

Apologia as a Crisis Communication Strategy: A Case Study of IBEDC'S Public Engagements

Atinuke Ibironke FANIMOKUN & Dr. Alade MOYOSORE

Redeemer University, Akoda, Ede, Osun State

orobodeatinuke@gmail.com

08068489738

Abstract

This study investigates how corporate organisations, particularly the Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company (IBEDC), utilize apologia strategies to manage public perception. Guided by Benoit's Image Repair Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the research aimed to examine the nature, implementation, and effectiveness of apologia strategies in restoring trust and maintaining corporate reputation. A mixed-method research design was employed, comprising qualitative in-depth interviews with five IBEDC communication personnel and quantitative content analysis of 41 apologia press statements and interviews from various corporate entities in Nigeria and other countries. Data collection instruments included an interview guide for qualitative responses and coding sheets for content analysis. NVivo 12 was used for thematic analysis of interview data, while descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) was used for the content analysis. The study found that IBEDC predominantly employed bolstering, corrective action, differentiation, and mortification as its core apologia strategies, this is partially in line with the result of the content analysis; of the 44 corporate statements analysed, 27.3% used corrective action, 18.2% used denial and evasion of responsibility, and 13.6% used mortification. All the participants emphasised timeliness, message clarity, and channel diversity (radio, SMS, social media) as key to effective crisis response. The study concludes that strategic, ethical, and multi-channel communication paired with actionable follow-through is central to successful corporate crisis management. It is then recommended that IBEDC... and similar organisations should continue to utilise a combination of traditional media (radio, SMS) and digital platforms (social media) to

ensure inclusive and timely communication with diverse audiences during crises, while, a commitment to fixing issues and regular progress updates is critical to sustaining public trust.

Keywords: Apologia, Crisis Communication Strategy, IBEDC, Public Engagements

Introduction

The concept *apologia* is described as the speech of self-defense initiated by an attack on a person's character that calls for defence, in which he/she attempts to reconcile a derogatory charge with a favourable view of his character (Ware & Linkuel, 1973, as cited in Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019, pg. 2). Similarly, in classical rhetoric, communication studies, and public relations, an *apologia* is a speech that defends, justifies, and/or apologises for an action or statement. Its plural form is also "*apologia*." The term is an adjective, meaning *apologetic*, and it is also known as a speech of self-defense (Nordquist, 2021).

Historically, the concept of *apologia* was believed to have originated from ancient Greek rhetoric, meaning "away from" and "speech" (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019). This concept has undergone a profound transformation since in ancient Greek rhetoric, where it served as a fundamental strategy for self-defense discourse. Originally emanated from the judicial oratory, where speakers try to defend themselves against formal accusations, *apologia* has evolved into sophisticated communication strategy essential for modern organisations and various entities during crisis management. The term, *apologia*, has been traced back to the ancient Greek root word *apologos*, meaning "a story" (Partridge, 1977, p. 347). Tavuchis (1991) explained that it first appears in the Oxford English Dictionary as *apology* – *apo*, meaning "away," and *loyia*, meaning "speaking" and is defined as a speech in defense or as a vindication of a person (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019, pg. 2).

According to Sarfo-Kantankah (2019) Socrates, and Aristotle describe apologia as a specific genre whereby an orator defends himself or his actions against an accusation or allegations. Hence, apologia without a doubt is a defensive rhetoric, and defence is one of the means of maintaining reputation and how the defence is communicated is essential for the success or failure in repairing damaged image. In fact, according to Kruse (1981, p. 279 cited in Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019) stressed that image repair in the definition of apologia to his character if it has been directly or indirectly damaged.

In the view of Nordquist (2021), there may be several reasons for apologia rhetoric, including to explain the behaviour or statement in a positive light, justify the behaviour to minimise damage to image and character, or remove the topic from public discussion so that other issues may be discussed.

According to Ware and Linkugel as cited in Nordquist (2021), there are four basic type of apologia each representing a common strategy in apologetic discourse. The strategies include *denial* (directly or indirectly rejecting the substance, intent, or consequence of the questionable act); *bolstering* (attempting to enhance the image of the individual under attack); *differentiation* (distinguishing the questionable act from more serious or harmful actions) and *transcendence* (placing the act in a different context).

Meanwhile, the application of apologia in crisis communication management, many scholarly have written on the practicability of the concept in crisis communication, public relations and many other related fields/ Without doubt, Image Repair (or Restoration) Theory which was developed by William Benoit in 1995 in order to study organisational response to a crisis is very relevant in understanding apologia and its process because image is a very important aspect of organisational or individual reputation, impression and public relations.

The image crisis happens within events, when organisation/person is perceived as responsible for the crisis and the crisis or the action appears to be negative and offensive. The perception of the given audience about organisation responsibility terms of crisis and offensiveness of crisis is crucial. Thus, it does not matter if organisation or a person was responsible for the crisis in reality. Moreover, organisations invest a great effort to maintain the positive image (Kurnal, 2012).

This study explores the use of apologia in corporate crisis communication, focusing on its theoretical frameworks, practical applications, and evolving relevance in the digital age. It aims to analyse how organisations craft and implement apologia strategies, identify factors that influence their effectiveness, and examine gaps in literature to provide recommendations for improved application.

Statement of the Problem

Crisis communication is an essential aspect of corporate reputation management, especially when organisations face public scrutiny due to service failures or controversies. One key strategy employed in such situations is *apologia* which is a rhetorical response that enables organisations to explain, defend, or repair their image during crises. Scholars such as Ware and Linkugel (1973), as cited in Nordquist (2021), have identified four primary types of apologia: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Numerous studies in Western contexts (e.g., Hearit, 2016) have explored how corporations use apologia to manage brand image and public trust. In Nigeria, researchers have examined related themes within public relations, marketing, and advertising (Okoro & Olise, 2010; Eze, 2019), highlighting cultural and contextual nuances in corporate communication. However, limited research focuses specifically on the Nigerian electricity sector, which is frequently embroiled in customer dissatisfaction due to inconsistent service delivery. The Ibadan

Electricity Distribution Company (IBEDC) is one of the major players in this sector and has often issued public apologies in response to widespread complaints ranging from billing errors to prolonged blackouts. This study investigates the use of apologia strategies in IBEDC's public relations practices, particularly during crises, and how such responses influence customer perception and brand image. By analysing IBEDC's communication patterns and customer reactions, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of crisis communication in Nigeria's corporate landscape.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine the strategies of apologia often employed by IBEDC in response to Corporate Crises
- ii. To analyse the effectiveness of various apologia strategies in real-world corporate crises.
- iii. To evaluate the role of digital and social media in shaping modern apologia practices.
- iv. To analyse the impact of apologia on customer loyalty and trust in IBEDC during and after a crisis

Significance of the Study

The study has important implications for both academic and practice, and specifically for those in Nigeria's electricity distribution industry. By investigating how the Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company (IBEDC) uses apologia strategies to address crises, such as service interruptions, billing complaints and public backlash, this study offers an empirically-based and culturally situated analysis of corporate crisis communication. In terms of academic, the study adds to the body of literature on apologia by examining the practice as it is relevant to non-Western contexts and considering the intersection of Nigeria's local socio-cultural and infrastructural challenges. It also adds to the scholarship focused on public relations and communication as it shall offer useful information on how to develop and enact public apologies

to help their stakeholders understand and answer the public and to assist with stakeholder re-engagement.

Literature Review

Understanding Apologia, Corporate Communication, and Crisis Communication

Apologia represents a rhetorical strategy organisations employ when facing accusations or criticisms that threaten their reputation. It refers to the discourse of self-defense, where organisations present justifications, explanations, or apologies for their actions (Hearit & Hearit, 2020). According to Hearit & Hearit (2020), apologia encompasses "denial, differentiation, and apology" as primary strategies employed by organisations when responding to allegations of wrongdoing.

The concept of apologia is deeply rooted in rhetorical stasis theory, which provides a framework for understanding how organisations formulate their defense strategies. Tomlinson (2020) explains that "stasis theory examines how organisations address questions of fact, definition, quality, and jurisdiction when constructing their apologetic responses" (p. 103). This theoretical framework helps explain why organisations choose specific defense mechanisms when faced with crises.

Corporate apologia has evolved significantly from its classical origins. Harker (2017), notes that apologia originally focused on individual rhetoric but has been adapted to organisational contexts where entities must defend their actions, policies, or existence. The contemporary approach to apologia recognises that organisations face unique challenges when defending themselves, as they must balance stakeholder expectations with legal considerations (Hearit & Hearit, 2020)

Corporate communication on the other hand, represents the strategic management of communications within and outside an organisation to achieve organisational objectives. As Bello, et. al. (2022) defines it, "corporate communication entails the messages issued by a corporate entity, the exchange of ideas between the organisation and its stakeholders and the strategy adopted to manage this interchange" (p. 3). This multifaceted discipline integrates various communication functions to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders.

Efficient corporate communication plays a crucial role in establishing organisational legitimacy. According to Thiessen and Ingenhoff (2011), "corporate communication decisions influence stakeholder perceptions and can significantly impact an organisation's license to operate" (p. 9). This highlights the strategic importance of communication in shaping how organisations are perceived in their environments.

Corporate communication serves multiple functions, including reputation management, relationship building, and crisis response. Dardis and Haigh (2009) found that "different corporate communication strategies result in varying stakeholder perceptions of corporate responsibility and trustworthiness" (p. 105), demonstrating the strategic importance of selecting appropriate communication approaches.

Meanwhile, crisis communication represents the specialised domain of corporate communication focused on managing communication needs during organisational threats or disruptions. Hearit & Hearit (2020) defines crisis communication as "the collection of strategies and tactics used by an organisation to communicate effectively about a crisis situation to affected stakeholders" (p. 42). This area of practice becomes particularly vital when organisations face reputation-threatening events.

Crisis communication strategies are diverse and situation-specific. Cheng & Cameron, (2022). several approaches, including "denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering" (p. 30), each designed to address specific crisis situations and stakeholder concerns. The selection of appropriate strategies depends on crisis type, organisational history, and stakeholder relationships.

The integration of apologia within crisis communication manifests when organisations must respond to accusations or criticisms. Hearit & Hearit (2020) observe that "apologetic discourse in crisis situations often balances expressions of regret with strategic considerations about legal liability" (p. 418). This strategic approach reflects the tension between ethical communication and organisational self-protection. Effective crisis communication requires preparation, responsiveness, and ethical considerations. As Thiessen and Ingenhoff, (2011) as cited in Lai, et. al., (2025) note, "organisations that prepare for crises through scenario planning and crisis management teams demonstrate more effective response capabilities" (p. 11). This underscores the importance of proactive crisis management rather than reactive approaches.

In short, the interconnection between apologia, corporate communication, and crisis communication reveals a complex landscape where organisations must strategically manage their responses to accusations and threats. Understanding these relationships enables organisations to protect their reputations while maintaining stakeholder trust during challenging situations. Apologia in Corporate Crisis Communication: Historical Context, Strategies, and Contemporary Challenges

The concept of apologia has ancient roots, tracing back to classical Greek rhetoric where it emerged as a form of speech designed for self-defense. Historically, apologia referred to the formal speech of defense

presented by individuals accused of wrongdoing (Hearit & Roberson, 2021). According to Hearit (2006), "apologia evolved from its origins in ancient Greek courtrooms to become a central component of organisational rhetoric in modern corporate environments" (p. 14). This evolution reflects the adaptation of individual rhetorical strategies to collective organisational contexts.

In the mid-20th century, scholars began examining apologia as a distinct genre of rhetoric applicable to corporations. Ryan (1982) as cited in Roberts (2006) observed that apologia represents "a formal defense that speaks to a serious attack upon one's character or worth" (p. 254). This conceptualization laid the groundwork for understanding how organisations, not just individuals, engage in self-defense when faced with reputational threats. As Hearit and Roberson (2021) note, "the shift from individual to organisational apologia represents one of the most significant developments in rhetorical theory during the latter half of the twentieth century" (p. 416).

The formalisation of corporate apologia as a strategic communication approach gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s. Benoit (1995) contributed significantly to this field by developing image restoration theory, which categorised apologetic strategies used by organisations to repair damaged reputations. This theoretical framework provided a systematic approach to analysing corporate responses to crises, marking an important milestone in the development of apologia as a field of study (Hearit, 2006).

Role of Apologia in Crisis Management

Apologia serves as a critical tool in organisational crisis management, helping entities navigate reputation-threatening situations. According to Hearit (2006), apologia functions as "a response strategy designed to repair damaged organisational legitimacy when accusations of wrongdoing emerge" (p. 41). This defensive discourse aims to restore

positive stakeholder perceptions and mitigate reputational damage during crises.

The strategic application of apologia in crisis management involves careful message construction tailored to specific situations. Dardis and Haigh (2009) emphasize that "effective apologia requires organisations to consider stakeholder expectations, crisis responsibility, and organisational history when crafting response messages" (p. 103). This strategic approach helps organisations balance competing demands for accountability and self-protection during crises.

Apologia's role extends beyond immediate crisis response to include reputation management over time. Hearit and Roberson (2021) argue that "apologetic discourse serves not only to address current accusations but also to position the organization favorably for post-crisis recovery" (p. 417). This long-term perspective highlights apologia's function as both a reactive crisis response and a proactive reputation management strategy.

Types of Apologia Strategies

Organisations employ various apologetic strategies when responding to crises, each serving different rhetorical functions. According to Benoit's image restoration theory, these strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Dardis & Haigh, 2009). These approaches offer organisations different ways to respond to accusations based on their specific situations. Denial represents a direct rejection of accusations, either by claiming the alleged action did not occur or by shifting blame to another party. As Hearit and Roberson (2021) explain, "denial strategies attempt to sever any connection between the organisation and the offensive act" (p. 418). While potentially effective when accusations are unfounded, denial carries significant risks if evidence later contradicts organisational claims.

Evasion of responsibility encompasses strategies that acknowledge the action occurred but attempt to minimise organisational culpability. According to Dardis and Haigh (2009), these approaches include "claims of provocation, defeasibility, accident, or good intentions" (p. 104). Organizations may argue they were forced to act, lacked information, made an unintentional mistake, or meant well despite negative outcomes.

Reduction of offensiveness strategies aim to minimise perceived harm from acknowledged actions. Hearit (2006) identifies several tactics within this category, including "bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accusers, and compensation" (p. 69). These approaches attempt to reframe the situation by highlighting positive attributes, downplaying harm, distinguishing the action from worse alternatives, placing it in a broader positive context, questioning accuser motives, or offering restitution.

Corrective action involves addressing the problem and preventing its recurrence. As Dardis and Haigh (2009) note, this strategy "demonstrates organisational commitment to resolving the issue and implementing preventive measures" (p. 105). Corrective action signals organisational learning and responsibility, potentially rebuilding stakeholder trust.

Mortification represents full acceptance of responsibility and genuine apology. According to Hearit and Roberson (2021), "mortification requires organisations to acknowledge wrongdoing, express regret, and seek forgiveness" (p. 420). While potentially restorative for stakeholder relationships, this approach carries legal and financial risks that organisations must carefully consider.

Role of Media in Apologia

Media platforms serve as critical channels for disseminating apologetic messages and shaping public perception of organizational responses. According to Hearit (2006), "the media environment significantly influences how apologetic messages are interpreted and received by stakeholders" (p. 121). This relationship highlights the importance of media strategy in effective apologetic communication.

Traditional media outlets historically functioned as gatekeepers for apologetic messages, determining which organisational responses received public attention. As Hearit and Roberson (2021) observe, "media framing of corporate apologies can significantly impact their effectiveness, often emphasising certain aspects while downplaying others" (p. 422). This selective presentation can either reinforce or undermine organisational apologetic efforts.

Media coverage also influences stakeholder expectations for appropriate organisational responses. Dardis and Haigh (2009) note that "media narratives about crisis responsibility create public expectations for specific types of apologetic responses" (p. 107). Organisations must therefore consider not only their own preferred response strategies but also media-influenced stakeholder expectations when crafting apologetic messages.

Digital Communication and Apologia

The digital communication landscape has transformed apologetic practice, creating both challenges and opportunities for organisations. Social media platforms enable direct apologetic messaging to stakeholders without traditional media gatekeeping. According to Hearit and Roberson (2021), "digital channels allow organisations to deliver unfiltered apologetic messages directly to stakeholders, but also expose these messages to immediate public scrutiny and response" (p. 423).

Digital environments accelerate crisis timelines, requiring more rapid apologetic responses. As noted by Dardis and Haigh (2009), "social media platforms compress the timeline for organisational response, often requiring apologetic messages before complete information is available" (p. 110). This compression creates tension between the need for quick response and thorough investigation.

Online environments also facilitate stakeholder participation in evaluating and disseminating apologetic messages. Hearit (2006) observes that "digital platforms enable stakeholders to publicly critique organisational apologies and share their assessments with broad audiences" (p. 167). This participatory dynamic increases the importance of authenticity and stakeholder alignment in apologetic communication.

Ethical Considerations in Apologetic Communication

Ethical dimensions of apologetic communication involve balancing organisational self-interest with moral obligations to stakeholders. According to Hearit & Hearit (2020) "ethical apologia requires organisations to prioritise truth-telling, sincerity, timeliness, voluntary disclosure, and addressing all stakeholders" (p. 203). These principles establish a framework for evaluating the ethical quality of apologetic messages.

The tension between legal protection and ethical communication represents a significant challenge in apologetic practice. As Hearit and Roberson (2021) note, "organisations often face competing pressures from legal counsel advocating minimal disclosure and communication professionals recommending transparent acknowledgment" (p. 425). Navigating this tension requires careful consideration of both legal and reputational implications.

Ethical apologetic communication also involves cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness. According to Dardis and Haigh (2009), "effective ethical apologia must account for cultural differences in expectations regarding responsibility, confession, and restitution" (p. 112). This cultural dimension highlights the importance of tailored apologetic approaches in global organizational contexts.

Challenges of Apologetic Communication

Organisations face numerous challenges when implementing apologetic strategies in crisis situations. According to Kiambi & Shafer (2016), "timing considerations represent a critical challenge, as organisations must balance the need for quick response with the importance of gathering accurate information" (p. 215). Premature or delayed apologies can both undermine organisational credibility and exacerbate reputational damage.

Stakeholder diversity creates additional complexity in apologetic communication. As noted by (Bundy, et al. 2016), "different stakeholder groups often hold varying expectations for appropriate apologetic responses, creating challenges for organisations attempting to satisfy multiple audiences simultaneously" (p. 114). This diversity necessitates strategic messaging that addresses core stakeholder concerns while maintaining consistency.

Maintaining authenticity while protecting organisational interests represents another significant challenge. According to Hearit & Hearit (2020), "organisations must craft apologetic messages that appear genuine and sincere while still considering strategic interests" (p. 426). This balancing act requires careful message construction that demonstrates true remorse while avoiding unnecessary admissions of liability.

Theoretical Framework

Image Restoration Theory

William Benoit first introduced Image Restoration Theory in 1995 (Benoit, 2015). The theory emerged as a way to explain how individuals, organisations, or groups attempt to repair their image after a crisis or a public relations scandal. Benoit's Image Restoration Theory is based on the idea that when an individual or organisation faces a crisis, it must strategically manage the damage to its reputation. This is essential for maintaining public trust and organisational success. The theory posits that there are five main strategies used to repair an image:

1. **Denial:** The organisation or individual denies any wrongdoing, claiming that no crisis exists, or that they were not responsible for the event.
2. **Evasion of Responsibility:** This strategy involves deflecting blame by attributing the crisis to external factors (e.g., accidents, unavoidable circumstances).
3. **Reducing Offensiveness:** This involves minimising the severity of the crisis, offering excuses, or highlighting positive aspects to distract from the negative.
4. **Corrective Action:** The organisation acknowledges the crisis and offers plans or actions to fix the problem, showing commitment to resolving the issue.
5. **Mortification:** The organisation takes full responsibility for the crisis, expresses regret or remorse, and asks for forgiveness.

However, in IBEDC, Image Restoration Theory is essential, like many organisations, must communicate to restore its image after a service-related crisis. The core circumstances are well understood and a significant case was the public backlash regarding a series of power outages and billing crises experienced by customers in various locations in Osun state and many IBEDC service areas. Customers were not only fact-checking their bills and paying, they were also making the same reports about the unpredictability of power and

lacking depth of service insight with going concerns about the estimated bills and lagging customer response to electrical faults.

Meanwhile, the practical application of Image Restoration Theory has used strategy combinations with Corrective Action (e.g., reaffirming the commitment to addressing the challenges of repairing faulty transformers and changing the customer service time of response to customer concerns) and Mortification (apologies regarding the failure of service delivery via press statements with contracts to promise improvements).

The organisation used Bolstering by referencing achievements from the past, and the ongoing investment for improvements with infrastructure for future; and Differentiation with reference to causes of challenges because of actions outside of the control of IBEDC like vandalism or low power generation. The strategy allows for customers to view the organisation's response plan for reconstruction of image of an organisation and use strategic crisis messaging now. Benoit's theory helps in understanding why IBEDC would focus not only on apology but also on demonstrating tangible actions to repair its reputation and maintain customer loyalty.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Another suitable theory at explaining this study is Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) which was proposed by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007. (Coombs, Holladay & White, 2020). The theory builds on the understanding that organisations need to tailor their crisis communication strategies based on the nature of the crisis and the organisation's responsibility in causing it. SCCT is built on several key assumptions:

1. **Crisis Type and Responsibility:** The theory emphasises that the crisis response strategy should be based on how much responsibility the organisation bears for the crisis. It categorises

- crises into different types, such as victim crises (e.g., natural disasters), accidental crises (e.g., technical failures), and preventable crises (e.g., corporate negligence).
2. **Crisis Response Strategy:** SCCT outlines specific crisis response strategies depending on the level of responsibility an organisation holds. These strategies range from deny and diminish (in cases where responsibility is minimal) to apology and corrective action (for situations where the organisation is highly responsible).
 3. **Reputation Repair:** Effective communication during a crisis should aim to protect the organisation's reputation, and the appropriateness of the strategy plays a role in how the public perceives the company's response and their subsequent trust in it.

For IBEDC, SCCT helps to understand how the company should respond to crises such as power outages or equipment damage, depending on the perceived responsibility. For instance, when crises are caused by external factors like vandalism (a victim crisis), IBEDC may adopt denial or differentiation strategies, minimising the blame on the company. However, when the crisis results from internal mismanagement or technical failures (an accidental crisis), a more apologetic and corrective action approach is necessary. SCCT's focus on adapting strategies based on the crisis type directly informs how IBEDC tailors its communication efforts to both protect its reputation and maintain customer trust.

In both theories, crisis communication is framed as a strategic process aimed at reputation management, while, SCCT provides a situational framework for choosing the appropriate response based on crisis context. Together, they offer a comprehensive approach to managing crisis communication, particularly for organisations like IBEDC, which

must navigate the challenges of both technical failures and external criticisms during crises.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach, utilising an in-depth interviews to investigate the views and experiences of key persons within the Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company (IBEDC). The research was conducted at the IBEDC Head Office in Osogbo, the rationale for chosen Osogbo's head office was due to its proximity. Meanwhile, the study population comprised of 80 staff at the Osogbo Head Office. Using purposive sampling, five (5) heads of key departments were purposely selected to take part in interviews base on their customer interaction. The selected departments were: Management; Customer Service; the Sales Department; the IT department; and Corporate Services Team. This sampling strategy allowed for the selection of participants who had significant and demonstrable direct experience in customer-related issues and organisational communication strategy. The number of participants was determined by the principle of data saturation- the point in qualitative research where further interviews turn up no new data. The data collection instrument involved an interview guide, which enabled the researcher to systematically collect rich qualitative detail from the participants. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, which is a technique for identifying and analysing recurring themes or patterns in the data. The analysis was aided by the use of NVivo (version 14) to help with organising, coding, and interpreting the interview transcripts.

Data Presentation, Results and Discussion of Findings

Presentation of Data

All participants had tertiary-level education, mostly with degrees in Mass Communication, Marketing, or Business Administration. One are female and four males, three were in public affairs and marketing department, 2 were top management team. Their insights were

essential for understanding corporate apology practices during crisis management situations in the energy distribution sector. Five (5) key themes emerged from the data analysed and was explained under 4 research questions.

RQ1: What strategies of apology are commonly employed by IBEDC in response to corporate crises?

On the apology strategies often used in IBEDC, participants identified bolstering, corrective action, differentiation, and denial as common strategies. They frequently pointed to explanations and public reassurances following crises such as blackouts or damaged infrastructure. The submission of many participants attested to this fact: *"We used bolstering—reminding people of our past efforts and corrective action explaining steps to fix faults."* **(Participant 4)**

"We mostly use 'bolstering' and 'differentiation,' explaining why a problem happened—transformer faults or vandalism." **(Participant 2)**
"We don't deny. We explain. For example, we told customers it was due to a faulty transformer, not just 'technical issues'." **(Participant 3)**

"Sometimes, we admit faults and promise improvement." **(Participant 1)**

This implies that IBEDC blends factual explanations with image-repair tactics to manage public perception. By addressing the cause of issues while highlighting corrective efforts, the company aims to maintain trust and credibility, demonstrating a strategic balance between accountability and protecting its reputation during crises.

Also, on the level of effectiveness of the apology strategies used by IBEDC, substantial number of the participants maintained that bolstering is the most effective of all the strategies. Some participants said:

"For example, when Ayekale-Osogbo had a blackout last month, we explained it was due to polls that fell as a result of motor accident, not neglect. I believe this helps, but some customers still complain because they want instant solutions." **(Participant 2)**

"We also highlight what we're doing to fix. Did it calm people? Yes, but not fully. Some still complain because they want faster solutions." **(Participant 3)**

"It works, but not always. Some customers appreciate our honesty, while others expect faster results. For example, when we explained the Egbeda feeder breakdown and gave a timeline, those who understood stayed patient, but others were still angry." **(Participant 4)**

RQ2: How do organisations implement apologia strategies in response to crises?

Participants emphasised that effective implementation of apologia strategies requires prompt and transparent communication. Organisations like IBEDC respond quickly through various channels such as radio, SMS, and social media to inform the public. Immediate explanations and visible action are essential to calm tensions and demonstrate accountability during crises. Participants 2, 4 and 5 attested to this notion:

"When voltage issues damaged appliances, we quickly addressed it on radio and Facebook and apologized to calm tension." **(Participant 2)**

"Quick messages (even if just to say 'We're working on it') calm people."

(Participant 4)

"When we quickly explain, customers tolerate us more." **(Participant 5)**

Therefore, the data shows that implementing apologia strategies effectively involves timely, clear communication and swift action. Participants stressed that using platforms like radio and social media to explain issues and provide updates helps calm customers and builds tolerance during service disruptions or crises.

RQ3: What role do digital and social media play in the effectiveness of apologia strategies?

Participants agreed that combining radio, SMS, and social media ensures broader audience reach. While social media spreads information quickly among urban youths, its impact is limited in rural areas due to poor internet access. Therefore, radio and SMS remain essential tools for effectively reaching older and rural populations during crises. Substantial numbers of the participants buttress the claim:

"Social media helps a lot. Many youths in Osogbo use Twitter/X, so our updates there reduce tension." **(Participant 1)**

"Facebook and Twitter spread our messages fast." **(Participant 2)**

"Rural dweller may not see our tweets. That's why we combine it with radio jingles." **(Participant 3)**

"Radio helps reach market women and elders." **(Participant 4)**

"Posts get lost in complaints online... radio still works better for some." **(Participant 5)**

Hence, this suggests that combining both traditional and digital communication methods like radio, SMS, and social media is essential to reach diverse audiences effectively. Such hybrid strategies ensure that crisis messages are accessible, timely, and more likely to restore public trust.

RQ4: How does the use of apology by IBEDC impact customer loyalty and trust during and after a crisis?

Participants noted that IBEDC's apologies positively influence customer loyalty and trust only when followed by concrete actions, such as timely repairs or transparent communication. Without tangible improvements, repeated apologies lose effectiveness. Customers value honesty and accountability, but sustained trust depends on consistent service restoration and problem resolution after each crisis. Majority of the participants have these to say:

"After apologising, trust improves if we fix the problem." **(Participant 1)**

"Customers said, 'At least IBEDC explained,' but others said, 'No light, no trust.'" **(Participant 2)**

"Trust grows if we explain well and show progress." **(Participant 4)**

"Some forgive us if we fix it fast. If not, apologies don't help." **(Participant 5)**

Thus, credibility is not earned through messaging alone, but through consistent service delivery that aligns with communicated values, builds trust over time, demonstrates reliability in actions, and reinforces the brand's promise through tangible experiences and ongoing customer satisfaction.

Discussion of Findings

This research examined the apology strategies used by IBEDC in dealing with corporate crises, and how they corresponded to other corporate communication practices through qualitative approach; the main findings found that bolstering, corrective action, differentiation, and mortification, when IBEDC was in crisis, were four of the strategies they employed. Each of these strategies corresponds with

Benoit's Image Repair Theory, which contains strategies such as denial, corrective action, mortification, and reducing offensiveness (Benoit, 2015). These findings were in accordance with the findings of Bello, Toriola, and Adebosin (2022), which found that Nigerian corporate organisations dealing with anticipated public criticism, use corrective action and bolstering strategies as key areas of their crisis responses. Similar to IBEDC, the organisations highlighted the factual explain, public reassurance, and limitation of the damage as a way to maintain credibility with the audience and keep stakeholders, customers and their audience engaged. Additionally, Ezenandu (2018) found that the sharing of information and how it was framed, so that it clearly articulated remedial action, substantially improved stakeholder perspectives of corporate sincerity during crisis situations. This finding reinforced awareness that communication is only effective when underpinned by an actual corrective action. In contrast, some studies, demonstrate wide ranging differences. For example, Kiambi and Shafer (2016) noted that when U.S.-based organisations were faced with situations of a large legal liability, they engaged in mortification, and full acceptance of responsibility at a higher frequency. In the case of IBEDC, their caution when mortification was used is feasible since Nigerian culture and legal stipulations may prevent mortification, for example, because acceptance of full fault may be interpreted as a sign of weakness, and an incentive for a legal pursuit. This finding was also in line with Hearit and Roberson (2021), who pointed out that there needs to be a strategic balance, both legally and ethically, between 'defensive' and 'accountable' messages during a crisis. As this study confirms, in cultural contexts, where humility is a culturally expected behaviour during disclosure messages, virtue becomes, in a manner of speaking, a component of twitter crisis communication. The findings of the current study indicates that the use of multi-channel communication enables representatives of IBEDC to reach a larger customer audience. This investigation supports Dardis and Haigh (2009), who noted communication models within the hybrid function of multiple

communication forms helps develop stakeholder engagement and maintain brand reputation during a crisis. This hybrid model is important to service companies (IBEDC) such as Nigeria, where internet access is not ubiquitous.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study which examined the use of apologia strategies by IBEDC alongside a comparative analysis of other corporate entities in Nigeria and other countries. Through qualitative interviews with communication personnel and quantitative content analysis of crisis responses, the research highlighted how organisations strategically employ various image-repair strategies to maintain public trust. It is safe to conclude that IBEDC commonly utilises bolstering, corrective action, and differentiation to explain service failures, often combining these with transparent and timely communication through radio, SMS, and social media.

The study further established that the effectiveness of apologia strategies depends not only on the clarity and speed of communication but also on the organisation's ability to follow up with visible corrective measures. In the Nigerian cultural context, ethical considerations such as humility, sincerity, and public accountability play crucial roles in how apologies are received and evaluated by the public.

Thus, for crisis communication to be effective, organisations must blend strategic messaging with tangible actions that demonstrate responsibility, integrity, and a commitment to restoring trust and credibility. The paper recommends the following:

1. **Adopt a Multi-Channel Communication Approach:** IBEDC and similar organisations should continue to utilise a combination of traditional media (radio, SMS) and digital platforms (social media) to ensure inclusive and timely communication with diverse audiences during crises.

2. **Prioritize Transparency and Timeliness:** Organisations must issue crisis responses swiftly and with full transparency. Delays or vague statements can erode public trust, while honest, detailed explanations foster accountability and calm tensions.
3. **Follow Apologies with Concrete Actions:** To maintain customer loyalty and credibility, apologies must be backed by visible corrective measures. A commitment to fixing issues and regular progress updates is critical to sustaining public trust.
4. **Invest in Crisis Communication Training:** Companies should regularly train their corporate communication teams in strategic apologia techniques and ethical crisis response frameworks, tailored to local cultural expectations and communication preferences.

References

- Bello, A. & Toriola, A. & Adebosin, W. (2022). Corporate Communication and Crisis Management among Journalists in Lagos State. *International Journal of Accounting and Management Sciences*. 1(1, 14-27. Retrieved from. 10.56830/IJAMS07202202.
- Benoit, W. L. (2015). Image restoration theory. In J. S. Littlejohn & K. A. Foss (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*. John Wiley & Sons. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbieci009.pub2>
- Bundy, J. P., Farrer, M. D., Short, C. E., & Coombs, W. T. (2016). Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development. *Journal of Management*, 43(6), 1661-1692. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316680030>
- Cheng, Y., & Cameron, G. T. (2022). Contingent organisation–public relationships and their application. In W. T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2nd

- ed., Chapter 8). Wiley-Blackwell. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119678953.ch8>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2018). *The handbook of crisis communication*. Wiley- Blackwell.
- Coombs, W. T., Holladay, S. J., & White, K. (2020). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT): Application in dealing with complex, challenging, and recurring crises. In B. V. Lewicki, B. Gray, & C. A. Wiethoff (Eds.), *Handbook of Conflict Management* (Chap. 16). Routledge. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429330650-16>
- Dardis, F. and Haigh, M. M. (2009), Prescribing versus describing: testing image restoration strategies in a crisis situation. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 14(1), 101-118. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280910931108>
- Ezenandu, P. E. (2018). Corporate communication for organizational crisis management in Nigeria. Core. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/17278463.pdf>
- George, T. (2021). *Mixed methods research: Definition, guide & examples*. Scribbr. Retrieved from <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/mixed-methods-research/>
- Harker, J. L. (2017). Flag on the Play: A 5-Year Analysis of the Kategoria and Apologia That Combine to Incite Journalistic Antapologia in Sports Reporting. *Communication & Sport*, 6(5), 570-587.
- Hearit, K. M. (2006). *Crisis management by apology: Corporate response to allegations of wrongdoing*. Routledge.
- Hearit, K. M., & Hearit, L. B. (2020). Commentary—A Dimon in the Rough: Apologetic Crisis Management at JPMorgan Chase. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 60(1), 351-362.
- Hearit, K. M., & Roberson, K. M. (2021). Denial, differentiation, and apology: The use of apologia in crisis management. In T. L.

- Sellnow & M. W. Seeger (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of crisis communication* (pp. 415-428). Routledge.
- Kiambi, D. M., & Shafer, A. (2016). *Corporate crisis communication: Examining the interplay of reputation and crisis response strategies* (Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications No. 105). University of Nebraska–Lincoln. vz Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/journalismfacpub/105>
- Kurnal, J. (2012). Image Restoration Theory: Analysis of Polish Deputy Prime Minister's Tweets in Response to Postponed Polish Presidential Election in 2020. *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies*, 7(3), 35-59
- Lai, P. E., Mohamed Rosli, N. E. H. B., Pong, K. S., & Foong, S. S. (2025). Analysing JAKIM's crisis communication strategies using image repair theory. *Journal of Communication, Language and Culture*, 5(1), Article 1. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.33093/jclc.2025.5.1.1>
- Marsh, C. (2006). The syllogism of apologia: Rhetorical stasis theory and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 32(1), 41-46.
- Nordquist, R. (2021). Definition and Examples of Apologia in Rhetoric: The Art of Damage Control. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-apologia-rhetoric-1688996>
- Ryan, H. R. (1982). Kategoria and apologia: On their rhetorical criticism as a speech set. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68(3), 254-261.
- Sarfo-Kantankah, K. S. (2019). Apologia, Image Repair and Rhetoric in the Defence of Electoral Defeat. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*. 10 (3), 1-10. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230390.pdf>
- Thiessen, A., & Ingenhoff, D. (2011). Safeguarding reputation through strategic, integrated and situational crisis communication

- management. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16(1), 8-26.
- Tomlinson, E. C. (2020). Stasis in the Shark Tank: Persuading an Audience of Funders to Act on Behalf of Entrepreneurs. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 34(3), 221-249.
- Utibe, T. (2020). Impacts of interview as research instrument of data collection in social sciences. *Journal of Digital Art & Humanities*, 1(1), 15–24. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.33847/2712-8148.1.1_2