"We're so sorry – yes we really are": Optimal apology strategies for errant fundraising charities

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to determine the strengths of the influences of certain factors potentially contributing to an effective apology for a fundraising charity. Four motivational forces possibly affecting public acceptance of an apology issued by a charity are explored, i.e., persuasion knowledge activation, a viewer's regulatory focus, trait forgiveness, and scepticism regarding charity advertising.

Design/methodology/approach

Texts for two apologies (one based on expressions of guilt, the other on expressions of shame) were created for a fictitious international aid charity, some field workers of which had engaged in child abuse. A questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 777 members of the public containing one or other of the apologies.

Findings

A good match between a participant's regulatory focus and the regulatory focus of an apology significantly improved the likelihoods of the apology being "liked" and accepted. Nevertheless, the quality of the match had no impact on a person's inclination to donate to the organisation. Trait forgiveness and donation history significantly influenced liking and acceptance of an apology, but not inclination to donate.

Originality

Although past studies have examined the roles of apologies within the communication management activities of commercial organisations, research into the effectiveness of apologies by fundraising nonprofits has been sparse. Outcomes to the present investigation offer insights into how charity managers can best apologise for a fundraising nonprofit organisation's errant behaviour.

Key words: Organisational apologies, regulatory focus, persuasion knowledge, guilt-based messages, shame-based messages, trait forgiveness, charities.

1. Introduction

A number of studies have examined the roles of apologies as critical aspects of the communication management activities of commercial organisations (see for example Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Chung and Jiang, 2017; Sandlin and Gracyalny, 2020), but little research has been completed into the apology practices of fundraising charities. A fundraising charity is a charitable organisation that raises money to support its cause by asking individuals, businesses, foundations, government bodies and other entities for financial support. Fundraising occurs, inter alia, through charity events, online appeals, door to door solicitations, and legacy campaigns. In the UK it is possible to fundraise even if an organisation is not a state-registered charity, but the organisation cannot claim to be a charity

when soliciting donations (see Charity Commission, 2024). Apology practices are important because scandals involving fundraising charities are not uncommon and, in several countries, media coverage of nonprofit scandals has increased substantially in recent years (Chapman, Hornsey and Gillespie, 2021; Chapman, Hornsey, Gillespie and Lockey, 2023). Miscreant charities might be involved in fraud, misuse of funds, false disclosures of financial information, sexual or other forms of abuse of victims, or any one of several other forms of misbehaviour (see Archambeault, Webber and Greenlee, 2015). To help restore a charity's reputation, and importantly its fundraising capacity consequent to a scandal, the organisation is likely to issue a public apology. The apology might acknowledge responsibility for the offence (providing reasons for its occurrence), express remorse, promise not to repeat the misbehaviour, state how a problem has been fixed, and perhaps overtly request forgiveness (Roschk and Kaiser, 2013; Bentley, 2018; Polin et al., 2024).

Disparate crisis scenarios can necessitate different approaches to apology formulation. Scenarios could relate to, for example, safety issues, unexpected disasters, misconduct (as in the present study), or financial misbehaviour. Depending on the situation, an apology could range from a simple statement of regret, a partial apology, a basic explanation, to a fully-fledged sincere apology specifying actions to remedy a situation and commitment to change (Georgiadou, 2023). Again, dependent on a particular scenario, an apology can be proactive in nature seeking at a very early stage to shape how events unfold, or responsive and involving a thoughtful analysis hopefully leading to results with long as well as short-term benefits. Coombs and Holladay (2002) recommended that organisations should carefully evaluate the nature of a crisis in terms of responsibility before devising a response. Although a study completed by Coombs and Holladay (2008) concluded that in certain circumstances a statement of sympathy accompanied by information could substitute for an apology, an organisation that knows it is responsible and at fault should always apologise.

Chung and Lee (2021) reported a substantial volume of literature which concluded that, among the various crisis message strategies available to an organisation, an apology can significantly and substantially help maintain the organisation's reputation. Maintenance of reputation is crucial for an organisation's wellbeing. This requirement was emphasized by Benoit (1997) whose Image Restoration Theory offered strategies for organisations to repair their reputation after a crisis. Strategies included denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and expressions of embarrassment or shame. Each strategy could be tailored to specific situations. Benoit's (1997) theory views perceptions as key in image repair because an audience's perceived image of an organisation influences the effectiveness of a defence, which could take the form of an apology. As in the present study, an organisation creating image repair messages may face more than one audience, so the organisation must decide which audiences to address and then develop image repair messages accordingly. The construction of messages for image repair, according to Benoit, needs to consider crisis type and seriousness, level of culpability, existing organisational reputation, degree of offence potentially caused to an audience, and availability of corrective actions.

An apology can help maintain reputation through the de-escalation of a crisis situation via acceptance of guilt for the problematic situation (Coombs and Holladay, 2008). A study by Pace, Fediuk and Botero (2010) revealed that acceptance of responsibility after a transgression caused an organisation's publics to feel less anger toward the organisation. An apology that focused on accepting responsibility resulted in substantially less reputational damage than not accepting responsibility. Apologies expressing guilt or shame clearly admit responsibility. According to Hornsey, Chapman, La Macchia and Loakes (2024), an apology can be the best way to protect an organisation's reputation when an organisation openly admits responsibility for a crisis, as then there will be little further reputational cost resulting from making an apology.

An organisation's past actions (contributing to its reputation) and stated future plans can influence public perceptions of an apology (Turk et al., 2012). A study by Kiambi and Shafer (2016) found that organisations with good prior reputations had significantly better post-crisis reputation evaluations, aroused less anger, and experienced less negative word of mouth among the public than those with bad prior reputations. Hornsey et al. (2024) noted how apologies signalling future reform had greater impact on public trust and support than communications that just admitted culpability. Reform signals suggested that an errant organisation was unlikely to repeat transgressions in the future.

Arguably, moreover, an apology might enhance a charity's engagement with its publics (cf. Riesterer, 2023). Apologising demonstrates that the organisation cares about the feelings of its audiences, acknowledges its wrongdoing, and is willing to make things right. Danao (2024) suggested that engagement would benefit via an apology's ability to diffuse negative emotions (notably anger), build loyalty and credibility, and restore trust. Developing audience engagement, Danao (2024) continued, involves building relationships with customers at every touch point with an organisation, including pain points (which require apologies).

The present study examined key elements potentially contributing to an effective apology for a fictitious international aid charity, certain field workers of which had been found to engage in child abuse. Four motivational forces possibly affecting public acceptance of the charity's apology were explored, i.e., persuasion knowledge activation, a viewer's regulatory focus, trait forgiveness, and scepticism regarding charity advertising. The stimulus offered to participants in the investigation contained either a guilt-based or a shame-based message. The following sections discuss the variables included in the study.

2. Regulatory focus

Regulatory focus theory examines the types of actions that individuals take in order to align themselves with their values and aspirations (Higgins, 1997). The theory proposes the existence of two regulatory systems: "promotion focused" and "prevention focused". Promotion focus is associated with ideals, advancement, aspiration, success and achievement. People with high promotion focus regulate their decisions and behaviour to realize positive outcomes (Camacho, Higgins and Luger, 2003). Prevention focus, conversely, relates to vigilance, safety, and caution. Individuals with high prevention focus concentrate on potential losses and seek to prevent negative outcomes (Santelli, Struthers and Eaton, 2009).

A promotion framed apology might attempt to return the viewers perceptions to a positive level (i.e., achieve a gain); whereas a prevention framed apology could attempt to prevent negative perceptions from further deterioration (Atav, Chatterjee and Roy, 2021). Hence, a promotion focused apology should emphasise positive outcomes whereas a prevention focused apology should emphasise the prevention of negative outcomes (Lee and Aaker, 2004).

2.1 Goodness of regulatory fit

Studies have demonstrated that matching the regulatory focus of a transmitted message with a viewer's regulatory focus can significantly enhance attention to and engagement with the message (for details see Zhao and Pechmann, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2020). Promotion focused people may be more persuaded by messages that emphasise achievement whereas a prevention focused individual could be more persuaded by messages based on reductions of negative outcomes (Aaker and Lee, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2020).

According to Santelli et al. (2009) people are more inclined to forgive transgressors when the latter's apologies suggest regulatory orientations consistent with their own, as a good fit makes an individual "feel right" (Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004). A fit which

induces positive feelings towards a charity based on its achievements should have greater influence on promotion focused people who, in general, are more sensitive to the presence of positives in a message (Aaker and Lee, 2001). Conversely, a fit that emphasises the prevention of negative outcomes might be more likely to affect prevention focused individuals.

2.2 Guilt, shame, and regulatory focus

Confessions of guilt might appear in a charity's apology for its misbehaviour, implying an organisation's desire proactively to fix what was wrong (Tangney and Dearing, 2003), and likely to focus on *specific actions* rather than reporting a negative self-evaluation of the organisation (Hareli and Eisikovits, 2006). Ran, Wei and Li (2016) observed that while guilt-based apologies typically emphasize "tension, remorse and regret over the 'wrongdoing done'", they are often accompanied by statements of intentions to bring about positive changes to help repair the damage caused (p.4). This, Ran et al. (2016) continued, represents a promotion focused message approach.

Accordingly, a promotion focused guilt framed apology is likely to fit better with a promotion focused viewer as it could lead to a deeper "feel right" emotion (Santelli et al., 2009). Promotion focused guilt-based messages can demonstrate heightened organisational self-efficacy in relation to achieving solutions to a problem. Thus, guilt-based messages are compatible with the motivational profile of a promotion focused individual (Ran et al. 2016). Considering that a promotion focused guilt-framed apology fits better with a promotion focused viewer, promotion focused guilt-based messages may be expected to exert more influence on promotion focused viewers (cf. Pounders et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Shame-based messages

In contrast, a shame-based apology might acknowledge that as well as a wrongdoing conflicting with an organisation's standards, the organisation has *negative feelings about itself* (Han, Duhachek and Agrawal, 2014; Ran et al., 2016). A shame-based message could focus on admitting the organisation's failure to keep its promises, confess that in consequence the charity's worth has been diminished, and recognise that the organisation may therefore have been less able to fulfil its fundamental mission (Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek, 2007; Stuewig et al., 2010). Messages might not emphasise the organisation's ability to overcome a problematic situation proactively, but instead focus on the avoidance of a problem recurring.

Shame-based apologies that deliver avoidance themed and possibly self-deprecatory messages may be regarded as prevention focused in nature (Nguyen et al., 2020). Therefore, a prevention focused shame-based message, which articulates ways of preventing or avoiding negative consequences, is likely to be congruent with the emotional motivation of a prevention focused person. Hence a message of this type might engage and influence prevention focused viewers more deeply than people with a promotion focus (Keller, 2006; Pounders et al., 2018).

3. Persuasion knowledge activation

Unless it is convincing, an apology may be regarded as little more than "cheap talk" that causes the viewer to feel manipulated (Abdollahi, Xu and Rim, 2024). The persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright, 1994) (i) predicts how people react to messages (especially advertising messages) in terms of the extent to which viewers understand the persuasive nature of received messages, and (ii) posits that individuals can resist being persuaded *only if* they recognise that a message has an ulterior motive and is deliberately designed to persuade (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; Evans and Park, 2015). Once persuasive intent is recognised, i.e., once persuasion knowledge is "activated", the viewer will seek to

evaluate the appropriateness of the message with respect to whether the message is fair or is simply intended improperly to manipulate the observer.

Research has established that an individual's regulatory focus can determine whether an advertising message activates persuasion knowledge and hence motivates the person to become vigilant vis-à-vis manipulative tactics within the message (Boerman, van Reijmersdal and Neijens, 2012; De Veirman and Hudders, 2020; Choi and Park, 2021). Kirmani and Zhu (2007), for instance, found that prevention focused people tend to be more vigilant against persuasion attempts in advertising messages because they are cautious, avoidance orientated and will wish to *avoid* being influenced by such messages. Therefore, on seeing a message which they suspect contains cues suggesting manipulative intent, prevention focused individuals are more likely to activate persuasion knowledge and to view the message negatively (Santelli et al., 2009; Nguyen et al., 2020).

4. Charity advertising scepticism

Scepticism concerning any and all communications from fundraising charities could impair viewers' inclinations to accept an apology from an errant organisation (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007; Pounders et al., 2018). As the degree of a person's charity advertising scepticism increases, so the persuasiveness of a charity apology is likely to fall (see Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998; Forehand and Grier, 2003). Certain charities in the UK and in other countries have been embroiled in scandals, and extensive media publicity following these scandals has diminished levels of public trust in the charity sector as a whole (Brindle 2019). A general lack of trust in the charity sector could have spill-over effects on any or all advertising messages transmitted by charities, including apologies, (Chaabane and Parguel, 2014). Thus, charity advertising scepticism may be anticipated to have an effect on a viewer's activation of persuasion knowledge.

Kirmani and Zhu (2007) noted that because prevention focused people tend to concentrate on (i) negative information within a communication, and (ii) avoiding being unduly persuaded, they often exhibit greater scepticism of messages "even in the presence of ambiguous cues" (p. 689) (see also Choi and Park, 2020). Conversely, promotion focused individuals have sometimes been found to be less sceptical of advertising messages (Mendini, Peter and Gibbert, 2018; Ahmad and Guzmán, 2021) since, allegedly, they might feel less threatened by them.

5. Covariates

5.1 Trait forgiveness

Research has established that certain individuals are more forgiving than others (Huang and Enright, 2000; Rye et al., 2001), i.e., to exhibit "trait forgiveness", a disposition to forgive interpersonal transgressions over time and across situations (Brose et al., 2005). Unforgiveness can be experienced as an unpleasant emotional state which individuals are then motivated to reduce or overcome (Toussaint and Webb, 2005). Studies have found that trait forgivingness is likely to be associated negatively with anger, hostility and resentment (Li et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2023), but positively with sympathy and empathy (McCullough, 2000; Berry et al., 2005) .

5.2 Donation history

An individual's charity donation history is included in the study as it captures several aspects of a person's overall involvement with charities: altruistic and empathetic tendencies, personal experiences of charities, perceptions of the efficiency of fundraising organisations, social norms, and warm glow experienced when giving (see Bennett, 2019). These considerations might affect a person's willingness to accept an apology. Donations to charities in general (rather than to specific causes) are relevant in relation to the

abovementioned donor characteristics, as they reflect an individual's overall tendency to engage with fundraising charitable organisations.

6. A suggested model and hypotheses

The above variables were incorporated into the model shown in Figure 1, which posits that the regulatory focus of the viewer of an apology affects persuasion knowledge activation in relation to the apology. Then, activation of persuasion knowledge reduces the likelihood that an apology

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

will be accepted, or in a sense "liked", and/or will induce willingness to donate to the charity. Also, the degree of an individual's scepticism concerning charity advertising could moderate the influence of the person's regulatory focus on persuasion knowledge activation. On the basis of the previously cited literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. After viewing a charity's apology, a prevention focused person will activate persuasion knowledge to a significantly greater extent than a promotion focused person.

H2. High persuasion knowledge activation will reduce acceptance of and liking for an apology, and will reduce the viewer's intention to donate to the charity.

H3. Acceptance, liking of an apology, and donation intention will be greater if the people who view a prevention focused shame-based apology have a prevention focus and the people who view a promotion focused guilt-based apology have a promotion focus.

H4. (a) Charity advertising scepticism will intensify the influence on persuasion knowledge activation of a person's regulatory focus having viewed either a promotion focused guilt-based apology or a prevention focused shame-based apology.

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(b) The moderating influence of charity advertising scepticism will be stronger among prevention focused people.

H5. Trait forgiveness will have a direct positive effect on the dependent variables (acceptance, liking of the apology, donation intention).

H6. The charity donation history of the viewer will have a direct effect on the dependent variables (acceptance, liking of the apology, donation intention).

7. Methods and materials

7.1 Measures

Literature sources for the items relating to the abovementioned variables used in the model are shown in the Appendix to the paper. To create the stimuli used in the study the authors collected 22 examples of apologies published online by charities (nine involving children and sometimes relating to sexual or other forms of abuse) in English speaking countries over the last 15 years. These were distributed to a group of experts comprising three charity fundraising managers, the heads of two charity support organisations, and two academics who specialise in the marketing of nonprofit organisations. A one-hour online workshop was then convened at which the participants were asked to (i) identify which of the examples tended towards expressions of guilt or shame, and (ii) offer suggestions for the development of guilt-based and shame-based messages. Consequently, the authors constructed three possible guilt-based apologies and three possible shame-based apologies. These were presented to 44 adult employees of or visitors to one of the authors' home universities who were (i) told that the apologies involved an international children's charity which had employed local field workers in Africa who had abused some of the children they were supposed to help, and (ii) asked to select three words from a list of 16 (eight words relating to

guilt and eight to shame) they believed best fitted each of the six options. The following apologies were then drafted, one guilt-based and the second shame-based.

1. Guilt-based

OUR GUILT

We feel intensely guilty about our field workers' appalling behaviour regarding their abuse of the children in their care. Our guilt is overwhelming, but we assure you that we immediately took, and continue to take, tough, direct, and effective actions to repair as fully as possible the damage caused by our field workers' disgraceful actions. Yes, we needed to make deeply fundamental changes to our operations in the region, so straightaway we have implemented a multitude of steps specifically designed to put into effect the positive and practical changes that were clearly required and to rapidly and without question help to make good the harm our people caused to those they should have taken care of.

We abjectly confess our guilt concerning our field workers' behaviour, but the new and extensive operations we have now activated are totally committed to resolving the situation. We promise to seek constantly to maintain and improve the high standards you are entitled to expect from our workers in the field.

2. Shame-based

OUR SHAME

We feel intensely ashamed about our field workers' appalling behaviour regarding their abuse of the children in their care. Our shame is overwhelming, and we are deeply sorry for the damage caused by our field workers' disgraceful actions. Yes, we completely admit that

we failed to keep our promises to these children, and that our field workers' dreadful behaviour made us considerably less able to undertake the work that is so desperately required in the region. We feel really bad about ourselves, so we have taken a multitude of steps specifically designed to prevent and avoid any repetitions of this unacceptable behaviour towards the people our field workers should have taken care of.

We totally accept that our field workers' actions were shameful. We have no excuses to offer but be rest assured that we have implemented numerous measures to stop this type of behaviour from ever taking place again. We are striving constantly to ensure that never again can the high standards you are entitled to expect from our workers in the field be violated.

8. Execution of the study

A preliminary analysis of the basic empirical credibility of Figure 1 was undertaken, followed by the distribution of a questionnaire to a sample of members of the UK public. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the XXX Business School Ethics Committee on 16th March 2023 ref. XXXXXX. Participants in both the preliminary and the main studies were informed in writing about the study's procedures, benefits, and other aspects before their participation. Half the participants received a questionnaire containing a promotion focused guilt-based apology; the other half received a prevention focused shame-based apology. The preamble to the questionnaire stated that the apology had been issued by an international aid charity, operating in Africa, where certain local field workers of the charity had engaged in child abuse of the children they were supposed to be helping.

8.1 Preliminary analysis

Two initial convenience samples were assembled over an eight-month period comprising adult visitors to events (e.g., open days, colloquia and conferences, businesspeople completing market research investigations in a behavioural science laboratory) at the home

university of one of the authors. Eighty-one participants were shown the above guilt-based

apology and 83 the shame-based apology. Each person then completed a questionnaire

comprising the items for persuasion knowledge activation, regulatory focus, and key items

from the dependent variables listed in the Appendix to the paper. The dependent variables

items comprised the item "inclined to accept the apology", "likely to donate", and the average

of the six "liking" items (honest, etc.). As expected, advertising scepticism was more

pronounced among prevention focused people ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.06$) than among promotion-

oriented individuals ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(162) = 2.12$, $p = .03$, with an effect size of 0.34.

Table 1 shows the interactions among the participants' exposure to either the guilt-based

apology or the shame-based apology, regulatory focus scores, levels of persuasion interaction,

and the dependent variables.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1 indicates that promotion-oriented sample members were significantly inclined to

"like" and accept the guilt-based apology but not the shame-based apology whereas

prevention focused individuals were significantly likely to like and accept the shame-based

apology. The connection between persuasion knowledge activation and regulatory focus was

much stronger among prevention focused people who were shown the shame-based apology.

Donation intention did not correlate significantly with regulatory focus in either scenario.

Otherwise, these outcomes lend credibility to the core propositions of Figure 1.

9. Test of the model

The full questionnaire containing one or other of the above apologies was distributed to

members of the panel (whose characteristics broadly matched those of the overall UK adult

population) of a commercial data collection company until 777 responses were received.

Three hundred and eighty people received the shame-based apology and 397 the guilt-based

apology. Apart from factual demographic queries, variables were measured using five-point Likert scales. The nine dependent variable items listed in the Appendix were factor analysed, three primary factors emerging. Factor one contained "inclination to accept the apology" as the dominant leading item and accounted for 35% of total variance. Factor two comprised items with loadings greater than value 0.7 for perceptions that the apology was honest, credible, sincere, and persuasive, and explained 30% of total variance (Cronbach's alpha = .79). The third factor was dominated by the likelihood of a person donating to the charity and accounted for 22% of total variance. Accordingly, the factor two items were combined into a single dependent variable entitled "general liking of the apology". This was employed alongside "inclination to accept the apology" and "donation intention" as the variables to be explained. The two remaining items (the apology was irritating, and likelihood of recommending the charity to others) were outliers and were removed from the analysis.

Donation frequency and annual value of donations were not significantly correlated (R = .11, p = .31) and hence were treated as separate independent variables. The mean values of these variables were close (range M = 2.47 to M = 2.54) for the respondents shown either the guilt or the shame-based apology, and the differences were insignificant at the .05 level or below. A comparable situation applied to trait forgiveness, suggesting that the effects of both donation experience and trait forgiveness did not vary with respect to type of frame (guilt or shame-based). None of the control variables (age, gender, educational level, financial status) correlated significantly with the tendency to accept either type of apology, or with any of the other variables in the model. Accordingly, the reduced form of the model was estimated 12 times (three dependent variables x two regulatory focus scores x guilt-based or shame-based apology), using Hayes mediation software (extended model 8 [Hayes, 2022]). The results are presented in Tables 2A to 2D.

INSERT TABLES 2A TO 2D HERE

10. Discussion

Table 2A shows the effects on the three dependent variables of participants' levels of prevention focus among the members of the sample shown the prevention focused shame-based apology. Here, a strong connection existed in all three regressions between the participants' prevention focus scores and the activation of persuasion knowledge. Scepticism of charity advertising positively and significantly moderated persuasion knowledge activation, which in turn significantly reduced the likelihood of the apology being liked or accepted, but not the likelihood of donating to the charity. Trait forgiveness and a person's charity donation history affected positively and significantly an individual's inclination to accept the apology, but did not significantly influence liking of the message or intention to donate.

The situation pertaining to prevention focus scores and people shown the guilt apology is presented in table 2B. Links between prevention focus score and persuasion knowledge activation were significant at the .05 level, but the effects were considerably lower than those presented in table 2A. Participants were significantly likely to accept the apology but (in contrast to table 2A) they did not on the average appear to like the apology. Nor did they intend donating to the charity. Other significant influences ($p<.05$) matched those given in table 2A.

As regards the effects of promotion focus scores among participants shown the promotion focused guilt-based apology (table 2C), high promotion focus did not significantly induce persuasion knowledge activation. Presumably, individuals with high promotion focus were impressed by the action-oriented features of the guilt-based apology and were not particularly suspicious of the charity's motivations in highlighting these features. Nevertheless, charity advertising scepticism did increase persuasion knowledge activation

significantly and, where substantial persuasion knowledge activation occurred, it significantly reduced liking and acceptance of the apology, but had little influence on intention to donate. Promotion focus had strong effects on liking of and inclination to accept the guilt-based apology, but not on willingness to donate. The effects of trait forgiveness and donation history were comparable to those stated in tables 2A and 2B. Table 2D shows the influence of promotion focus scores among people who viewed the shame-based apology. Persuasion knowledge was significantly activated, but no significant connections arose between promotion focus and any of the dependent variables. Persuasion knowledge activation had powerful negative influences on liking of, and inclination to accept the apology but not on willingness to donate.

Overall, hypothesis one is accepted. Hypothesis two is partially accepted: persuasion knowledge activation exerted significantly negative effects on acceptance and liking, but was insignificant regarding donation intention. The importance of a match between an individual's regulatory focus and a corresponding message frame is confirmed, apart from the insignificance of the link with donation intention, leading to the partial acceptance of hypothesis three. Charity advertising scepticism intensified the influence of a person's promotion focus on persuasion knowledge activation in all cases, in line with hypothesis 4A. The moderating effect of charity advertising scepticism among prevention focused participants was, at .02, double that of the effect among promotion focused people, confirming hypothesis 4B. Hypotheses five and six are partially accepted, as trait forgiveness and donation history significantly impacted acceptance of an apology, but not liking of the apology or willingness to donate to the charity.

11. Conclusion

While the results endorse the relevance of trait forgiveness, of scepticism about charity advertising, and of regulatory focus vis-à-vis acceptance of and liking for an apology, these variables had little effect on donation intention. This outcome is in line with the results of several studies completed in the nonprofit sector which concluded that "liking" a charity appeal may have little connection with actual donation behaviour (for details see Wallace, Buil and de Chernatony, 2017; Erlandsson, Nilsson and Västfjäll, 2018). Wallace et al. (2017) noted that whereas "liking" is cognitive, giving money is "real". Within an experiment, participants are sure that that they will not be asked to donate for real. Donation is frequently associated with altruism, but altruism is not necessarily connected with accepting or liking an errant charity's apology. Erlandsson et al. (2018) noted moreover that liking a charity advertisement does not automatically translate into donations because "liking" frequently reflects a fleeting emotional response, whereas donating involves a more considered decision. Also, Erlandsson et al. (2018) continued, factors such as the degree of emotionality within an appeal, the perceived credibility of the charity, a person's income, values, personal connection to the cause, and the donor's personal circumstances could also play significant roles regardless of how much an individual likes an advertisement. Liking an advertisement can indicate that it is seen as engaging or emotionally resonant, but this does not necessarily translate into a commitment to donate. Donor fatigue (i.e., declining rate of response from donors to persistent calls for charitable donations [see Breeze, 2013]) could also exert an influence.

As predicted, acceptance of an apology was more likely among regular and substantial donors to charity, although the connection of past charity donation behaviour and *liking* an apology was insignificant. A possible explanation of this finding is that regular and substantial givers to charities may be less impressed by the contents of an observed apology consequent to their greater general knowledge of the charity sector. Coombs (2007) suggested

that an apology viewer's pre-crisis relationship with an organisation was important for mitigating the person's response to the communication. The prior relationship could be built on "personal experience" of the organisation, usually obtained via mass media coverage of the organisation. In a crisis situation an apology presents an opportunity for the organisation to give its own side of the story. An apology viewer's level of *involvement* with a charity and its cause could depend in part on personal experience. The more involved the individual the more personally affected the person is likely to be affected by an apology (Coombs and Tachkova, 2024), and hence the more willing the person to donate in the future and to accept the apology. Also, the degree of a person's attributions of altruistic motivation underlying an apology might influence the individual's attitudinal response. An apology seen as constituting an altruistic desire for the wellbeing of victims will be better received than an apology regarded as simply an accommodating measure (Coombs and Holliday, 2005). At the personal level, the fact that the errant charity was operating in Africa might suggest that a person's inclination to accept an apology may be based on an altruistic personal desire to help.

The results of the study confirm the need for a good fit between an observer's regulatory focus and message content. Accordingly, an errant organisation could benefit from issuing more than one type of apology to the general public. The contents of each apology could differ with respect to emphasizing either a promotion focus, in order to appeal to promotion focused individuals, or a prevention focus aimed at prevention focused people. A charity could, for instance, seek to influence promotion centred viewers by stressing how the organisation's beneficiaries will benefit from the charity's more general future activities, citing examples within an apology (Atav et al., 2021). There are few reasons for a charity not issuing two (or more) apologies, each worded in manners designed to appeal to individuals possessing a particular regulatory focus. Nevertheless, Georgiadou (2023) noted that while a

sincere apology can help rebuild trust, multiple apologies must be applied with care, or they could be counterproductive. Georgiadou (2023) compared a guilt-based apology with a simple apology ("We are sorry") and four other apology forms (e.g., offer of repair). Findings indicated that very often a single apology might not be sufficient and that multiple apologies tailored to different aspects of a problem were more effective. Multiple apologies following a crisis could demonstrate an organisation's commitment to addressing the problem and preventing recurrence. All apologies needed to express remorse, accept responsibility, offer repair, and promise not to repeat the offence in the future.

Persuasion knowledge activation exerted significant and substantial downwards influences on liking of and inclination to accept an apology. Therefore, it is in the interests of an errant charity to attempt to minimise the effects of persuasion knowledge activation on viewers' reactions to an apology. This cannot be done easily within the text of an apology, although messages can be carefully designed to help viewers process the information presented in the apology in an appropriate manner (Fransen, Smit and Verlegh, 2015). Suggestions for reducing persuasion knowledge activation in response to charity communications given in past literature have included (i) the incorporation within a message of striking pictures plus high visual salience via the use of vivid colour (given that members of the public expect to see certain forms of advertisement design [Brüns and Meißner, 2023]), and (ii) embedding a communication within a suitable contextual environment (Evans and Park, 2015). Another device for reducing persuasion knowledge activation might involve the provision of an online link within an apology that leads to a webpage which offers more complete and useful information. According to Beckert, Koch, Viererbl and Schulz-Knappe (2020), persuasion knowledge activation may be reduced by blending persuasive messages with other content, reducing content clutter, and transparency about the true nature of an issue. Absence of transparency can result in viewers assuming a hidden and ulterior motive

underlying a message. Of itself, the delivery of high-quality content that resonates with the target audience can minimise the likelihood of activation, as can the selection of suitable media for the transmission of a persuasive message (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022). Where it is possible, the inclusion within a message of an endorsement by a well-known celebrity or other influential person might greatly reduce the incidence of persuasion knowledge activation (Willemsen, Withuis, Brom and Boerman, 2024).

The results contribute to general communication management in a number of ways. Failure to manage a crisis can exacerbate its negative effects and significantly damage its reputation, and apologies delivered in a timely manner can effectively help restore trust and mitigate reputational damage (Georgiadou, 2023). Findings from the present study offer an understanding of key elements that may constitute a sound apology; components which, according to Bentley and Ma (2020), have remained elusive. Coombs and Holladay (2008) observed how, within the field of crisis communication, apologies have "overwhelmingly" been found to be the best response to a crisis because they are "less accommodative response strategies than denial, excuse or justification" (p. 287). Properly constructed apologies using appropriate themes (e.g., guilt or shame) can, through impression management, enhance an organisation's legitimacy, improve its image, and reinforce its accountability (Li, Li, Chen and Wei, 2023). They can help to shape how members of the public perceive a crisis situation such as the one described in the current investigation (cf. Coombs and Holladay, 2010). Li et al (2023) characterised apologies as a natural fit with crisis communications as they call forth a defence against reputational attacks.

From a communications management perspective it is relevant to note that, in line with the findings of the present study, past research has found that apologies have the potential to constitute a key component of crisis communication strategy and one that is capable of minimising negative public perceptions and helping to regain public trust (Bentley,

2018). Indeed, by taking responsibility and expressing regret for errant behaviour, apologies may be the fastest and most convincing way of reaching a charity's target audience (Bentley, George and Lambiase, 2021), might facilitate the maintenance of positive relationships with actual and potential donors, and could demonstrate the organisation's accountability and commitment to improvement and generally benefit the organisation's image (Coombs and Holladay, 2008). Also, effective apologies may represent a less costly tool for protecting a charity's reputation than certain other public relations devices (Georgiadou, 2023). Organisational communications that emphasise a desire to do better in the future can make the public believe that the organisation is fundamentally sound and that it will not repeat the offense for which it is apologising (Bentley and Ma, 2020). Chung and Lee (2021) suggested that an apology "can be an appropriate communication tool from an ethical perspective", considering that a communication admitting the organisation's fault and expressing concern for affected groups may, through correcting a negative situation and obtaining forgiveness, be "an optimum approach to meet the critical demand from various publics" through demonstrating the organisation's "ethical authenticity" (p. 130). In summary, apologies used as a tool of communication management can, if delivered genuinely and appropriately, significantly influence relationships by demonstrating accountability, repairing trust, and fostering open communication (Coombs and Holladay, 2008).

10.1 Limitations and caveats

Only two differently worded apologies were offered to the sample members, each containing a strong emphasis on a specific promotion or prevention approach. Consequently, the investigation did not include apologies incorporating neutral conditions, or "mixed" conditions that incorporated both promotion focused and prevention focused elements. The participants viewed the apologies within an "artificial" setting as part of an academic investigation, not in real life media environments. Hence, the generalisation of the results is

desirable across different types of apologies involving dissimilar types of charity, various forms of organisational misbehaviour, and disparate levels of emotional intensity that errant charities hope to create within messages. Additional moderating influences could be included in future studies. Future research might also incorporate field experiments, which offer increased ecological validity and hence findings that are more generalizable to real-world situations. Field experiments are conducted in natural settings thus minimizing the influence of artificial laboratory environments (Baldassarri and Abascal, 2017). Participants are often unaware that they are being studied and this reduces the possibility of biased results due to the influence of participants' knowledge of a study's purpose. On the other hand, researchers have less control over extraneous variables in field experiments compared to laboratory situations.

The research was completed in a single country using a single participant sample and a single questionnaire. Replications in other countries would be valuable, as would the application of alternative scales and/or multi-method approaches designed to capture donation intention plus trust repair considerations not revealed by the present study. It would also be worthwhile to extend the analysis to a longitudinal investigation to help determine if initial acceptance translates into long-term donor behaviour. Moreover, since the findings suggest that variables such as trait forgiveness and charity donation history have complex roles that may differ with respect to how messages are framed, future research might develop a more detailed model that includes additional moderating variables (e.g., crisis severity, media influence, or pre-crisis organisational reputation).

Although trust repair is a core objective of an organisation's apology (see Lewicki, Polin and Lount, 2016), it was not possible to explore the contribution of an apology to trust restoration within the confines of the present study. Future research could usefully examine in some depth the capacity of a charity's apology to enhance public assessments of trust in the

organisation (cf. Hornsey et al., 2024). For instance, is an emphasis on longer-term reform of the charity's actions more effective for improving trust than admissions of culpability? Are trust violations related more to perceived incompetence than to perceptions of ethical transgressions? What other considerations might affect the impact of an apology on trust, e.g., length of explanation of an event, remorse, or restitution (cf. Yang, 2024). Will an apology persuade readers that a wrongdoing charity is worthy of trust going forward?

APPENDIX. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

About yourself

Unless otherwise stated all items were measured using five-point Likert agree/disagree scales

Charity donation experience

In the last year, how many times have you made a charitable donation?

☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-4 ☐ 5-6 ☐ 7 or more

How much money have you donated to charities in the past 12 months? ☐ £0 ☐ £1-£50 ☐ £51-£100 ☐ £101-£500 ☐ £501-£1000 ☐ More than £1000

General

Age category: 18-27; 28-37; 38-47; 48-57; 58-67; 68-77; over 77

Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ☐ Prefer not to say

Highest qualification on leaving education: ☐ High school ☐ Bachelor's ☐ Master's ☐ Doctorate ☐ Other

Compared to other people I would say that I am financially: very well off; quite well off; about the same as most other people; less well off; much less well off

Persuasion knowledge activation (based on Ham et al., 2015; Boerman et al., 2023; Karagür et al., 2022). Lambda = 7.0, alpha = .80.

This apology:

Raises suspicions that the message has an ulterior motive

Aims more to stimulate financial donations than to provide useful information

Tries to hide manipulative tactics that underlie its purpose

Simply aims to influence favourably my opinion of the charity rather than to provide useful information

Attempts to manipulate viewers in ways I do not like

Inappropriately attempts to control viewers' thoughts

Is little more than manipulative marketing

Tries to trick viewers into believing that the charity is genuinely addressing the problem

Is designed to persuade rather than to offer a genuine apology

Was created deliberately to misrepresent the situation to the public

Regulatory focus (adapted from Lockwood et al., 2002; Fellner et al., 2007)

Promotion focus. Lambda = 6.9, alpha = .79.

Overall, I am more oriented toward achieving success than preventing failure

I frequently think about how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations

My major goal in life is to achieve my ambitions

I often imagine myself experiencing good things that I hope will happen to me in life

In general, I am focused on achieving positive outcomes in my life

I set myself goals which I am confident I will achieve

Changes make my life thrilling and worth living

In an uncertain situation, I tend to "go for it" and take the risk.

It is very important to me that I am satisfied with myself, regardless of what other people think

I like trying out lots of new and different things, and am usually successful in doing so

Prevention focus. Lambda = 6.7, alpha = .77.

My major goal in life is to avoid becoming a failure

I often feel anxious that I will fall short of my responsibilities and obligations

In general, I am focused on preventing negative events in my life.

I often worry that I will fail to accomplish my goals

I often think about bad things that I fear might happen to me

I am more oriented toward preventing losses than I am toward achieving gains

I often think about the person I am afraid I might become in the future

As a rule, I try to avoid risk as far as possible

I tend to feel uncomfortable in new, unfamiliar situations

I try to avoid changes in my life as far as possible

Scepticism towards charity advertising in general (based on Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998).
Lambda = 5.5, alpha = .84.

I cannot depend on getting the truth from charity advertisements (RS)

Charity advertisements are rarely reliable sources of information about the quality and performance of the advertising charity (RS)

I feel I am accurately informed by the messages contained in charity advertisements

Charity advertising is in general truthful and believable

Charity advertisements are interesting and informative

After viewing a charity advertisement, I rarely feel that I have been fully and properly briefed about the situations the charity deals with (RS)

Charity advertisements are little more than propaganda (RS)

Trait forgiveness (adapted from Berry et al., 2005; Toussaint and Webb, 2005; Atav et al., 2021). Lambda = 4.8, alpha = .78.

I can forgive other people for almost anything

I have usually forgiven those who have hurt me

Forgiving people gives me a warm feeling inside

People close to me say I tend to hold a grudge for too long (RS)

I try to forgive others even when they do not feel guilty about what they did

I find it difficult to forgive and forget an insult (RS)

Dependent variables (adapted from Santelli et al., 2009; Atav et al., 2021; Karagür et al., 2022; Boerman et al., 2023). See text for diagnostics.

I am not likely to donate to the charity (RS)

I am likely to recommend the charity to other people

I am inclined to accept the apology

I found the apology: honest; irritating (RS); credible; convincing; sincere; persuasive.

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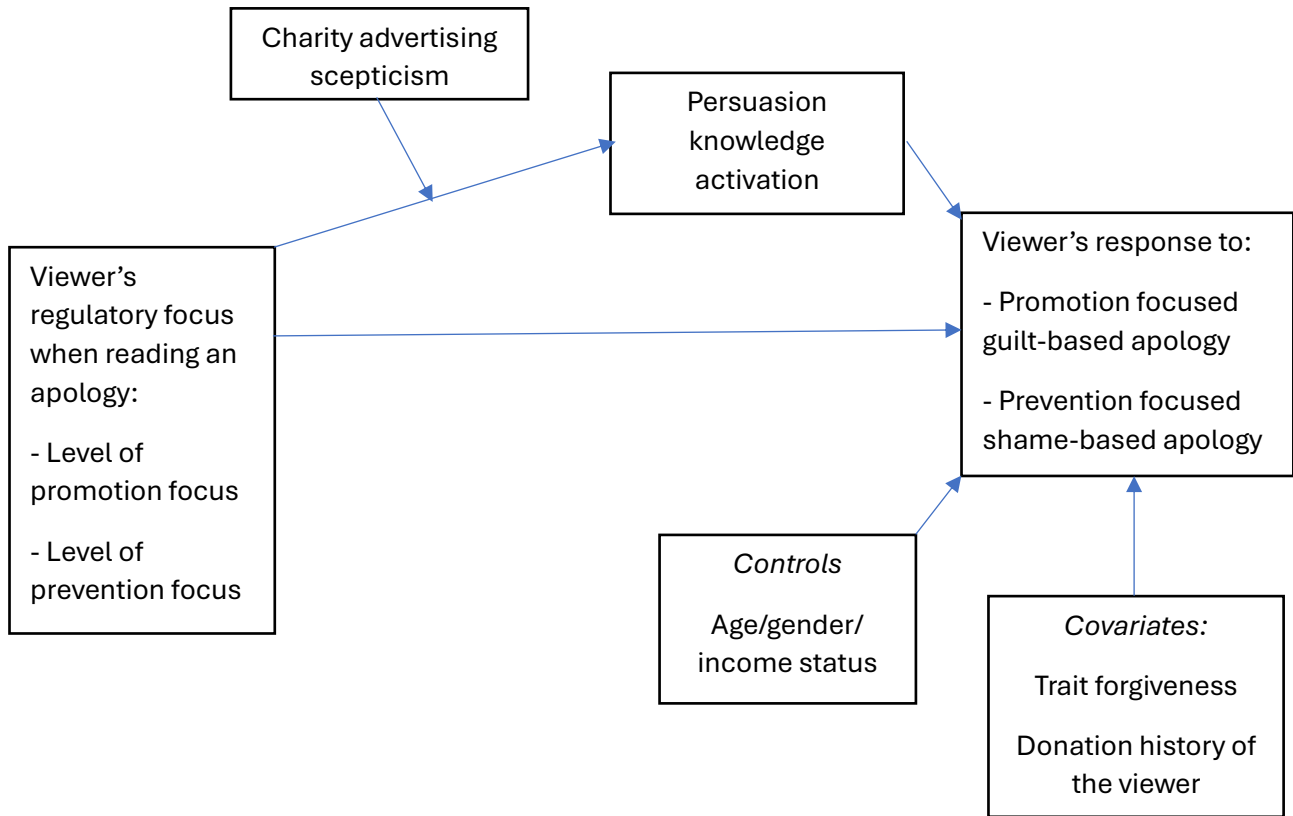
Figure 1

The Model

Table 1

Correlations

		Promotion focus score	Prevention focus score
Willing to accept the apology	Shown guilt apology	.43 (2.02)*	.11 (0.09)
	Shown shame apology	-.34 (2.04)*	.22 (2.19)*
Likes the apology	Shown guilt apology	.44 (2.55)*	.14 (1.12)
	Shown shame apology	-.36 (1.99)*	.39 (2.22)*
Intends to donate to the charity	Shown guilt apology	.09 (0.09)	.06 (1.00)
	Shown shame apology	.05 (0.88)	.05 (.09)
Persuasion knowledge activation	Shown guilt apology	.12 (1.10)	.21 (2.01)*
	Shown shame apology	.28 (2.27)*	.47 (3.03)**

t-values in parentheses. *Indicates significance at the .05 level, ** at the .01 level.

Table 2A

Test of the Model: Effects of Participants' Prevention Focus Score Among People Shown the Shame-Based Apology

Column A: Dependent variable of the regression is "Inclination to accept the apology"

Column B: Dependent variable of the regression is "General liking of the apology"

Column C: Dependent variable of the regression is "Donation intention"

	Persuasion knowledge activation			Dependent variables		
	A	B	C	Inclination to accept the apology	General liking of the apology	Donation intention
Prevention focus score	.51 (4.34)***	.44 (3.99)***	.39 (2.99)**	.30 (2.22)*	.26 (2.04)*	.10 (0.99)
Persuasion knowledge activation				-.32 (2.99)**	-.22 (1.99)*	-.13 (1.35)
Trait forgiveness				.27 (2.00)*	.08 (1.16)	.06 (0.88)
Frequency of donations				.25 (2.58)**	.09 (0.77)	.06 (0.91)
Annual amount of donations				.27 (2.11)*	.19 (1.11)	.12 (1.26)

Charity advertising scepticism x prevention focus score	.02 (2.29)*	.02 (3.00)**	.01 (2.02)*			
R-square	.41	.39	.37	.58	0.44	0.14
Overall indirect effect				.40 (3.69)***	.35 (2.86)**	.29 (2.00)*

t-values in parentheses. *Indicates significance at the .05 level; ** at the .01 level; ***at the .001 level.

Table 2B

Test of the Model: Effects of Participants' Prevention Focus Score Among People Shown the Guilt-Based Apology

	Persuasion knowledge activation			Dependent variables		
	A	B	C	Inclination to accept the apology	General liking of the apology	Donation intention
Prevention focus score	.21 (1.99)*	.23 (2.11)*	.20 (2.00)*	.23 (2.30)*	.14 (1.44)	.10 (1.20)
Persuasion knowledge activation				-.31 (2.77)**	-.33 (3.00)**	-.14 (1.44)
Trait forgiveness				.22 (2.25)*	.09 (1.47)	.11 (1.22)
Frequency of donations				.23 (2.00)*	.16 (1.16)	.09 (.08)
Annual amount of donations				.30 (2.59)**	.14 (1.33)	.11 (1.00)
Charity advertising scepticism x prevention focus score	.02 (2.68)**	.02 (3.00)**	.02 (2.45)*			
R-square	.28	.25	.22	.52	0.27	0.12
Overall indirect effect				.48 (3.76)***	.29 (2.00)*	.08 (0.10)

t-values in parentheses. *Indicates significance at the .05 level; ** at the .01 level; ***at the .001 level.

Table 2C

Test of the Model: Effects of Participants' Promotion Focus Score Among People Shown the Guilt-Based Apology

	Persuasion knowledge activation			Dependent variables		
	A	B	C	Inclination to accept the apology	General liking of the apology	Donation intention
Promotion focus score	.12 (1.12)	.16 (0.09)	.11 (1.12)	.33 (3.00)**	.30 (2.88)**	.12 (1.11)
Persuasion knowledge activation				-.20 (2.00)*	-.22 (2.00)*	.09 (0.09)
Trait forgiveness				.34 (3.45)***	.11 (1.11)	.13 (1.06)
Frequency of donations				.22 (2.83)**	.05 (0.56)	.09 (0.09)
Annual amount of donations				.25 (2.55)*	1.00 (1.00)	.10 (1.00)
Charity advertising scepticism x promotion score	.01 (2.00)*	.01 (1.98)*	.01 (2.22)*			
R-square	.16	.12	.15	.61	.45	.09
Overall indirect effect				.38 (3.09)**	.33 (3.00)**	.12 (1.38)

t-values in parentheses. *Indicates significance at the .05 level; ** at the .01 level; ***at the .001 level.

Table 2D

Test of the Model: Effects of Participants' Promotion Focus Score Among People Shown the Shame-Based Apology

	Persuasion knowledge activation			Dependent variables		
	A	B	C	Inclination to accept the apology	General liking of the apology	Donation intention
Promotion focus score	.21 (1.99)*	.24 (2.11)*	.19 (1.98)*	.16 (1.77)	.16 (1.44)	.08 (0.08)
Persuasion knowledge activation				-.33 (3.77)***	-.33 (3.05)*	-.10 (1.00)
Trait forgiveness				.27 (2.22)*	.12 (1.24)	.06 (0.05)
Frequency of donations				.29 (3.00) **	.09 (.09)	.11 (1.15)
Annual amount of donations				.21 (1.99)*	.13 (1.33)	.09 (1.00)
Charity advertising scepticism x promotion score	.01 (2.00)*	.01 (2.01)*	.01 (2.00)*			
R-square	.18	.22	.21	.39	.16	.06
Overall indirect effect				.30 (3.00)**	.23 (2.00)*	.08 (.09)

t-values in parentheses. *Indicates significance at the .05 level; ** at the .01 level; ***at the .001 level.