

A Study of the Elements of Corporate Apology Letters on Social Media

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Received: January 26, 2025

Accepted: February 28, 2025

Online Published: March 18, 2025

doi:10.5539/ibr.v18n2p49

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ibr.v18n2p49>

Abstract

With the rise of social media, enterprises are increasingly confronted with challenges in crisis communication, as platforms like *Weibo* amplify public scrutiny and accelerate the spread of information. In this context, corporate apology letters have become a crucial tool for managing and mitigating the consequences of a crisis. This paper explores the key elements and effects of apology letters within the Chinese food and beverage industry on *Weibo*. Utilizing a questionnaire survey for data collection, and SPSS27.0 for statistical analysis, the study employs reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis to test the research question. The findings reveal that admission of mistakes, emphasis on corporate culture, and solemn commitment exhibit a strong positive correlation with apology satisfaction, thereby being pivotal elements in an effective apology framework. Conversely, while maintaining public relations, repeated apologies, and expressions of gratitude show moderate positive correlations, they have no linear relationship. The research contributes a comprehensive framework for crafting corporate apology letters, offering valuable insights for enhancing crisis management strategies. The findings have significant implications for theoretical development and practical application in crisis communication.

Keywords: apology letters elements, Chinese food and beverage industry, cooperate apologies, social media

1. Introduction

In recent years, in China, the rapid advancement of science and Internet technology has driven the transformation of media technology. New media has become an indispensable tool for information dissemination in daily interpersonal communication (Peng, 2015) breaking the boundaries of time and space and allowing information to be quickly received (Wang, 2021). Social media, with its instant, convenient, and interactive advantages, has quickly become the main way for people to express their opinions, obtain information, and share information (Yao & Zhao, 2017). However, in this new media environment, consumers' supervisory function over enterprises gradually expands, and the possibility of negative news exposure for enterprises is increasing (Xu & Han, 2018). Enterprises would inevitably face situations that lead to customer dissatisfaction, which would seriously affect the profit and reputation of the company. Under these circumstances, choosing effective crisis communication strategies can help businesses restore trust and repair their brand image to the greatest possible.

In the field of enterprise crisis management, choosing the right communication strategy is crucial. Among these, apology stands out as one of the most effective and fundamental approaches, as pointed out by Kim & Yang (2012). The emergence and development of new media have also widened the channels for enterprises to apologize. Enterprises can apologize on social media. *Sina Weibo*, with its overwhelming influence and popularity, has attracted lots of enterprises and became an important platform for their promotion and marketing (Wei & Tian, 2015). Its real-time, open, shareable, and interactive characteristics (Liu et al., 2024) make it a major platform for companies to issue apology letters in response to crises. Additionally, the market size of Chinese food and beverage industry plan to reach 6202.3 billion yuan in 2025. Chinese food and beverage industry permeates the lives of every citizen and profoundly affects people's healthy living, which leads to a situation where the Chinese food and beverage industry can easily provoke customer dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is necessary and crucial to write effective apology letters to communicate with customers and restore trust for Chinese food and beverage industry.

While the importance of effective communication in managing customer relations has been widely acknowledged, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the specific elements used in apology letters. Most of the existing research only focuses on the general elements (Yang, 2019) and the strategy of apology letters (e.g., Ma et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2022), rather than the specific points and the overall framework. Additionally, there is almost no research focusing on the Chinese food and beverage industry. Thus, the aim of the research is to explore the key elements and effects of corporate apology letters in the Chinese food and beverage industry on *Weibo*, filling the research gap in specific elements and for this industry. It also aims to use statistical analysis to test the relationships between elements and apology satisfaction, and to provide a comprehensive framework for crafting effective apology letters to enhance crisis management strategies.

The subsequent sections of this paper are structured as follows: Section 2 covers the literature review, which lays the theoretical foundation. Section 3 proposes a research question and shows the research methodology while the experimental analysis and results are presented in section 4. Finally, the last section provides the conclusions, implications, limitation and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Corporate Apologies

The crisis is an inevitable aspect of business operations, characterized by its suddenness, destructiveness, uncertainty, and urgency (Ding, 2004). Thus, if not managed appropriately, crises can result in severe and unpredictable consequences. However, due to the manageability of a crisis, even when a crisis occurs, organizations can mitigate its negative impact by adopting appropriate response methods (Xu & Han, 2018). In particular, sectors with inherent risks like the food and beverage sector, part of the tourism industry, have unique vulnerabilities (Su, 2005), where service lapses or food safety issues can trigger a crisis (Zhang, 2006). Consequently, the careful selection of crisis response methods is essential in this industry.

Among the various crisis responses, the apology has been identified as one of the primary response strategies, and it has been extensively studied in academic literature (e.g., Lee & Atkinson, 2019; Kim & Yang, 2012). Some scholars perceive an apology merely as an acknowledgment of responsibility and an attempt to seek forgiveness (Benoit, 1994; Hearit, 2005), while others argue that it should encompass compensation, corrective actions, and expressions of remorse (Lazare, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). These help us establish assumptions about the elements of apology letters from the perspective of the concept of apology and lay the foundation for this paper.

In terms of functionality, an apology helps organizations repair trust, protect reputation, and restore image during a crisis (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Brazeal, 2008; Dean, 2004; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016). Fuchs-Burnett (2002) proposed that apologies can reduce negligence, mend relationships, and even create new opportunities for the company. These suggest that using an apology to address crises is a valuable strategy. In addition, few studies focus on apology letters in the Chinese food and beverage industry, thus it is valuable for this paper to study the elements to establish an effective apology framework for Chinese food and beverage enterprises.

2.2 The Influencing Factors of Effectiveness of Apology Letters

The effectiveness of corporate apology letters is influenced by various factors, including the language, tone, authenticity, transparency, and timeliness of the apology. Apologies can take various forms, including verbal apologies (Henderson et al., 2020), speech apologies (Koehn, 2013), and apology letters (Page, 2014). Among these, corporate apology letters play an increasingly important role in today's business environment. Apology letters can provide more time and space to express key issues in a more detailed and thorough manner (Huang, 2018). A corporate apology letter is a formal letter sent by a company after experiencing a crisis, mistake, or negative event. Research shows that appropriate apologies can alleviate consumer dissatisfaction, restore corporate image (Souder, 2009), and enhance customer loyalty. Therefore, corporate apology letters are a crucial tool for restoring trust and repairing relationships, with their effectiveness largely determined by factors.

The expressions of corporate apology letters significantly impacts their effectiveness. The effectiveness of corporate apology letters is greatly influenced by factors such as language (Page, 2014; Yang & Hu, 2020), symbols (Ma et al., 2021), person (Xie et al., 2022), and linguistic modifiers (Liu, 2021), all of which impact audience acceptance and corporate image. Key elements like authenticity, transparency, and timeliness also play a role in effectiveness. While full forgiveness may be hard to achieve (Kádár et al., 2018), a timely apology can reduce dissatisfaction and improve brand image. The tone and attitude of the apology (Wang, 2014) are crucial, formal or stiff language can hinder effectiveness, while a sincere, friendly tone is more likely to foster trust. Thus, the success of apology letters hinges on factors such as language, tone, timing, and authenticity.

2.3 Apology Letters Elements

Many scholars have studied the key elements of corporate apology letters, which are crucial for crisis management and public relations. These elements significantly impact public response and recovery outcomes.

Firstly, acceptance of responsibility refers to the companies need to clearly acknowledge their responsibilities in the incident, avoiding vague or ambiguous language. This clear acknowledgment of responsibility enhances the credibility of the apology and alleviates audience dissatisfaction (Benoit, 1994). Yi & Bai (2022) pointed out that acknowledging responsibility is one of the elements for a successful apology letter, as consumers are more likely to forgive companies that can openly admit their mistakes. For product-related issues, companies should recall defective products, apologize, compensate consumers, and address root causes (Wen, 2014).

Secondly, remedial actions are essential. An effective apology letter should include an apology and be committed to specific remedial measures. This demonstrates the company's commitment to repairing relationships and restoring trust (Coombs, 2007). Making remedies can restore consumer trust and showcase the company's sense of responsibility and commitment to customers. Remedial actions also include repairing the company's image (Benoit, 1994; Wang, 2015), maintaining public relations (Yi & Bai, 2022), and appealing for the understanding and support of those affected, thereby laying a foundation for the company's long-term development.

Thirdly, it is an explanation of the incident. Providing appropriate explanations regarding the background and causes of the incident (Yi & Bai, 2022) helps convey the company's attitude toward the incident through timely and objective reasons. It also serves as a severe test of the company's crisis management capabilities (Wang, 2015), aiding in increasing consumer understanding. Acceptance of responsibility and explanations of causes represent an understanding and clarification of the issues, while remedial actions and commitments to improvement represent corrections of deviant behavior and future promises (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The expressions of remorse acknowledges and regrets the established facts (Kádár et al., 2018).

Scholars have drawn various conclusions about the elements of apology letters, with most agreeing on three key points. These findings form the basis for this research, which explores both general and specific elements within those categories. As a crucial tool for crisis management, corporate apology letters require further study, especially in today's fast-paced information era. While many studies address the elements of apology letters, some aspects remain unclear (Georgiadou, 2023), and research on the specific components of these elements is limited. This paper aims to explore the general and specific elements of apology letters issued by Chinese food and beverage companies on *Weibo*, helping these companies effectively manage crises.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

Based on the preceding analysis, this paper proposes the following research questions: What are the specific elements included in apology letters from restaurants in China via *Weibo*? What specific elements are essential in an apology letter? How elements influence customer satisfaction with an apology letter?

Before conducting the formal investigation, the study selected all apology letters from Chinese food and beverage companies from 2020 to 2024 on *Weibo*, totally thirty letters. Then, using content analysis, word frequency analysis, and sentiment analysis, the content of each apology letter was divided into sentences or paragraphs for a detailed examination in Excel. Building on the work of previous studies (e.g., Kleefeld, 2007; Yang, 2019; Cao & Li, 2020), this study summarized each sentence or paragraph of each apology letter into general and specific elements. Next, the paper counted the general and specific elements that have appeared in these thirty apology letters to generate Table 1.

Table 1. Elements of an apology letter

	Specific element 1	Specific element 2	Specific element 3
General element 1 Remorse	Expressions of regret	Repeated apology	/
General element 2 Responsibility	Incidents handling	Admission of mistakes	Immediate rectification
General element 3 Resolution	Solemn commitment	/	/
General element 4 Reparation	Measures taken	Emphasis on corporate culture	Maintenance of public relations
General element 5 Gratitude	Expressions of gratitude	/	/

Subsequently, in these 30 apology letters, the study calculated the frequency of each specific element (Table 2)

and found the average frequency to be 71.68 percent.

Table 2. The frequency of each element

Specific Elements	Frequency
Expressions of regret	100%
Repeated apology	56.67%
Incidents handling	100%
Admission of mistakes	56.67%
Immediate rectification	90%
Solemn commitment	40%
Measures taken	86.67%
Emphasis on corporate culture	66.67%
Maintenance of public relations	60%
Expressions of gratitude	60%
Average	71.68%

According to the preceding table, the four elements of expressions of regret, incident handling (e.g., Appendix Example 3 & Example 4), immediate rectification (e.g., Appendix Example 7), and measures taken (e.g., Appendix Example 10) are above the average. Cao & Li (2020) indicated that expressing an apology is an essential part of an apology letter. In traditional Chinese culture, the concepts of “courtesy” and “harmony” are deeply rooted in people’s hearts. The apology reflects the respect and politeness of the enterprise to consumers, which meets the requirements of “courtesy” in Chinese culture. When a company has problems, a sincere apology to consumers can avoid the further escalation of the conflict. In addition, Yi & Bai (2022) also highlighted that the handling of the incident is widely used in the apology letters. For immediate rectification and measures taken, according to repair theory and attitude and behavior consistency theory (Jiang, et al., 2009), the apology is not only a language expression, but also needs to repair the relationship through practical actions, and people are more inclined to believe that the apology matches words and deeds. If the apologizer only says and does not do, the credibility of the apology will be greatly reduced. They can therefore be regarded as fundamental elements of apology letters, applicable across various contexts. These elements correspond to universal emotional needs, communication theories, and social norms. Furthermore, existing practical experience and successful cases demonstrate their high effectiveness and broad applicability. Consequently, in most cases, the necessity of these elements does not require validation through questionnaire surveys. The paper then selected specific elements with frequencies below the average to explore whether they are necessary elements in the apology letters of Chinese food and beverage companies.

The frequency of “repeated apology” (e.g., Appendix Example 1 & Example 2) in these 30 apology letters was found to be 56.67 percent, which is below the average. This practice involves a company offering an initial apology followed by a subsequent apology at the conclusion of the letter, aiming to strengthen the tone of the apology and foster consumer understanding and forgiveness (Xin, 2023).

Similarly, the frequency of “admission of mistakes” (e.g., Appendix Example 5 & Example 6) in these 30 apology letters was 56.67 percent, a relatively low rate. This element refers to the company admitting its serious errors (Ai, 2016) and recognizing internal issues, which enhances the sincerity of the apology, demonstrates accountability, and facilitates the restoration of trust between the company and its stakeholders.

“Solemn commitment” (e.g., Appendix Example 8 & Example 9) is under average in these 30 apology letters, which is 40 percent. This element refers to the company’s explicit promise to correct mistakes and prevent recurrence, demonstrating a commitment to fully resolve the issue and offering consumers assurance to alleviate their concerns. Customers generally expect service providers to make such commitments to address problems (Kim et al., 2006).

Additionally, “emphasis on corporate culture” (e.g., Appendix Example 11 & Example 12) appeared in 66.67 percent of these 30 apology letters, also below the average frequency. Corporate culture, which represents the fundamental identity of a company, including its “mission, vision, and core values” (Meng, 2013), serves to convey the organization’s values. This can be seen as an implicit form of commitment, aimed at repairing the company’s image.

“Maintenance of public relations” (e.g., Appendix Example 13 & Example 14) with a lower-than-average frequency appeared in 60 percent of the 30 apology letters. This refers to efforts to rebuild the relationship between the company and the public by addressing emotional needs and inviting public oversight (Yi & Bai, 2022). It emphasizes the company’s recognition of consumers’ emotional needs, aiming to reduce the distance between the company and its customers. Additionally, by accepting consumer supervision, the company increases transparency, which helps restore trust and improve its image.

“Expressions of gratitude” (e.g., Appendix Example 15 & Example 16) typically involves a company thanking consumers for their supervision and attention. This expressions helps strengthen the relationship between the parties and can have positive effects (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016). It appeared in 60 percent of the 30 apology letters, which is below the average. Therefore, this warrants further consideration of its importance in apology letters.

3.2 Questionnaire Design

The aim of this questionnaire is to understand consumers’ views on the necessity of the six specific elements mentioned above. By understanding consumer attitudes, this paper seeks to provide effective frameworks for apology letters and strategic recommendations for businesses when managing crises.

The questionnaire consists of 14 questions, mainly divided into four parts. The first section contains basic demographic information about consumers, such as age and gender. In the second section, a virtual apology letter is designed, including the ten elements in Table 1, and then multiple-choice questions about the content of the apology letter are presented, designed to explore the impact of different apology elements on consumer satisfaction with the apology letter. Satisfaction is evaluated using a Likert five-point scale (1= “Strongly Disagree”, 2= “Disagree”, 3= “Neutral”, 4= “Agree”, 5= “Strongly Agree”). The third section of the study designs a satisfaction scale to examine consumers’ overall satisfaction with the apology letter, based on the following key factors that are considered essential for a satisfying apology letter: sincerity (Xu & Han, 2018; He, 2018), accountability and responsibility (Yi & Bai, 2022), willingness to forgive (Xu & Han, 2018), and trust repair. These factors are important criteria for determining the effectiveness of an apology letter in satisfying consumers. The fourth section is an open-ended question that allows participants to provide specific suggestions or modifications to the content of the apology letter.

This paper adopts the principles of random sampling and collects data through online questionnaires. The questionnaire is distributed via social media and email to encourage broad participation and increase the generalizability of the findings. In this survey, invalid questionnaires were screened out based on characteristics such as answers with obvious patterns, response times that differed significantly from the normal completion time, and logical contradictions in responses to similar items. As a result, 105 valid questionnaires were obtained, with a response rate of 95 percent.

4. Results

In the paper, the collected valid questionnaire is treated as the sample for analysis, through SPSS27.0 to conduct a thorough examination of both the data itself and the reliability of the questionnaire. Subsequently, Pearson’s correlation analysis is performed to examine the strength and direction of relationships between key variables. Finally, regression analysis is utilized to explore predictive relationships and assess the degree to which the independent variables influence the dependent variables.

4.1 Reliability Analysis

Reliability refers to the consistency or stability of the measurement results, specifically whether the measurement tool can stably measure what it measures (Li & Xin, 2008). For the reliability analysis, Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient was employed as the primary measure of internal consistency, as presented in Table 3. Cronbach’s Alpha is a widely used statistical method to assess the reliability or consistency of a scale, and it provides an indication of how closely related a set of items are as a group.

Table 3. Reliability Analysis

Reliability Statistics		
Indicators	Cronbach’s Alpha	Terms
Satisfaction Scale	0.896	5
Total Scale	0.933	11

In this study, the total scale exhibited a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient greater than 0.9, which indicates a very high level of internal consistency. This suggests that the items included in the Total scale are highly reliable and measure the intended construct consistently. On the other hand, the satisfaction scale showed Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient greater than 0.8 and approaching 0.9, which also indicates a strong level of reliability. A coefficient in this range suggests that the satisfaction scale possesses good internal consistency, meaning that the items measuring satisfaction are closely related and can be considered reliable. According to He (2018), values of Cronbach’s Alpha above 0.8 are generally considered acceptable, and values above 0.9 are considered excellent. Therefore, both the total scale and the satisfaction scale pass the reliability test, confirming that the scales used in this study are appropriate for measuring the intended constructs.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics of the sample variables typically include measures such as the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum. These measures offer insights into the central tendency, dispersion, and variability of the responses within the sample. By examining the mean values, the study is able to summarize the general trends or patterns across the respondents' answers.

In the descriptive statistical analysis of the questionnaire results, this study focuses primarily on the descriptive characteristics of the sample variables, providing a comprehensive overview of the data collected from the 105 survey participants. To ensure accurate and reliable results, the data analysis was conducted using SPSS27.0, which enabled the generation of key descriptive statistics, which were then organized and presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics

	Descriptive Statistics				
	N	minimum value	maximal value	average value	standard deviation
admission of mistakes	105	1	5	3.85	1.036
emphasis on corporate culture	105	1	5	3.42	1.133
solemn commitment	105	1	5	3.85	.928
maintenance of public relations	105	1	5	3.68	1.061
repeated apology	105	1	5	3.80	1.060
expressions of gratitude	105	1	5	3.80	1.069
apology letter satisfaction	105	1.00	5.00	3.6400	.80975
Number of valid cases (in a column)	105				

According to the results presented in Table 4, the mean values of all independent variables exceeded 3.0, which suggests that the overall responses across the different dimensions of the study tended to fall within the upper-average range. More specifically, the mean values indicate that the participants' views on the apology letter were predominantly between the categories of "agree" and "strongly agree" on the Likert scale.

4.3 Correlation Coefficient

In data analysis, the operation of studying whether there is a correlation between 2 or more variables and the direction of correlation, and the correlation strength is called correlation analysis (Shen et al., 2021; Sun, 2007). Correlation analysis of the data from this survey is shown in Table 5 which mainly shows the P value of the correlation coefficient between apology letter satisfaction and the other 6 independent variables.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Coefficient

	admission of mistakes	emphasis on corporate culture	solemn commitment	maintenance of public relations	expressions of gratitude	repeated apology	apology letter satisfaction
admission of mistakes	1						
emphasis on corporate culture	.637**	1					
solemn commitment	.716**	.637**	1				
maintenance of public relations	.637**	.490**	.741**	1			
expressions of gratitude	.528**	.475**	.609**	.706**	1		
repeated apology	.463**	.311**	.555**	.583**	.627**	1	
apology letter satisfaction	.718**	.713**	.738**	.595**	.536**	.489**	1

** At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation was significant.

The study takes the admission of mistakes, emphasis on corporate culture, solemn commitment, maintenance of public relations, expressions of gratitude, and repeated apology as independent variables, and apology letter satisfaction as the dependent variable. It aims to examine whether there are correlations between these variables and the strength of those correlations. The Pearson correlation coefficient typically ranges from -1 to 1, a coefficient of -1 indicates a perfect negative correlation, while a coefficient of 1 signifies a perfect positive correlation. And the absolute value of the Pearson coefficient is used to reflect the closeness of the relationship. The absolute values are divided into four intervals: greater than 0.7, between 0.4 and 0.7, between 0.2 and 0.4, and less than 0.2, which correspond to the following relationship strengths: very strong, moderate, weak, and negligible, respectively (Zhou, 2021). Referring to Table 5, the results show that the company's active admission

of mistakes, emphasis on corporate culture, and solemn commitment exhibit a very strong positive correlation with apology letter satisfaction. In contrast, maintenance of public relations, expressions of gratitude, and repeated apology show a moderate positive correlation with apology letter satisfaction. While these factors are still positively related to satisfaction, their influence is not as pronounced as the first set of variables. This overall pattern indicates that while there are both very strong and moderate correlations between the independent variables and apology letter satisfaction, the differences in correlation strength suggest areas for further exploration.

4.4 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is a key statistical method used to explore and quantify the relationships between different variables, as well as to determine the extent of their influence on one another. In this study, regression analysis was employed to analyze the research question put forward within the theoretical model. Specifically, the research aimed to examine how various factors influence respondents’ satisfaction with the apology letter. To achieve this, a multiple linear regression model was established, focusing on the factors that could affect the level of satisfaction with the apology letter. The model allowed for the identification of both the strength and direction of the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable. By employing this approach, the study provides deeper insights into the key drivers of consumers’ attitudes toward the apology letter.

Table 6. Regression Analysis

	Non standardized coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	significance	Collinearity statistics	
	B	standard error	Beta			tolerance	VIF
(constant)	.790	.215		3.670	.000		
admission of mistakes	.196	.070	.250	2.810	.006	.407	2.455
emphasis on corporate culture	.243	.057	.340	4.253	.000	.504	1.983
solemn commitment	.247	.090	.283	2.745	.007	.304	3.291
maintenance of public relations	-.009	.075	-.012	-.120	.904	.331	3.022
expression of gratitude	.006	.067	.008	.089	.929	.413	2.423
repeated apology	.086	.059	.112	1.446	.151	.537	1.864
	R ²					0.683	
	F					35.237	
	P					<0.001	

Dependent variable: Satisfaction with apology letter

From the data presented in Table 6, it is evident that the R-squared value is 0.683, which indicates that the model has a relatively high degree of fit. This means that approximately 68.3 percent of the variability in the dependent variable, which in this case is satisfaction with the apology letter, can be explained by the independent variables included in the model. Furthermore, the p-value of the regression analysis is less than 0.01, suggesting strong statistical significance. This indicates that at least one of the six independent variables included in the model has a meaningful impact on satisfaction with the apology letter.

Breaking this down further, the significance levels of three independent variables (admission of mistakes, emphasis on corporate culture, and solemn commitments) are all found to be less than 0.05. This suggests that these variables have a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable, with the positive B coefficients indicating a linear positive correlation. Overall, they explain that these independent variables have a linear positive correlation with the apology letter’s satisfaction of the dependent variable.

On the other hand, the significance levels of the remaining three independent variables (maintenance of public relations, expressions of gratitude, and repeated apologies) are all greater than 0.05. This indicates that these variables do not have a statistically significant linear relationship with the dependent variable.

Additionally, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all the independent variables are below 5, which indicates that there is no issue of multicollinearity in the model. This means that the independent variables are not highly correlated with each other, which is a desirable property for the reliability and interpretability of the regression results.

5. Discussion

This study focused on analyzing the elements and how these elements affect the satisfaction of corporate

apology letters on social media, specifically within the Chinese food and beverage industry. The research aimed to understand the general and specific elements that constitute an effective apology letter and how these elements influence consumer satisfaction. The study was conducted through a textual analysis of 30 apology letters from Chinese food and beverage companies on *Weibo*, followed by a questionnaire to gather consumer perceptions on the necessity of six specific elements. The results of the study indicated that certain elements of apology letters, such as the admission of mistakes, emphasis on corporate culture, and solemn commitment, have a strong positive correlation with consumer satisfaction with the apology letter. These elements were found to be statistically significant in influencing the effectiveness of the apology. Other elements, such as maintenance of public relations, expressions of gratitude, and repeated apology, showed a moderate positive correlation but were not found to be linear relationship.

Firstly, the results of the study provided strong support that admitting mistakes is a crucial element in crafting effective apology letters. A clear and direct admission of responsibility was found to have a significant positive correlation with consumer satisfaction, indicating that individuals place a high value on companies demonstrating accountability for their actions. This admission of mistakes helps repair trust between the company and its customers (Yuan et al., 2017). Consumers are more likely to perceive the apology as genuine and sincere when the company openly admits its faults, which in turn increases their overall satisfaction with the apology.

Secondly, the results also reinforced that emphasizing corporate culture in apology letters plays an essential role in enhancing their effectiveness. This element was shown to have a strong positive correlation with apology letter satisfaction, suggesting that consumers appreciate when companies explicitly convey their core values and commitment to addressing the issue at hand. Emphasize the company's corporate culture, values, and commitment to improvement signals, indicating that the company has a sense of social responsibility and will take responsibility for its actions (Zhao, 2011). This approach helps foster a sense of alignment between the company's actions and the consumers' expectations, which contributes to a more satisfactory apology experience.

Thirdly, the results strongly supported that solemn commitment is a crucial component in apology letters. The presence of this element demonstrated a robust positive correlation with the satisfaction derived from the apology letter, suggesting that when a letter conveys a genuine, serious commitment to resolve the issue or prevent future occurrences, it resonates more effectively with recipients (Kim et al., 2006). This sense of solemn commitment seems to offer consumers a feeling of security, as it assures them that their concerns are being taken seriously and that the apology is not merely a formality. Moreover, it fosters a sense of trust in the sincerity of the apology (Sun et al., 2022), reinforcing the idea that the apology is backed by concrete actions rather than empty words. This finding highlights the importance of showing genuine accountability and responsibility in any apology, especially in customer-facing communications where relationship-building is key.

However, maintaining public relations through apology letters was less strongly supported in this study. Although a moderate positive correlation was observed between the inclusion of public relations elements and apology letter satisfaction, this relationship was no linear relationship. While public relations efforts can enhance the tone and professionalism of an apology, they are not pivotal in determining the effectiveness of the letter. In essence, managing public perception is important for a company's reputation, but consumers seem to prioritize authentic admission of mistakes, a clear demonstration of corporate values, and a genuine commitment to resolution over public relations strategies (Coombs, 2007). This suggests that consumers value sincerity and accountability more than the strategic communication efforts aimed at influencing their perception of the company. Therefore, while public relations may enhance the professionalism of an apology, it does not overshadow the importance of demonstrating genuine responsibility and commitment to improvement (Schultz et al., 2011).

Contrary to initial expectations, the idea that repeated apologies are essential in apology letters was not strongly supported by the data. While a moderate positive correlation was found between repeated apologies and the overall tone of the letter, the relationship was no linear relationship, indicating that this element does not play as critical a role in the effectiveness of the apology. This suggests that while reiterating an apology may have some influence on how sincere or empathetic the apology appears, it is not a defining factor in how well the apology is received. Rather, the focus may need to shift toward the quality and substance of the apology itself, as opposed to the quantity of apologies expressed. In essence, a well-crafted apology may be far more effective than multiple reiterations of regret, especially if each apology adds little new substance to the conversation (Sun et al., 2022).

Similarly, the idea that expressions of gratitude is necessary in apology letters was not strongly supported by the results. Although a moderate positive correlation was observed between expressions of gratitude and the overall satisfaction of the apology letter, this relationship did not reach statistical significance. This implies that while gratitude, such as thanking the recipient for their patience or understanding, may contribute to a positive tone of the apology (Bi, 2021), but this may make customers feel confused, thinking that the merchant is shifting focus rather than truly solving the problem. In addition, the effect of gratitude has a “marginal diminishing effect”, which means that excessive gratitude may appear hypocritical or deviate from the focus, and instead reduce satisfaction. Thus while a well-placed expressions of gratitude can enhance the emotional resonance of the letter, the key determinants of an effective apology are likely to lie elsewhere.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the elements of apology letters in the Chinese food and beverage industry on *Weibo*, providing a foundational framework for companies to effectively issue apologies on social media. In addition to the four elements (expressions of regret, incidents handling, immediate rectification, and measures taken) mentioned above, which not only appear above the average frequency of the 30 apology letters but also conform to the Chinese culture or the past existing literature and theories. The findings indicate that admitting mistakes, emphasizing corporate culture, and making solemn commitment exhibit a strong positive correlation with apology satisfaction and are deemed essential elements of apology letters. Conversely, maintaining public relations, offering repeated apologies, and expressing gratitude are moderately positively correlated with apology satisfaction but lack statistical significance. These elements are not considered necessary for an effective apology letter.

This study reveals the frequency and importance of specific apology letter elements through quantitative analysis and clarifies the process and standards for enterprises to write apology letters in crisis events. Companies can optimize the writing process of the apology letter based on these standards to ensure that it can be issued quickly and effectively when a crisis occurs, so as to reduce the negative impact of the crisis. From a practical point of view, the research provides specific apology letter writing guidelines for catering enterprises and will not only help to improve the quality of crisis communication in the catering industry, but also enhance consumers’ trust in the catering industry, and thus promote the healthy development of the industry. At the same time, the research results also provide a reference for enterprises in other industries, which have a certain universality.

Despite the valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. First of all, this paper adopts a questionnaire survey to collect data, so there may be differences in the respondents’ understanding of the apology letter and questions, which affects the authenticity and reliability of the sample data. And since this study is non-probability sampling, it results in lack of sample representativeness and limited statistical inference. Secondly, this study focuses exclusively on apology from the Chinese food and beverage industry on *Weibo*, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or industries. Furthermore, In the open-ended questions of the questionnaire, 90 percent of the respondents who provided suggestions believed that the remedial measures needed to be improved.

Based on the limitations mentioned above, firstly, future research can adopt different methods to collect data, such as using qualitative methods. Additionally, future research can expand the scope of research beyond just apologizing in the Chinese food and beverage industry on *Weibo* to improve the universality of research conclusions. Finally, future research can also delve into the effectiveness of various remedial measures on the public’s willingness to forgive and explore the most effective remedial measures in times of crisis for businesses.

Acknowledgments

Our deepest gratitude undoubtedly goes to School of English for International Business at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Mr. Chen, for his constant encouragement and guidance. Lastly, we extend gratitude to ourselves for the perseverance and dedication invested in this research.

Authors’ contributions

Qin and Lai were responsible for the study design and revising. Both authors were responsible for data collection, coding and drafting manuscript. Qin drafted the manuscript and Lai revised it. Both authors read, revised and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix A

Examples of Elements

例 1: 再次向广大消费者与公众致以诚挚歉意。

Example 1: Once again, I wish to extend my sincere apology to the consumers and the public.

例 2: 再次郑重道歉!

Example 2: Apologize solemnly once again!

例 3: 最近,湖北经视《经视直播》栏目,以及湖南经视《大调查》栏目分别报道了我们武汉及长沙两家门店,存在违反公司规定擅自更改原料赏味期标签等问题。

Example 3: Recently, the “Jingshi Direct” program of Hubei Jingshi and the “Big Investigation” program of Hunan Jingshi reported that our two stores in Wuhan and Changsha had violated company regulations by changing the labels of the raw material taste period without authorization.

例 4: 针对今天《新京报》报道的“xxx 在北京 xx 门店使用过保质期原料,闻出馊味才废弃”等相关问题对此我们高度重视,并在第一时间成立了内部专项稽核小组,经核查、核实,新京报文中所涉及的 4 家门店严重违背了……

Example 4: We attach great importance to the issues reported by the Beijing News today, such as “xx Beijing xx Store, used expired raw materials and only discarded them after smelling the sour smell”. We have established an internal special audit team as soon as possible. After verification and investigation, the four stores involved in the Beijing News article have seriously violated....

例 5: 该事件令人痛心疾首,对于该加盟店严重违法有关规定,总部负有不可推卸的责任,这暴露了我们在管理上的重大漏洞和对加盟店的监管失责,我们深刻意识到我们存在的问题。

Example 5: This incident is heart wrenching. The headquarters bears an inescapable responsibility for the serious violation of relevant regulations by the franchise store. This exposes significant loopholes in our management and our oversight of the franchise store. We are deeply aware of the problems we have.

例 6: 同时陷入了深深的反思,一切归于我的怠慢和对产品把控的疏忽,没有像从前一样亲力亲为地管理门店运营。

Example 6: At the same time, we fell into deep reflection and attributed everything to my negligence and lack of control over the product. I did not personally manage the store operation as before.

例 7: 上海晶品门店立即闭店整改, 对店铺评估合格后方可营业, 对于上海晶品门店给消费者带来的不好体验, 对相关责任人进行追究, 一查到底。

Example 7: The Shanghai xx Store was immediately closed for rectification, and the store could not be opened until it was evaluated as qualified. For the bad experience brought to consumers by the Shanghai xx Store, the relevant responsible person was investigated to the end.

例 8: 我们将深刻反思、引以为戒坚决杜绝此类事件的再次发生。

Example 8: We will deeply reflect on and take warning and resolutely prevent the recurrence of such incidents.

例 9: 我们会以此为戒, 尽全力提升服务品质, 保障食品安全, 不辜负大家对 xx 的信任和期望。

Example 9: We will take this as a warning, try our best to improve the quality of service, ensure food safety, and live up to everyone's trust and expectation in xxx.

例 10: 我司高度重视食品安全质量, 近期加大对全国范围内所有门店的稽查力度, 从食材安全、门店规范、流程管理等多个方面进行严格品质管控。对于不符合经营标准的门店及时整改, 包括但不限于解除合作关系;与此同时, 我们建立三级安全管理队伍, 提高企业全体员工的食品安全意识和社会责任意识, 并成立数百人的永久性督查小组, 对全国门店进行巡查、交叉检查、远程巡检等多种严格管理措施, 保证消费者舌尖上的安全。

Example 10: Our company attaches great importance to food safety and quality. Recently, we have intensified the inspection of all stores across the country and carried out strict quality control from the aspects of food material safety, store standards, process management and other aspects. For stores that do not meet the operating standards, including but not limited to terminate the cooperation. Meanwhile, we establish a three-level safety management team to improve the food safety awareness and social responsibility awareness of all employees, and set up a permanent inspection team of hundreds to conduct inspection, cross inspection, remote inspection and other strict management measures to ensure the safety of consumers.

例 11: 坚守食品安全底线, 这是我们不变的原则。

Example 11: Adhere to the bottom line of food safety, this is our constant principle.

例 12: 我们一直致力于将自己的糕点做放心、做好吃, 让消费者放心把糕点给自己的父母吃、给自己的儿女吃。

Example 12: We have been committed to making our cakes at ease and delicious, so that consumers can give them to their parents and their children to eat.

例 13: 我们会积极配合所有后续调查, 欢迎广大消费者、监管部门及媒体进行监督。

Example 13: We will actively cooperate with all follow-up investigations, and welcome the consumers, regulatory authorities and the media to be on duty.

例 14: 如您遇到涉及“xx 冰杯”的消费体验问题, 也欢迎您通过客服热线向我们反馈, 我们将派专人及时跟进处理。

Example 14: If you encounter any consumption experience problems involving the “xx Ice Cup”, you are also welcome to report back to us through the customer service hotline. We will send special personnel to follow up and deal with it in time.

例 15: 感谢公众和媒体的监督, 让我们有机会弥补自身工作的疏漏和不足们将持续推进 520 直播的售后工作,真诚感谢大家的关注与支持。

Example 15: We would like to thank the public and media for your supervision, which has given us the opportunity to make up for our own work omissions and shortcomings. We will continue to promote the after-sales work of 520 live streaming and sincerely thank everyone for their attention and support.

例 16: 感谢大家对 xx 一直以来的监督, 我们一定会用行动来证明我们知错就改的态度, 谢谢大家。

Example 16: Thank you all for your continuous supervision of xx. We will definitely use our actions to prove our attitude of correcting mistakes. Thank you.

Appendix B

Questionnaire Contents

Title: A Study of the Elements and Effects of Corporate Apology Letters on Social Media

Dear friends,

It is an honor to invite you to participate in this survey. This questionnaire explores the elements and main points of apology letters from Chinese catering companies on *Weibo*. The answers are anonymous and will not have any negative impact on you personally. At the same time, we promise to keep the results of your filling strictly confidential, and all the information is only for academic research. There is no right or wrong way to choose the questions. Please read the instructions and the contents carefully and fill in the questions according to your own real thoughts.

Once again, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks for your support and help!

1. What is your age

A. Under 18 years old B. Ages 18-25 C. Age 25 +

2 Your gender is

A. Male B. Female

Letter of apology for improper practices and kitchen hygiene at Delicious Catering

Dear customers and media,

A. (Incidents handling) This morning, the media reported that one of our company's stores has had operation violations and kitchen hygiene problems.

B. (Immediate rectification) In this regard, our company attaches great importance to, and in the first time to stop the store for rectification.

C. (Expressions of regret) Food hygiene has always been the most concerned issue of our company. For the occurrence of this incident, we would like to apologize to all consumers who care about and support delicious food.

D. (Admission of mistakes) This incident reflects a serious mistake in the daily management of the store, and Delicious Catering Company has an inescapable management responsibility.

E. (Emphasis on corporate culture) Adhere to the bottom line of food safety, which is our constant principle.

F. (Measures taken) At present, our company has formed a special investigation team to enter the store to investigate the cause of the incident. We will announce the results of the investigation in a timely manner. At the same time, we require all our stores to conduct thorough self-inspection, standardize operation, implement the system and take it up the results of self-inspection and self-correction at any time. In the follow-up, we will also strictly regulate the management system and strengthen training. At the same time, in order to give you a real sense of our efforts and determination, we have decided to offer a 20 percent discount to customers who come to the store within three days from now.

G. (Expressions of gratitude) Thank you for your supervision of delicious food all the time. We will certainly prove our attitude towards correcting mistakes with actions.

H. (Maintenance of public relations) Please, consumers, friends who love Delicious Catering continue to supervise and give us an opportunity to improve and progress.

I. (Solemn commitment) And we will take this as a warning and promise that this kind of thing will not happen again.

J. (Repeated apology) Sorry again to all our customers!

Delicious Catering

November 23, 2023

Please answer the following questions based on the above letter of apology, with options “1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree”

[Note: When answering, please look at the letter of apology itself and set aside the original events. Thank you!]

Table 7. Questionnaire Contents

Variables	Questions
Overall Satisfaction	<p>3. You are satisfied with this letter of apology.</p> <p>4. You think the above apology letter is sincere and satisfactory.</p> <p>5. Do you think the above apology letter shows the store’s responsibility and makes you feel satisfied?</p> <p>12. After reading the letter of apology, you think you will choose delicious restaurant again in the future.</p> <p>13. You think the above apology letter has increased your willingness to forgive.</p>
Specific Elements	<p>6. Regardless of other factors, you believe that admitting mistakes in the apology letter can make you feel more responsible for the company and improve your satisfaction with the apology letter.</p> <p>7. Regardless of other factors, a company’s apology letter emphasizing its value culture, such as “we always adhere to the bottom line of food safety”, will make you feel that the company’s image has been repaired to a certain extent.</p> <p>8. Regardless of other factors, you believe that the company’s solemn promise in the apology letter will be more sincere and improve your satisfaction with the apology letter.</p> <p>9. Regardless of other factors, you will think that adding the sentences like “Please consumers, friends who love us continue to supervise and give us a chance to improve and progress” in the apology letter can make you feel more responsible for the company and improve your satisfaction with the apology letter.</p> <p>10. Regardless of other factors, you think it is necessary for the company to add a word of thanks at the end of the apology letter to narrow the distance between the company and you and improve your satisfaction with the apology letter.</p> <p>11. Regardless of other factors, you may feel that a second apology in an apology letter will make the apology more sincere than a single apology, thus increasing the apology letter and increasing your satisfaction with it.</p>
	<p>14. Do you think the above apology letter needs any improvement? If the apology letter needs improvement, please make suggestions, thank you!</p> <p>A. Yes _____ B. No</p>