



Sorry but no sorry: The use and effects of apologies in airline webcare responses to NeWOM messages of flight passengers

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ABSTRACT

Offering an apology is a strategy brands use in response to negative electronic word of mouth. However, its effectiveness is equivocal and may depend on its combination with other strategies. In this paper, the use and the effectiveness of offering an apology in webcare conversations between airlines and complaining customers on Twitter is investigated. In Study 1, a corpus study was conducted to examine whether and how apologies occurred in 480 webcare conversations. Offering an apology was the most frequently used response strategy. Moreover, accommodative strategies were more frequent than defensive strategies. In Study 2, we investigated the effectiveness of apologies separately and combined with a defensive and/or accommodative strategy. The experiment had a 2 (apology: present vs. absent) × 2 (defensive strategy: present vs. absent) × 2 (accommodative strategy: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. Flight passengers ($N = 151$) assessed a webcare response to a service failure on the airline's reputation. Although the presence of an apology did not enhance brand reputation, a combination of both a defensive and accommodative strategy did. We conclude that airlines prefer an apology as response to online complaints, but the combination of defensive and accommodative strategies truly protects their reputation.

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1. Introduction

Dissatisfied customers are increasingly voicing their complaints to a large audience on social media, such as Twitter. Research consistently shows this negative electronic word of mouth (NeWOM) has detrimental effects on brands' reputation (Lee & Song, 2010; Lee & Cranage, 2014). Therefore, brands have started to monitor and engage in online conversations with complaining customers, which is coined as 'webcare' (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). An adequate webcare response offers brands the opportunity to protect their reputation. These responses typically range from defensive (e.g., justifications) to accommodative (e.g., corrective actions; Van Noort et al., 2014).

In this paper, we focus on the use and effectiveness of offering an apology in webcare responses to online complaints in the airline industry. In this service industry, there is a high degree of (online) interaction between the service provider and customers about various service failures (e.g., flight delays, seat denials, and lost luggage; Lorenzoni & Lewis, 2004), for which airlines could apologize.

However, the effects of offering an apology in webcare responses are equivocal (e.g., Dens, De Pelsmacker, & Purnawirawan, 2015; Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). On the one hand, offering an apology could be detrimental for brands, because it implies they are responsible for the service failure (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Lee & Song, 2010). On the other hand, an apology could be perceived as a sign that brands put their customers first, resulting in positive outcomes (e.g., Dens et al., 2015). Arguably, the effectiveness of an apology depends on how it is combined with defensive and/or accommodative strategies. For example, an apology with a defensive strategy might diminish brands' responsibility for the problem, whereas an accommodative strategy might boost it.

This paper aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How do airline companies offer apologies to complaining customers on Twitter? (2) How does offering an apology with and without a defensive and/or accommodative strategy affect passengers' perceptions of the airline's reputation? The research questions are addressed by means of a mixed methods approach. To answer the first research question, a corpus analysis was conducted of 480 webcare conversations between customers and 20 international airlines. Both Page (2014) and Morrow and Yamanouchi (2020) point out that the public nature of corporate

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apologies influence their form and content as these apologies are not only concerned with repairing the relation with the complaining customer, but also in maintaining and protecting the brand's reputation with an overhearing audience. In the corpus analysis the form and content of corporate apologies in this online discourse context are analyzed. The second research question was answered by means of an experiment in which passengers of an international airline assessed a corporate apology in a fictitious webcare conversation between a customer complaining about a service failure and the airline company. The corporate apology was systematically manipulated in order to determine its effectiveness in restoring the airline's reputation. By combining these research methods, not only the characteristics of corporate apologies, but also their effectiveness is investigated in a particular discourse context: airlines' responses to online complaints on Twitter.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Offering an apology in a webcare response

Apologies are ubiquitous, they are used in different languages and throughout time (see for example Jucker, 2019). Therefore, apologies have received scholarly attention from different disciplines, including linguistics and communication science. Although there is disagreement about the definition of an apology, scholars acknowledge the form and the function of apologies may vary (cf. Page, 2014; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020). An apology implies that an offence or wrongdoing has occurred which requires a remedial action. Therefore, an apology can be regarded as an acknowledgment of (the responsibility for)² the dissatisfying event and can include an expression of regret (e.g., Fraser, 1981; Lutzky & Kehoe, 2017; Wierzbicka, 1987). In the context of webcare, a customer's complaint about a brand's service failure can be perceived as requesting a remedial action of the brand. By apologizing the brand attempts to mitigate the negative repercussions of the service failure (Roschek & Kaiser, 2013).

Offering an apology is one of the response strategies distinguished by the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007b). Although the SCCT has been developed in the field of crisis communication, the framework has also been applied in the field of webcare (e.g., Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Dens et al., 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). The SCCT framework organizes response strategies (which were also articulated in the Image Restoration Theory, Benoit, 1995, 1997) on a continuum from accommodative to defensive. On this continuum the degree of responsibility taken by the brand for the service failure varies (Coombs, 1998; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Whereas accommodative responses are used to communicate a high degree of responsibility, defensive responses are used to express a low degree of responsibility for a service failure (Coombs, 2007b; Kerkhof & Dijkmans, 2019; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Accommodative responses refer to the acknowledgement and acceptance of a dissatisfying event caused by brands. These responses can range from lowly or moderately (e.g., providing information) to highly (e.g., corrective actions) accommodative actions (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Defensive responses include brands denying their responsibility, and justifying the cause of the negative event (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Einwiller and Steilen (2015) distinguished a third strategy, passive responses,

² The definitions of apology differ in whether or not the offender takes responsibility for the negative event. According to Deutschmann (2003) a prototypical apology includes an offender who recognizes and takes responsibility for an offence whose victim was the offended and the ensuing remedy leading to an expression of regret. However, Davidow (2003) defines an apology as an acknowledgment by the offender of the victims' distress.

in their corpus analysis of brands' responses on social media. This passive strategy refers to the absence of a public webcare response which includes the brand being non-responsive, or redirecting the complaining customer to a private channel.

Research has shown brands do not frequently offer an apology in webcare conversations. Huibers and Verhoeven (2014) conducted a content analysis on brands' response strategies in 587 Dutch webcare conversations on Twitter. Approximately two-thirds of the conversations started with a complaint. Although brands responded more often with an apology than with defensive strategies (i.e., denial 8 per cent, justification 6 per cent), apologies appeared only in 10 per cent of the cases. Other accommodative strategies, though, were used more often (i.e., providing information 66 per cent, expressing sympathy 30 per cent, corrective action 24 per cent). In approximately 40 per cent of the conversations multiple response strategies were used. Apologies often occurred with the accommodative strategy of expressing sympathy (Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). Likewise, Einwiller and Steilen (2015) conducted a large-scale content analysis on brands' response strategies to NeWOM messages on Facebook and Twitter accounts of 34 large US brands. In contrast to providing information (60 per cent) and expressing gratitude (28 per cent), apologizing was a rarely employed response strategy (5 per cent). Arguably, brands are not generous in apologizing in webcare responses because it might imply they are responsible for the negative event (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Lee & Song, 2010).

The studies of Huibers and Verhoeven (2014) and Einwiller and Steilen (2015) mainly focused on strategies brands use to respond to NeWOM messages and provide little insights on the form of apologies. Contrastingly, Page (2014) focused on the wording of apologies in, inter alia, brand tweets. She showed brands expressed their apologies frequently using the formulation 'sorry' instead of 'apology', 'afraid', and 'regret'. Moreover, Page (2014) showed brands' apologies often contained corrective actions, whereas explanations as to why the offence occurred were not frequently employed. Presumably brands combine apologies with corrective actions to avoid a 'double deviation' (i.e., a failed recovery of a service failure; Bitner et al., 1990).

In this paper, we focus on the use of offering an apology in webcare responses within a homogeneous sample: airlines. This particular service industry delivers products which are intangible and need to be consumed before they can be fully evaluated (Lorenzoni & Lewis, 2004). Therefore, it is likely there will be a discrepancy between the customer's expectation and perception (Steyn et al., 2011) which might increase the chance of online complaints about service failures. Based on the findings of Einwiller and Steilen (2015), Huibers and Verhoeven (2014), and Page (2014) we formulated the following hypotheses that will be examined by means of a corpus analysis:

- H1: Airlines' webcare responses to NeWOM tweets will rarely contain an apology.
- H2: Airlines' webcare apologies will be combined with accommodative rather than defensive responses.
- H3: Airlines' webcare apologies will often contain the wording 'sorry' instead of other apology wordings (i.e., 'apology', 'afraid', and 'regret').

2.2. Effectiveness of offering an apology in webcare

Webcare can serve multiple organizational goals, including customer care and public relations (Van Noort et al., 2014). For customer care the goals of webcare are signaling customer problems with brands' service or products. By engaging in an online conversation with complaining customers, brands can solve the problems

which meet or even exceed customers' expectations (Van Noort et al., 2014). Webcare is also a means for reputation management. Brands' responses to NeWOM messages are not only read by dissatisfied customers, but also by other social media users (i.e., bystanders: a third party who did not suffer from the service failure him/herself but who observes the service failure; Dens et al., 2015; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). By engaging in webcare, brands demonstrate they take the concerns of their stakeholders³ seriously, which may prevent NeWOM messages from becoming a crisis, but also may influence stakeholders' impressions of them (i.e., reputation; Van Noort et al., 2014).

The SCCT is informed by the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958). According to the Attribution Theory people search for the causes of events (i.e., make attributions), especially those that are negative and unexpected, such as service failures (Coombs, 2007a; Weiner, 2006). The type of service failure influences peoples' attributions (Coombs, 1995; 2007a; 2007b). A distinction can be made between service type failure in the amount of attributed responsibility to the brand which is based on attributions of *locus*, (i.e., who caused the service failure?), controllability (i.e., was the service failure preventable?), and stability (i.e., will the service failure occur again?) (Bradley & Sparks, 2009; Weiner, 2000; 2006). For example, airline passengers experiencing flight cancellations due to weather conditions may attribute little responsibility to the airline company compared to airline passengers experiencing the same service failure due to technical issues of the airplane.

When a service failure occurs, stakeholders assess the degree to which the brand is responsible for the (unexpected) negative event, which negatively affects brand reputation (Coombs, 2007a). Thus, (perceived) responsibility is a determinant of brand reputation. Besides responsibility, brand reputation is also based on determinants of the brand's credibility (i.e., ethos; McCroskey, 1966; 2007), such as trustworthiness and competence (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2002). Trustworthiness refers to the degree of honesty and integrity that a source is motivated to communicate valid assertions. Competence can be described as the degree to which a source is considered to be capable of making those assertions (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Erdogan, 1999). In case of a service failure, stakeholders assess the brand's acts to solve the issue. If the brand does not demonstrate trustworthiness and competence, its reputation may be damaged.

Reputational damage can be limited or even repaired with an appropriate webcare response to a NeWOM message, such as an apology. The SCCT recommends to use an accommodative strategy (i.e., an apology) in the case of services failures with high responsibility attribution. By apologizing brands acknowledge the service failure and accept responsibility (Davidow, 2003; Liao, 2007; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). Furthermore, the SCCT recommends to use a defensive strategy (i.e., no apology) in the case of service failures with low responsibility attribution. Using an accommodative strategy (i.e., an apology) in the case of a service failure with low responsibility attribution might bring stakeholders to the conclusion that the service failure is much worse (Coombs, 2007b). In this paper, we will focus on one particular service type failure, i.e., lost luggage (a frequent service failure in the airline industry; SITA, 2018) caused by a baggage handling error at the airport. Arguably, airline passengers could attribute the responsibility to the airline company for losing their luggage. Therefore, we expect that the presence of an apology will lead to more favorable perceptions of brand reputation than the absence of an apology. This assumption is reflected in hypothesis four.

H4: Stakeholders' perception of brand reputation will be more positive with the presence of an apology in a webcare response to a lost luggage complaint than the absence of an apology.

However, a simple apology might be not enough to handle online complaints (Davidow, 2003). In this case an apology is merely an empathetic response in which the brand acknowledges the customer's complaint, but fails to take the responsibility for resolving the situation (Hoffman & Chung, 1999). Moreover, apologies typically co-occur with other response strategies (Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). This raises the question whether the addition of another strategy is more effective than a single apology, and in turn, which combination is the most effective to restore the brand's reputation: an apology combined with a defensive response strategy, an accommodative response strategy, or both? In the present study we distinguish between a single apology, an apology plus a defensive strategy (i.e., justification: explanation about the cause of the service failure), an apology plus an accommodative strategy (i.e., corrective action: explanation that the service failure is less likely to occur again), and an apology plus defensive and accommodative strategy (i.e., justification and corrective action).

Brands can go beyond apologizing by providing closure by means of a corrective action. This might satisfy stakeholders because they feel the brand is making an extra effort (Dens et al., 2015). According to the SCCT, corrective actions are part of rebuild strategies: brands attempt to improve their reputation by offering (symbolic) forms of aid to stakeholders (Coombs, 2007b). However, stakeholders are likely to demand some sort of explanation when a service failure occurs, which differ in attributions of *locus*, controllability, and of stability (Bradley & Sparks, 2009; Weiner, 2000; 2006). Previous research has shown equivocal results on the effectiveness of using justifications as a response strategy (Chen & Lee, 2018). For example, Wang and Mattila (2011) conducted an experiment in which explanation types for a service failure were systematically varied. They concluded explanations, and in particular justifications, enhanced fairness perceptions and brand loyalty. By contrast, Bradley and Sparks (2009) found justifications lead to lower satisfaction. According to the SCCT, justifications are part of diminish strategies: brands communicate their lack of control over the service failure -and thus reducing their responsibility- in an attempt to mitigate reputational damage (Coombs, 2007b). In addition, an apology can be used in conjunction with a justification and a corrective action. With this combination of response strategies, brands apologize and explain what caused the service failure and promise that this service failure is not likely to happen again. The SCCT recommends to maintain consistency in the response strategies: mixing diminishing (e.g., justifications) and rebuilding (i.e., apologies, corrective actions) strategies might erode the effectiveness of the overall response (Coombs, 2007b). However, this combination of response strategies could affect stakeholders' attributions (i.e., the cause of the service failure is known and the problem will be fixed) and protect brand reputation (Bradley & Sparks, 2009; Dens et al., 2015). Because of the plausibility of both explanations, the following contradictory hypothesis will be tested in an experiment:

H5: Stakeholders' perception of brand reputation will be more positive (negative) with the presence of a defensive and accommodative strategy in a webcare apology to a lost luggage complaint than the absence (presence) of these response strategies.

To answer the research questions a mixed methods approach was used. First, a corpus study was conducted to investigate the form and content of apologies occurring in airlines' webcare

³ In this paper we use the term stakeholders to refer to consumers and bystanders. Both can affect or be affected by the behavior of a brand (Bryson, 2004).

Table 1
Brands in the airline industry that were included in the corpus study ($n = 20$ brands).

Brand	Country	Continent	Type
Alaska Airlines @AlaskaAir	Alaska	North America	Low cost
Allegiant @Allegiant	United States	North America	Low cost
Easy Jet @easyjet	United Kingdom	Europe	Low cost
Eurowings @eurowings	Germany	Europe	Low cost
FlyBE @flybe	United Kingdom	Europe	Low cost
Frontier @FrontierCare	United States	North America	Low cost
Jet2 @jet2tweets	United Kingdom	Europe	Low cost
Norwegian Air Shuttle @fly_norwegian	Norway	Europe	Low cost
Ryanair @Ryanair	Ireland	Europe	Low cost
Southwest @SouthwestAir	United States	North America	Low cost
Aer Lingus @AerLingus	Ireland	Europe	Full-service
Air Canada @aircanada	Canada	North America	Full-service
Air Transat @airtransat	Canada	North America	Full-service
British Airways @British_Airways	United Kingdom	Europe	Full-service
Finnair @Finnair	Finland	Europe	Full-service
JetBlue @JetBlue	United States	North America	Full-service
Lufthansa @lufthansa	Germany	Europe	Full-service
United @United	United States	North America	Full-service
Virgin Atlantic @virginatlantic	United Kingdom	Europe	Full-service
WestJet @WestJet	Canada	North America	Full-service

responses to complaining customers on Twitter. Subsequently, an experiment was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of airline's webcare apologies in protecting reputation whilst controlling for service failure type and carrier type.

3. Corpus study

3.1. Corpus

The selection of the airlines for the corpus study was based on a list with 150 major airlines over the world (<https://www.seatguru.com/browseairlines>). An inclusion criterion was that they had to engage regularly in webcare on Twitter. Subsequently, 10 low cost and 10 full-service Western carriers were randomly selected to ensure a balanced corpus (see Table 1).

By means of systematic random sampling we manually selected via each airline's Twitter profile two webcare conversations per month in the time period of one year (2017–2018). These English conversations ($n_{\text{brand}} = 20$; $n_{\text{total}} = 480$) started with a customer complaining about a service failure, followed by the webcare response of the airline. Any follow-up tweets by the initial customer and the airline were selected as well, which enabled us to examine the whole webcare conversation. As a consequence, the total sample contained 1,426 tweets (809 customer tweets; 617 airline tweets).

3.2. Codebook

In the first stage of the analysis, all conversations were coded using a codebook⁴ to identify the airlines' response strategies. The webcare response strategies were divided into seven categories that could be allocated to the three main strategies, i.e., passive, defensive, and accommodative (cf. Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014).

The passive strategy contained responses in which the airline tried to redirect the customer to another (preferably private) communication channel or to non-webcare employees (e.g., help-desk employees at the airport, cabin attendants) (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). The defensive strategy contained two sub strategies: denial, and justification. The sub strategy denial described responses in which the airline denied the situation, and/or diminished its responsibility (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). Justification entailed responses in which an explanation was given about the cause of the service failure. The airline mentioned factors that were out of their control (e.g., 'due to weather conditions') or shifted the responsibility to another party (e.g., 'by order of the police')

⁴ An overview of the brands included in the corpus study and the codebook can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/nsedq/>. Due to privacy regulations the coded corpus and the data from the experiment can be requested by contacting the first author.

Table 2
Cohen's kappa scores for intercoder reliability.

Category	Cohen's kappa
<i>Passive strategy</i>	
Redirection	0.97
<i>Defensive strategy</i>	
Denial	
Justification	0.76
<i>Accommodative strategy</i>	
Corrective action	0.79
Apology	0.99
Sympathy	0.82
Information	0.76

(Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). The accommodative strategy contained four sub strategies: corrective action, apologizing, expressing sympathy, and informing. A corrective action included responses in which the airline mentioned the steps taken to prevent a repeat of the problem and offered (concrete) help (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). In the second sub strategy, the airline apologized for the service failure and could ask for forgiveness (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014; Page, 2014). Expressing sympathy contained expressions in which the airline showed its compassion with the customer (empathy) or sympathy with her/his situation (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). Informing contained responses in which clear and objective information was given (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014).

For each sub strategy, the codebook included the description, examples, and IFIDs (Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices; Houtkoop & Koole, 2000; Page, 2014): linguistic elements that indicate the potential presence of a certain strategy (e.g., 'DM', 'direct message', 'online form', 'helpdesk at the airport', indicated the presence of a redirection). All webcare responses were manually coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of each category; this approach enabled us to identify multiple strategies per webcare response.

In the second stage of the analysis, webcare responses in which an apology occurred were analyzed in more detail with regard to the IFID. We manually coded which specific word was used to express the apology, such as 'sorry', 'regret', 'apology', and 'apologize' (cf. Page, 2014). In case an airline offered an apology multiple times in one response, all IFIDs were noted.

3.3. Coding procedure

Before coding the corpus, a training was conducted in which the codebook was discussed and illustrated with examples. Next, a training set ($n = 15$) of airlines' webcare responses to NeWOM tweets was created. These conversations were not part of the final corpus. The training set was individually double-coded by the authors of this paper. Subsequently, the codings were compared and discussed, leading to final agreement and minor revisions of the codebook. To calculate intercoder reliability, the first and second author double coded a subset of 20.8 per cent of the corpus (i.e., $n = 100$ conversations). Cohen's kappa scores showed sufficient to satisfactory reliability (see Table 2).⁵ Finally, the rest of the corpus was coded by the second author.

⁵ The Cohen's kappa for denial could not be calculated because this strategy did not occur in the training set and in the rest of the corpus.

Table 3
Absolute and relative frequency of strategies in airlines' webcare responses ($n = 1,162$ response strategies) to NeWOM messages.

Response strategy	Frequency
<i>Passive strategy</i>	
Redirection	301 (25.9%)
<i>Defensive strategy</i>	
Denial	0 (0.0%)
Justification	65 (5.6%)
<i>Accommodative strategy</i>	
Corrective action	77 (6.6%)
Apology	402 (34.6%)
Sympathy	132 (11.3%)
Information	185 (15.9%)
Total	1,162 (100%)

3.4. Results

Table 3 shows the distribution of the three main response strategies differed significantly in airlines' webcare responses ($\chi^2(2) = 718.66, p < .001$). Accommodative response strategies occurred most often in airlines' webcare responses (796; 68.5%). Also, the distribution of the six sub strategies differed significantly in airlines' webcare responses ($\chi^2(5) = 459.38, p < .001$): redirections and apologies were overrepresented whereas justifications and corrective actions were underrepresented in the corpus. In contrast to H1, the airlines' webcare responses contained most often an apology.

Furthermore, we investigated to what extent apologies were combined with other strategies in webcare responses. We expected apologies to be combined more with accommodative than defensive strategies (H2). On average, a webcare tweet contained 1.88 response strategies ($SD = 0.78$), ranging from 0 to 5 strategies. Table 4 shows that only 44 of 402 apologies (10.9%) contained no other response strategy. Moreover, the distribution of the (combination of) main response strategies with which an apology was combined differed significantly in airlines' webcare responses ($\chi^2(6) = 413.29, p < .001$): apologies with a passive strategy or accommodative strategy were overrepresented whereas apologies with a defensive strategy and combinations of passive defensive, and/or accommodative strategies were underrepresented in the corpus. An apology with only defensive strategies hardly occurred (14; 3.9%). This finding confirmed H2.

Finally, the wordings used to apologize were investigated. Table 5 shows the distribution of the wordings differed significantly in airlines' webcare responses ($\chi^2(3) = 437.50, p < .001$). The wording 'sorry' was used most often by airline companies whereas 'regret' hardly occurred. This finding supported H3.

4. Experimental study

4.1. Design

We conducted an experimental study in which passengers of an international airline evaluated a webcare conversation between the airline and a customer who complained about his lost luggage. The study conformed to a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ design with Apology (present vs. absent), Defensive strategy (present vs. absent), and Accommodative strategy (present vs. absent) as between-subjects factors. This yielded eight experimental conditions to which participants were randomly assigned. The dependent variable was brand reputation.

Table 4
Absolute and relative frequencies and examples of apologies with and without other response strategies ($n = 402$ strategies).

Response strategy	Frequency	Example
Only apology	44 (10.9%)	I'm really sorry to hear that you've been affected by a delay. Kind regards, Caro [Eurowings, c21]
Apology + 1 response strategy	252 (62.7%)	
<i>Passive strategy</i>		
<i>Redirection</i>	144 (57.1%)	We're sorry for the delay and confusion with your luggage. Can you please DM the claim number so we can look into this for you? ^AD [United, c1]
<i>Accommodative strategy</i>		
<i>Information</i>	48 (19.0%)	Sorry for the late follow up. You can check the status of your search here: http://eurowin.gs/29patDu . Best, Zoe [Eurowings, c20]
<i>Sympathy</i>	24 (9.5%)	We certainly understand how attitude is everything when irregularities occur. We apologize for any disappointment, Lamar. ^KJ [Southwest, c4]
<i>Corrective action</i>	22 (8.7%)	Our apologies for the extended delays in response. An agent at Customer Relations will answer your claim ASAP. Thank you. /mc [AirCanada, c2]
<i>Defensive strategy</i>		
<i>Justification</i>	14 (5.5%)	Hi Maggie, apologies to the delay to your flight. This has been due to the French ATC strike and the weather. ^Helen [British Airways, c9]
Apology + 2 response strategies	95 (23.6%)	
<i>Passive and accommodative strategy</i>		
<i>Redirection + Sympathy</i>	23 (24.2%)	Christina, we understand this is not the experience you were hoping for and we apologize. Can you please DM us more about your inflight experience? ^LT [United, c23]
<i>Redirection + Information</i>	12 (12.6%)	Hi Kaleigh, we do apologise for the delays, where are you heading, our Newark to Rome flight is ready for departure at 7.30 pm today, call 1800 357 4159 if you need further assistance/ft [Norwegian Fly, c12]
<i>Redirection + Corrective action</i>	9 (9.5%)	Hi Jennifer, we apologize for this. If you did not seat in the seat you paid for you will be refunded. Please email us here: http://gofly.us/naTn30iUihW . ^CG [Allegiant, c12]
<i>Two accommodative strategies</i>		
<i>Sympathy + Information</i>	18 (18.9%)	Apologies! Most delays are at very short notice, it is not always possible to inform passengers accordingly. I hope that you will be on your way soon - have a pleasant flight. /Ella [Lufthansa, c6]
<i>Corrective action + Information</i>	6 (6.3%)	I'm sorry to hear that your flight was cancelled, Dennis. If you can't transfer to another flight, you can get a full refund in manage bookings: http://spr.ly/6013Dmwf3 . Our flight tracker will give you more options: http://spr.ly/6016Dmwfu . Tolga. [EasyJet, c12]
<i>Corrective action + Sympathy</i>	6 (6.3%)	Hi Chris, we apologise for the inconvenience and upset caused. We're aware our team have spoken to you and processed a refund. DS [Jet2, c2]
<i>Defensive and accommodative strategy</i>		
<i>Justification+ Sympathy</i>	7 (7.4%)	Flight 3333 was held up due to a delay from the incoming aircraft. We do apologize, Tyler and glad you made it to Seattle safely [Air Alaska, c4]
<i>Justification + Information</i>	5 (5.3%)	Thanks for that information, Amy. I've looked into this for you and I can see that flight BE6166 is delayed due to a late incoming aircraft following an earlier air traffic delay. I can also see that this flight has a current estimated time of departure of 19:35. I apologise for any inconvenience that this delay may cause. - Will [FlyBe, 19]
<i>Justification + Corrective action</i>	4 (4.2%)	Sorry for the lengthy experience. I can't access your correspondence, but I can assure you that your request is being handled. → → Due to the large number of requests, it may take several weeks for my colleagues to process it. Thanks for your patience. Aidan [Eurowings, c24]
<i>Passive and defensive strategy</i>		
<i>Redirection + Justification</i>	5 (5.3%)	We're sorry again for the inconvenience. We did everything possible to find a replacement pilot, as quickly as we could, so that the flight could still operate. If you wish to make a formal complaint, you can do so here: http://virg.co/feedback ^B [Virgin Atlantic, c24]
Apology + 3 response strategies	10 (2.5%)	
<i>Defensive strategy and two accommodative strategies</i>		
<i>Justification + Sympathy+ Information</i>	3 (30.0%)	Hi Margaret, So very sorry that weather affected travel plans. We do see that flight 1702 did have a weather delay of 2 h and 42 min but has arrived at the destination. Thank you for your patience! Thank you for choosing Allegiant.-Bree [Allegiant, c2]
<i>Justification + Corrective action + Information</i>	1 (10.0%)	Hello, sorry for the delay. The aircraft is arriving late from the previous flight, and times are being published as we receive them. Issues are being encountered at that stations. We have given 15\$ meal vouchers during the wait/CPA [Air Transat, c9]
<i>Passive strategy and two accommodative strategies</i>		
<i>Redirection + Sympathy + Information</i>	2 (20.0%)	Hi Laura, we can assure you this is not the case, we're sorry you are getting an error. I've just tried the link and it's working. Please try again. ^Lynn [British Airways, c7]
<i>Redirection + Corrective action + Sympathy</i>	1 (10.0%)	I am really sorry for the delay and caused inconveniences. Unfortunately, the social media team doesn't have access to compensation reports. Please stay in contact with: buchungsinfo@eu.eurowings.com. My colleagues will assess your claims. Regards, Alex [Eurowings, c18]
<i>Three accommodative strategies</i>		
<i>Corrective action + Sympathy + Information</i>	2 (20.0%)	We are sorry to hear this, Ciara. We have now escalated this with our team and have been assured that you will be contacted as soon as possible. We apologise for the delay and appreciate your ongoing patience with this [Air Lingus, c16]

Table 4 (continued)

Response strategy	Frequency	Example
Passive, defensive and accommodative strategy Redirection + Justification + Sympathy	1 (10.0%)	We're very sorry for any frustration. Unfortunately, Monday mornings are a very busy travel day to the bay area & most flights are full. Please DM us your confirmation code using the link below. -Angel [Air Alaska, c12]
Apology + 4 response strategies	1 (0.3%)	Hello, thank you for reaching out and I apologize for the delay in response. You are allowed one reservation change without any penalties due to the hurricane. Please contact our Reservations department at 801-401-900 for assistance with your reservation. ^AS [Frontier, c1]
Passive, defensive and two accommodative strategies Redirection + Justification + Corrective action +Information	1 (100%)	

4.2. Participants

The participants⁶ were 151 Dutch passengers of an international airline⁷ (60.9% male) who were recruited during their flight from Amsterdam to various destinations, such as Chicago, Genève, and Hong Kong. All respondents were adults ($M_{\min} = 18, M_{\max} = 67$), the average age of the participants was approximately forty years ($M = 39.8, SD = 12.2$). Most participants were highly educated (70.4%) and flew with the airline once per six months (45.7%). Moreover, four in ten participants owned a Twitter account (40.4%), and 13.9% had posted a NeWOM message on social media in the past six months. The participants in the eight conditions were comparable concerning their age ($F(7,143) = 1.70, p = .11$), gender ($\chi^2(7) = 7.52, p = .38$), number of flights per year ($\chi^2(28) = 24.97, p = .63$), having a Twitter account ($\chi^2(7) = 10.06, p = .19$), and posting a NeWOM message ($\chi^2(7) = 10.38, p = .17$).

4.3. Materials

The materials were based on a real Dutch Twitter conversation between a passenger and the airline. The conversation started with the passenger's complaint about his lost luggage. The airline responded to the complaint by asking whether the passenger had filled in a missing baggage report at the airport. This basic webcare response contained the brand's characteristic tone of voice, such as addressing the customer by his name. Subsequently, the experimental conditions were added to the conversation. The apology was operationalized as: 'we are sorry that your luggage did not come along'. We selected justification as the defensive strategy and corrective action as the accommodative strategy because they were almost equally present in our corpus. Justification was operationalized by giving more information about the cause of the service failure (i.e., 'due to a fault in the baggage handling system at Schiphol your suitcase remained behind'). Corrective action was operationalized by indicating that the risk of service failure would be reduced in the near future (i.e., 'a new baggage basement will open soon which reduces the risk of lost luggage'). The webcare conversation was formatted in the lay-out of Twitter.

4.4. Instrumentation

The dependent variable was measured with an online survey created with iPad application Polldaddy. Brand reputation was measured with eight items on seven-point scales using the following constructs: trustworthiness ('sincere-insincere', 'reliable-unreliable', 'honest-dishonest'; McCroskey, 2007; McCroskey & Teven, 1999), competence ('capable-incapable', 'competent-incompetent', 'wise-unwise'; McCroskey, 2007; McCroskey & Teven, 1999), and responsibility ('The brand is responsible for losing the luggage', 'The brand could have avoided the problem that occurred'; Griffin et al., 1992). These eight items were subjected to principal components analysis (PCA) with a varimax rotation. This analysis revealed the presence of two components with an Eigenvalue that exceeded 1 (Eigenvalue = 4.53, Eigenvalue = 1.48). This explained 50.8% and 15.4% of the variance. The component 1 items measured trustworthiness and competence, which was labelled as Credibility (Erdogan, 1999). The internal consistency for this set of questions was very reliable ($\alpha = 0.93, M = 5.29, SD = 1.00$). The component 2 measured Responsibility, which was a reliable set of questions as well ($r = 0.57, p < .001, M = 4.60, SD = 1.36$). Therefore, 'credibility' and 'responsibility' were used for further analysis.

4.5. Procedure

Flight passengers were randomly recruited for the experiment by a cabin attendant of the airline. After agreeing to participate,

Table 5

Absolute and relative frequency of apology IFIDs in webcare responses ($n = 425$ IFIDs).^a

IFID	Frequency
Sorry	288 (67.8%)
Apologise/Apologize	77 (18.1%)
Apologies	52 (12.2%)
Regret	8 (1.9%)

^a The sum of the apology IFID exceeds the amount of 402 apology responses, because some webcare responses contained multiple apology IFIDs.

the respondents received an iPad with the online survey containing the experimental materials and the questionnaire. Participants first answered some demographic questions (i.e. age, education, Twitter use) after which one of the eight versions of the webcare conversations was randomly shown. Subsequently, brand reputation was measured. The whole procedure took approximately 10 min.

4.6. Results

A factorial MANOVA was conducted to test the effects of response strategies on the two brand reputation constructs credibility and responsibility. Since the Box's test was significant $F(21, 70337.84) = 2.80, p < .001$, the Pillai's Trace values are reported. For post-hoc comparisons the Bonferroni correction was used.

Table 6 shows the results for the brand reputation constructs credibility and responsibility. There were no main effects of the response strategies on credibility and responsibility: Apology ($V = 0.009, F(2,143) < 1$), the defensive strategy justification ($V = 0.02, F(2,143) = 1.68, p = .19, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$), and the accommodative strategy corrective action ($V = 0.013, F(2,143) < 1$). Since our study did not find significant differences between the presence and absence of an apology on both brand reputation constructs, H4 is rejected.

In order to test H5, the interaction effects between the response strategies were investigated. No interaction effects were found between apology and justification, and apology and corrective action (both V 's = 0.01, $F(2,143) < 1$). However, there was a significant interaction effect between justification and corrective action ($V = 0.07, F(2,143) = 5.16, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$). The univariate results revealed a significant effect for credibility ($F(1,144) = 6.65, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$) and responsibility ($F(1,144) = 5.93, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$). Fig. 1 shows the airline's credibility was evaluated more positively when the webcare response contained a justification and a corrective action ($M = 5.69, SD = 0.69$) than a response with a justification but without a corrective action ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.18, t(73) = 2.64, p = .009$). Concerning the airline's responsibility, Fig. 2 shows the airline was perceived as more responsible when responding without a justification and without a corrective action ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.33$) than responding

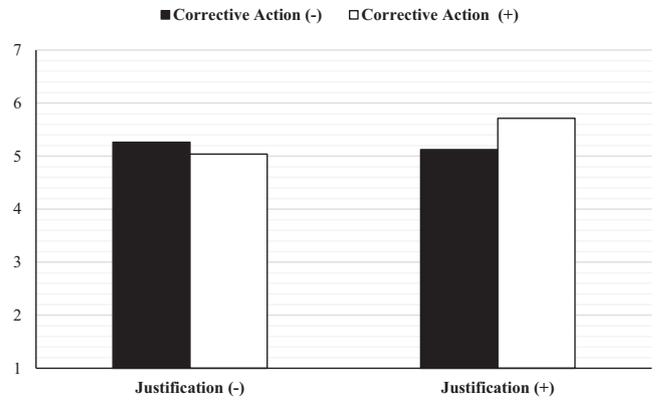


Fig. 1. Interaction between justification (defensive) and corrective action (accommodative) in webcare responses for credibility.

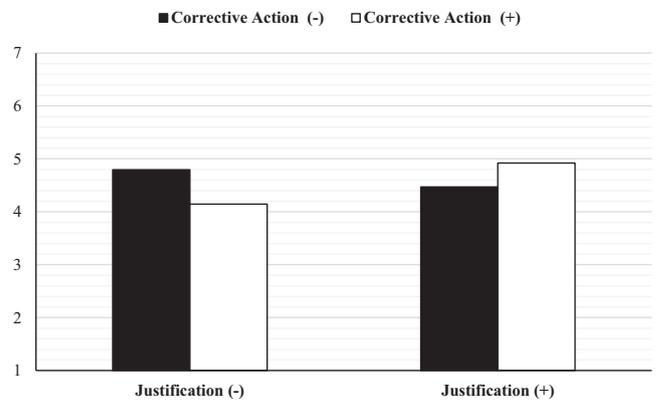


Fig. 2. Interaction between justification (defensive) and corrective action (accommodative) in webcare responses for responsibility.

without justification but with a corrective action ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.40, t(75) = 2.05, p = .04$).

Furthermore, a three-way interaction was found between the response strategies ($V = 0.05, F(2,143) = 4.09, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$). The univariate tests showed a significant effect for credibility ($F(1,144) = 5.42, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$), but not for responsibility ($F(1,144) = 1.32, p = .25, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$). Fig. 3 shows that a webcare response without an apology, but with a justification and a corrective action was perceived as more credible ($M = 6.02, SD = 0.60$) than a response without a corrective action ($M = 4.98, SD = 1.03, t(34) = 3.21, p = .002$). No other effects were found (all p 's > 0.05). These findings showed that the presence of an apology did not enhance brand reputation, but the combination of a defensive and accommodative strategy did which partly confirms H5. However, this three-way interaction should be interpreted cautiously as the effect size was small, probably due to the relatively low total number of participants.

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses) for the brand reputation constructs credibility and responsibility as a function of apology, justification (defensive), and corrective action (CA; accommodative) (assessed on 7-point scales).

	- Apology				+ Apology			
	- Justification		+ Justification		- Justification		+ Justification	
	- CA	+ CA						
Credibility	5.32 (1.18)	4.81 (0.99)	4.98 (1.03)	6.02 (0.61)	5.20 (1.01)	5.27 (0.71)	5.27 (1.33)	5.41 (0.64)
Responsibility	4.95 (1.35)	4.32 (1.57)	4.81 (1.33)	4.75 (1.92)	4.64 (1.33)	3.97 (1.21)	4.14 (1.43)	5.10 (0.83)

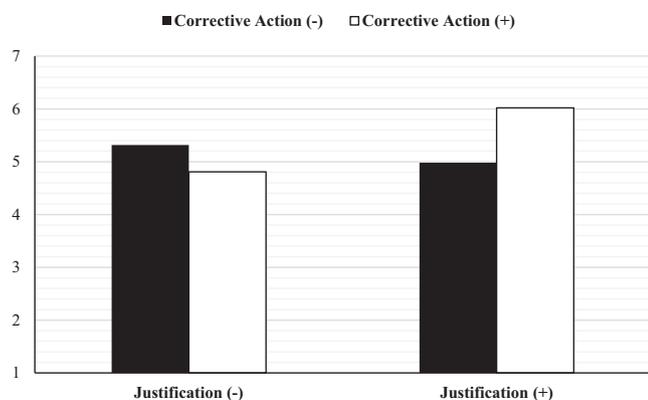


Fig. 3. Interaction between justification (defensive) and corrective action (accommodative) in webcare responses without an apology for credibility.

5. Conclusion and discussion

How do airlines offer apologies to complaining passengers on Twitter and can their response protect their reputation? To answer this research question, we used a mixed-method approach in which we combined a corpus study and an experimental study. The corpus analysis of webcare conversations between airlines and complaining customers on Twitter revealed an apology is the most frequently used response strategy. This finding contradicts the results found by [Huibers and Verhoeven \(2014\)](#) and [Einwiller and Steilen \(2015\)](#). A possible explanation could be that our corpus solely consisted of webcare conversations starting with a complaint whereas the corpus of [Huibers and Verhoeven \(2014\)](#) also consisted of conversations starting with a question or compliment. Furthermore, the corpus of [Einwiller and Steilen \(2015\)](#) contained brands' responses to NeWOM messages on social media accounts of 34 large US brands ranging from stores to car manufactures. Our NeWOM corpus consisted of webcare responses within one specific industry. The airline industry is a service industry in which there is a high degree of interaction between the employees and the passengers. All passengers' contacts with employees (e.g., the check-in desk, the plane) may lead to dissatisfactory experiences. Therefore, complaint management and service recovery are an integral part of airlines' service delivery strategy ([Lorenzoni & Lewis, 2004](#)), which might not be the case in other industries (e.g., manufactures, retailers). By publicly offering an apology, airlines acknowledge the offence and express their regret. Since this response can be observed by both the initial customer and bystanders, the airlines' webcare serves a customer care and a public relations goal ([Van Noort et al., 2014](#)).

Furthermore, the corpus analysis showed airlines often combine an apology with other response strategies, which corroborates the findings of [Huibers and Verhoeven \(2014\)](#). Remarkably, the passive strategy redirection (i.e., transferring a customer to another communication channel; [Einwiller & Steilen, 2015](#)) frequently co-occurred with an apology. Probably, airlines redirect customers to a private channel due to the nature of their problem (i.e., webcare employees need additional (personal) information in order to solve the problem). This strategy seems to be an accommodative action in order to meet individual customer's needs instead of a passive action. Therefore, instead of referring to a redirection as a passive strategy we propose to add it as an additional, fourth response strategy (i.e., individual accommodative strategy (cf. [Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014](#)) besides the passive, defensive, and (public) accommodative strategy. Future research should analyze the effectiveness of the individual accommodative strategy compared to the other response strategies in terms of corporate reputation.

The corpus study provided knowledge on the content and form of apologies in airline companies' responses to customers' complaints on Twitter. In order to investigate how online corporate apologies influence passengers' perceptions of brand reputation, an experimental study was conducted with apologies, separate and combined with a defensive and/or accommodative response strategy. In contrast to the expectations based on the SCCT, an apology did not enhance brand reputation. No differences in the perceived credibility and responsibility were found when a defensive strategy was used (i.e., no apology) or an accommodative strategy was used (i.e., an apology). Though, the combination of a defensive (i.e., justification) and accommodative (i.e., corrective action) strategy did. Participants found the airline more credible and less responsible for the service failure when the webcare response contained both strategies. This finding corroborates the results of [Coombs and Holladay \(2008\)](#): other accommodative actions, such as a corrective action, can be just as effective as an apology in producing a favorable reaction from stakeholders who did not experience the negative event themselves (i.e., bystanders). Arguably, the presence or absence of an apology did not affect brand reputation because participants perceived it as a sign of empathy instead of a sign of remorse ([Blodgett et al., 1997](#); [Dens et al., 2015](#)) which might be due to our wording of the apology in the experimental material (i.e., 'We are sorry that your luggage did not come along'). [Pace et al. \(2010\)](#) as well as [Lazare \(2005\)](#) suggested consumers perceive the wording of an apology differently regarding the brand's acceptance of responsibility (e.g., compare prior wording with 'We apologize for losing your luggage'). Further research could therefore focus on the perception and impact of the wording of service failure apologies on social media.

The combination of a justification and a corrective action might have shifted participants' locus attribution and stability attribution. The presence of a justification might have changed participants' locus attribution (i.e. the airline did not cause the service failure but the airport's baggage handling system did, which is presumably no common knowledge for airline passengers), which in turn could have reduced the perceived responsibility. Also, the presence of a corrective action might have changed participants' stability attribution (i.e., the service failure will not persist because a new baggage handling system will be installed), which in turn could have enhanced the perceived credibility. This promise might have been especially relevant for our participants (i.e., highly involved bystanders who experience the airline's service while reading the brand's webcare conversation) in restoring their trust in the airline. Future research should investigate the relation between response strategies, participants' attributions, and brand reputation in more detail. Moreover, the airline's prior reputation could have influenced the passengers' evaluations. The airline's responsibility and credibility ratings were quite high. Future research could explore differences between customers and non-customers and their evaluation of service failures apologies on social media (cf. [Manika et al., 2017](#)).

This paper provided valuable insights into the usage and effects of apologies in webcare responses of a homogeneous service industry. However, future research is needed to ensure the generalizability of the findings. Regarding the corpus study, we only focused on Western airlines and showed apologies appeared most often in their webcare. However, research has shown differences in complaining and responding to complaints between cultures that differ in uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism ([Liu & McClure, 2001](#); [Wang & Mattila, 2011](#)). Also, the generalizability of the experimental study's findings is limited. With eight experimental conditions, the total number of participants was relatively low. Each condition contained at least 18 passengers, but we preferably should have involved more participants per condition. Finally, the context in which an apology is offered plays an impor-

tant role in its effectiveness. SCCT suggests the effectiveness of response strategies, such as an apology, depends on crisis type, crisis history, and prior relational reputation (Coombs, 2007b; 2009). For example, passengers could perceive the airline as highly responsible and less credible if it is known for frequently losing luggage. In the experiment, however, a full-service airline was used which might have contributed to the overall high credibility and responsibility scores (i.e., passengers expect the airline will solve the service failure). It is therefore relevant to examine webcare apologies for budget airlines with a less strong reputation and a longer history in service failures. Next to that, the perceived severity of the service failure should be investigated in the future. Passengers could perceive a webcare apology differently if the airline was responsible for the service failure (i.e., *attribution of locus*) and the service failure had severe negative consequences for the passenger (e.g., overbooked flights, flight cancellations, flight diversions).

The mixed-method approach used in the present study seems to be a useful way to investigate social media interactions. First, we analyzed the form and content of airlines' online apologies by means of a corpus analysis using authentic data. After quantifying how often apologies occurred and co-occurred with defensive and accommodative strategies, their impact on brand reputation was systematically examined in an experimental study in which airline passengers participated. The findings of both studies provide valuable insights in the characteristics and effectiveness of online corporate apologies.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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.

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