

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Corporate Apologies by Starbucks CEO from the Perspective of Crisis Management

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Abstract: From the perspective of crisis management, this research examines how Starbucks chief executive officer (CEO) extended corporate apologies to the stakeholders via an interview video and a monologue video under the framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). The apologies offered by Starbucks CEO in an interview with ABC News and a monologue were analyzed to illustrate textual, and visual characteristics. The analysis of text, discourse practice and social practice was conducted to explore apology discourse strategies employed by Starbucks CEO. The results indicated that corporate apology discourse contributes to crisis management and revealed the interplay of corporate apology discourse, crisis management, and social background.

Keywords: Multimodal critical discourse analysis; Corporate apologies; Crisis management

Publication date: June 2021; **Online publication:** June 30, 2021

1. Introduction

An organization's survival in a crisis depends greatly on its speed of response^[1]. Social media provides a crucial platform for organizations to respond as rapid as possible and the corporate apology video is one of the approaches to deliver apologies to the stakeholders globally. The stakeholders prefer apology videos in a vivid and visual way to apology letters or announcements, and thus, the text itself is no longer the mere semiotic approach to convey apologies transmitted through the communication, but rather non-verbal semiotic resources, such as sounds and videos, are also capable of expressing apologies. It is not surprising that organizations, especially those listed in Global 500 are embracing the trends of integrating corporate apology videos into crisis management.

A corporate apology video is the one through which, the representative of an organization offers apologies, for correcting the mistakes it made, to the stakeholders in order to retrieve its reputation and its good relations with the stakeholders. When done well, corporate apology videos may help fix a public relations disaster and turn around ill will towards a company. However, if done poorly, such videos can add to the problem and seem disingenuous and insincere. Despite the strategic importance of corporate apology videos, only a few studies have examined them concerning both linguistics and management, and consequently there is plenty of room for a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the extent to which corporate apology videos contribute to crisis management.

2. Literature

2.1. Multimodal critical discourse analysis

Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis framework ^[2], representative of critical discourse analysis, consists of three parts – text, discourse practice and social practice. The text level describes the formal attributes of the linguistic text. The discourse practice level interprets the audience's interpretation of the multimodal text. The social practice level explains the ideological factors that determine the formation of the discourse. The process of text formation, propagation and acceptance denotes the interrelationship of text, discourse practice and social practice. Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar ^[3], representative of multimodal discourse analysis, comprises three meanings which are representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. The representational meaning is classified into narrative and conceptual structures; the interactive meaning is composed of contact, social distance, attitude, and modality; the compositional meaning is comprised of information value, salience, and framing.

Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) is the integration of critical discourse analysis and multimodal discourse analysis and has accelerated the development of the two elements. This research incorporates Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar into Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis framework to realize the analytical framework of MCDA, under which, the texts, sounds, videos all exert collaborative impacts on the creation and transmission of the meanings to reveal the ideologies and power relations that remain latent in verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources.

Table1: Crisis response strategies

Crisis response strategies	Descriptions
(a) An attack on the accuser	The crisis manager confronts the group or person that claims a crisis exists.
(b) Denial	The crisis manager claims that there is no crisis.
(c) Excuse	The crisis manager attempts to minimize organizational responsibility for the crisis.
(d) Victimization	The crisis manager reminds stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis as well.
(e) Justification	The crisis manager attempts to minimize the perceived damage inflicted by the crisis.
(f) Ingratiation	The crisis manager praises stakeholders and reminds them of the past good works done by the organization.
(g) Corrective action	The crisis manager tries to prevent a repeat of the crisis and/or repair the damage done by the crisis.
(h) Full apology	The crisis manager publicly accepts responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from the stakeholders.

2.2. Crisis response strategies

Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory ^[4], a theory regarding crisis management, proffers a benchmark to the assessment of the strategies and their practices in the process of crisis communication.

Crisis response strategies are important components of Situational Crisis Communication Theory ^[5]. Crisis is “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” ^[6].

If organizations attempt to handle the crisis successfully, crisis response strategies are required, which mean “what an organization says and does after a crisis serve to protect a reputation after a crisis” ^[7]. An apology is marked by organizations accepting responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness ^[1]. However, apology, in a narrow sense, is one of the eight crisis response strategies ^[5], which means, in corporate apology videos, the representative of an organization may take advantage of any of the following crisis response strategies as per **Table 1**.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research questions

- (1) What are the characteristics of corporate apology videos in regards of textual, and visual modalities?
- (2) What are the apology discourse strategies employed by Starbucks CEO?
- (3) What are the interrelations of corporate apology discourse, crisis management, and social background?
- (4) What are the viewers’ attitudes towards Starbucks CEO’s apologies in the interview?

3.2. Video selection

On April 12, 2018, two men entered a Starbucks store in Philadelphia and asked to use the bathroom, but an employee told them it was only for paying customers. When they then sat in the store without ordering anything, the manager called the police, and the men were arrested for trespassing, for which no charges were filed. Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson has called the incident “reprehensible” and apologized publicly for it in an interview on ABC’s “Good Morning America” and in a monologue. After that, the CEO met the two men arrested in person and apologized for the way they were treated on April 17.

The two videos posted on YouTube on April 16th, 2018 include “Starbucks CEO speaks out after black men arrested” with the duration of 7’32” by ABC News and “A Follow-up Message from Starbucks CEO in Philadelphia” with the duration of 2’23” by Starbucks Coffee.

The video format was transcribed into the textual format, so that the textual and visual modalities could be analyzed independently. The analysis of the text level, by way of AntConc v3.5.8, illustrated the features of words, phrases, and their frequencies. ELAN (EUDICO Linguistic Annotator) helped to create, edit, visualize, and search annotations for corporate apology videos to research the strategies of visual representation.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Analysis of multimodal text

4.1.1. Textual modality

According to results of AntConc v3.5.8, the first-person singular pronoun of “I” and the first-person plural pronoun “we” record a comparatively high frequency with a total number of 29 and 21 respectively, while the third-person plural pronoun “them” features 5 times in the word list. As the singular nominative “I” appears more frequently than the plural nominative “we,” Starbucks CEO would rather bear the liability for the incident as a top manager, than take the responsibility in the name of the organization. The frequent usage of the singular nominative might arouse the viewers’ empathy because the plural nominative which represents the organization with a kind of formality in the context of corporate apologies, would exude a perfunctory sense. But sometimes, Starbucks CEO makes good use of a plural nominative and a reflexive pronoun in the face of the anchor’s questions.

The third-person plural pronoun “them” refers to the two gentlemen involved in the incident, but the

second-person pronoun “you” is not used for the same function in both the interview and the monologue. Therefore, certain is that the two corporate apology videos are clearly targeted at the stakeholders (e.g., existing customers of Starbucks) other than the victims in the incident. The stakeholders are concerned with what the organization would do to the victims for remedies, but not a hypocritical performance to appease them.

The adjective “accountable” and the noun “responsibility” are of high frequency, with 4 and 3 times respectively among the two videos. The usage of such words is indispensable, because at the very least, Starbucks CEO needs to express the responsibility for the incident. Starbucks CEO tends to use “responsibility” in the interview and inclines to use “accountable” in the monologue.

The word “sorry” is the most fundamental utterance with extensive usage for apologies but only used once in the monologue among the two videos. This, to some extent, insinuates that the word “sorry” seems too casual for corporate apologies and the viewers are inclined to consider it as a flippant attitude. On the contrary, the verb “apologize” and the noun “apology,” are more frequent with 4 times among the two videos. Starbucks CEO often apologizes with the word “personal” or “personally,” which is a way to emphasize his personal care or attention to set great store by the victims.

The words “training” and “guidelines” plausibly have nothing to do with apologies, but in fact they are well-connected among the two videos. Starbucks CEO circumvents the detailed description of what happened at the Starbucks store, but instead, he constantly underlines the significance of improving staff training and guidelines, which corresponds to corrective action, one of the crisis response strategies.

The word “police” and the phrase “two gentlemen” record a word frequency of 6 and 5 respectively among the two videos. It is reasonable that Starbucks CEO calls the victims in a polite manner. He is non-committal about why the police was called in the incident but provides a few examples of scenarios in which the police should be called. This can be explained by justification which is one of the crisis response strategies.

In terms of syntax, Starbucks CEO is apt to employ the sentences beginning with the singular nominative “I” and the plural nominative “we,” in order to make the apologies, admit the mistakes, and offer corrective measures, while sentences with the formal subject “it” are used to take responsibility for the incident and affirm determination to handle it.

4.1.2. Visual Modality

(1) Representational meaning

Representational meaning refers to the relations between and among the participants (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The participants of the interview video include the anchor and Starbucks CEO while only one participant, Starbucks CEO is involved in the monologue video. The representational meaning, presented by the relations among the characters, the environment, the locus, and the incident, is classified into narrative representation and conceptual representation. Narrative representations focus on social actions while conceptual representations concentrate on social constructs. **Figure 1.** is comprised of two screenshots from the interview video and the representational meanings delivered by them are totally different.

The left picture presents the anchor and Starbucks CEO with the same size of their figures, but they differ in their expressions. The anchor seems to be asking trenchant questions and her expression is relieved. In contrast, Starbucks CEO looks strained and austere, for any inappropriate answers may further jeopardize the reputation of the organization. This picture exudes a sense of conceptual representation in which the anchor takes up a strong position and Starbucks CEO is in a weak place. The left side of the right picture brings out the focus of a protest with a concourse outside a Starbucks store. This picture exudes a sense of narrative representation which conveys a message that Starbucks CEO is impelled to offer apologies out of sincerity because of the protest’s and the viewers’ pressure on him.

Starbucks CEO's desire to be understood and forgiven by the stakeholders can be identified in the monologue video, in which his face keeps solemn and his eyes keep looking at the camera lens (**Figure 2**). He offers apologies at the beginning of the video and offers promises at the end of it. This is also how he behaves during the interview video, which suggests the consistency of his attitude towards apologies. This picture is indicative of conceptual representation.

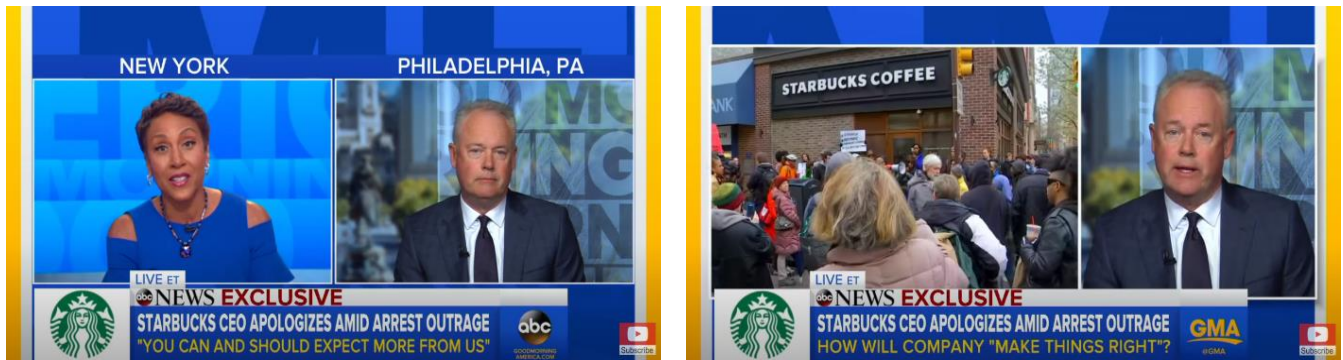


Figure 1. Screenshots from the Interview Video



Figure 2. Screenshot from the Monologue Video

(2) Interactive meaning

Interactive meaning refers to the relations between the participants and the viewers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Contact refers to visual communication between the participants and the viewers. If the former and the latter look at each other, this is called “demand;” otherwise, it is called “offer.” This explains why Starbucks CEO in the two videos looks at the camera lens. His goal is the demand of forgiveness in lieu of the offer of apology.

Social distance refers to the distance between the participants and the viewers. The demand of forgiveness requires the connection between Starbucks CEO and the viewers. The former builds a personal distance with the latter who can clearly catch sight of his upper body above his waist. The close shot shortens the distance and constructs the connection between them.

Attitude is determined by the shooting angle. In the two videos, the shooting angle is parallel to the Starbucks CEO's line of sight. A closer distance is attributed to a straight angle, which lends a sense of equality to the viewers other than inequality that a high or oblique angle may convey. Direct level eye contact is likely to arouse the viewers' empathy and indirectly ask for the viewers' recognition of the apologies. This angle may bring the viewers a kind of involvement.

Modality is also part and parcel of interactive meaning. The two videos differ in their main color. Cool color in the interview video may call to mind a feeling of sadness which is detrimental to the viewers' acceptance of the apologies while warm color in the monologue video may produce a feeling of warmth that is instrumental in arresting the viewers' attention on the apologies. Besides, Starbucks CEO is focalized

while the background is blurred in the monologue video, making the viewers subconsciously focus on him, but the image in the interview video fails to distinguish the focalization between Starbucks CEO and the background so that the viewers may be sidetracked by the peripheral information.

(3) Compositional meaning

Compositional meaning can be considered as the integration of representational and interactive meanings (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Information value is transmitted by how the participant is positioned. In the monologue video, Starbucks CEO positioned at the center is the important information, which leads to the viewers’ concern with the apologies. Nevertheless, the interview video shifts the viewers’ attention from the apologies to other information (e.g., the protest), and thus the volume of the apologies is turned down.

In terms of salience, Starbucks CEO in the monologue video is put in the foreground position while in the interview video he most often shares the equal space with the anchor and in some moments is overshadowed by other scenes pertaining to the incident. For this reason, Starbucks CEO plays a passive role in the interview.

Regarding the framing, the monologue video is filmed in what seems like a study, in which what might be a family picture, despite a blurred background, may render a sense of harmony and people-oriented value. In comparison, the wording of “Good Morning America,” the name of the television program, is framed behind Starbuck CEO. The background may remind the viewers of the nature of the interview which is to query the interviewee. From this point of view, Starbucks CEO is in a position of weakness in the interview.

4.2. Analysis of discourse practice

This stage is aimed at examining the communicative process in which how the multimodal text is generated and accepted, in order to bring to light the ideologies behind corporate apology videos. **Table 2.** summarizes apology discourse strategies in the two videos in compliance with six crisis response strategies.

Table2. Apology discourse strategies

Apology discourse strategies	Crisis response strategies
Reduce the responsibility of infringement	Excuse
Insinuate that the brand itself is also the victim of the crisis	Victimization
Justify the possibilities of calling the police	Justification
Remind customers of Starbucks’ regard for them	Ingratiation
Promise to improve training and guidelines	Corrective action
Accept responsibilities and offer apologies	Full apology

4.2.1. Reduce the responsibility of infringement

When the anchor asks why the store manager felt compelled to call the police because of these particular men, Starbucks CEO evades to talk about the reason and the infringement of the customer right, and he makes a conclusion at the end of the answer (Example 1). In the two videos, Starbucks CEO uses the word “gentlemen” five times to politely address the victims in the incident, which ironically however, emanated from the impolite way the victims were treated at a Starbucks store. In the monologue video, Starbucks

CEO also underlines that the gentlemen did not deserve such treatment (Example 2). His evasive answer and noble diction denote his intension to reduce the responsibility of infringement.

“What happened to those two gentlemen was wrong.” (Example 1 from Interview)

“These two gentlemen did not deserve what happened and we are accountable.” (Example 2 from Monologue)

4.2.2. Insinuate that the brand itself is also the victim of the crisis

The first sentence in the answer to the question why the store manager felt compelled to call the police because of these particular men, is a description of Starbucks’ operation (Example 3). Starbucks CEO expects to get across to the viewers the message that a large business scale with slightly different guidelines might lead to strenuous supervision. For this reason, the brand itself may also fall victim to the incident. The monologue video provides a similar sentence, claiming that different local practices may be the cause of the incident (Example 4).

“Certainly with 28,000 stores around the world, different regions put in some slightly different guidelines in how they handle certain situations.” (Example 3 from Interview)

“Now certainly as I’ve been reviewing the situation, understanding that with 28,000 stores around the world that in certain circumstances local practices are implemented.” (Example 4 from Monologue)

4.2.3. Justify the possibilities of calling the police

The focus on this incident was why the police should be called to arrest two men seated at the Starbucks store without ordering. Starbucks CEO assures the viewers of the situations where the police should be called, with the aim of relieving the damage inflicted by the incident, and he confesses the inappropriateness of calling the police in this case (Examples 5-6).

“Now there are some scenarios where the police should be called if there’s threats or disturbance. Those may be appropriate times. In this case, none of that occurred. It was completely inappropriate to engage the police.” (Example 5 from Interview)

“Now certainly there are some situations where the call to police is justified – situations where there’s violence or threats or disruption. In this case none of that existed.” (Example 6 from Monologue)

4.2.4. Remind customers of Starbucks’ regard for them

When the anchor quotes from Starbucks statement that Starbucks stands firmly against racial profiling, the introductory sentence in the answer is the company vision to provide a harmonious place for the customers, which contributes to evoke memories of customers’ satisfactory experiences at Starbucks (Example 7). Another sentence with a similar pragmatic function is also presented in the monologue video, claiming that this incident was an individual case other than the ordinary practice of Starbucks (Example 8). Ostensibly, the two examples are the presentation of Starbucks’ business philosophy; but in practice, ingratiation is employed to remind customers of Starbucks’ regard for them, for the sake of apologizing.

“Starbucks was built as a company that creates a warm welcoming environment for all customers. That didn’t happen in this case that I know.” (Example 7 from Interview)

“This is not who we are and it’s not who we’re going to be.”

(Example 8 from Monologue)

4.2.5. Promise to improve training and guidelines

In the two videos, Starbucks CEO doesn’t state any disciplinary action against the employee (Examples 9-10). From the perspective of the internal structure of an organization, the protection against the media’s intrusion into employees’ private life helps to boost the team’s morale. Conversely, this protection is not what the viewers expects from Starbucks. Starbucks CEO then offers corrective measures which basically include promising to improve training and guidelines and guaranteeing to meet the victims in the incident. The commitment to meet the victims face-to-face is very respectful.

“Well, you know, it’s easy for me to say and point blame to one person in this incident. You know, my responsibilities to look not only to that individual but look more broadly at the circumstances that set that up just to ensure that this never happens again. So, those reviews are conducting as we speak. And I’ve been very focused on understanding what guidelines and what training ever let this happen. What happened was wrong and we will fix it.”

(Example 9 from Interview)

“Now there’s been some calls for us to take action in the store manager. I believe that blame is misplaced. In fact, I think the focus of fixing this. I own it. This is a management issue, and I am accountable to ensure we address the policy and the practice and the training that led to this outcome. Now today I’ve been on the phone with the mayor, the police commissioner, and other leaders in the community. I’m looking forward to spending the next two days meeting and visiting with them personally and you have my commitment. We will address this, and we will be a better company for it.”

(Example 10 from Monologue)

4.2.6. Accept responsibilities and offer apologies

An integral part of corporate apology videos is accepting responsibilities and offering apologies. Despite the omission of the latent reason for the incident, Starbucks CEO takes responsibility for the treatment of the victims in the incident and apologizes to them and other stakeholders, with the words, says, “wrong,” “responsibility,” and “apologize” (Examples 11-12).

“You know, first of all, I’ll say the circumstances surrounding the incident and the outcome in our store on Thursday were reprehensible. They were wrong and for that I personally apologize to the two gentlemen that visited our store. Now certainly, you know, it’s my responsibility to understand what happened and what led to that and ensure that we fix it.”

(Example 11 from Interview)

“I want to begin by opening a personal apology to the two gentlemen who were arrested in our store. What happened in the way that incident escalated, and the outcome was nothing but reprehensible and I’m sorry. I want to apologize to the community in Philadelphia and to all my Starbucks partners.”

(Example 12 from Monologue)

4.3. Analysis of social practice

Starbucks CEO, the representative of the top management of the organization, should have been aware of racial discrimination involved in the incident. But he has never directly offered any answers pertaining to racial discrimination to whatever questions, even though the anchor in the interview has made endeavors to entice him to concede racism involved in this case. From the perspective of social practice based on Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework, his evasion of racial discrimination is primarily contingent on three reasons. First, his politeness to address the two men as “gentlemen” should be in accord with other

utterances within the two videos. If not, that seems ironic. If he admits this was a case of racial discrimination and addresses them as “gentlemen”, the viewers, especially the community of the victims, might consider such word as a stinging satire. This may render his apology discourse strategies futile. Secondly, racial discrimination may be easily connected to some taboos. He can hardly estimate the repercussions if pointing it out, in spite of the assistance of a think-tank. Thirdly, what happened is not what can be recovered. Most viewers have considered it as racism after the occurrence of the incident and whether he admits cannot impact their perspective on the incident. Consequently, Starbucks CEO had better confess the improper treatment of the victims and offer apologies, instead of specifying that this was a case of racial discrimination.

Soon after the incident occurred, Starbucks CEO has taken immediate actions in response to the indignation of the stakeholders by attending interviews with different television programs, posting announcements and videos for apologizing and other reasonable approaches. The devotions of Starbucks CEO deserve the settlement of the crisis. But technically, as regards the apology, the sooner, the better. If Starbucks CEO and his think-tank had predicted a storm of protest arising from the incident, he would have extended his apologies earlier, probably, one day after the incident. If so, the viewers might be more likely to accept his apologies.

Overall, the responses of Starbucks CEO in the two videos are satisfactory notwithstanding the lack of widespread acceptance from the viewers. And he has kept his promise and personally apologized to the victims face-to-face. Starbucks has also announced plans to close a number of stores in the United States for anti-bias training. The result is gratifying, for the two men has jointly appreciated his effort to foster communication. Hence, the analysis of social practice connotes that corporate apology discourse matters to crisis management, but meanwhile, whether the actions are consistent with the words is another matter that determines the stakeholders’ attitudes towards the organization after the crisis.

5. Conclusions

As economic development is inextricably linked to science and technology, the speed at which corporate apology videos go viral has changed everything for corporations in the face of a public relations crisis. The representative of the top management needs to manifest the organization’s responsibility for the crisis on a virtual stage immediately. Such approach can present risks but so does taking too long to apologize.

In this research, Starbucks CEO in the two videos delivered a message that the organization had learned from its misdeeds. He expressed sincerity and commitment to get the thing right. It seemed that Starbucks CEO’s apology was approximately enough to meet the demand of most stakeholders. The fact is that Starbucks has successfully managed the crisis, after which, at least, it has been continuously developing. Hence, the lesson for business leaders is to apologize quickly, sincerely, and to pay the price.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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