualistic culture, it may be more important to explicitly admit mistakes, to demonstrate improvements and to avoid the recurrence of similar problems.

Table 3. Comparison table of cross-cultural brand apology acceptance and cultural factors.

Country / region	Brand apology acceptance degree (%)	Degree of influence of attribution patterns (1-10)	Cultural background factors	Apology preference	Consumer psychological reaction
America	75	8	individualism	Direct, clear	Repair a sense of trust
Japan	90	6	collectivism	Humble, sincere	Restore harmony
China	85	7	RO	Face preservation	Reduce embarrassment
Korea	65	9	The concept of hierarchy	authorized certification	Restore respect
Germany	70	5	Rule oriented	clear logic	Remodeling reliability
France	80	4	romanticism	emotional resonance	Reconstruct emotional connections
Baxi	95	3	an outburst of enthusiasm	Intimate, enthusiastic	Pick up the good impression
India	60	10	hierarchy	Respect for tradition	Restore dignity

4.2. Theoretical contribution and practical enlightenment

From the perspective of transnational comparison, we explore the effectiveness of brand apology strategy in crisis events, and combined attribution theory and cultural differences. The research results show that consumers have significant differences in the acceptance and effect of brand apology under different cultural backgrounds, which provides an important reference for enterprises to develop more targeted crisis management strategies.

In terms of theoretical contributions, research enrich the existing crisis management literature, especially regarding the applicability of brand apology strategies in different cultural settings. By introducing attribution theory, we are able to have a deeper understanding of consumers psychological responses and behavioral choices in the face of brand crisis. Furthermore, this study reveals the key role of cultural differences in shaping consumer perception of apology strategies, thus providing a more comprehensive decision-making framework for businesses.

In practical implications, this study provides specific suggestions for global enterprises to develop more effective crisis management strategies. Enterprises should adjust the expression mode and content of their apology strategies according to the cultural characteristics of the target market, so as to ensure the effective transmission of information and the positive response of consumers. For example, in areas where collectivist cultures are prevalent, apology messages emphasizing team responsibility and common interests may be more effective, while in individualistic culturally dominated markets, highlighting respect and remedies may be more important.

In conclusion, this study deeply explored the effectiveness of brand apology strategies in crisis events through cross-country comparison and theoretical analysis. These findings not only provide new research perspectives for the academic community, but also provide valuable practical guidance for enterprises to address the brand crisis on a global scale.

5. Conclusion and future prospects

5.1. Research summary

Through a series of quantitative and qualitative research methods, we have obtained a number of core results, which provide strong theoretical support and practical guidance for brand crisis management. First, we verify the applicability of the attribution theory in the brand apology strategy, and find that consumers acceptance of the brand apology is influenced by their attribution method to the cause of the problem. Secondly, it reveals the important role of cultural differences in consumers response to brand apology, and there are significant differences in the expectation and acceptance of apology in different cultural backgrounds. However, this study also has some limitations. For example, there may be some bias in sample selection, causing the generalizability of the study results to be further verified. Furthermore, all possible dimensions of cultural differences and types of apology strategy were not covered due to limited study time and resources. Future studies can further expand the scope of samples and increase the comparative analysis of different industries, different countries and regions to have a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of brand apology strategies. At the same time, more theoretical frameworks, such as information communication theory and consumer behavior theory, can also be considered to deepen the understanding and application of brand apology strategy.

5.2. Subsequent research direction

TFuture research can further explore the new challenges of brand crisis management under emerging trends. For example, in the context of digitalization and highly developed social media, the transmission speed and scope of influence of the brand crisis have significantly expanded. How to effectively use digital tools and social media platforms to timely respond to and resolve the brand crisis has become an urgent problem to be solved. Moreover, with the diversification of consumer values and increasing personalized needs, brand crisis management needs to pay more attention to the changes in consumer psychology and behavior in order to develop more targeted and effective apology strategies.

On the other hand, the research can also deeply explore the influence mechanism of cultural differences on the acceptance of brand apology strategies. Although this study has preliminarily revealed the relationship between cultural differences and the effectiveness of apology strategies, the specific path and mechanism of influence still need to be further clarified. Through in-depth analysis of consumer psychology and behavioral characteristics under different cultural backgrounds, it can provide strong support for enterprises to develop more accurate and effective brand crisis management strategies in transnational operation.

In conclusion, the research on the effectiveness of brand apology strategies in crisis events is a research field with broad prospects and practical application value. Through continuous exploration and innovation, we can provide enterprises with more effective brand crisis management solutions, while promoting the development and improvement of relevant theories.

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