

**Communicating Apologies Effectively:**  
**An Experimental Study Examining How Apology Elements and Communication Mediums**  
**Influence Forgiveness**

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### **Abstract**

After a relational transgression, the offender may apologize to maintain the relationship and attain forgiveness from the transgression-receiver. This study investigated how apology elements and communication mediums may impact the extent to which a transgression may be forgiven. Using a 2X2 experiment examining effective apology elements (apology elements present vs. apology elements absent) and communication mediums (face-to-face vs. texting), this study examined the extent to which the offender would receive forgiveness after a hypothetical transgression committed by a friend. Nine hundred and forty-four ( $N = 944$ ) participants responded to an online survey that randomized the type of apology that they would receive from a friend after the transgression. Results indicated that a face-to-face apology with the effective apology elements encouraged higher levels of forgiveness in comparison to a text apology without the effective apology elements. A face-to-face apology with the effective apology elements did not significantly differ in forgiveness from a text apology with the effective apology elements, suggesting that apology quality is more important than the medium in which the apology is communicated.

Keywords: apologies; effective apology elements; communication mediums; forgiveness

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As humans, we are bound to experience conflict with the people around us at one point or another. These conflicts can come in the form of arguments, internal feelings, or outward behaviors (Brehmer, 1976). With each set of individuals in a situation hoping to reconcile, someone is constructing an apology with hopes of gaining forgiveness from the person that they upset. Apologies are defined as “admissions of blameworthiness and regret for an undesirable event” (Schlenker & Darby, 1981, p. 275). This prompts us to the idea that apologies may be more than accountability and reconciliation, but rather a means to save face, and preserve an untainted opinion that one has of us, more than making the hurt party feel better. Often, apologies can be posed in a ritualistic manner to fulfill a societal expectation (Kotani, 2002). Regardless of why an apology is presented, they are a source of reconciliation and are crucial for relationship sustainability (Fraser, 1981). Apologies serve a purpose of balance in society as a means of social norm, and they are an expected behavior when things go wrong (Smith, 2009). It is this expectation that leads to the lingering feeling of negativity, hurtfulness, and anger in the victim when they do not receive an apology. Before one can take the steps to address someone with an apology, one must first understand the communication mediums by which this exchange would be most successful. By understanding which communication medium leads to higher success in achieving forgiveness, we can strategically design and conduct our apologies during conflict resolution. In an age where communication is no longer conducted solely face-to-face but also computer-mediated (i.e., text messaging), it is important to understand the implications these mediums can have on relationship management. Thus, the purpose of this study is to

analyze how effective apology elements and communication mediums may impact the likelihood of attaining forgiveness after a relational transgression.

### **Effective Apology Elements**

Apologies serve as a pivotal step in reconciliation. They carry the power to show acknowledgment and care for an act committed against someone. To understand how to use apologies to achieve forgiveness, we must first understand apologies and the emotional impact that they carry. Apologies not only serve to create reconciliation on behalf of the person providing it, but the act itself is understood as a social norm. Not only does a lack of apology leave the offended feeling hurt, but it also causes them to challenge their morals and values as accountability is understood as a social expectation (Kotani, 2002). The various aspect of these apologies plays a role in the effectiveness of the words and the probability of achieving forgiveness. Bippus and Young (2019) describe eight elements of apologies and state that effective apologies include these eight elements. The first three elements are a *clear statement framing the apology*, an *expression of regret or sadness*, and an *identification of the offense*. These three elements work to address the act committed and reflect acknowledgment to the victim. The next four elements are an *acknowledgment of responsibility*, an *explanation for why the offense occurred*, a *promise that it will not reoccur*, and an *offer of repair* to reflect the importance of the relationship and how the offender will behave in order to repair the relationship. The final remaining element is a *request for forgiveness*. In combination, these eight elements can address a variety of transgressions and reflect that the apology serves a significant importance in maintaining the relationship (Bippus & Young, 2019). The authors conclude by stating that offenders can do more damage to their relationship if they leave the victim's

expectations unmet; thus, suggesting that the utilization of these elements in an apology is imperative.

Ultimately, an apology that includes these elements should be more effective in gaining forgiveness compared to an apology that does not include these elements (Bippus & Young, 2019). When the effective elements are included, an apology has the opportunity to address various aspects of an offense and achieve forgiveness through this act of accountability and reported promise for change. Therefore, hypothesis one posits:

H1: Compared with an apology that does not include the effective apology elements, participants will report greater forgiveness for an apology that does include the effective apology elements.

### **Communication Mediums**

After a transgression, people may choose to apologize in a number of different ways. In doing so, there may be outlying factors that influence the effectiveness of the apology. There has been research that has examined the importance of the timing of an apology after a transgression (Frantz & Bennigson, 2004), the role of personality as it works with forgiveness (Kaleta & Mroz, 2021), and the role of the communication medium when building relationships with others (Walther, 1996). Frantz and Bennigson (2004) reported that delayed apologies were more effective because the victim had more time to feel heard and understood. Other studies have taken a look at how variables like personality can affect the acceptance of an apology as well. The findings of Kaleta and Mroz (2021), share that agreeable people tend to be more trusting and empathetic and are prone to forgiveness in an attempt to keep the peace during interpersonal conflict.

The medium chosen, such as face-to-face (FTF) or text, to communicate an apology may also impact how an the apology is perceived. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to the practice of communication through any form of computer-based technology, such as texting, email, and social media (Dietz-Uhler & Bishop-Clark, pg. 269, 2001). This mode of communication is rapidly growing in today's world with people wanting more access to timely communication, mobile utility, and accessibility. Communication mediums have been found to create challenges in interpersonal relationships and concern management. Little is left said on the effectiveness of FTF apologies versus CMC, and the likelihood of achieving forgiveness based on these mediums. It is important to evaluate the implications of various communication mediums in apology effectiveness as the age of technology introduces relationship management in new ways like never before. In Jin and Park's study (2010), the researchers found that adults utilize cell phones with social motives. These motives are to create companionship, affection, utility, and communication. If we can learn how to utilize technology and meet communication expectations during conflict, we can utilize technology to manage these conflicts and provide apologies in a way that is sustainable for the trend of our society.

Walther (1996) discusses how the increased mode of CMC directly affects interpersonal interactions. Through the interpersonal CMC model, parties are interested in the mutual goal of developing social relationships. This model highlights intimate communication styles within the relationship. Those involved in this model are commonly sharing personal information, collaborating on strategic ideas, and over time, conveying various levels of personal information to curate a close tie. It is important to note that Walther (1996) suggests that although these parties communicate through CMC, they develop interpersonal relationships with the same amount of social information as FTF communication. However, the rate at which the information

is shared between parties is significantly slower (Walther, 1996). This rate of information trade affects the relationship by the dissonance created from missing cues such as tone of voice, body language, and rate of reaction to information shared (Walther, 1996). Because of these delays, interpersonal parties may not have the time needed to adequately manage task and relational concerns, ultimately leading to clarification conflicts. Considering this, we believe that a text (CMC) apology would be inadequate for achieving forgiveness compared to an FTF apology because in-person interaction allows for visual, verbal, and non-verbal cues that cannot be displayed or sensed via text (Walther, 1996).

Thus, hypothesis two posits:

H2: Compared to a text apology that includes effective apology elements, participants will report greater forgiveness for a face-to-face apology that does not include effective apology elements.

Moreover, Novak and colleagues (2016) examined how CMC and FTF differ in both form and function. Their study suggested that CMC communication led to negative forms of communication more often than FTF as there were decreased levels of connection and communicated emotions. This means that the couples studied reported that they were more likely to argue, speak rudely to each other, and lack affectionate connections compared to couples who conducted most of their communication FTF. Ultimately, the researchers discovered that couples who utilized CMC to address serious topics including apologies and expression of affection found that the impact of this behavior was more detrimental to the relationship than utilizing FTF mediums. Taking this into account, we believe that communicated apologies that include effective apology elements (Bippus & Young, 2019) will lead to a higher likeliness of achieving forgiveness compared to text apologies that do not contain the elements.

Thus, hypothesis three posits:

H3: Compared to a text apology that does not include effective apology elements, participants will report greater forgiveness for a face-to-face apology that includes effective apology elements.

Apologies that contain the elements suggested by Bippus and Young (2019) show to have increased levels of achieving forgiveness. Because these elements encompass an acknowledgment of the transgression and the promise for reconciliation and changed behavior. In a study conducted by Yamamoto and others (2021), researchers found a significant relationship between facial displays of apology and how it related to being understood as sincere. The study references that various research has indicated that nonverbal responses including a display of sadness or changing facial movements serve to enhance an apology's effectiveness and lead the receiver to report greater levels of sincerity and acceptance. Moreover, nonverbal cues are further discussed in Shlenker and Darby (1981) as they researched and concluded that in social settings, it is an "inappropriate response to walk away from a transgression without doing anything" (pg. 275). This result further supports the idea that when something goes wrong, it is socially expected to then address the situation to reduce harm and increase the possibility of forgiveness. The connections between offender and receiver in times of apology assist in the likelihood of achieving forgiveness as the receiver is more inclined to forgive after noticing displays of remorse, regretful tone, and active verbal and nonverbal cues. Given these findings, FTF experiences may invoke deeper emotion with the receiver, which may lead to a higher chance of forgiveness. When tying in all of these parts, it is important to study how the intersectionality of communication mediums and apology elements affect the likelihood of forgiveness.



Thus, hypothesis four posits:

H4: Compared to a text apology that does not include effective apology elements, participants will report greater forgiveness for a face-to-face apology that does not include effective apology elements.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were comprised of 944 individuals. The participants consisted of 472 men, 457 women, 7 nonbinary/third gender, and 5 participants who preferred not to answer (2 selected “other”). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 74 years. Among these participants, 754 participants identified as White/Caucasian, 48 participants identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 18 participants identified as Black/African American, 66 participants identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 14 participants identified as Native American, 9 participants identified as Middle Eastern, 17 participants who chose not to report their ethnicity, and 18 participants who preferred not to answer (18 selected “other”). When asked about their highest degree level, there were 17 participants with less than a High School diploma, 74 with a High School diploma or higher, 208 having some college experience but no degree, 175 with an Associate’s Degree, 283 with a Bachelor’s Degree, 119 with a Master’s Degree, 47 with a Professional Degree, and 21 with a Doctorate Degree.

### **Procedures**

This study was a 2x2 experiment that analyzed different apology conditions and how they influenced perceptions of forgiveness. Data was collected using an IRB-approved online survey. The survey was posted to online forums including Facebook, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Instagram. After participants provided their ages and agreed to participate in the study, they were asked to

read a hypothetical scenario. The scenario was adapted from Frantz and Bennis (2004) that described a scenario of a friend named Chris (See Appendix A). In this scenario, Chris arrives home after a bad baseball game and completely forgets about the plans that he has with his friend (i.e., the participant). The participant then learns that the next day not only did Chris not reach out to them regarding their plans but that Chris also went to a party with different friends. After reading this, survey participants read one of five possible apologies: *FTF with Apology Elements Present*, *FTF with Apology Elements Absent*, *Text with Apology Elements Present*, *Text with Apology Elements Absent*, and *No Apology (i.e., Control condition)*. The apologies were created for this study (See Appendix A). The control condition did not present an apology to the participant after reading the offense scenario. Depending on the randomly assigned apology, participants were prompted to reflect on their forgiveness response to Chris' transgression using the TRIM-18 scale (McCullough, 2006). Lastly, students provided their demographic information.

## **Instrumentation**

### **TRIM-18 Scale**

In this study, we utilized the TRIM-18 scale (McCullough, 2006) to measure the extent to which the participants would forgive Chris for the relational transgression. This scale is applied as a seven-point Likert-type scale with items ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example elements of the scale include "I'll make him pay," "I'm going to get even," and "I will avoid him." Each of these elements serve the purpose of measuring the level of forgiveness the participant is willing to give our scenario transgressor, Chris after he issues an apology. Negatively-worded items were reverse-coded so that higher values reflected higher levels of forgiveness.

## Results

Hypothesis one predicted that there would be differences in forgiveness in response to apologies that include elements of an effective apology over apologies that do not contain these elements. Results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that there were significant overall effects between the conditions,  $F(4, 926) = 14.222, p < .001$ . Games-Howell post hoc comparisons revealed that FTF apologies that contained all effective elements ( $M = 4.619$ ) had significantly higher reported forgiveness compared to FTF apologies that did not contain the effective elements ( $M = 4.258$ ). Moreover, text apologies that contained all effective elements ( $M = 4.591$ ) had significantly higher reported forgiveness compared to text apologies that did not contain the effective elements ( $M = 4.130$ ). Therefore, H1 was supported.

Hypothesis two predicted that a text apology containing effective apology elements would have less achievement of forgiveness compared to a face-to-face apology that does not contain all of the effective elements of an apology simply because it is conducted in person. Results of an ANOVA indicated that there were significant overall effects between the conditions,  $F(4, 926) = 14.222, p < .001$ . Games-Howell post hoc comparisons revealed that a FTF apology that lacked the effective elements ( $M = 4.258$ ) was significantly less likely to achieve forgiveness than a text apology containing the effective apology elements ( $M = 4.591$ ). Therefore, H2 was not supported.

Hypothesis three predicted that a FTF apology containing all effective elements would achieve forgiveness at a higher level than a text apology that did not contain the effective elements. Results of an ANOVA illustrated significant overall effects,  $F(4, 926) = 14.222, p < .001$ . Games-Howell post hoc comparisons revealed that FTF apologies that contained all effective elements ( $M = 4.619$ ) had significantly higher chances of achieving forgiveness

compared to a text apology that did not contain the elements ( $M = 4.130$ ). Therefore, H3 was supported.

Hypothesis four predicted that text apologies that did not include effective apology elements would be less likely to achieve forgiveness in comparison to FTF apologies that do not include effective apology elements. Results of an ANOVA illustrated significant overall effects,  $F(4, 926) = 14.222, p < 0.615$ . Games-Howell post hoc comparisons revealed that FTF apologies that did not contain all effective elements ( $M = 4.258$ ) did not significantly differ in forgiveness compared to text apologies that did not contain the effective elements ( $M = 4.130$ ). Therefore, H4 was not supported.

Games-Howell post hoc comparisons revealed that the “no apology” control condition ( $M = 4.0482$ ) was significantly less likely in achieving forgiveness in comparison to conditions of the FTF apology with apology elements present ( $M=4.619$ ) and the text apology with apology elements present ( $M = 4.591$ ). Moreover, the text apology with apology elements absent condition ( $M = 4.130$ ) and the FTF apology with apology elements absent ( $M = 4.258$ ) did not significantly differ in the reports of forgiveness when compared to the “no apology” control condition.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we found results that further support Bippus and Young’s (2019) study on the effective elements of apology and the role they play in achieving forgiveness. Our results demonstrate that apologies containing these elements ranked the highest in the likeliness of achieving forgiveness. When comparing the results among the five conditions, the communication medium was not the most impactful variable that affected the likelihood of forgiveness. When the right words are used in an apology, it can effectively express an

understanding that events have occurred that have broken trust (Lewicki, 2016). The expression of this understanding can serve as a comfort, a sign of respect, and a request for forgiveness. When adequately addressing the victim with an apology that includes effective elements, the transgressor has an opportunity to perform interpersonal obligations of respect and relationship conservation (Lewicki, 2016). According to the findings, the aspects of an effective apology seem to be influential in attaining forgiveness rather than the communication medium.

These findings are particularly interesting due to the previously proposed research that may suggest otherwise. In Jin and Park (2010), the researchers highlight the importance of face-to-face interactions in adding depth of connection within a relationship. Additionally, authors Yamamoto and colleagues (2021) deduced that nonverbal, in-person behaviors, directly affect the sincerity of emotion behind interpersonal resolution practices. And although our overall data supports that apology elements play a more important role in forgiveness, it is still important to note that FTF communication mediums were (slightly) more likely to achieve forgiveness than their computer-mediated counterparts (although these differences are very small and were not statistically significant in this study's sample).

When discussing the implications of the results, it is important to note that these findings provide a direction for future research. With the prior research suggesting that apology elements play a direct role in forgiveness and the reported findings that show well-produced apologies are most effective when given FTF; future research can further analyze these variables in different ways. This perception of social motives behind computer-mediated communication is crucial as the results found from our study can have implications on the way that people choose to communicate with one another while using this means of communication. If we know that CMC via text messaging can have the same weight of influence as FTF communication, it suggests that

technology provides the same opportunities in interpersonal relationship maintenance when using apologies. From this study, it may be that conflicts similar to the proposed scenario can be resolved via text just as effectively as sitting down in person with a friend as long as the communication contains the effective elements as described by Bippus and Young (2019).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although this study gathered valuable findings, it is not without its limitations. Primarily, this study focused on a friendship scenario with a male (Chris) as the offender. In a study by Schumann and Ross (2010), the researchers discovered that women, on average, tend to apologize more than men. It may be that women perceive offenses at greater severity levels compared to men. Moreover, the limitation that Chris is a male may produce a different natural first response. Taking Schumann and Ross's (2010) study into consideration, the roles of gender in relationship conflict can lead to different understandings of a scenario and the depth of an offense. An second limitation is the idea that this scenario was based on a platonic friendship in order to focus on only one type of interpersonal relationship context. Future research should examine how apology elements work with communication mediums in other relationship contexts such as workplace, romantic, or family. With each relationship type, there may be different motives for apology and forgiveness that researchers may wish to examine.

The third limitation is that the majority of our participants were white American men and women. As Kotani (2002) shares, different cultures function and produce communication in very different ways. With our participation pool comprised of a majority of White/Caucasian men and women with some sort of higher educational degree, we are unable to represent a larger, more diverse sample. The way these participants process conflict, grant forgiveness, and access computer-mediated communication outlets may differ as well. For this, it would be important

that future studies strategically distribute their survey among diverse population groups to gather results with a more culturally inclusive pool. A fourth limitation is the range within various age groups. With CMC gaining traction in the last 20 years (Walther 1996), we face differing considerations of CMC versus FTF communication. With the majority of our participants ranging from 19-38 years, there is a potential for there to be generational differences from participants who are older and were not raised alongside CMC technology.

It is with this overarching theme of face-to-face communication success that a recommendation for future studies could look deeper into the medium of face-to-face communication. Even though some results were not statistically significant, face-to-face ranked highest in forgiveness achievement every time (even if only slightly). It may be that the act of apologizing in person (even if it is a bad apology) conveys a message of commitment when compared to a quick text message apology. Walther (1996) suggests that for humans to feel each other's emotions in conversations, displays of response, and clarity in message, it is best to be FTF. This claim further suggests the importance of gathering more research to navigate ourselves through an age of digital communication. Understanding what elements work better in FTF and CMC may serve as the insight needed to better improve interpersonal communication with the various relationships in our lives.

### **Conclusion**

While reflecting on the meaning of forgiveness, McCullough (2008) shares that forgiveness is used as a means of keeping cooperative relationships intact. He further suggests that forgiveness by the receiver leads to fewer feelings of vengefulness, bitterness, and anger towards the aggressor. Forgiveness is important to our society as it allows us to remove our negative emotions towards one another and replace ill will with reconciliation, wishes for the

best, or simply a release of anger. This study highlights the findings in apology effectiveness between various communication mediums that both contain and lack, Bippus and Young's (2019) apology elements, and their relationship in achieving forgiveness after an apology is given. Our findings suggest that in the event an apology is needed, it is in the transgressor's best interest to conduct an apology that includes all the effective elements more so than focusing on the medium to which this apology is communicated. Additionally, we found that the combination of effective elements of apology (Bippus and Young 2019) and FTF communication led to the highest reports of forgiveness toward the transgressor. With the addition of these findings to the communication community, we are one step closer to knowing what it takes to repair relationship more effectively, and ultimately, keep the peace in our friendships.



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## Appendix A

*One Friday night, you were waiting in your dorm room for your close friend Chris to get back from his baseball game. The two of you had made plans earlier in the week to go see a movie you had heard was really good, and later go to a party on campus. Chris was supposed to show up around 9:00pm when he got back from the game with his team, but sometimes games ran a little later. At around 8:30pm, your roommates all left to go to an on-campus party and asked you to join them. It sounded like fun to you, but you knew you could not just break the plans you had made with Chris. You were ready at 9:00pm and ended up waiting until 10:30pm, until it was clear that either something was wrong or he had forgotten. The next day, you learned from a mutual friend that Chris had been out partying from 8:30pm on.*

## Appendix B

### **Apology with Effective Elements Present:**

*Hey, I am so sorry for missing our plans last night. My game ended around 8:30pm and I played so badly that my mind was not in the right place when I got home. I was so frustrated with my poor performance that I was not thinking about anything. I completely forgot about our plans to go to see the movie. It is my fault for forgetting about our plans. I feel terrible knowing that I stood you up and regret being so forgetful. From now on, I am going to put reminders in my phone to help keep track of my plans and find better ways to get back in the right frame of mind after a bad game. I cannot let my game frustrations affect my relationships with the people I care about. I promise that I will not miss our plans again. I want to make it up to you. If you are free next Friday, I want to take you to see that new movie because I know how much you want to see it. Do you think you can forgive me and give me another chance?*

### **Apology with Effective Elements Absent:**

*Hey, are you mad about last night? Yeah sorry. My game ended around 8:30pm and when I got home, I left for a party 10 minutes later. By the time I was at the party and remembered the plans, it was too late to text you and I figured you were already asleep. But if you were still up, it is your fault because you should have texted me to remind me. The party was awesome. I needed to decompress with the guys after a tough game. You should really come next time. Don't be mad at me for not texting you about our plans. I was not even thinking after I had such a bad game. It was seriously one of the worst games I have ever had and I am just glad I was able to get out for a little instead of sitting at home being mad at myself. I know we didn't get to see that new movie we said we wanted to, but we can do something else another time. Look, you know I am bad at time management, so don't be mad at me, okay?*