International Journal of Communication 19(2025), 47–69 1932–8036/20250005

Rethinking Crisis Response: Cross-Cultural Insights from Comparing American and Korean Corporate Apologies

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This study qualitatively and quantitatively compared 80 American and Korean apology statements during corporate crises to (1) deductively test Benoit's image restoration theory, (2) inductively develop new crisis strategies through an empirical exploration of different cultural contexts, and (3) examine how cultural differences play into corporate apologia. To accomplish the objectives, the study qualitatively and quantitatively compared Korean and American apologies by testing and expanding Benoit's image restoration theory (IRT) under multicultural contexts. As a result, gratifying consumers and appealing sincerity were added to the original 5 strategies of IRT. The study also revealed that even though denial was absent in both cultures, American apologies more frequently used evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness, whereas Korean apologies implemented more corrective action, gratifying consumers, and appealing sincerity.

Keywords: corporate apology, crisis communication, intercultural communication, image restoration theory

A simple three-word sentence like "I am sorry" can hold different significance and meanings across different cultures. For instance, a corporate apology in Western culture might be considered insincere from an East Asian perspective, whereas profuse apologies in one culture come across as incompetent communication in another culture (Park & Guan, 2009). According to Goffman (1971), an apology represents a "remedial interchange," which involves the process of admitting responsibility, expressing remorse, and imploring forgiveness. However, apologies are perceived differently in collectivist cultures compared with Western perspectives, with a greater emphasis on conformity, in-group harmony, and prioritizing group goals over individual ones (Lim, 2020). In collectivist cultures, apologies are seen as a recognition of the burden suffered by the victim and gestures to restore relational harmony rather than admissions of guilt (Ide, 1998).

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Date submitted: 2023-04-23

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This cultural divergence in perceptions and functions of apologies can shape communication strategies during crises. For example, in the United States, apologies can imply legal liability, leading to reluctance in their use because of fears of litigation (Maddux, Kim, Okumura, & Brett, 2011). However, in collectivist cultures, an apology from an organization typically signals empathy and concern for those affected without necessarily admitting guilt and carrying legal implications (Lim, 2020). Such differences demonstrate that apologies are not simply situational norms but reflections of cultural attributes, as they are communicative behaviors or speech acts (Lakoff, 2001). In other words, corporate apologies are inevitably subject to specific cultural principles and communication styles of diverse stakeholders, taking into account how they interpret and express themselves during a corporate crisis (Lee, 2005).

Furthermore, with the rise of multinational corporations and the growing needs for effective strategic communication with international stakeholders, numerous scholars have underscored a lack of multicultural perspectives and an overreliance on Western-centric approaches in the field of public relations (PR; Chen & Culbertson, 1996) and crisis communication (Lee, 2005; Manias-Muñoz, Jin, & Reber, 2019). Drawing attention to the underlying ethnocentrism among PR researchers and practitioners, Stohl (2001) highlighted that international crisis communication is not merely a matter of transferring Western crisis communication practices to new cultural contexts. Specifically, recent scholars (Barkley, 2020; Lim, 2020) who have conducted cross-cultural studies on corporate apologies pinpointed that several strategical recommendations from the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, Holladay, & Tachkova, 2019) are not applicable to East Asian contexts because of the cultural differences in frequency of apologies in daily lives, conflict management style, and perceptions of crisis responsibility and reputational threat levels. Hence, given the increasing deviations from original theories across different cultural contexts, it is essential that crisis communication should evolve beyond adapting Western approaches and develop new strategies that are suitable for diverse cultural and global settings.

In addition to the lack of perspectives and empirical studies from non-Western cultures, the traditional discourse of corporate apologies has primarily centered on presenting corrective measures to regain public favor (Burns & Bruner, 2000). However, this one-way communication approach overlooks the growing importance of emotional resonance in stakeholder engagement, especially in the increasingly interactive and personalized landscape of digital communication. As expectations for authenticity and emotional connection from corporations rise, there is a need to expand existing apology frameworks to include strategies that address not only the logistical aspects of reparation but also the emotional and psychological needs of message audiences.

In response to sustained demands for non-Western and audience-oriented perspectives in crisis communication, this study compares American and Korean apology statements during corporate crises qualitatively and quantitatively. The study aims to: (1) deductively test Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory (IRT), (2) inductively develop new crisis response strategies through empirical exploration of different cultural contexts, and (3) delve into how cultural factors play into corporate apology rhetoric by employing Hofstede's (2011) four cultural dimensions that show relatively high discrepancies between the United States and Korea (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and long-term orientation). By examining a preestablished theory in a different cultural context and identifying new culturally inclusive strategies, the study broadens and contextualizes the scope of crisis communication research. Moreover, departing from

previous cross-cultural studies focused on particular crises via single country case studies (Zhou & Xu, 2022) and experiments (Barkley, 2020), the present study examines apology statements of multiple crisis contexts via mixed methods to compare repeated patterns in apologia. Additionally, by offering strategic guidelines, the study aims to foster cultural sensitivity and competence among practitioners to effectively communicate crises with stakeholders from diverse cultures.

Literature Review

Corporate Apologia

One of the chief rhetorical approaches in crisis communication is corporate apologia, a company-crafted, defensive communication effort intended to reduce the negative consequences of a crisis, restore the corporate image (Benoit, 1997), ease public anger (Thomas & Millar, 2008), and help corporations gain a prosocial status after a crisis (Lyon & Cameron, 2004). Apologia is also a public ritual where organizations follow a standard script and perform conventional expressions of remorse to complete the drama and escape guilt through speech (Tavuchis, 1991). Bauman (1989) maintained that speech in apologia proves it is a performance, designed for public exhibition, during which its quality and sincerity are judged by audiences (Hearit & Roberson, 2010). The need for apologia arises when there are allegations of wrongdoings, such as attacks on organization's public persona (Dionisopoulos & Vibbert, 1988), and violations of social legitimacy (Hearit, 2006). Moreover, Lee and Chung (2012) claimed that a corporate apology requires admitting responsibility, expressing sympathy to the victims, promising compensation, and reassuring improvement.

In terms of theoretical development, Ware and Linkugel (1973) introduced a theory of apologia consisting of four strategies (denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence) and four postures (absolutive, vindictive, explanative, and justificative) for self-defense. Dionisopoulos and Vibbert (1988) were some of the first scholars to apply rhetoric of apologia under organizational and corporate contexts, endorsing an assumption that corporations have a public persona. Hearit (2006) also established a normative and practice-oriented model called the rhetorical model of apologetic ethics, which facilitated researchers and practitioners evaluate the quality of communication and ethics of apology statements. The model offers criteria for ideal ethical standards (the apologia must be truthful, sincere, voluntary, timely, addressing all stakeholders, and performing in an appropriate context; Hearit, 2006). However, Hearit's (2006) model, as illustrated by Frandsen and Johansen (2010), did not address culturally sensitive practices or guidelines in apologia to cope with intercultural crises. The model does not work as intended because of globalization, political, religious, sociocultural, and linguistic dissimilarities that made organizations easier to deviate from sociocultural standards and tougher to apologize for their transgressions (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010). Coombs et al. (2010) asserted the need to revise Hearit's (2006) model by considering cultural factors and global settings. Thus, this study adds intercultural perspectives by exploring and comparing corporate apologia of non-Western companies and departs from parsimonious application of corporate apologia.

Image Restoration Theory

In addition to Hearit's (2006) model, other attempts to extend corporate apologia and take rhetorical approaches to present crisis response strategies have been made, as exemplified by image restoration theory (IRT; Benoit, 1997). According to Coombs and colleagues (2010), Benoit's (1997) IRT improved corporate apologia as a more refined tool for crisis communication research. IRT combines rhetoric—which includes apologia—with social science to induce practical crisis response strategies (Coombs et al., 2010). The theory underlies two assumptions: (1) corporate communication is a goal-oriented process; and (2) sustaining a positive image is a primary goal of organizational communication (Benoit, 1997). Benoit's (1997) IRT is composed of five strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Among the typologies, denial is simply denying the offensive action or shifting the blame to others (Benoit, 1997). Evasion of responsibility is provocation (claiming the act was a reasonable reaction to another's offensive act), defeasibility (absence of information or capacity), accident (mishap), and good intentions (well-meant; Benoit, 1997). Reducing offensiveness means reducing the perceived degree of offensiveness of the act through bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation. Corrective action is a strategy to restore the situation to the precrisis levels and prevent a recurring crisis (Benoit, 1997). Last, mortification is taking responsibility for the offense and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997). Benoit (1997) stressed that mortification is the most recommended strategy for crisis managers because accepting responsibility for a crisis works most effectively when the public perceives a sincere apology.

IRT is used in wide-ranging crises, such as airlines (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003), politics (Benoit & Brinson, 1999), and chemical industry (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). However, it has been minimally applied in quantitative studies and combined with other theories to compare with context-oriented approaches examining emotions, semiotic form, and communication channels during crises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). Therefore, as a theoretical lens to examine crisis response strategies embedded in the apology statements, this study adopts Benoit's (1997) IRT, the definitive work on the apologetic strategies under quantitative and multicultural contexts.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Corporate Apologies

Apologizing is a cultural process as to whom, how, and with what expressions an apology is conveyed embeds underlying cultural values (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990). Concerning that apologizing is a social and cultural behavior that resonates with social norms in any given culture, culture is an incontestable attribute in forming effective apologia. Since an apology is a communicative behavior, it cannot be fully comprehended without referring to cultural values (Wierzbicka, 1985). Despite its undeniable role in shaping crisis responses, intercultural crisis communication is underdeveloped because of the ethnocentrisms of the field (Lee, 2005). Addressing this issue, Haruta and Hallahan (2003) combined image repair strategies with Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions to compare Japanese and American organizational responses to airplane crashes and disclosed cultural differences in using apologies, media strategies, and litigation concerns. Hearit (2006) also examined cultural differences between American and Japanese defense strategies through a case study of the collision of an American submarine and a Japanese fishing boat in 2001. The study demonstrated how difficult it is for Americans to fulfill Japanese expectations of a proper

apology and restore sociocultural order of other cultures once it is disrupted, posing challenges to Hearit's Western-focused model of ideal ethics. Departing from qualitative approaches, Lee (2005) found that compensation, more than apology, aroused more sympathy from the Hong Kong audience, which does not align with the Western counterparts. This is because of the overuse of apologies in the East, which are far more ritualized and routinized than those of Western cultures (Lee, 2005).

Recent research on cross-cultural comparisons of apologies has explored mediums through which apologies are conveyed, taking into account platform-specific characteristics that shape communication styles. For example, Morrow and Yamanaouchi (2020) examined apologies as forms of computer-mediated communication by comparing English and Japanese responses from hotels to negative reviews on TripAdvisor. Inconsistent with previous findings, they found similarities in the frequency of apologies, the ambiguity in acknowledging responsibility, and the use of a corporate voice. However, they also revealed differences in the use of explanations, reparative actions, and the structure of opening and closing moves to build rapport. Another prevalently observed pattern is the variation within collectivist culture, as Isagozawa and Fuji (2023) uncovered differences in apology behaviors and intentions among Japan, China, and Malaysia. Their study noted that Japanese were more reluctant to offer corrective measures and compensation than the others, whereas Malaysians were more inclined to offer apologies with the intention of reaching a settlement (Isagozawa & Fuji, 2023).

Several recent studies have also demonstrated that the widely used SCCT is only partially applicable in non-Western contexts (Barkley, 2020; Lim, 2020; Manias-Muñoz et al., 2019). In addition to its ethnocentric origins, SCCT is grounded in Western communication theories, specifically apologia and attribution theory, and was developed using U.S. experimental data, which indicates that it reflects Western norms and perspectives (Ma & Zhan, 2016). For instance, although SCCT posits that accommodative strategies are effective in preventable crises when the organization is perceived to be highly responsible (Coombs et al., 2019), Lim (2020) revealed that Korean organizations often apologies regardless of their responsibility for the crisis, diverging from U.S. organizations, which reserve apologies for situations where they are directly at fault. This is because of a cultural tendency in Asian societies where apologies are ritualistic gestures rather than genuine admissions of guilt (Lim, 2020). Moreover, Korean organizations frequently use multiple crisis response strategies simultaneously, such as apologizing while also countering accusations in victim crises, whereas U.S. organizations typically adhere to a single strategy aligned with SCCT's guidelines based on perceived responsibility (Lim, 2020). In assessing SCCT's crisis typologies within the Japanese context, Barkley (2020) found that although the typologies aligned with misdeed and accident clusters about responsibility and reputational threats, they did not align with SCCT's categorization of workplace violence as part of the victim cluster. Japanese audiences perceived workplace violence as having a severe threat level typical of the preventable cluster, attributing collective responsibility to the organization rather than to an individual (Barkley, 2020). These discrepancies between subcultures and deviations from Western-based theories underline the need for further research to explore contested findings and develop inclusive strategies that widely resonate with stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Despite several still-limited numbers of recent approaches to assess Western-based crisis communication theories in Asian contexts, exploratory attempts to induce novel strategies to address both cultures have been scarcely made. To address the deficiencies in both cross-cultural and exploratory studies

in crisis communication, the study also aims to deductively test preestablished theories in the context of non-Western culture and inductively generate new strategies derived from Western and Eastern apologia. Therefore, the following question was proposed fill these research gaps:

RQ1: What crisis response strategies are observed in American and Korean apology statements?

Furthermore, to make sense of the cultural differences in apologia, Hofstede's (2011) dimensions have been employed as an overarching framework. Hofstede (1980) defined culture as the "collective programming of the mind," which makes a group member identify differently from that from another (p. 25). As a result, Hofstede (2011) introduced six dimensions of culture to facilitate a structured understanding of how cultural differences affect various aspects of behavior and organizational practices. For this study, four dimensions with the highest discrepancy between two cultures have been employed. The first dimension, power distance, evaluates the acceptance of unequal power distribution, whereas individualism versus collectivism describes the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups. Uncertainty avoidance gauges how much people of each culture feel comfortable with ambiguity. Long-term orientation features fostering virtues oriented toward future rewards, whereas short-term orientation stands for a preference for the present or past. According to the framework (Hofstede, 2011), South Korea was found to have high power distance (60) and uncertainty avoidance (85) as well as long-term orientation (86) and low individualism (18). Conversely, the United States demonstrated with lower power distance (40) and uncertainty avoidance (46), in addition to short-term orientation (50) and individualism (91) compared with South Korea.

Using Hofstede's (2011) dimensions, many scholars from different fields, varying from public diplomacy (Yun, 2008) to international marketing (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010) attempted to understand the audience. Considering the rise of multinational firms and globalization of businesses, several crisis communication studies have implemented the framework in comparing crisis strategies (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003; Wertz & Kim, 2010). Likewise, the study delves into the following research questions, employing the framework:

RQ2: To what extent are crisis response strategies embedded in apology statements qualitatively different across two cultures?

RQ3: To what extent are crisis response strategies embedded in apology statements quantitatively different across two cultures?

Materials and Methods

To address the aforementioned research questions, this study conducted both quantitative and qualitative content analyses of 80 corporate apology statements from American and Korean companies (40 from each). The statements were collected using convenience sampling via Google image search with the keywords "corporate apology" in both English and Korean. Convenience sampling is a nonprobability sampling method that samples data that are "convenient" to researchers without patterns (Edgar & Manz, 2017). The search term was intentionally broad to generate a wider population of apologies to sample from.

The convenience sampling approach was chosen for its practicality in accessing publicly available corporate statements. However, since only the apologies that were conveniently available have been collected, there exist limitations, such as potential biases and lack of representativeness of the sample. In the sampling process, we have applied the following sampling criteria to refine the search results and collect relevant samples: the statement should (1) be written and published by existing organizations; (2) address American or Korean audiences; (3) be of sufficient length (more than five sentences) to allow for in-depth analysis; and (4) include explicit indicators of an apology (i.e., sorry, apologize, regret). As a result, a total of 80 statements that conformed to criteria have been sampled. The research aims to quantitatively and qualitatively examine cultural variations in crisis response strategies and rhetorical devices embedded in corporate apologies, leveraging text-oriented approaches to explore organizational communication during crises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010).

For a qualitative content analysis, the first round of line-by-line open coding and the second round of axial and selective coding to collapse similar and relevant codes into overarching categories were performed via the NVivo software. The first round of coding was a line-by-line open coding, a method to freely and unrestrictedly evaluate the texts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From the line-by-line coding, a total of 27 initial codes have been created in addition to IRT, Benoit's (1997) 11 subcategories.

Then, axial coding has been undertaken as the authors thoroughly reviewed the texts and grouped recurring patterns of texts into categories, which are stepping stones of generating meanings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding linked the main categories with subcategories based on their conceptual similarities and associations (Charmaz, 2014). In the process, the subcategories that correspond to IRT's original categories were placed whereas subcategories that do not resonate with any of IRT categories were located separately. Finally, to cope with the remaining uncategorized subcategories, selective coding was conducted to further refine and unite categories based on overarching ideas and concepts and to derive new categories that eventually expand the original IRT typologies.

For quantitative content analysis, each line that falls under the generated categories was counted toward a corresponding category. Then, a percentage of the lines was calculated from the total number of lines of the apology statement. In other words, the unit of analysis for the quantitative part was each sentence in the statement, as it represents discrete units of communication within the context of apology statements. Analyzing frequencies of sentences not only serves to capture the proportion of the typologies in each apology statement but also standardizes the external variations such as different length and words of apology statements, thereby ensuring comparability across apology statements from different cultures. Sentences have been used in the past literature as a principled way of dividing transcribed data into units when assessing complexity in various types of speech data without compromising content validity (Däubler, Benoit, Jankin, & Laver, 2012).

There were a total of 682 sentences in American apology statements and 539 sentences in Korean counterparts. Before the procedure, 10% of the apology statements have been randomly sampled from both Korean and English apologies for calculating an intercoder reliability. Two bilingual coders were trained and coded the sampled 10% and generated mean intercoder reliability scores of 0.814 for American statements and 0.86 for Korean statements which are considered satisfactory (Krippendorff's alpha > 0.75). To ensure

reliability, a rigorous coding procedure has been implemented, as all coders underwent extensive training sessions to minimize potential discrepancies in coding interpretations. Furthermore, several rounds of discussions were held to address ambiguities and reach a consensus. Adjustments have been made to the codebook accordingly when potential uncertainties were identified during these sessions. Please see the Appendix for the codebook.

Results

RQ1: Newly Added Strategies

Two new strategies were generated by combining the subcategories that did not fall under IRT strategies: (1) gratifying consumers and (2) appealing sincerity. Furthermore, new subcategories and examples drawn from both cultures were added to the preestablished strategies of IRT (see Table 1). As a result of qualitative textual coding, the new subcategories were not added to denial, evasion of responsibility, and mortification for both countries as they employed these strategies relatively equally with the original theory. No subcategories of denial and provocation, a subcategory of evasion of responsibility, were found in any apology. However, both countries added a new subcategory under reducing offensiveness category. For example, a Korean company declared, "Sharing and righteousness are the pillars of our companies" (LG Chemicals, 2019, para. 3.), similar to an American apology that stated, "We consider diversity to be a fundamental value to be fully upheld, respected, and at the forefront of every decision we make" (Gucci, 2019, n.p.). Another new subcategory was added to Korean apologies under reducing offensiveness: emphasizing fairness and transparency. Numerous Korean apologies use expressions like "We will thoroughly investigate and inform you" and "We will promote transparency in all processes so that none of our customers are unfairly disadvantaged" (LG Chemicals, 2019, para. 8; Polaris, 2017, n.p.). The detailed results of axial and selective coding are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Crisis Response Strategies Between American and Korean Apologies.

American	Korean
1) Denial	**1) Denial**
a) Simple denial	a) Simple denial
b) Shift the blame	b) Shift the blame
2) Evasion of Responsibility	**2) Evasion of Responsibility**
a) Provocation	a) Provocation
b) Defeasibility	b) Defeasibility
c) Accident	c) Accident
d) Good intentions	d) Good intentions
3) Reducing Offensiveness	**3) Reducing Offensiveness**
a) Bolstering	a) Bolstering
b) Minimization	b) Minimization
c) Differentiation	c) Differentiation
d) Transcendence	d) Transcendence
e) Attack accuser	e) Attack accuser
f) *Reminding what corporate stands for*	*f) Reminding what corporate stands for*
4) Corrective Action	*g) Emphasizing fairness and transparency*[*]
a) Assurance it will not happen again	**4) Corrective Action**
b) New measures	*a) Assurance it will not happen again*
c) Resource allocations[*]	*b) New measures*
d) Promise for improvement	*c) CEO resignation*[*]
1) Make things right[*]	*d) Measures on employees*[*]
5) Mortification	*e) Promise for improvement*
a) Admission of Faults	1) We will try hard[*]
6) Gratifying Consumers	2) Turning over a new leaf[*]
a) Empathizing pain	**5) Mortification**
b) Reminding customers' values[*]	*a) Admission of faults*
c) Reminding their voices are heard[*]	***6) Gratifying Consumers***
d) Showing gratitude for love and support	*a) Empathizing pain*
e) Humor[*]	*b) Earning trust back*[*]
7) Appealing Sincerity	*c) Positioning consumers higher*[*]
a) Reflection	*1) We bow our heads*[*]
1) General statements on ethics	*d) Showing gratitude for love and support*
2) Learned lessons	***7) Appealing Sincerity***
*b) Personal stories**	*a) Reflection*
c) Exaggeration with dramatic speech	1) General statements on ethics
1) Uses of adverbs for "sorry"[*]	2) Learned lessons
	b) Exaggeration with Dramatic Speech
	1) Sorry for causing you concerns
	2) *Self-blame & self-deficiency*

Note. Italicized texts are inductively generated strategies and sub-categories in addition to five strategies of Benoit's image restoration theory (IRT). *= subcategories that exist exclusively in only one of the two cultures.

RQ2: Qualitative Differences

Since subcategories for corrective action were not introduced in the IRT, four new categories were added for both countries. Among the new subcategories, (a) assurance it will not happen again and (b) promise for improvement were observed for both countries. On the other hand, the subcategory (c) resource allocation was spotted in American apologies, whereas (b) CEO resignation and (c) measures on employees were prevalent in Korean apologies. Resource allocation indicates a specific amount of money that a company allocates to resolve the current problems or prevent crisis reoccurrence, as shown from Airbnb's promise of implementing a $50,000 guarantee for the property of hosts to compensate damage from Airbnb guests (Duryee, 2011, para. 11). Contrarily, both CEO resignation and measures on employees are punitive measures to hold the internal members responsible for mitigating public discontent. Although (d) promise for improvement was found in both Korean and American apologies, American apologies frequently used phrases that include "make things right" to highlight their determination for improvement. On the other hand, Korean apologies used expressions conveying messages such as "we will try hard" or a metaphoric expression such as "turning over a new leaf" to emphasize their vows to start from a clean slate (Korean Airlines, 2014, n.p.).

To further elaborate on two newly generated categories, (a) empathizing pain and (d) showing gratitude for love among the five subcategories of six gratifying consumers, cooccurred in both cultures. However, only American companies used sentences that correspond with subcategories of (b) reminding companies of customers' values, (c) reminders that customers' voices are heard, and (e) humor. American apologies attempted to gratify consumers by highlighting how much their consumers mean to them and how they are open to consumers' voices. Moreover, they used humor and casual tones to overturn negative consumer sentiment.

Conversely, Korean apologies had different subcategories for gratifying consumers like (b) earning trust back and (c) positioning consumers higher, which showed a stark contrast from American apologies by approaching customers with a more serious tone. The frequent use of expressions such as "we bow our heads to apologize" (Polaris, 2017, n.p.), and "thank you for scolding us" (Baedal Minjok, 2019, n.p.) reflects Korean companies' gratification strategy is to empower consumers and reinforce the vertical relationship between consumers and producers. Another new category, appealing sincerity, includes the subcategories of reflection and exaggeration with dramatic speech, seen in both countries. Reflection is when the companies acknowledge what they lacked ethically and reflect on what they learned from this experience. An example would be "turning this incident into a powerful learning moment for the Gucci team and beyond" (Gucci, 2019, n.p.). Exaggeration with dramatic speech is also another way of appealing sincerity, as American apologies often used adverbs like "extremely, deeply, unequivocally," and "unreservedly" in front of "sorry" or use superlative adjectives like "our deepest and most sincere apologies" (Justin Vineyards & Winery, 2016, para. 2) to accentuate their contrition. This strategy was employed in Korea in a more complicated manner, using modest and humbling phrases

such as "sorry for causing you concern" and "we will engrave your criticism and blame into our hearts" (Korean Airlines, 2014, n.p.) or with rhetorical devices that highlighted self-deficiency and self-blame. In addition to these two subcategories, American companies began their apology statements with their own personal accounts and feelings about the crisis to build intimacy with the readers, which makes their apologies sound more convincing and humane. For instance, a company representative shared her experiences to explain her wrongdoing:

> As a girl in my teens and early 20s, I had difficulty constructively expressing my intense feelings about what I witnessed in my ancestral land. Like many young people lacking life experience, I expressed myself by making insensitive remarks and statements of passion devoid of thought, not realizing the harm and offense these words would cause. (Cleveland 19 News, 2018, para. 17)

Another CEO shared his feeling in casual, layperson language rather than filling the apology with formal sentences. In this way, the apology appeared more from the heart, "When we learned of this, our hearts sank. We felt paralyzed, and over the last four weeks, we have really screwed things up" (Duryee, 2011, para. 8).

RQ3: Quantitative Differences

For a quantitative analysis, a frequency analysis via SPSS was adopted to complement qualitative findings and thus, to quantitatively compare how the five strategies of IRT, in addition to the newly derived strategies, were used similarly or differently in American and Korean apologies. As illustrated from Table 2, Korean apologies had a higher average percentage of corrective action (32%) than did American apologies (21.9%). Moreover, a higher tendency of appealing sincerity has been observed from Korean apologies (38.7%) compared with English apologies with 31.9%. Pertaining to gratifying consumers, Korean apologies showed a slightly higher percentage of 20.17% than did American apologies (16.4%). Last, American apologies had a slightly higher proportion of sentences that are attributed to reducing offensiveness (28%) than did Korean ones (23.5%). The other two had less than 1% differences.

Table 2. Frequency of Strategies by Countries (N = 1,221).

Variables	American	Korean
	n (%)	*n* (%)
Evasion of Responsibility	101 (14.8)	73(13.6)
Reducing Offensiveness	183 (26.8)	127 (23.5)
Corrective Action	149 (21.8)	172 (31.9)
Mortification	144 (21.2)	109 (20.2)
Gratifying Consumers	114 (16.8)	109 (20.2)
Appealing Sincerity	215 (31.6)	211 (39.1)

Note. American apologies (*n* = 682); Korean apologies (*n* = 539).

Discussion

The Emergence of New Image Repair Strategies

One of the primary findings of the current study is the discovery of two additional strategies—gratifying consumers and appealing sincerity—which present a noteworthy expansion to the IRT. Gratifying consumers departs from the conventional IRT strategies focusing on emotional satisfaction as a means of repairing the corporate image. Unlike corrective action, which aims to rectify the issue at hand, gratifying consumers seeks to create a positive association and appease the affected parties through personalized apologies or other forms of gratification that elicit positive emotions and a sense of being valued among consumers. It reflects a strategic shift from a focus on problem-solving to rebuilding a positive emotional connection with the consumer base. Similarly, appealing sincerity diverges from mortification by convincing stakeholders of the company's inherent integrity and ethical standards, rather than simply acknowledging faults. Appealing sincerity underlines transparency and genuine commitment to its core values and the well-being of the stakeholders to establish an emotional rapport and rebuild trust on a more personal level.

The emergence of the strategies involving emotional appeal can be attributed to stakeholder expectations of corporate responsibility and two-way relationship building. In other words, stakeholders these days seek not only the correction of wrongdoings but also an emotionally engaging narrative that aligns with their personal values and expectations of authenticity. Furthermore, the immediacy and intimacy of social media platforms may have catalyzed the strategic shift that privileges emotionality in corporate communication, as many recent corporate apologies on Twitter were found to use greetings, discourse markers, and emojis to build rapport with consumers (Page, 2014).

Limited Use of Denial and Evasion of Responsibility

That the first strategy of IRT, denial, was observed in neither of the apologies and that the second strategy, evasion of responsibility, obtained relatively low percentages in both cultures reveals how companies in recent years are reluctant to use approaches that do not immediately admit culpability and shoulder responsibility. The results resonate with Benoit's (1997) suggestions on using corrective action more than denial and evading responsibility. The empirical study also supports how apologies that actively admit responsibility reduce public anger more than passive admission (Lee & Chung, 2012). In addition, as evading responsibility is more prevalent in American apologies, it was inconsistent with Hofstede (2011) who contended that collectivist culture is more inclined to make more excuses and apologies to save face.

Different Subcategories for Reducing Offensiveness Between Cultures

Reducing offensiveness of the current event was used more often than the previous two strategies in both cultures. The most common approaches were minimization, bolstering, compensation, and a newly devised subcategory, a reminder of what the corporation stands for. These strategies mitigate the perceived offensiveness of a crisis to restore reputation through self-promotion (Li, 2017). Positive spins can effectively offset negative consumer sentiment by heightening positive feelings toward the corporation (Benoit, 1997). Reminding the stakeholders of their positive relationships with the corporations in the past can also gravitate

them to help protect the organization's reputation (Coombs et al., 2010). Unlike American apologies, Korean statements underscore transparency and fairness in resolving the problems. It is an accepted part of Korean culture, attributed to its uncertainty avoidance that is almost twice higher than in the United States. People from cultures with high uncertainty avoidance have less tolerance toward risk and ambiguity, as they feel uncomfortable in unstructured situations and require strict guidance (Hofstede, 2011). In other words, Korean apologies tend to ensure transparency and fairness in crisis response statements to meet the high consumer demands for unequivocal executions of subsequent crisis actions and continuous updates to overcome the perceived uncertainty.

Overall, although both cultures actively used reducing offensiveness via different substrategies, American apologies used reducing offensiveness and evading responsibility more than Korean apologies did. The reason is American consumers tend to seek legal recourse if corporations do not execute the actions declared through overt communication. It compels companies to carefully consider the potential risks of litigation and legal responsibility in all messaging (Sugimoto, 1997). Unlike the litigious nature of American society, East Asian cultures, which view restoring harmony as a resolution to a conflict, interpret litigation as a last resort after failed attempts to save the relationship (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003). Hence, different cultural interpretations of litigation induce divergent levels of legal risk for a company when delivering an apologetic message.

Greater Emphasis on Corrective Action for Korean Apologies

The propensity of Koreans to avoid ambiguity reflects in the significantly higher proportion of corrective action in their apologies. It is also explained by the long-term orientation in Hofstede's (2011) dimensions, a future-oriented perspective to endure the present for future outcomes (Hofstede, 2011). This indicates that Korean culture is more likely to hold long-term perspectives about crisis restoration than American culture. Different rhetorical approaches between two cultures promising improvement can also be explained by the short-term and long-term orientations. The subcategory "make things right" from American apologies is devoted to fixing things in the present, whereas "we will try hard" or "we will turn over a new leaf" from Korean apologies are based on future improvement. Hence, drawing on Hofstede's (2011) dimensions, Korean consumers' cultural tendency to concentrate on long-term changes might have induced companies to invest a higher proportion of their apologies to explicating corrective actions consisting of future plans such as promises for improvement and new measures. On the other hand, American apologies, while also committing to improvement, are more likely to frame these actions in terms of immediate and tangible corrections, such as the subcategories allocation of resources and "make things right," as well as frequent uses of "will not happen again," which reflect a shorter-term focus.

In addition, in contrast to American apologies, Korean apologies frequently mentioned CEO resignation and punitive employee measures as demonstrations of taking crisis responsibility. These subcategories also resonate with individualism-collectivism dimension from Hofstede (2011), as CEO resignations result in the context of a highly collectivist culture where audiences comprehend the causes of an event from contextual and group-level factors rather than individual actors (Maddux et al., 2011). It is also consistent with a previous finding that Japanese culture, another highly collectivist culture, demands that the person at the top of the organization be responsible and apologize on behalf of his or her

subordinates (Haruta & Halahan, 2003). However, the finding that another subcategory, measures on employees, has been observed from Korean apologies deviates from the previously established distinction between collectivist and individualistic cultures since the fundamental assumption of individualism is that the locus of control for events reside within individuals, whereas causal factors in collectivist cultures incite at the group or societal level (Maddux et al., 2011). Such deviation from typical collectivist cultures can be attributed to high uncertainty avoidance of Korea (Hofstede, 2011), as Koreans prefer detailed and reassuring messages with clear resolutions. Hence, Korea's collectivist and uncertainty-avoidant culture allows apology statements to include detailed corrective measures, such as CEO resignations and actions involving employees. Conversely, American apologies were more reluctant to explicitly state who will be held accountable on behalf of the organization and devoted less attention to elaborating on corrective measures to alleviate uncertainty.

Different Cultural Approaches to Consumer Gratification

For gratifying consumers, even though apologies from both cultures expressed their empathy toward consumers' pain, they employed dissimilar strategies for gratifying them and eventually assuage their anger. Furthermore, American companies make several attempts to gratify consumers by highlighting their values and positions as partners, which resonates with Hofstede's (2011) categorization of the United States as having high individualism. As exemplified by the subcategory "reminding their voices are heard," which appeared only in American apologies, they often emphasize individual experiences, personal stories, and direct expressions of gratitude toward consumers, reflecting the individualistic values of personal connection and accountability. Additionally, American apologies often used jokes and casual tones, as jokes are considered a strategy to cope with a loss of social approval without clearly admitting faults (Park & Guan, 2009). Conversely, Korean apologies used more vertical approaches to gratify consumers by reinforcing a hierarchy between companies and consumers. For example, the subcategory "we bow our heads" and statements like "thank you for scolding us" reflect a greater emphasis on hierarchal respect and collective responsibility between consumers and companies in Korea. This is attributed to Korea's higher-power distance—the degree of which less powerful members of society perceive and expect power to be distributed equally (Hofstede, 2011). An old Korean saying, *customers are the king*, similarly mirrors a high-power distance between consumers and producers, which is socially and culturally constructed. It also conforms to a stance that an apology in East Asian culture is perceived as expressing obedience and restoring order (Sugimoto, 1997).

Different Cultural Approaches to Appealing Sincerity

Finally, the use of dramatic speech to appeal sincerity for both cultures is explained by the fact that a strong sympathetic expression makes apologies appear more sincere and reliable (Hareli & Eisikovits, 2006). Reflecting on wrongful deeds is a way of honestly admitting blameworthiness for the crisis and, at the same time, convincing the stakeholders that the actors are fully aware of the problem and how to fix it to prevent future crises. Further, the fact that Korean apologies used the strategy of appealing sincerity more frequently than American ones did is associated with the collectivist culture's tendency to view feelings as more effective means to cope with conflict (Lee, 2005). A prior study revealed that consumers of an individualist culture prefer an organization to articulate the situation analytically and factually, whereas

collectivist culture expects messages that touch their feelings and express sympathy for the victims (Ting-Toomey, 1986). According to Sugimoto (1997), remediation strategies are perceived as a commitment to future actions in American culture, whereas East Asian cultures primarily associate them with a display of care and concern. Also, for cultures such as that of Japan and South Korea, the verbal message delivered through apologies signals that care about their consumers can sometimes be sufficient even without being backed by actual remediation (Sugimoto, 1997). It also means that a future action or compensation without sincerity and concern in the apologies might be considered dissatisfying for East Asian consumers. An emphasis on showing care and concern is evident in that a large portion of Korean apologies carry the expression "Sorry for causing you concern."

Another way of explaining such differences is how an apology is conceptualized in different cultures. American apologies often involve defining responsibilities and faults for the crisis, while Japanese apologies grapple with companies acknowledging the burden and pain consumers went through by expressing interconnectedness and indebtedness in their apology statement (Sugimoto, 1997). Therefore, the nature of American apologies to assign responsibility for an event and the litigious nature of American culture might have hampered organizations from exhibiting reflection, or an overt admittance of responsibility as a strategy to appear sincere, which can carry substantial legal risks.

In addition to how often the two cultures use sincerity, how dramatic speech is delivered also differs. American apologies use adverbial intensifiers before the word "sorry," whereas Korean apologies use metaphoric expressions to exaggerate their guilt and indebtedness to the consumers along with self-blame. Such differences in delivery are explained by the fact that apologia is often conceptualized as a public remediation ritual where organizations follow a standardized script and adopt familiar conventions of remorse and remediation to alleviate public anger (Hearit & Roberson, 2010). They also maintained that apologia is about institutions performing social actions by completing the drama and the auditors, evaluating the degree of the apologists' sincerity. Since a ritual conforms to cultural norms, ethics, practices, and linguistic formulas, the rhetorical devices, conventionally adopted for apologia, would differ by culture. For example, Korean apologies include ritualized and routinized apologetic expressions, such as "engraving your criticisms to our hearts" (Korean Airlines, 2014, n.p.) or "cannot lift our heads from shame" (Eland Park Ltd., 2017, para. 4). Despite such differences, appealing sincerity is the most prevalent among the seven strategies for both cultures. Enhanced sincerity can result in effective anger relief, a central goal of apologies (Robbennolt, 2003).

Limitations and Future Directions

However, this study has several limitations. It does not address how different types of crises and level of attributions audiences have toward the companies can affect the rhetorical devices of apologies. For instance, the study did not consider the types of company, industry, product, and crisis context, when analyzing the apology statements, which calls for future research to consider situational factors. Furthermore, future studies can benefit from examining apology messages from the same multinational company addressing audiences of different cultures to more accurately capture the sole role of culture in shaping corporate apologia. Also, although this study examined the strategies companies employ to cope with the corporate crises, it did not explore their efficacy. Hence, to further delve into the reception of these

strategies, future research can investigate audience reactions toward these apologies and how they differ across cultures through different methods, such as a survey or an experiment. The research also did not address the limitations of audience globalization and a narrow, binary division of East and West when characterizing the cultures and their apologetic norms. For instance, in American culture, responsibility for an event is assigned to individual actors, whereas in Japan, responsibility is diffused across employees as the locus of control is perceived to underlie at a group level rather than at an individual level (Maddux et al., 2011). Inconsistent with the tendency of Japanese culture, this study uncovered how the substrategy measures on employees were prevalent in Korean apologies. It demonstrates how the cultural discrepancy in apologies exists even within the collectivist or East Asian culture. Last, the use of convenience sampling may affect the generalizability of the findings, as they may not fully represent the broader population of apology statements because of the nonrandom selection process and the reliance on publicly available statements accessible via Google search. Future studies could address these limitations by employing a more systematic sampling method, such as stratified random sampling, and expanding the data source beyond Google search.

Conclusion

These findings have theoretical implications as the study expanded Benoit's (1997) IRT by testing it under an Eastern context. This approach differs from previous studies that tested SCCT across various cultural settings but were unable to identify new strategies because of the theory's quantitative framework. In contrast, IRT allows for more exploratory attempts involving the discovery of culturally specific strategies. The incorporation of two new emotionally laden strategies into IRT highlights the need for a more holistic approach to image restoration by considering the power of emotion and empathetic engagement in influencing public perceptions of crises. Therefore, the study adopts a receiver-oriented approach by considering audience identity-related factors, such as culture, and incorporating strategies designed to build emotional connections with stakeholders. This represents a strategic shift from traditional approaches that focus solely on addressing the problem through one-way communication. Aligning with prior studies, which adopted Hofstede's (2011) dimensions for studying corporate crises (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003; Wertz & Kim, 2010), the study also underlined the potential of Hofstede's (2011) dimensions as an effective tool in planning strategic and public communications. Furthermore, considering that the former studies on cultural differences in corporate crisis communication have largely been examined through descriptive case studies (Zhou & Xu, 2022) or experiments (Barkley, 2020), this study is one of the first attempts to apply mixed methods to assess apologetic strategies. In addition, unlike previous studies that often focus on a single case or use manipulated crises, this research examines multiple real-life apologies across various contexts, which elicits more generalizable and widely adaptable insights. Last, by making sense of cultural differences in crisis strategies through the lens of Hofstede's (2011) dimensions, this study broadens their scope of application beyond understanding cultural behaviors to the domain of corporate messaging and strategic communication. This study demonstrated the potential for Hofstede's (2011) dimensions to serve as a framework for interpreting how cultural values shape organizational responses to crises.

The study also provides practical insights into the need for building emotionally charged strategies by introducing two new strategies on emotional appeal. The emergence of these strategies that deviate from the original image-repair framework highlights the importance of navigating the complex emotional

landscapes of digital stakeholders by fostering a narrative of authenticity and humanization in corporate communication. Practitioners can use the findings to develop more effective image-repair strategies that resonate emotionally with stakeholders, acknowledging that stakeholders now prefer a combination of corrective actions and emotional satisfaction. Additionally, findings from cross-cultural examinations using Hofstede's (2011) framework offer practical guidelines on how to tailor strategies to cultural settings according to these dimensions. For instance, when addressing audiences of cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, it is recommended to articulate transparency and fairness by providing detailed plans and updates to alleviate consumer anxiety and maintain trust. Moreover, even with consumer gratification, companies targeting American audiences should acknowledge their value and partnership roles in the crisis resolution process, whereas those addressing Korean audiences should adopt more hierarchical gratification strategies that reinforce social order and the "customer is king" philosophy. Overall, it is advised to use sincere and interactive tones that treat consumers as partners in American apologies, whereas Korean apologies should adopt a humble tone that positions corporations lower than the consumers and provides practical, unambiguous guidance for the future. In addition, the current findings can be incorporated into the training materials and education for PR practitioners to develop cultural sensitivity when communicating with international stakeholders. Most importantly, this study provides empirical insights that taking culture into account, for PR practitioners, is a way to improve two-way communication with stakeholders by taking a social-constructionist and audience-oriented approach in communicating corporate crises.

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Appendix

Table 1. Sample Codebook

Variable	Variable Definition	Examples	Code value
Learned lessons	Insights gained from the experience, indicating growth/change of the organization	"I hope this can be a valuable lesson to other businesses about what not to do in a time of crisis, and why you should always uphold your values and trust your instincts" (Duryee, 2011, para. 6).	0 = no 1 = yes /Nominal
Promise for improvement	Pledge to enhance the performance and procedures of the organization	"These actions are just the beginning of our commitment to being a better, more engaged neighbor, a true steward of the land, and a local voice that lives up to the spirit of Paso Robles" (Justin Vineyards & Winery, 2016, para. 4).	0 = no 1 = yes /Nominal

Note. The complete codebook is available upon request.