
Research Article

Negotiating legitimacy: Interdiscursive performance and multimodal adaptation in corporate apology letters across polymedia environments

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Abstract: Corporate apologies constitute critical legitimacy-repair rituals in contemporary crisis communication. Current research predominantly examines monomodal textual features or born-digital formats, neglecting how traditional apology letters adapt across polymedia landscapes. Two key limitations persist: (1) insufficient attention to interdiscursive negotiations between legal, PR, and marketing discourses within crisis management teams, and (2) inadequate exploration of multimodal transformations when apology letters migrate across channels. This study addresses these gaps through a critical genre analysis of 53 corporate apology letters (2009–2024) disseminated via email, newspapers, websites, and social media. Integrating interdiscursive and multimodal frameworks, we examine how rhetorical moves negotiate competing professional objectives while adapting to channel affordances. Three discoveries emerge: First, legal hedging strategies manifest in Moves 8–9 through selective cause omission and indirect responsibility admission. Second, emotional intensification commodifies contrition into relational capital, contrasting with East Asian deference patterns. Third, channel-driven “participatory control” emerges: websites embed regulatory documentation within relational prompts, while social media hijacks interactivity for narrative control. The findings reveal corporate apologies as neoliberal legitimacy interfaces, transforming ethical accountability into linguistically engineered spectacles.

Keywords: corporate apology letters, critical genre analysis, interdiscursivity, multimodality, polymedia, legitimacy

摘要：本文结合批评性体裁分析与多模态理论，考察53封跨渠道发布的英文企业道歉信，剖析其修辞语步如何协调专业话语冲突并回应媒介特性。研究发现，道歉语篇通过法律规避策略与情感商品化机制，将伦理问责转化为一种技术化的话语实践；渠道差异则催生了差异化的“参与控制”策略，例如在网站中内嵌监管文本，在社交媒体上操控话题叙事。企业道歉信已成为新自由主义下重构组织合法性的核心话语媒介，本研究对危机传播实践具有启示意义。

关键词：企业道歉信，批评性体裁分析，互语性，多模态，多媒介环境，组织合法性

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1 Introduction

Corporate discourse now operates within what Brooks (1999) termed an “age of apology,” as organizations are more frequently apologizing to customers for their criticism, complaints, and discontent. Public apologies constitute “one of the most ubiquitous speech acts” (Drew et al., 2016: 1). Despite the emergence of novel crisis response genres—such as Twitter apologies (Page, 2014) and corporate image repair videos (Jaworska, 2023)—influenced by the polymedia landscapes, the traditional genre of apology letters persists as a strategic anchor for crisis management teams (CMTs). The continued dominance potentially stems from its unique capacity for controlled interdiscursivity: the deliberate weaving of legal accountability, relational repair, and institutional ethos into a unified textual fabric (Claeys & Opghenaffen, 2021). The attribute often tends to be attenuated in more ephemeral digital formats.

Recent scholarship in pragmatics has demonstrated growing interest in corporate apologies, with predominant research focusing on their discursive construction and pragmatic functions in image restoration, rapport management, trust (re)establishment, and cultural alignment (Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020; Page, 2014; Wang et al., 2021; Yang, 2024). While these studies have yielded valuable insights, they remain constrained by two significant limitations. First, although existing research acknowledges corporate apologies as collaborative products of CMTs (Chen et al., 2020; Claeys & Opghenaffen, 2021), it has consistently under-examined the distinct yet interconnected discursive contributions of key organizational actors. This oversight represents a critical gap in our understanding of the complex interdiscursive negotiation that shapes corporate apology discourse. Furthermore, they predominantly employ monomodal textual analyses, implicitly conceptualizing dissemination channels as passive transmission vehicles rather than semiotically active mediators that impact generic conventions. While some researchers have begun to explore visual aspects of corporate apologies (Berry, 2018; Jaworska, 2023), they examine born-digital formats (e.g., video apologies) and overlook how traditional written genres (particularly formal apology letters) undergo structural and functional transformations when adapted across different media platforms.

In this context, it becomes imperative to examine how the factors of participant collaboration and media platform affordances collectively shape corporate apology discourse, as well as how organizations strategically employ discursive resources to restore institutional legitimacy and repair damaged reputations. To achieve these purposes, the present study conducts a critical genre analysis of English-language corporate apology letters disseminated through four key stakeholder channels: emails, print newspapers, official websites, and social media platforms (including Twitter/X, Facebook, and Reddit). Critical Genre Analysis (CGA) (Bhatia, 2010, 2017) has proven particularly effective for investigating institutional discourse, having been scholarly applied to contexts ranging from university recruitment via WeChat (Feng, 2019) to CSR reports (Osman & Kadri, 2022). Of particular relevance is Yi and Bai’s (2022) study of corporate apologies on Weibo (China’s Twitter equivalent), which employed a traditional genre analysis approach (Swales, 1990) to identify obligatory rhetorical moves and their sequencing patterns in digital apologies.

Building upon this foundation, the current study advances genre scholarship of corporate apologies by incorporating two crucial dimensions: (1) the interdiscursive negotiation between multiple professional perspectives, and (2) the strategic deployment of multimodal resources across different media platforms. Through this multiperspective approach, we illuminate how CMT professionals artfully navigate generic conventions and semiotic resources to achieve organizational objectives in complex polymedia environments. Specifically, this investigation addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What distinctive communicative purposes and move structures characterize corporate apology letters as a genre?
- (2) What rhetorical strategies (particularly linguistic and visual resources) are employed to realize these moves across different media channels?
- (3) What sociocultural factors underpinning corporate apology discourse do these discursive features reveal?

The subsequent discussion proceeds as follows: First, I review key studies on corporate apology discourse. Next, I present the analytical framework and apply it to the corpus of apology letters. The analysis demonstrates that CGA offers valuable insights into this classic crisis response genre — revealing its inherent interdiscursive features (blending multiple communicative functions), stylistic diversity, and increasing reliance on multimodal elements like hyperlinks and embedded media.

2 Corporate apology discourse: interdiscursivity and multimodality in crisis communication

Corporate apologies constitute strategic rhetorical acts designed to restore stakeholder trust and repair institutional legitimacy. Sociologically, they function as remedial interchanges (Goffman, 1971), reframing organizational transgressions into socially acceptable narratives by balancing moral accountability and image restoration (Benoit, 1997). Linguistically, they operate as performative speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), typically structured around expressions of regret, acknowledgment of responsibility, explanations, offers of repair, and promises of forbearance (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). Unlike interpersonal apologies, corporate apologies are public-facing rituals, addressing diverse stakeholders (customers, investors, regulators) while aligning with societal values (e.g., transparency, sustainability) to secure legitimacy (Ogiermann, 2015; Suchman, 1995).

Research on corporate apologies spans multiple disciplinary perspectives. Communication studies, dominated by Image Restoration Discourse Theory (IRDT) (Benoit, 1997) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), have primarily examined strategic efficacy, revealing corporations' preference for repair-oriented apologies (Page, 2014) and legal hedging (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2021). Pragmatic analyses have focused on linguistic deconstruction, such as identifying patterns of accountability avoidance through agentless passives and non-performative regret markers (Xu & Liu, 2020). Discourse analytic perspectives have investigated genre conventions through move analysis (Yi & Bai, 2022) and appraisal resources (Wang et al., 2021). Despite these valuable contributions, current research remains fragmented, often examining strategic, linguistic, or structural elements in isolation while neglecting their integrated dynamics.

Professional discourse operates within established genre conventions that facilitate recognition and categorization (Mauranen, 1993). Genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990) has proven particularly effective for examining language use in professional and institutional contexts. However, as scholars have demonstrated, analyzing professional genres requires moving beyond text-context dichotomies (Devitt, 1991; Flowerdew, 2011). Bhatia's (2010, 2017) Critical Genre Analysis approach addresses this need by integrating text-internal resources (e.g., lexico-grammatical patterns, rhetorical structures) with text-external resources (e.g., professional norms, institutional constraints, cultural values). This approach becomes

especially relevant given contemporary communicative environments where pure genres increasingly give way to genre-mixing, genre-embedding, and genre-bending phenomena—collectively termed interdiscursivity.

The complex nature of business communication demands careful examination of interdiscursive practices in corporate discourse. Research has documented interdiscursivity across various corporate genres, including email communication (AlAfnan, 2017), tax computation letters (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006), and advertorial discourse (Deng et al., 2021). Claeys and Opgenhaffen's (2021) interviews with 38 Belgian CEOs and legal advisors revealed how corporate apologies—particularly formal letters—emerge as hybrid discourses shaped by competing institutional logics. While public relations (PR) professionals contribute to crisis management teams, legal advisors and executives carefully monitor statement formulation, creating texts that balance multiple, often conflicting, communicative purposes.

The digital transformation of professional communication has generated significant scholarly interest in how genres adapt to new media environments (Andersen & van Leeuwen, 2017). Genre scholars agree that web affordances produce distinctive features in digital genres compared to their traditional counterparts. Analyses of homepages, e-commerce sites, blogs, and videos reveal that digital genres typically exhibit multiple communicative purposes (combining information and promotion), non-linear move structures (enabled by hyperlinks), and extensive multimodal resources (Andersen & van Leeuwen, 2017; Lam, 2013). This multimodal turn has influenced corporate apology research, with studies examining digital crisis communication genres. Investigations have shown how Twitter apologies employ emojis and hashtags to compensate for platform-imposed brevity (Berry, 2018), while video apologies utilize CEO confessional and factory footage to construct authenticity (Jaworska, 2023). However, research has largely overlooked how digital platforms transform traditional apology letters into multisemiotic texts, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of classic genres' adaptation to polymedia environments.

Despite the abundance of interdisciplinary research on corporate apologies, two prominent gaps persist in current scholarship. First, while interdiscursivity has been examined in related corporate genres (e.g., emails, advertorials), its role in apology letters remains underexplored. Existing studies have dissected strategic, linguistic, or structural dimensions of apologies in isolation (e.g., IRDT, pragmatic markers, move analysis), yet few integrate these perspectives to reveal how discursive features simultaneously negotiate competing institutional demands (e.g., legal hedging vs. moral accountability) and societal expectations (e.g., transparency). Second, although digital transformation has spurred research on emergent apology genres (e.g., Twitter apologies, CEO videos), the adaptive strategies of traditional crisis genres—particularly apology letters—in polymedia environments remain overlooked. As these texts evolve into multisemiotic forms (e.g., hyperlinked explanations, embedded infographics), their multimodal affordances across different communication channels demand deeper scrutiny.

To address these gaps, this review calls for an integrated analytical approach that combines CGA with interdiscursive and multimodal perspectives. Such a framework would not only bridge divides between textual and contextual analyses but also illuminate how corporate apology letters strategically reconcile competing demands and semiotic resources across media channels, thereby advancing our understanding of contemporary organizational discourse.

3 Methodology

In this section, a quick overview of the data collecting and analysis methods will be provided. The corpus under investigation consists of 53 English-language corporate apology letters issued between 2009 and 2025. The sample letters represent four distinct distribution channels: email apologies (n=18), full-page newspaper advertisements (n=14), corporate website news releases (n=12), and official social media posts (n=9). All documents are from companies headquartered in Anglophone nations (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom) or multinational corporations that use English as their principal language for global stakeholder communication. The corpus encompasses various industries, including banking, technology, e-commerce, and aviation, which are associated with high-profile crises (cases that frequently attract extensive media attention and provoke public scrutiny). The crises cover contentious issues such as racism, organizational misdeeds (e.g., mass layoffs), and technological breaches.

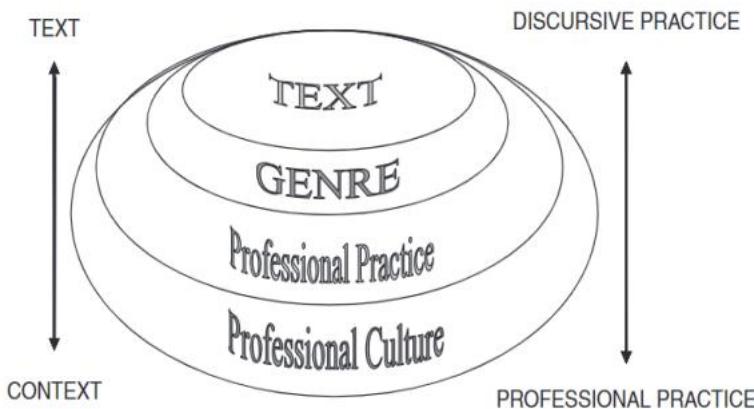
Data collection in this study employed a two-phase sampling strategy. First, a purposive sampling focused on Fortune Global 500 companies (2024 edition) was conducted, as their high public visibility necessitates legally vetted, rhetorically polished apologies—a sampling approach consistent with Wang et al.'s (2021) research on CEO apologies. Second, a snowball sampling was implemented to supplement the initial dataset, drawing from media reports, social media reposts, and PR consulting sites. The search method utilized targeted Google queries combining company names with standardized apology markers (e.g., “apologize,” “deeply regret”) as identified by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), along with channel-specific search operators (e.g., site: company.com; filetype: pdf).

The composition of the final dataset reflects several practical challenges in studying digital crisis communications. Approximately 30% of initially identified apologies had been deleted from official sources, and the earliest reliably available digital records date to 2009. The final sample of 53 cases represents all verifiable apologies that met our inclusion criteria, with some obtained through secondary sources like media reprints and social media reposts when primary sources were unavailable. Strict ethical protocols were implemented throughout the collection process, excluding any texts containing personally identifiable information (PII) or sourced from non-public channels.

The analysis draws upon Bhatia's (2010) Critical Genre Analysis model, the notions of interdiscursivity (Bhatia, 2004, 2010), and multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), and corpus-based move analysis (Upton & Cohen, 2009). According to Bhatia (2010), professional discourse operates across four overlapping levels—textual, genre-specific, professional practice, and professional culture—to construct and interpret meanings in professional settings (see Figure 1). This nested configuration demonstrates how professional communication materializes through the strategic integration of linguistic (e.g., lexico-grammatical, rhetorical, and organizational features), institutional (e.g., genre conventions, professional practices), and socio-cultural resources (e.g., professional or institutional culture), forming the foundation of the CGA model.

Figure 1

Patterns of discourse realization in professional contexts (Bhatia, 2010, p.34)



Interdiscursivity, rooted in Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) heteroglossia, is a key concept in critical discourse analysis and genre studies. It captures the dynamic interplay of genres, discourses, and professional practices (Fairclough, 1992), enabling communicators to adapt generic conventions for strategic purposes (Bhatia, 2010). For example, corporate annual reports often merge accounting, legal, public relations, and economic discourses (Bhatia, 2004), illustrating how interdiscursivity reflects the complex, hybrid nature of professional communication. Within the CGA model, this phenomenon is examined at the professional practice level, where genre boundaries are often blurred to meet institutional objectives.

Given the digital nature of contemporary texts, multimodality is another critical lens. It is defined as “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20). Digital genres increasingly rely on visual, hypertextual, and interactive elements, requiring analysts to move beyond purely linguistic features and consider how multiple semiotic modes shape meaning (Lam, 2013).

The analysis proceeds in three stages, aligned with the nested structure of the CGA model, including genre analysis (textual and multimodal), interdiscursive analysis (professional practice), and socio-cultural analysis (professional culture). At the foundational textual level, genres are analyzed as conventionalized communicative events (Bhatia, 1993) that serve distinct communicative purposes (Bhatia, 2004). In examining corporate apology letters, this stage focuses on identifying their core rhetorical functions (e.g., accountability, reputation repair). These purposes are operationalized through move structures—discrete rhetorical units that perform specific communicative functions (Upton & Cohen, 2009). The analysis reveals that while certain moves typically appear as obligatory elements, others may be optional, resulting in structural variation across texts. Importantly, these moves often overlap or recur rather than following a rigid linear sequence (Bhatia, 1993), and in digital contexts, they are frequently realized through multimodal resources including texts, images, and hyperlinks, necessitating a semiotic approach that extends beyond linguistic analysis (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005).

Moving beyond textual features, the second stage examines interdiscursive performance at the level of professional practice. This analysis explores how text-external factors (e.g., governance norms, legal constraints) shape and complicate genre conventions. A key finding is

how corporate apology letters strategically blend public relations discourse (focused on image repair) with legal discourse (aimed at liability mitigation), reflecting the inherent tension between corporate accountability and risk management (Bhatia, 2004). This interdiscursive mixing demonstrates how professional genres adapt to multiple institutional demands.

Finally, the analysis situates these findings within the broader context of professional culture. Recognizing that genres are deeply embedded in institutional and cultural practices (Kress, 1985), this stage interprets the findings in relation to corporate accountability expectations, crisis communication norms, and the socio-cultural values that influence how organizations construct responses to scandals or failures.

To ensure analytical rigor, the author and a second coder with genre analysis experience separately annotated the dataset (53 corporate apology letters) in Excel sheets, categorizing moves, multimodal aspects, and interdiscursive patterns. The current study adopts qualitative discourse analysis to detect a wide range of linguistic and visual features. However, the features are quantified as needed to understand their distribution. Move typologies were refined through discussion between the author and second coder, drawing on prior research (Bhatia, 2004; Feng, 2019; Lam, 2013; Yi & Bai, 2022). Intercoder agreement exceeded 85%, with discrepancies resolved via consensus.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Move structure and communicative functions

Analysis of 53 corporate apology letters reveals 14 distinct rhetorical moves (see Table 1). Moves 5 – 13 constitute the core apology structure, forming a complete apologetic statement typically distributed as PDF documents (see Figure 2). These core moves are predominantly text-based, with limited multimodal elements—only Move 5 (Indicating brand identity) and Move 13 (Providing signature) incorporate visual components (100% and 60% for each). In contrast, the channel-specific moves (1-4 and 14) demonstrate more pronounced multimodal adaptations: Move 1 (Tilting) indicates strong visual emphasis (55%), Move 2 (Showing metadata of website news) combines informational content with hypertextual links (45%), and Move 3 (Establishing public communication links) is entirely hypertext-dependent (100%). Social media-oriented moves show distinct patterns—Move 4 (Providing short social media posts) is purely textual, while Move 14 (Providing further interaction) is the most interactive element across all moves, reflecting the platform’s communicative norms. These distribution patterns highlight how different channels privilege specific modalities: websites favor hypertextual and visual elements, while social media emphasizes interactivity, with traditional channel apologies maintaining primarily textual formats.

Table 1*Moves identified in corporate apology letters*

	Move	Occurrence (%)	Hypertextual elements (%)	Visual elements (%)	Interactive elements (%)	Main functions
1	Titling	34	0	55	0	Relational/ Informational/ Promotional
2	Showing metadata of website news	17	45	0	0	Informational
3	Establishing public communication links	11	100	0	0	Promotional
4	Providing short social media posts	13	0	0	0	Informational
5	Indicating brand identity	60	0	100	0	Promotional
6	Saluting	68	0	0	0	Relational
7	Expressing regret	100	0	0	0	Relational
8	Providing account	80	0	0	0	Informational/ Accountable
9	Acknowledging responsibility	85	0.02	0.02	0	Accountable/ Relational/ Promotional
10	Offering corrective actions	90	0.06	0	0	Informational/ Instructional/ Promotional/ Regulatory
11	Making a promise	64	0	0.02	0	Relational/ Promotional
12	Expressing gratitude	45	0	0	0	Relational
13	Providing signature	60	0	60	0	Regulatory/ Relational
14	Indicating further interaction	28	0	0	100	Relational/ Regulatory/ Promotional/ Accountable

Figure 2

A sample of complete apology letter



In the central apologetic moves (5–13), six moves that appear in over 60% of the corpus are identified as obligatory based on Kanoksilapatham's (2007) criteria, while three moves (5, 12, 13) remain optional. The six essential moves include:

- Move 6: Saluting
- Move 7: Expressing regret
- Move 8: Providing account
- Move 9: Acknowledging responsibility
- Move 10: Offering corrective actions
- Move 11: Making a promise

These moves incorporate Lewicki et al.'s (2016) six key elements of effective apologies: expression of regret, explanation of what went wrong, acknowledgment of responsibility, declaration of repentance, offer of repair, and request for forgiveness. Notably, the acknowledgment of responsibility (Move 9) is obligatory in this framework, contrasting with Yi and Bai's (2022) findings, where it was optional in Chinese corporate apologies. Structurally, Move 6 (Saluting) typically appears at the beginning of apology letters, while Move 13 (Providing signature) is commonly placed at the end. The remaining moves exhibit positional flexibility and may recur within the same text. For example, in Amazon's apology letter to Representative Pocan, the phrase "we owe an apology to Representative Pocan" appears at the

opening, followed by a repeated apology (“We apologize to Representative Pocan”) at the conclusion.

Channel-specific move patterns (1-4 and 14) emerge distinctly in the corpus (see Table 2), revealing how platform conventions shape rhetorical structures. Website apologies demonstrate strict formal requirements, with Move 1 (Titling) appearing universally and Move 2 (Showing metadata of website news) occurring frequently as obligatory elements, whereas Moves 3 and 14 serve as optional enhancements. Social media apologies prioritize conversational engagement, mandating Move 4 (Providing short social media posts) and Move 14 (Indicating further interaction) for immediacy, with Move 1 being absent (0/9)—as a title is likely replaced by a short tweet on social media.

Table 2

Frequency of moves across channels

Moves/Channels	Email apologies (n=18)	Newspaper apologies (n=14)	Website apologies (n=12)	Social media apologies (n=9)
Move 1: Titling	0	6	12	0
Move 2: Showing metadata of website news	0	0	9	0
Move 3: Establishing public communication links	0	0	6	0
Move 4: Providing short social media tweets	0	0	0	7
Move 5: Indicating brand identity	9	11	3	9
Move 6: Saluting	18	6	6	6
Move 13: Providing signature	14	10	7	1
Move 14: Indicating further interaction	0	0	6	9

Email apologies follow distinct professional conventions, with the absence of Move 1 (Titling, 0/18) most likely reflecting methodological scope—the collected data captured email body content while omitting subject lines, which generally serve as titles in electronic correspondence. These apologies all feature Move 6 (Saluting) as a relational necessity and demonstrate a strong preference for core apologetic moves, with Move 5 (Indicating brand identity) and Move 13 (Providing signature) appearing frequently. Newspaper apologies combine formal and public-facing features, emphasizing authoritative elements (Moves 5 and 13 as required, Move 1 as optional), while excluding interactive moves (Move 14, 0/14), which reflects the limitation of print media (Song, 2025). These systematic divergences underscore how channel affordances govern both structural requirements and functional move selection in the genre.

Corporate apology letters exhibit a strategic hybridization of four professional discourses, each serving distinct crisis management objectives. Public relations discourse prioritizes relational repair through expressive (e.g., Move 7) and reconciliatory moves (Moves 10–12), fosters dialogue via interactive elements (e.g., Move 14), and legitimizes organizational

accountability (Move 9). Legal discourse mitigates litigation risks by embedding factual accounts (Move 8) and responsibility acknowledgment (Move 9). Marketing discourse permeates promotional function to reframe organizational image, while executive leadership formalizes authority through regulatory conventions (e.g., Move 13). These professional discourses materialize through six communicative functions:

- Promotional function leverages brand identity to redirect public attention;
- Informational function discloses crisis details and informs stakeholders of remedies;
- Relational function rebuilds stakeholder trust and social legitimacy;
- Instructive function guides affected parties through corrective actions;
- Accountable function combines legal protection with ethical posturing;
- Regulatory function formalizes organizational protocols.

In this study, interdiscursivity manifests when individual rhetorical moves serve multiple communicative purposes simultaneously (e.g., Move 8 combines informational and accountable functions). The following analysis will focus on moves demonstrating such functional complexity, particularly central apologetic moves (7-10). Moves with singular or conventionalized functions will not receive separate section-level analysis:

- **Move 2** (Showing metadata of website news) operates as purely informational discourse, providing standardized metadata (e.g., publication dates, author credits) with occasional hyperlinks to executive profiles.
- **Move 3** (Establishing public communication links) and **Move 4** (Providing short social media posts) adhere to platform conventions—the former embedding share/download buttons, the latter serving as textual summaries for image-attached full apologies.
- **Move 5** (Indicating brand identity) and **Move 6** (Saluting) function as genre-conventional scaffolding—Move 5 reinforces institutional authority through logos or letterheads (primarily promotional), while Move 6 employs formulaic salutations (exclusively relational).
- **Move 11** (Making a promise) and **Move 12** (Expressing gratitude) typically conclude apology letters following corrective actions (Move 10), serving as conventional closure devices.
- **Move 13** (Providing signature) appears at the end, often featuring executives' electronic signatures (60% of signed letters) with occasional CEO portraits, functioning as both a regulatory formality and a relational gesture.

These excluded moves either lack discursive hybridity (Moves 2, 4, 6, 11-12) or reflect channel-specific technical requirements (Moves 3, 5, 13). The analysis will instead prioritize moves where interdiscursive negotiation—between PR, legal, and marketing objectives—is most salient.

4.2 Interdiscursivity and multimodality across moves

4.2.1 Move 1: *titling*

The titling move functions as a critical entry point for readers in website (present in all 12 cases) and newspaper apologies (6 of 14 cases), while being absent in email and social media formats due to channel conventions. Website apologies predominantly employ text-based headlines, with only Alaska Airlines and Lufthansa incorporating aircraft images, symbolizing operational continuity. Linguistically, these titles combine informational and relational functions through two dominant structures: (1) declarative sentences providing crisis details (Text 1b), and (2) nominal phrases establishing scope (Text 1a). This dual focus mirrors news headline

conventions in prioritizing factual clarity (Bell, 1984), while incorporating interpersonal markers like first-person pronouns absent in traditional news contexts. Visually, website titles use enlarged fonts (20-28pt) for prominence, with accompanying aircraft images serving as visual metonyms for corporate capability (see Figure 3).

Text 1 Examples of titling

- (a) Public Apology to the Community (519)
- (b) Why we've canceled flights, and what we are doing to get back on track (Alaska Airlines)
- (c) WE'RE SORRY AUSTRALIA FOR GIVING YOU SO, SO MANY DELICIOUS, MOUTHWATERING DEALS (Domino's)
- (d) We have a responsibility to protect your information. If we can't, we don't deserve it (Facebook)
- (e) We're deeply sorry (Optus)

Figure 3

Apology letter (title) issued by Alaska Airlines, 2022 on website



In contrast, newspaper apology ads (e.g., Domino's, Volkswagen) exhibit promotional characteristics through three linguistic strategies: (1) emotional intensification (Text 1c: "SO MANY DELICIOUS..."), (2) moral framing (Text 1d: "We have a responsibility..."), and (3) repetitive minimalism (Text 1e: "We're deeply sorry"). These features align with Cook's (2001) framework of advertising discourse, particularly in their brand-centric openings (all titles begin with "We") and sensory language (Text 1c). Visually, they appropriate advertising conventions through full-page layouts with 30-40% title space allocation, high-contrast typography, and strategic capitalization (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Apology letter issued by Domino's, 2022 in newspaper



The interdiscursive tension is most evident in newspaper apologies, where commercial persuasion techniques (hyperbole, benefit claims) are repurposed for crisis response—a phenomenon resembling what Bhatia (2010) terms “generic appropriation.” Meanwhile, website titles demonstrate professional discourse hybridization, blending journalistic information density with public relations’ relational work. This divergence underscores how medium-specific affordances shape discursive priorities: websites favor explanatory accountability through news-derived formats, while print ads perform reputational repair using appropriated advertising rhetoric.

4.2.2 Move 7: expressing regret

As the most essential move in corporate apology letters (100% occurrence, Table 1), Move 7 serves as the foundational expression of contrition through conventionalized apology markers—Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), confirming findings from previous research (Xu & Liu, 2020; Yi & Bai, 2022). Its linguistic and functional patterns reveal both ritualized and strategic dimensions of corporate apology discourse.

Linguistic analysis identifies three primary IFID types with distinct characteristics. The most frequent, “apologize/apology” (45 cases in corpus), typically appears in institutionalized formulations such as “we apologize for/to...” or “please accept my apology for...” The less formal alternative, “we are/I am sorry (for)...” (21 cases), conveys a more personal tone. The relatively rare “regret” (7 cases) demonstrates more detached phrasing (e.g., “we regret that...”), often employed in legally sensitive contexts. These IFIDs are consistently intensified by attitude

markers (e.g., “deeply,” “sincerely,” “truly”) that modify the writer’s commitment to the apology. Syntactically, corporate “we” dominates (64% of cases), emphasizing collective responsibility, while first-person singular constructions (CEO voice) appear in 36% of cases to personalize accountability.

While primarily serving a relational function, Move 7 frequently combines with other moves, demonstrating interdiscursive hybridity. For instance, Hitachi’s statement (Text 2a) merges contrition (Move 7) with accountable discourse by incorporating crisis details (Move 8). Similarly, Lufthansa’s formulation (Text 2b) combines regret with a carefully qualified acknowledgement of responsibility (Move 9). This functional flexibility allows Move 7 to appear either as an opening gesture or following explanatory content, with potential recurrence throughout prolonged crisis communications.

Text 2 Examples of expressing regret

- (a) We deeply apologize for the delay in responding to your servicing needs (Hitachi)
- (b) While Lufthansa is still reviewing the facts and circumstances of that day, we regret that the large group was denied boarding rather than limiting it to the non-compliant guests (Lufthansa)

These patterns collectively demonstrate how Move 7 fulfills the apology genre’s core ritual through formulaic IFIDs while permitting strategic variations that negotiate institutional positioning across legal, public relations, and interpersonal dimensions. The consistent co-occurrence of IFIDs with intensifying attitude markers particularly underscores the importance of emotional intensification in corporate apology discourse.

4.2.3 Move 8: providing account

As a core component of corporate apology letters (80% occurrence, Table 1), Move 8 functions to explain crisis situations through two key steps: event description (Step 8a, 88%) and cause explanation (Step 8b, 37%) (see Table 3). The disparity of preference for the two steps aligns with crisis communication practices. For instance, PR professionals from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) advise organizations to gather facts and disclose them promptly while avoiding speculative attribution of causes (Lawson-Zilai, n.d.). The move demonstrates significant positional flexibility, frequently combining with other moves to achieve interdiscursive effects.

Table 3

Steps of Move 8

Move	Steps	Frequency (%)
Move 8: providing account	Step 8a: event description	88
	Step 8b: cause explanation	37

Step 8a typically employs fact-oriented language such as temporal markers (e.g., “during the past few weeks”), specific metrics (e.g., “63 fewer pilots”), and passive constructions (e.g., “documents were damaged”). These linguistic choices facilitate neutral framing of events while maintaining an objective tone. Step 8b, when present, uses causal connectors (e.g., “due to,”

“because (of)”) and process verbs (“led to,” “resulting in”) to explain circumstances, often emphasizing external factors (e.g., “Omicron surge and winter storms”) or demonstrating institutional reflexivity (e.g., “We should have recognized this sooner”).

The move commonly interacts with other apology components to create hybrid discourses. When combined with Move 7 (Expressing regret), as in Text 3a, it blends relational and informational functions. Pairings with Move 9 (Acknowledging responsibility), as seen in Text 3b, reflect strategic legal-discursive positioning.

Text 3 Examples of providing account

- (a) We apologize for the delay (Move 7, Step 8a) caused by unprecedeted demand. (Step 8b) (ASSC)
- (b) Late in the evening on Wednesday, November 30, unprecedeted hurricane-force winds hit the Southern California area. (step 8b) As a result, much of the electric system sustained considerable damage. (step 8a) Southern California Edison (SCE) took immediate action to identify necessary resources, and started restoration efforts as quickly and safely as possible. SCE crews, and crews under contract to us worked together around the clock from the time the high winds started. (Move 9) (SCE)

These patterns collectively show how Move 8 bridges factual disclosure and strategic positioning. Its selective implementation—particularly the lower frequency of cause explanations—reveals organizations’ careful calibration of transparency and accountability in reputation management (Chen et al., 2020). The move’s variable structure allows companies to maintain essential crisis information flow while controlling culpability framing, exemplifying the negotiated nature of corporate apology discourse.

4.2.4 Move 9: acknowledging responsibility

As another core component of corporate apology letters (85% occurrence, Table 1), Move 9 serves to strategically acknowledge responsibility through three distinct yet interrelated steps (see Table 4). The first step, admitting fault (Step 9a), appears in nearly all cases with this move (90%) but typically employs mitigated language that expresses sympathy or regret rather than direct admission of wrongdoing. This reflects the well-documented tension between legal and public relations imperatives in crisis management. As Hall (n.d.), a business litigation attorney, emphasizes: “Public statements may be interpreted as admissions of liability... communications should be carefully calibrated to avoid unintended legal consequences” (para. 2). This explains why phrases like “we recognize the pain” (the 519) or “we must do better” (Alaska Airlines) dominate corporate apologies—they constitute what Myers (2015) terms “legally defensible mortification strategies” that satisfy public expectations while minimizing litigation risks. The second step, affirming institutional values (Step 9b), appears less frequently (60%) and focuses on corporate ethos through purpose statements and normative declarations, such as Lufthansa’s emphasis on cultural diversity and equal opportunity or Anthem’s commitment to cybersecurity. The third step, demonstrating remedial efforts (Step 9c), appears in about 35% of cases and emphasizes ongoing actions through progressive verb forms, as seen in Samsung’s “taking proactive steps” or Anthem’s “working around the clock.”

Table 4*Steps of Move 9*

Move	Steps	Frequency (%)
Move 9: acknowledging responsibility	Step 9a: admitting fault	90
	Step 9b: affirming institutional values	60
	Step 9c: demonstrating remedial efforts	35

The move exhibits significant interdiscursive hybridity, blending different communicative purposes. Step 9a primarily functions as accountable discourse, satisfying relational expectations while limiting potential liability through the vague formulations of legal strategy (Text 4a). Steps 9b and 9c introduce promotional discourse by reframing the crisis as an opportunity to reinforce corporate values (Text 4b) and demonstrate institutional responsiveness (Text 4c). Positionally, these steps follow a predictable pattern—they typically appear after the expression of regret or explanation, projecting an image of resolution and renewal (Text 4d). This structure reflects what Coombs (2007) describes as the dual imperative of corporate apologies—meeting stakeholders’ demands for accountability while protecting organizational reputation. The predominance of indirect fault admission coupled with selective use of value affirmation and effort demonstration reveals how corporations navigate this tension, using mitigated language to acknowledge problems while strategically deploying positive messaging to rebuild trust.

Text 4 Examples of acknowledging responsibility

- (a) We sincerely apologize for the disruption.(move 7) We also understand how frustrating this situation may have been (step 9a) [.....] (Capital One)
- (b) We know that we must continue to improve the way we provide programs and services for those in our communities. We also know that we must continue to advocate for systemic change to address issues of discrimination, poverty, barriers to service and violence across all institutions.(step 9b) (the 519)
- (c) Over the last few days, we looked at how we got here, and are taking action to get back on track. (step 9c) (Alaska Airlines)
- (d) As you have probably heard, [.....] (step 8a) Our top priority is taking care of you and helping you feel confident about shopping at Target, and it is our responsibility to protect your information when you shop with us. (step 9b) We didn't live up to that responsibility and I am truly sorry. (step 9a, move 7) (Target)

4.2.5 Move 10: offering corrective actions

As the second most frequently employed essential move in corporate apology letters (90% occurrence, Table 1), Move 10 plays a crucial role in demonstrating organizational responsiveness through concrete remedial measures. This move characteristically blends multiple discourse types to achieve both practical and reputational purposes. The informational dimension predominates, with companies detailing specific corrective actions through future-oriented language (e.g., “we will implement,” “are reviewing”) and structured presentations of steps (e.g., Target’s 4-step security overhaul). Simultaneously, the instructional component provides clear guidance to affected stakeholders, often shifting to second-person address (e.g., “you should contact,” “please visit”) to facilitate user engagement.

The discourse strategically incorporates promotional elements that reframe the crisis as an opportunity for improvement, as seen in eBay’s emphasis on providing “best platform for your

business” or Samsung’s description of “unprecedented remedy options.” The persistent promotional interweaving further reflects Benoit’s (1997) observation that *corrective action* doubles as an image-repair tactic in corporate discourse. Additionally, about 30% of cases embed regulatory discourse by referencing compliance with authorities (e.g., Anthem’s FBI cooperation) or industry standards (e.g., Samsung’s CPSC-approved recall). Linguistically, the move favors active constructions with corporate agents (e.g., “we have established,” “our team is deploying”) to emphasize organizational control, while temporal markers (e.g., “immediately,” “in the coming weeks”) establish urgency and commitment.

Positionally, Move 10 typically follows the sequence of regret-expression, explanation, and responsibility-acknowledgement, but precedes future commitments, creating a logical progression from problem to solution. This placement allows companies to leverage corrective actions as evidence of reformed practices before making broader promises. The discourse reveals a tension between functional crisis management and reputational repair, where concrete measures serve both to resolve the immediate issue and symbolically reconstruct organizational legitimacy. Expert endorsements, procedural transparency, and quantifiable targets frequently appear as rhetorical devices to enhance the persuasiveness of the proposed solutions. Ultimately, Move 10 functions as a pivotal transition in the apology narrative, redirecting attention from failure to institutional learning and improvement.

4.2.6 Move 14: indicating further interaction

Move 14 serves as a channel-specific element that facilitates ongoing dialogue between organizations and stakeholders, with distinct manifestations across different platforms. In website apologies (50% adoption), this move typically takes the form of asynchronous interaction tools such as dedicated contact modules with embedded email forms (see Figure 5), and social media icons (see Figure 6). These elements combine linguistic prompts (e.g., “Get our newsletter and special updates,” “Keep up with...on social...”) with visual signifier to encourage continued engagement while maintaining corporate control over the communication process.

Figure 5

Sign-up function with embedded email form (the 519)



Figure 6

Social contact icons (Alaska Airlines)

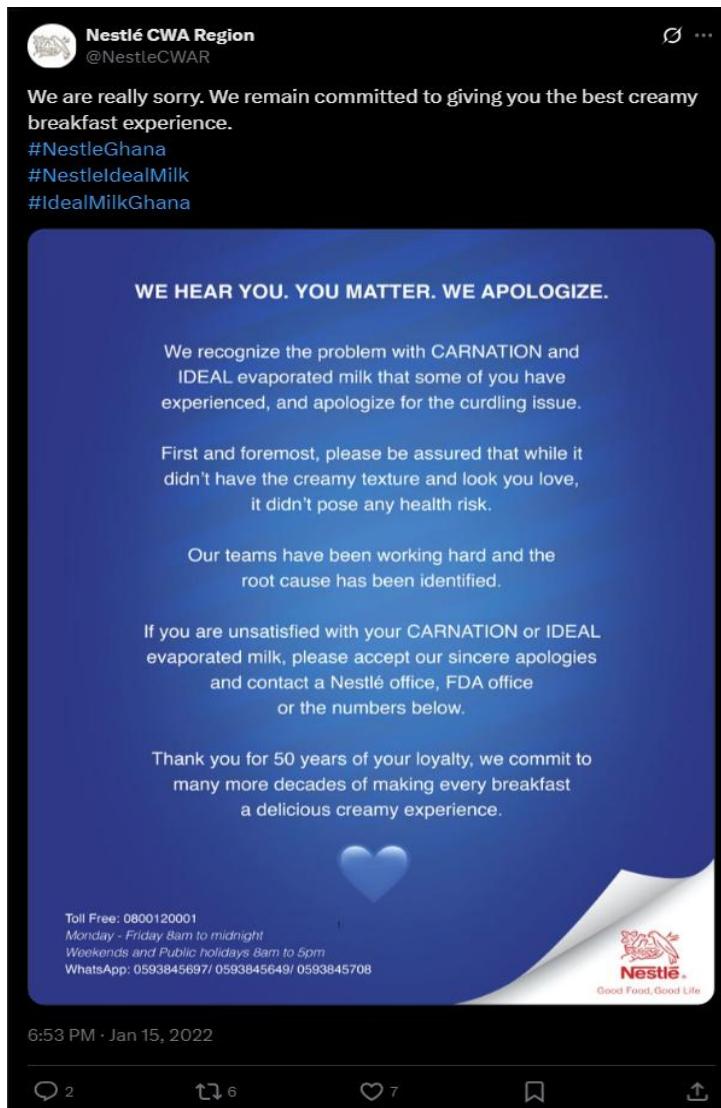


Social media platforms (100% adoption) transform Move 14 into a dynamic, real-time interaction space through three key features: public interactivity functions (e.g., likes, comments, shares), branded hashtag communities (e.g., #NestleGhana), and visual-directive

call-to-action elements (Figure 7). These features serve dual purposes—while ostensibly providing stakeholder engagement opportunities, they simultaneously allow companies to monitor public sentiment and steer crisis narratives. The hashtag functionality in particular demonstrates sophisticated discursive control, enabling organizations to aggregate conversations while maintaining promotional visibility.

Figure 7

Apology letter issued by Nestlé on X.com



The interdiscursive nature of Move 14 reveals important platform-dependent strategies. Website implementations blend relational discourse (dialogue invitations) with regulatory discourse (compliance documentation), as seen in Anthem's combination of contact forms with security protocol downloads. Social media versions, by contrast, merge promotional discourse (branded communities) with accountable discourse (public responsiveness), exemplified by Capital One's real-time comment addressing on Reddit. This move's functional significance lies in its ability to extend crisis communication beyond the initial apology, transforming static

statements into ongoing, platform-appropriate engagement opportunities that serve both corporate and stakeholder needs.

4.3 Sociocultural underpinnings of corporate apology discourse

The discursive features of corporate apology letters reveal three profound sociocultural dynamics shaping contemporary crisis communication.

First, it reveals the legalization of public discourse. The pervasive mitigated responsibility in Move 9 (Step 9a: 90% indirect admissions) and selective cause disclosure in Move 8 (Step 8b: 37% occurrence) reflect a risk-averse corporate culture amplified by litigious societal environments (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2021). This contrasts with Yi and Bai's (2022) findings in Chinese contexts, where explicit responsibility avoidance was more prevalent, suggesting Anglo-American apologies navigate stronger legal accountability expectations. The dominance of corporate "we" further signals institutional defensiveness, revealing how litigious environments ritualize institutional hedging (Fairclough, 1992).

Second, it demonstrates the emotionalization of accountability. The strategic emotional intensification of apologies—like employment of attitude markers (e.g., "sincerely/deeply apologize")—aligns with Western individualism's demand for performative sincerity. This "confessional performance" (Menon, 2024) commodifies contrition into brand-aligned emotional labor, satisfying consumerist expectations for personalized accountability while obscuring structural failures. Contrast this with East Asian corporate apologies, where hierarchical deference supersedes emotional displays (Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020): the Western emphasis on affective intensity ultimately serves market-preserving authenticity, transforming regret into relational capital.

Third, channel-driven "participatory control" exposes digital-era regulatory paradoxes. While social media's interactive features (e.g., hashtags, comments included in Move 14) ostensibly democratize discourse, they function as steered engagement— "#NestleGhana" aggregates criticism into brand-managed containers, converting dialogue into datafied metrics. Conversely, traditional channels (e.g., newspaper ads) reject interactivity entirely (0% Move 14), prioritizing institutional monologue. This duality exemplifies what Song (2025) terms the governance illusion: digital platforms promise transparency yet amplify corporate narrative control through algorithmic curation, while analog formats preserve authoritarian disclosure norms.

These dimensions collectively frame corporate apologies as neoliberal legitimacy rituals—hybrid texts that performatively reconcile profit logic with social expectations through linguistically engineered contrition (Jaworska, 2023). The genre's evolution reflects capitalism's adaptive capacity: embedding legal self-preservation within emotional spectacle, all while harnessing digital tools to simulate accountability.

5 Conclusion

This study reveals corporate apology letters as strategically engineered interdiscursive hybrids that reconcile competing institutional demands—legal risk mitigation, relational repair, and brand preservation. Through critical genre analysis of 53 apology letters across four dissemination channels, three key findings emerge:

- Generic Structure: The genre comprises 14 rhetorical moves, with six core moves (Moves 6–11, e.g., expressing regret, providing account, acknowledging responsibility, offering corrective actions) constituting the obligatory apologetic framework, while channel-specific moves (Moves 1–5, 14) adapt to platform conventions (e.g., social media's interactive Move 14 vs. print's visual Move 1).
- Interdiscursive Negotiation: Central moves (7–10) exhibit functional hybridization, blending legal discourse (e.g., hedged accountability in Move 9), relational discourse (e.g., intensified regret markers in Move 7), and promotional discourse (e.g., corrective actions as reputation repair in Move 10).
- Multimodal Adaptation: Digital platforms diversify semiotic resources—websites employ hypertextual elaboration (e.g., Move 2's embedded links), while social media prioritizes participatory affordances (e.g., Move 14's comment fields).

Collectively, these findings position corporate apology letters as polymediated legitimacy interfaces, where interdiscursive tension and multimodal flexibility enable organizations to negotiate contemporary accountability expectations.

While this study provides valuable insights into corporate apology discourse, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. First, while the 2009–2024 temporal scope effectively captures apology practices in the contemporary digital landscape, it necessarily excludes earlier pre-social media examples that might reveal different genre conventions and strategic approaches. This temporal limitation means we cannot fully trace the evolutionary trajectory of corporate apologies across different media eras. Second, the Anglophone corporate focus, while providing methodological consistency, may not account for cultural variations in apology strategies, particularly in contexts where indirectness or hierarchical communication norms prevail. Third, while we included social media apologies (n=9) to represent emerging digital practices, this relatively small sample size may not fully capture the diversity of interactive strategies being developed across different platforms.

Future research should build upon these findings while addressing the current limitations through the following directions. First, to overcome the temporal constraint of the 2009–2024 corpus, investigations may incorporate pre-digital-era apologies (e.g., 1980s–2000s archival materials) to trace the genre's historical evolution. Second, comparative cross-cultural analyses could examine non-Anglophone contexts—particularly cultures with distinct apology norms like East Asian hierarchical deference—to test whether findings on responsibility framing (e.g., Move 9's indirect admissions) hold across communicative cultures. Third, expanded studies of social media apologies could systematically analyze platform-specific adaptations (e.g., interactive features in Move 14) using larger datasets, including emerging phenomena like AI-generated apologies. Collectively, these directions would mitigate the study's constraints while advancing understanding of corporate apologies as dynamic, culturally mediated genres.

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