A Simone, il regalo più grande che la vita mi ha fatto.

Ai miei genitori, affinché io possa restituirvi tutto ciò che voi mi avete sempre donato.

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Introduction

In the last decades, the number of critical situations and potential threats to which organizations are exposed have exponentially increased. This is also due to the advent of social media, which has empowered users with the possibility of sharing their thoughts and opinions with thousands, if not millions, of people, regardless of their truthfulness or the impact these can have on firms. Indeed, today more than ever before, companies' misbehaviours and wrongdoings are being exposed online. For this reason, the importance placed on crisis management and crisis communication has grown. The fundamental role that crisis communication plays in a critical situation can be understood if we consider the fact that the main threat a critical situation poses to a firm is to damage its reputation, which is the result of decades of hard work and substantial resource investment. Since communication is at the basis of building the corporate reputation, we can also state that it is at the basis of safeguarding and, when needed, rebuilding such reputation.

In crisis communication, corporate apologies play a central role. For an organization, apologizing is necessary in order to offset the negative consequences of a crisis. Indeed, they are fundamental tools to restore the reputation of the organization involved in the critical event and earn back stakeholders' trust, by decreasing the adverse feelings towards the firm, as well as diminishing the punishment, and re-engaging the audience. To communicate effectively during a crisis, it is essential to adopt a communication approach that resonates with the public.

Today, one of the main trends in communication involves the ever-increasing use of humour in different spheres of interpersonal, as well as corporate, communication. Because of organization's need to connect with their audiences

by adopting a communication style that speaks to them, many companies have started to feature a humorous component in their communications. Indeed, even if humour has always been known and used by individuals, recently it has become a much more pervasive aspect of our everyday life, characterising both the private and professional sphere. Such an increase in the use of humour may be motivated by the fact that it facilitates the release of psychological and emotional tensions and distress. Therefore, considering the various critical moments that have characterised the past few decades, humour has been adopted by many as a way to cope with such crises, realising stress and emotional strain. This is true especially for younger generations, such as Gen Z, who uses humour as a metaphorical shield to protect its psychological wellbeing. Keeping in consideration the numerous benefits of using humour in corporate communication, this project examines the opportunity for practitioners to include a humorous nuance in corporate apologies. Indeed, even if humour has numerous benefits, and has already been adopted in other branches of corporate communication, from advertising to social media communication, its use in crisis communication remains limited. Therefore, the present thesis aims at unveiling whether and how humour could be used efficiently by companies in their apologies, as well as underlining the conditions for its use, the potential benefits of adopting such strategy and the possible risks. In this way, a well-defined framework of action will be provided to professionals.

Such guidelines will be offered following a comprehensive literature review of crisis communication, with a strong focus on corporate apologies, outlined in chapter 1; an analysis of the main theories, nuances, and uses of humour, with a glance at its potential in an organization's apologies, carried out in chapter 2; and finally chapter 3 features an analysis of three key case studies that aim at concretely demonstrating how humour could have a strategic role in corporate apologies, by fostering forgiveness and trust rebuilding. The case studies which

will be analysed are (1) KFC's "FCK" apology, published after a massive chicken shortage affected the majority of the franchise's restaurants; (2) Three UK's "Holiday Spam" apology, which was the company's humorous response to its non-consumers complaints about the oversharing of holiday snaps that followed its "Feel at Home" initiative which deleted roaming costs; and lastly (3) Ryanair's apology after issuing 190 unsigned checks to travellers who had seen their planes being cancelled or heavily delayed.

In particular, the analysis of three case studies will be useful to highlight the main benefits companies have witnessed after including a humorous nuance in their apologies, creating a connection with the theory and delimitating how it applies to real-world scenarios. Such analysis will also underline the risks of adopting a humorous stance while sending out an apology, which coherently with what has been stated by scholars, derives from an uncareful analysis of the context in which the apology is offered. Two winners and one loser who will add relevance and concreteness to the points made in the two previous chapters, supporting theory and adding to it. Moreover, towards the end of the third chapter, a confrontation between the two successful case studies, notably KFC's apology and Three UK's apology, has been carried out to identify common aspects, as well as differences, in the use of humour. A comparison between KFC's and Ryanair's apology is also present. Indeed, being both sincere apologies where a humorous nuance was featured, it is important to underline the differences that have led to the success of the "FCK" campaign, while dooming Ryanair's apology.

Therefore, how is the use of humour in corporate apologies perceived by stakeholders? Can it help restore the organization's reputation in a crisis? Humour can have a strategic role in corporate apology, fostering forgiveness and trust rebuilding, therefore preserving the company's reputation, thanks to its ability to humanize the firm, portraying it as a group of human beings. Adding a

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humorous nuance to a corporate apology can also help releasing stress and encouraging the creation of a positive climate, where a connection with stakeholders can be established. Still, in order to craft an effective humorous apology, a profound study of the context, of the audience, and of the alignment with the organization's identity must be carried out. This is what truly makes the difference in the publics' perception of the apology. Humour must serve a purpose, its use must be strategic, and not just "for the sake of it".

1 Crisis Communication: A Literature Review

1.1 Crisis Communication

Every organization will face critical situations during its lifetime, which, if not correctly managed, will turn into dramatic crises. Indeed, experts state that, in the business world, crises are a question of "when" and not "if" (Coombs et al., 2010). Following the advent of social media, individuals are now empowered to share their opinions and experiences online, both positive and negative, consequently increasing organizations' possible threats. This has led to more attention being given to crisis management as a way of facing such criticalities.

As Coombs (2007, as cited in Invernizzi & Iozzia, 2022, p. 157-158) stated, crisis management is a process of continuous prevention and management of crisis situations aimed at (1) foreseeing critical events; (2) crafting intervention plans to be executed in the occurrence of a crisis; (3) implementing and managing the activities included in the plan to reduce the negative impact of the crisis; (4) and learning from the crisis itself to reduce the possibility of critical situations representing in the future.

The main threat a crisis presents to a company is the destruction of its reputation, which Coombs and Holladay (2014) describe as the way people perceive and evaluate an organization. A firm's reputation is the result of years, if not decades, of hard work and substantial resource investment, which companies are determined to protect. Since communication is at the basis of building the corporate reputation, we can also state that it is at the basis of safeguarding and, when needed, rebuilding such reputation. This is why it can be said that crisis communication is an essential element of crisis management.

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1.1.1 Definitions and Theories of Crisis Communication

According to Coombs (2010), crisis communication can be considered as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a critical circumstance. Professionals gather and analyse the information sources at their disposal to develop a comprehensive view of the crisis, which allows them to plan and direct the company's communication efforts to effectively manage publics' understanding of the critical event and of the role of the involved firm in it. Indeed, crisis communication is viewed as a set of communication activities that aim at preserving safety and organizational stability when crises threaten normal operations and it involves different response practices, which diverge according to the crisis type and situation (Spradley, 2017).

Crisis communication does not only concern communication during a critical event, but also before and after it. Invernizzi and Iozzia (2022) underline that, in the pre-crisis phase, communication is necessary to disseminate the results of the monitoring and listening activities aimed at identifying potential threats to the organization and weak signals that critical situations send out before developing into damaging crises. At this stage, another objective of crisis communication is to establish and diffuse prevention models and practices, define management plans and procedures, develop and nurture positive relationships with stakeholders, and prepare through simulations and training (Spradley, 2017). In particular, training is needed as not all members of the organization have crisis management skills. It is fundamental to continue communicating also after the immediate resolution of the crisis. Externally, communication in the post-crisis phase should be aimed at keeping stakeholders updated on the measures and behaviours implemented to correct for the damage caused by the crisis and to prevent it from recurring in the future. Internally, post-crisis communication should be focused on evaluating the results achieved, considering the

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consequences for the reputation and the credibility of the firm (Invernizzi & Iozzia, 2022). The outcome of the evaluation activity should be communicated internally to adjust strategies and update the crisis manual.

Among the main theories of crisis communication, Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) certainly occupies the centre stage. According to this theory, in the event of a crisis, people identify its causes and decide where to place responsibility for it (Coombs, 2007, as cited in Chung & Lee, 2017, p. 127). In turn, the company's response to a critical event depends on situational factors, notably the attribution of responsibility on the part of stakeholders and the company's ability to control the crisis. Another fundamental theory of crisis communication is the Image Repair Theory developed by Benoit, which focuses on using communication to recover the organization's image when it has been harmed or seriously threatened by a crisis. The main principles on which this theory is built are that communication is a goal-oriented activity and that protecting the positive reputation of an organization is one of the central goals of communication (Benoit, 2015).

1.1.2 The Importance of Crisis Communication for the Survival of the Company

Crises have an impact on the reputation, the image, and the business performance of organizations. They can even threaten the overall survival of a company if not managed properly. In fact, because of a crisis, a company could lose the support of customers, investors, shareholders, as well as other categories of stakeholders. Communication is the essence of crisis management (Coombs, 2010); thus, crisis communication is a fundamental asset for navigating into such an operational nightmare without drowning.

Critical situations are characterised by instability and insecurity. Communication is required to oppose such negative feelings, as it allows to share timely and accurate information. The sharing of information with all involved stakeholders is necessary so that the company can position itself as the primary source of information regarding the crisis. In this way, the company can guide the flow of information, rather than suffering it. Communicating effectively will allow the organization to underline the actions implemented to face the crisis and to repair for the harm caused, which will emphasise the proactiveness of the organization and its ability to manage and control the situation. Therefore, the company will have a better chance of being viewed positively and reduce the loss of support from stakeholders. Indeed, organizations are increasingly being judged not on the nature of the crisis they must manage, but on how they respond to it (Doorley, Garcia, 2010, as cited in Invernizzi & Iozzia, 2022, p. 150), since often what matters is not the misbehaviour in itself, but what comes after it. Everyone was wearing them or dreaming of it. The brand's golden period lasted until November 2022, when Balenciaga faced controversy regarding its holiday campaign, which featured children holding a "bondage teddy bear" or surrounded by child pornography law papers. Online, users started to accuse the fashion brand of child sexualisation and paedophilia. However, what forever marked Balenciaga's reputation was not the critical situation in itself, but its response to it. Initially the brand adopted the denying strategy, trying to shift blame on its advertising agency. A week after, it issued an official apology, which was then followed by the the CEO Charbit and creative director Demna's personal apologies. Despite these apologies, their lateness and the initial crisis response caused many to advocate against the company, including famous celebrities such as model Bella Hadid, influencer and entepreneur Kim Kardashian, and singer Dua Lipa. The loss for Balenciaga was not only economic, but also reputational, as the brand lost

consumers' support and trust. Still, Balenciaga has not completely recovered and has lost relevance in the fashion world.

Figure 1. Image retrieved from Euronews (2022) showing one of the pictures from Balenciaga's 2022 holiday campaign.

1.2 The Role of Corporate Apologies in Crisis Communication

Corporate apologies lie at the heart of crisis communication, as they are the leading means organizations have for restoring the reputational loss and saving the relationship with stakeholders.

When companies' wrongdoing is exposed and they are subjected to public scrutiny, a threat to their reputation emerges. The process of maintaining or repairing a firm's reputation and image is called corporate apologia (Chikudate, 2010) and, in most cases, it involves the company acknowledging its responsibility for the critical event by issuing an apology. In particular, concerns about the

future of the company prompt the decision to apologise. Such concerns may include the willingness of the firm to retain customers and other stakeholders who suffered from its actions by restoring trust and reputation, reducing negative feelings towards the organization, decreasing punishment, and re-engaging with the victims (Racine et al., 2018). Moreover, as Manika et al. (2017, as cited in Shao et al., 2022) highlight, corporate apologies are salient not only for those directly affected by the crisis, but to existing and potential customers as well, who judge the company based on its response to it. Thus, an effective apology is designed not only to preserve or earn back the trust of the victims of the event, but of all those who have been exposed to it.

1.2.1 Definitions and Theories of Corporate Apologies

A corporate apology is a complex public response strategy whose objective is to restore the firm's image after a transgression, meaning any negative occurrence that presents a significant threat to the company's operations or reputation and becomes well-publicized (Shao et al., 2022). Corporate apologies are typically public statements offered shortly after the critical event, when the company may not yet possess complete knowledge of what has happened. Their aim is to reach a vast audience and preserve the relationship with the firm's stakeholders (Lee and Chung, 2012, as cited in Shao et al., 2022). Lawyers, interested in avoiding lawsuits for the company and its officers, may have a role in crafting and discussing the apology (Kohen, 2013).

As Coombs points out in his SCCT theory, an organization should apologise for its misconduct when it is perceived by the public and by its stakeholders as the responsible for the negative event. Expressing liability can help softening stakeholders' view of the company and their response to the episode, while also

showing the firm's ability to take ownership of the surrounding environment. Indeed, Pace, Fediuk, and Botero (2010, as cited in Chung & Lee, 2017, p. 128) discovered that a corporate apology focused on taking responsibility results in less reputation damage, showcasing the power of a good apology for the survival of the company. This view aligns with Leunissen's et al. (2013, as cited in Shao et. Al, 2022) belief that by apologising for its past misbehaviour, a company can preserve its present viability. In fact, apologies can convey desire and willingness of reform, demonstrating that the firm regrets its behaviours and it is unlikely to commit the same mistake in the future (Hornsey et al., 2024).

1.2.2 Structure and Elements of an Effective Corporate Apology

Generally, when crafting an apology there is a standard structure that companies follow. The corporate apology starts with (1) an initial apology followed by (2) an explanation of what has happened, where the company clearly admits its faults and (3) a promise the misbehaviour will not be repeated in the future. At this point, (4) the firm explains what it is doing to repair the damage done. The apology ends with (5) a further expression of regret. Including these five components in the apology can increase its likeliness to succeed.

Corporate apologies can feature cognitive, conative, and affective language components (Shao et al., 2022). However, there is no globally agreed definition of what the actual elements of an effective corporate apology should be. Some scholars believe it should be focused on accepting accountability (Benoit & Drew, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2008, as cited in Chung & Lee, 2017, p. 128), whereas others emphasise the importance of communicating sympathy, compensation, and a promise of corrective action (Patel & Reinsch, 2003, as cited in Chung & Lee, 2017, p. 128). Kohen (2013) highlights that a good and ethical corporate

apology should name the exact issue for which the company is taking responsibility. Indeed, expressing liability is by far the leading element of apologies for several researchers, as expressed also by Lewicki et al. (2016, as cited in Woods, 2022, p. 17).

The spokesperson is a crucial element of corporate apologies, and its choice must be thoughtfully reasoned. Indeed, as suggested by Invernizzi and Iozzia (2022), the spokesperson must be able to deal with the media, arouse empathy in the public, inspire trust, and show support to the families of those affected by the crisis. Trust is particularly important as the public is more likely to accept and believe a message issued by a trustworthy figure. Still, trust goes beyond sincerity (Kohen, 2013), as it is related to the willingness of stakeholders to confide in the speaker and to follow their guidance. Depending on the severity of the crisis, the role of the spokesperson could be played by the CEO (Invernizzi & Iozzia, 2022). However, this choice must be weighed against the above-mentioned elements. To prove this point, it is useful to think about the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the major marine oil spill in history. This environmental catastrophe was caused by the explosion of the oil platform operating in the Gulf of Mexico, where eleven people lost their lives and many others were injured. In the aftermath of the event BP, the company owning and opearting the platfrom, held a press conference featuring the CEO Tony Hayward who issued the apology on behalf of the firm. Despite the choice of the CEO as the spokesperson being coherent with the gravity of the situation and his effort to emphatise with the victims and their families, we cannot help but notice Hayward was not able to effectively fulfil his role and reconquer the public's trust and sympathy. This is probably due to his previous attempts to shift blame to the owner of the rig, as well as to the questionable comments he made during an interview with the Guardian, where he tried to downplay the environemntal impact of the accident, stating that the spill, if compared to the amount of water in the gulf was almost meaningless, but

also to his declaration about wanting "this thing over" and "his life back", considered insensitive towards those affected by the crisis, especially the families of those eleven men who had lost their lives. The main problem is that all those comments received negative public scrutiny, which lead to a widespread adverse view of the CEO. For this reason, stakeholders were not able to accept his apology and to confide in him, and in turn in the company. In such a situation, the BP should have better evaluated its options, since it is fair to claim that the same apology conveyed by a different spokesperson could have received a far better response.

1.2.3 Risks and Challenges

The process of crafting a corporate apology presents several risks and challenges, which need to be seriously considered by communication professionals. Indeed, as suggested by Chung and Lee (2012), an apology that does not feature the proper components could be discarded as superficial and devious by the public. Thus, an apology crafted without deeply weighting the elements to be included will fail. Moreover, Kohen (2013) stresses that if stakeholders believe the apology is not sustained by a real intent of reform, but it is issued solely to improve the firm's image, they will dismiss it as insincere and irrelevant. Supporting one's communication with provable facts and transparent information is essential for all forms of communication, especially crisis communication, and thus, corporate apologies. Indeed, an apology without any action is meaningless (Shao et al., 2022); hence, behind a corporate apology there should be a concrete effort. Regarding this theme, a best-case study involves Barilla. In 2013, during an interview in the italian radio programme "La Zanzara", Guido Barilla, the owner and president of the famous and omonimous food company and main pasta producer in the world, made some uncomfortable declarations about Barilla

wanting to protect and preserve the "traditional family" against new families. In particular, he declared Barilla would only portray traditional father-mother-children families in its commercials. These comments were not welcomed by the international LGBT+ community and by its supporters, who decided to boycoytt the brand. At first, the crisis left small space for hopes of recovery. However, the brand managed the critical event perfectly and was able to recover with far less damage than expected. The real strenght of their crisis response was the genuine effort and concrete actions taken. Not only did Guido Barilla apologise personally, but he also ensured he would meet "representatives of the groups that best represent the evolution of the family" and that the firm would implement integration programmes and training to prevent discrimination. Indeed, on the company's website, a dedicated section shows Barilla new philosophy on the subject of inclusion, showcasing also their achievements in the field. The heartfelt apology, supported by concrete actions, made it extremely effective and the company is now praised worldwide for its inclusivity efforts.

Another risk associated with corporate apologies has to do with their public nature. Indeed, they could expose an issue, that, otherwise, would have had a restricted audience, to a far broader one. This is true especially today with social media that can shed light on crises all over the world. Also, as suggested by Hornsey et al. (2024) a corporate apology could strengthen the culpability of the organization in the public's mind, communicating that it is in fact responsible for the critical event. Therefore, increasing the negative views of the apologiser (Ohbuchi et al.1989, as cited in Racine et al., 2018, p. 489).

Moreover, an apology cannot be merely centred on expressing regret, as its main objective is restoring trust. Speech acts that are not structured and delivered with the aim of fostering and restoring trust are failed apologies (Kohen, 2013). Taking as an example the above-mentioned Deepwater Horizon oil spill, BP's apology

completely lacked any concrete effort to recover its stakeholders' trust. In fact, the company's speech was almost entirely focused on expressing regret, which is indeed a fundamental component of corporate apologies, but that cannot lead to the success of the apology alone.

Still, some publics may never accept the apology (Kohen, 2013). This is where the reputation of the firms enters in play. Companies with a stronger reputation have higher chances to recover from crises and to earn back trust from their stakeholders. This means that an apology could be better welcomed if the apologizing firm has a positive reputation. As Kohen (2013) affirms, apologies never occur in a vacuum and whether the apology is welcomed by stakeholders may depend on the organization past behaviors and comments, including any previous lack of response. There are some organizations that simply have a negative reputation, resulting from being often involved in critical situation, and which makes their apologies irrelevant for the public, such as Spirit Aviation that classifies 98th out of 100 in the 2024 Axios Harris Poll 100 reputation rankings.

1.3 The Psychology of Apologies

People need to make sense of what happens around them, to identify subjects and objects, causes and effects, perpetrators and victims. We simply want to know, to understand the world we live in and comprehend why an event has occurred. This is true especially when such events are negative and unexpected (Coombs, 2007).

It is on this idea of attribution of causality that Weiner (1986) advances his Attributional Theory of motivation and emotion. Individuals make attributions based on three dimensions: (1) stability, (2) the locus of control, and (3)

controllability. Stability refers to how an event relates to past instances, whereas locus of control considers whether the development of the crisis was induced by external or internal forces, and controllability refers to whether the occurrence was intentional or not (Racine et al., 2018).

In the context of a crisis, stakeholders will make attributions about the causes of such crisis, thus assessing responsibility (Coombs, 2007, as cited in Chung & Lee, 2017). Based on the attribution of responsibility, how the organization will need to communicate to its publics, what elements should be featured in the apology, and what could be the stakeholders' reaction to it may change.

1.3.1 The Emotional Reaction to Corporate Apologies

Scholars suggest that apologies can reduce victims' negative emotions towards the company and help improve its reputation.

An important element of corporate apologies is accepting accountability. In an experiment focusing on the public's emotional reaction to apology statements, Chung and Lee (2012) discovered that a corporate apology expressing active responsibility is more likely to relieve public anger than an apology communicating passive responsibility, especially when the firm's liability is evident. In their study, sympathy did not turn out as a significant factor to relieve public's anger, differently from what other scholars believe. Indeed, stakeholders' trust in corporations has been progressively diminishing, as proven by multiple studies, such as PwC 2024 Trust Survey (Forbes, 2024). Thus, people may not show the same mercy to organizations as they do to other individuals, because they doubt the truthfulness of corporations' sympathetic apology (Chung & Lee, 2012). The results of this experiment may be also confirmed by

some real-world cases. An example is Maple Leaf Foods, which in 2008, saw a segment of its production facilities tested for listeria, after an outbreak that killed 22 people and sickened many others. The company took charge of the situation from the very beginning, closing the investigated sectors and voluntarily removing its products from the market. In particular, the CEO decided not to listen to its lawyers who advised him not to apologise, since that would have meant acknowledging responsibility. His decision ultimately proved right, since his heartfelt apology where he assumed complete accountability for the event and the subsequent deaths and illnesses was positively accepted by the public. Indeed, Maple Leaf Foods is still in business nowadays. Still, companies are often tempted to avoid taking full responsibiity, issuing apologies with a more superficial tone. Taking passive responsibility means acknowldeging the mistake, but not taking proper ownership of one faulty actions. Even Dove fell in the trap when, in October 2017, it published an advertising showing a black woman's skin becoming white, as she removed her shirt. The ad, that was meant to sponsor the firm's soap, turned into a PR nightmare. Obviously, the company was accused of skin racism and a global boycott started. Instead of showing accountability for its actions, Dove decided to apologyse for the damage caused, stating that its intent was actually showing that Dove's soap is meant for everyone. The apology did not satisfy the firm's publics, as reported by The Guardian (2017), which highlights the prevalence negative comments under the apology tweet.

Figure 2. Image retrieved from Australian Broadcast Corporation (2017) showing Dove's unappreciated campaign.

1.3.2 The Public Perception of Corporate Apologies

Apologies affect people's perceptions of the offending organization by expressing reform and/or by showing accountability (Hornsey et al., 2024). According to Shao et al. (2022), people perceive and evaluate the apology on three levels: (1) accountability, (2) authenticity, and (3) fairness. When a firm accepts liability, the apology is perceived as sincere and genuine, and its contents are judged as just, then the results of the corporate apology results will be enhanced trust and brand equity, which can positively impact the company's performance and reduce the relational damage.

Still, as previously mentioned, accountability may be a "double-edged sword" (Shao et al., 2022), since it could enhance the view of the organization as responsible for the crisis. while also exposing it to potential lawsuits or demands for compensation and restitution (Koehn, 2013). Nonetheless, in an experiment,

Hornsey et al. (2024) showed that even though perceptions of culpability are higher when the firm apologises than when the firm denies responsibility or adopts a no-comment strategy, corporate apologies obtain higher consumer trust and support. Indeed, perception of reform outweigh perception of culpability in shaping consumers' reactions. JetBlue perfectly emobodies this concept. For a week after Valentine's day 2007, 1,000 JetBlue flights were delayed or cancelled due to an ice storm that collpased the organization's operation systems. This led to general discontent and angryess towards the company, since many could not reach their loved ones or depart for a romantic getaway. JetBlue reaction to the critical event was successful especially because of the underlined intent of reform. Indeed, even if JetBlue acknowldged liabilility thus increasing its culpability perceptions when it could have blamed the weather, the airline company stressed their commitment to start sharing better and more timely information with their travellers, claim supporterd also by the creation and publication of the "JetBlue Airways Customer Bill of Rights", where information on how costumer will be updated in case of flight delay, cancellation, or divertion, as well as the consequent compensation is reported. These initatives highlighted the company's commitment to change and allowed the company to minimise the damage.

Even the timing of apologies influences their perception and evaluation, and should, therefore, be taken into consideration. Indeed, an apology offered long after the critical event may be discarded as irrelevant by the public. Moreover, Schweitzer et al. (2015, as cited in Woods, 2022, p. 20) underline that corporate apologies using informal language and personal communication are seen as more authentic.

1.4 The Influence of Social Media on Corporate Apologies

The use of corporate apologies has been exponentially increasing since the beginning of the 21st century, and especially in the last decade (Lindner 2007; Adams 2000, as cited in Kohen, 2013, p. 239). There is the need to apologise more, as firms misbehaviours and unethical activities are increasingly being exposed online. As a matter of fact, social media can act as crises generators and crises amplifiers. Indeed, a crisis can originate on such platforms, starting, for instance, from content published by the organization and not appreciated by users, as in the case of Dolce & Gabbana and the "Eating with Chopsticks" video that all of us surely remember. These new media can even amplify a crisis, uncovering the behaviours of the company and reaching a far broader audience in just a matter of minutes, if not seconds. Because of their power, professionals have started to navigate how to communicate on social media during critical situations.

Figure 3. Image retrieved from CNN (2018), showing a frame of D&G "Eating with Chopsticks" video.

Social media have completely revolutionised the way we communicate, creating new work methods for and approaches to crisis communication (Eriksson, 2015). They have their own rules and norms, which need to be considered by companies while drafting their apology. Above all, according to Gistri and Wannow (2024), there are five key components of an effective corporate apology on social media, notably: (1) an initial apology, such as "I'm sorry", (2) an explanation or account of the cause that led to the transgression, (3) an expression of liability for the event, (4) an offer of reparation, (5) and a promise to do better in the future. These components are in line with the required elements of a traditional corporate apology; however, they must be adapted to the tone, content, and style of social media and of the specific platform. For example, timeliness becomes even more important for apologies shared on social media. This need is linked to the fact that information online spreads like a wildfire. Thus, if in the past companies had 24 hours to respond to a crisis, now they have just a few minutes, or a few hours at best. Moreover, on these platforms, information is compressed in a brief caption or in a short video. This means that professionals must be able to shrink the firm's complex and long discourse, highlighting only the focal points. However, writing a short and effective apology seems to be more challenging (Staubach & Wannow, 2024), as identifying which are the most important piece of information is a process that requires a deep study and concrete understanding of the situation, of the audience's expectations, and of the company's position.

1.5 The Use of AI in Corporate Apologies

One of the newest trend in the corporate world has to do with the use of AI for carrying out daily business activities. Professionals have already started to rely on AI-powered programs to fulfill different communication tasks (Korn Ferry, 2024) and we can only imagine the presence of AI in firms will continue to grow. Thus, it is fair to expect AI technologies to be soon used even to develop corporate apologies.

1.5.1 Benefits and Potential Pitfalls

Focusing on corporate apologies, online, one can find many AI apologies generators, and many can see the potential benefits of using such instruments when dealing with a crisis. AI can generate a perfect corporate apology, which still takes in consideration the main characteristics of the firm, in just a matter of seconds, allowing for a rapid response (Korn Ferry, 2024). Moreover, chatbots can manage multiple interactions contemporaneously, processing large amounts of data. Considering that the number of comments and messages received by an organization during a critical moment and even after an apology is immense, AI could be a valuable tool not only to provide timely responses, but also to signal to professionals inquires and complaints that are worth further attention.

However, for an activity that requires so much emotional intelligence, empathy, and a deep understanding of public perceptions, one could question the ability of AI in writing an effective corporate apology. Indeed, AI cannot comprehend all the subtle, yet complex, emotions involved when people communicate, as McDermott (2024) stated. For this reason, it is necessary for professionals to use AI as a co-pilot and not as the leader of the process of corporate apologia. To

avoid worsening the crisis, the output of AI should be revised, adjusted, and only then approved and diffused.

Companies' interest in the use of AI is growing exponentially and this interest is proved also by the many studies carried out on the subject. However, research on the use of AI in drafting corporate apologies is very limited and requires further examination. Still, as highlighted by Xiao and Yu's (2025), chatbots have big potential in crisis communications as they can enhance stakeholder satisfaction, reduce responsibility attribution, and increase the perceived competence of the organization. Surely, for AI to be used effectively, companies need a strategic plan, which includes feeding the machine the appropriate data about the firm, experimentation, and training (McDermott, 2024).

2 Humour and its Potential in Corporate Apologies

2.1 Three Theories of Humour

Through history, humour has caught the attention of numerous researchers in various fields, from psychology to anthropology and communication. Nonetheless, as proposed by Pirandello (1908) the only thing on which all these scholars have agreed is how challenging describing humour is. Many have listed its characteristics, without however achieving a holistic and final theory of it. Some believe that a comprehensive understanding of humour could be conquered by studying its philosophy. However, such road has not been truthfully navigated. Holt (2008) suggests that this negligence could be due to the commonly shared fear that the more fascinating and amusing a phenomenon is, the less its philosophy seems to be.

Still, historically, three main theories of humour have emerged: (1) the superiority theory, according to which derision is at the heart of humour, (2) the incongruity theory, which sees unexpectedness and contradiction as a prerequisite for humour to exist, and (3) the relief theory, that attempts to explain the connection between humour and laughter and sees them as a way for humans to release tensions. Indeed, in Freud's interpretation of this theory, humour and laughter were used to distract the brain from taboos and forbidden thoughts, freeing it from the mental strain associated with them. Meyer (2000) underlines how each of these theories is linked to a specific situation which grants an appropriate use. Indeed, relief humour is particularly indicated in tight contexts, such as during a difficult negotiation or when addressing a problematic topic where humour's goal is to ease the perceived tension. On the other hand, since incongruity humour combines situations, people, or ideas that are not typically considered as related,

it is suitable for proposing new angles and perspectives. Lastly, superiority humour could be exploited for increasing the sense of belonging to a community and underling felt differences with rival groups.

2.1.1 Definition and Nuances of Humour

According to Romero and Cruthirds (2004, as cited in Béal & Grégoire, 2021, p. 244), "any amusing communication that generate positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization" can be considered as humorous. Moreover, it is associated with smiling or laughing, which are the direct results of favourable reactions to humorous messages. Also, humour is intertwined with a strong social and collective component. This aspect is underlined by Meyer (2000), who suggests that people seem to laugh livelier when watching a television show with others, than when they are alone.

To be able to understand the humoristic trait of a message, the public needs to be somehow knowledgeable with the situation to which the interlocutor is referring to. This means that the target of an organization's communication needs to be familiar with or possess the instruments to comprehend the elements that make a certain message humorous. Indeed, as Raskin (1992, as cited by Meyer, 2000, p. 316) stated, understanding, together with willingness, is a prerequisite for experiencing humour. Coherently, Rolle (2012) highlights that for a humorous message to be understood and welcomed, the company and its stakeholders must share a "common encyclopaedia", meaning mutual knowledge about the different aspects of life. In this way, their perspectives on what could be considered amusing, comic, or laughable will be aligned. Such shared understanding will allow the audience to grasp the amusing and entertaining components of the message, while at the same time, it will protect the company

from potential pitfalls, as it decreases the possibility that the communication will be misinterpreted.

A fundamental element that needs to be considered in every communication activity is the audience. As a matter of fact, it is the audience and its perception of the message that will determine the success or failure of the firm's effort. This aspect is especially true when it comes to humour. Indeed, humour is situationally dependent (Meyer, 2000), which means that based on the circumstance in which the humorous message is diffused, the reactions to it will change. Indeed, finding themselves in the same situation, some audiences may perceive humour as fitting, whereas others as inappropriate. At the same time, the same audience may view humour as essential in certain contexts and as superfluous in others.

Austers et al. (2017) highlight three dimensions of humour, which are coherent with the three above-mentioned theories of humour: (1) aggression, where humour is used to mock and attack the receiver of the communication, (2) incongruity, where humour lies in the representation of two opposed and apparently conflicting ideas as somehow similar, and (3) arousal-safety, based on the release of tension and subsequent arousal people experience when they understand the humorous component of a message and therefore "get" the joke. These three dimensions of humour can be useful for introducing its different forms that characterise our daily communications. A first broad classification of humour distinguishes between light forms and dark forms of humour. Light forms of humour, defined as benevolent and virtuous, are aimed at creating positive connections and relationships, as well as dealing with issues and misbehaviours in a more relaxed manner. Indeed, as advanced by Ruch (2004, as cited in Hoffman et al., 2019, p. 372), light humour involves the ability and maturity to look at our flawed world under with a tolerating and forgiving perspective. On

the other hand, darker forms of humour are aggressive and hostile in nature and their goal is not to unify, but to divide and isolate. As a matter of fact, when using dark forms of humour, the interlocutor attacks, mocks, and humiliates the receiver of their communication, putting them in an uncomfortable situation. Indeed, the main difference between light and darker forms of humour is that the former are focused on laughing *with*, whereas the latter are designed for laughing *at.* Taco Bell is a perfect example of an organization that integrated light humour in its communications and succeeded. In January 2011, Taco Bell found itself facing controversy after being accused of not using enough beef in the filling of its tacos to name them "beef tacos". In this context, the firm saw the opportunity to share the truth about its famous product, which was actually mainly filled by beef. Therefore, Taco Bell decided to publish a humorous apology on various American newspaper, including the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. The humorous, yet provocative, apology started by saying "Thank you for suing us" and proceeded to underline that Taco Bell's beef tacos are made by 88% of beef. The apology employed light humour which exploited the incongruity of the situation, and which was aimed at amusing and engaging the audience. Indeed, this is an example of laughing *with* the public, as the company was not trying to make fun of the readers, but to shed light on the untruthfulness of the accusations while maintaining the informal approach that had always characterised the organization. Moreover, it is important to underline that, even if the heading of the apology is indeed humorous, the body of the apology was, instead, extremely serious and aimed at underlining the company's true and

concrete effort at being transparent with its publics and providing them with quality products.

Figure 4. Image retrieved from Eater (2011), showing the heading of Taco Bell's humorous apology.

On the other hand, an example of a firm that has used humour to laugh *at* its audience is Home Depot. As a matter of fact, in 2013, Home Depot, in an attempt to integrate humour in its social media communications, published an image of three drummers on Twitter. Two of them were black, whereas the other one was dressed as a chimpanzee. The humoristic component was in the caption of the post, as the firm asked its followers to identify which drummer was different from the others. Users did not appreciate the humorous nuance of the tweet, which felt not only as laughing *at* a part of them, notably the black community, but also as undermining them. Moreover, such use of dark humour was not in line with Home Depot's brand identity and therefore was not perceived as genuine by its stakeholders.

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Figure 5. Image retrieved from ABC News (2013), showing Home Depot's unappreciated humorous tweet.

Considering the high danger connected to dark humour, some practitioners completely discouraged its use in the corporate context. Some even went further and stated that dark humour cannot be considered a true form of humourism. In fact, in an interview, Rolle (2012) stated that humourism is never laughing at, but always with. This vision further separates light humour from darker humour, suggesting that the only real approach to humour is the kind-hearted and in "bona fide" one.

Humour could be further classified in four styles, notably (1) affiliative humour, (2) aggressive humour, (3) self-enhancing humour, and (4) self-defeating humour. Affiliative humour is a lighter form of humour aimed at forging relationship by smiling and laughing together of typical everyday situations, with which many can relate to. On the other hand, aggressive humour is a darker kind of humour, and it involves the derision of the target of the humorous message. When a firm adopts self-enhancing humour, instead, it exploits its only secure ally: itself (Rolle, 2012). Indeed, with self-enhancing humour, the organization light-heartedly smiles at its own mistakes and weaknesses. Lastly, self-defeating humour is a rather aggressive form of humour, where the speaker attacks or mortifies themselves. Therefore, the target of the humorous communication is still the company itself, however, in this case, the tone of the message is more hostile.

Recently, humor has become much more mental and reasoned, developing into a proper cognitive process. This is revolution needs to be taken in consideration by professionals adopting it while crafting their communications, in particular apologies. Indeed, an effective humorous apology must be witty, as it cannot afford to be a mere, non-sensical, stereotypised joke. Humour is not easy or straight-forward. It is the ability to unveil a ray of lightness on matters that all seem, but light. However, to provide this kind of perspective a deep contextual analysis and reasoning is needed.

2.1.2 Cultural Dimension of Humour

Giddens (1994, as cited in Valentini, 2022, p. 211) defines globalization as "the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa". As an outcome of this process, firms have started to experience the

need to acquire the instruments and develop the capabilities to interact effectively to intercultural audiences. As a matter of fact, globalization, which has been further advanced by digitalization, resulted in companies communicating with extremely variegated audiences, constituted by culturally, ethnically, and ideologically diverse publics, who have distinct traditions, histories, manners, as well as a different perception of humour and of what can be considered humorous. Indeed, as underlined by Jiang et al. (2019, as cited in Scheneider, 2024, p. 36) even though humour is a universal phenomenon, it is greatly influenced by cultural backgrounds.

Thus, before using humour while talking to, or addressing, a multi-cultural audience, companies need to consider the differences that exist between them. Indeed, what can be perceived as funny in a culture, may be seen as incredibly disrespectful in another. Therefore, it is essential for firms to put themselves in their public's shoes and analyse what Hofstede defines as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2011, as cited in Żemojtel-Piotrowska & Piotrowski, 2023, p. 1).

When studying a culture, professionals should interpret it through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions model. The model was developed during the 1970s, when the theorist was working for IBM, which, being a multi-national company, wanted to know more about cultural difference among employees. From his studies six cultural dimension emerged: (1) individualism vs collectivism, which refers to the degree to which group relationships are valued over the individual itself, (2) power distance, which defines the extent to which unequal distribution of power is accepted in a given society, (3) masculinity vs femininity, linked to how roles are distributed in a culture and whether fundamental values are male-oriented or female-oriented, (4) uncertainty avoidance, which evaluates

a culture's comfort when found in unclear situations, (5) short-term vs long-term orientation, which is linked to how time is perceived and whether people adopt a short-term or long-term perspective in their daily life, and (6) indulgence vs restrain, which is connected to the degree to which people welcome amusement and gratification of desires as part of their life. By studying their stakeholders through these six dimensions, practitioners will be able to understand the habits, traditions, and ways of life that may influence how they react and perceive humour, as well as what different publics find humorous. For instance, in an experiment, Alden et al. (1993) analysed the differences in humorous appeals in various cultures, focusing on two elements of the cultural dimensions model, notably individualism vs collectivism and power distance. Their study highlighted that in collectivist countries, humorous advertisements mainly revolved around group situations, whereas in individualist nations, the situation was quite the opposite. In this regard, it could be useful to compare two different humorous advertisements, one from an individualist country, notably the USA, and one from a collectivist nation, notably, China. Starting from the USA, the 2016 Hyundai's Super Bowl commercial "First Date", aimed at promoting the brand's new safety measures, particularly the car tracker, is a perfect example of the use of humour revolving around an individual. In this advertisement, Hyundai decided to represent an overprotective father who lets his daughter and his new boyfriend borrow his car for their first date. He is then able to follow them throughout the whole night and protect his beloved child from any harm, thanks to the car tracker. This humorous commercial is focused on an individual, in particular the father, rather than a group situation, and it is coherent with USA's individualistic orientation. On the other hand, in Listerine's "Swish Away Suay" commercial, aired during the Chinese New Year's in 2023, humour is linked to a group situation, and it is in line with China's collectivist orientation. As a matter of fact, in this advertisement, the mouthwash and oral care company exploited humour to underline the importance of taking care of one's oral hygiene by portraying a

family struggling to take a family portrait, because of one of the members having bad breath. Therefore, their suggestion was that to achieve a better consumer response in collectivist cultures, firms should prioritise humorous contents featuring large groups of individuals, whereas in individualistic countries, situations concerning smaller groups or single subjects were preferable. Furthermore, from their analysis of high and low power distant nations, it emerged that in countries characterised by a high-power distance culture, humorous ads often featured people from different social classes involved in hierarchical situations. To the contrary, in low-power distant nations, individuals' upbringing and social roles were less marked. Furthermore, the researchers noticed the presence of incongruity as a common element of humorous advertising in all cultures analysed. Indeed, what really changes in publics' perception of humour is not the structure of the humorous message, but its content. Thus, the real difference in the reaction to humour is not in how the message is constructed, as incongruity proves to be effective in the majority of cultures; it is the topic to which humour is referring to. For instance, Western countries appreciate sarcastic humour focused on politics, whereas Middle Eastern nations seem to prefer self-deprecating humour. In 2008, Lee and Lim, expanded Alden et al.'s study, considering also the uncertainty avoidance category of the cultural dimension model in relation to incongruity resolution and the individualism vs collectivism orientation connected to arousal safety. Through their experiment, the researchers appreciated that humorous advertisements with safe or resolved conclusions were favoured by cultures oriented towards uncertainty avoidance. To the contrary, uncertainty-takers countries seemed to prefer humorous commercials that lacked a clear resolution. Looking at arousal safety, it was suggested that stakeholders with higher collectivist orientation prefer content employing the arousal safety humour process, differently from individualistic countries.

Figure 6. Screenshot taken from @Anthon Miyazaki's YouTube video showing Hyundai's Super Bowl commercial picturing the dad being able to follow his daughter on her first date (2020).

Figure 7. Screenshot taken from @ListerineMalasya's Listerine's CNY ad, published on YouTube, showing a family enjoying together Listerine's benefits (2013).

For an organization, studying its publics and stakeholders means protecting itself from the downsides of a failed attempt at using humour, which include reputational damage, loss of stakeholders' support, and public's puzzlement. This is why it is of such importance for professionals to examine the cultural differences with its stakeholders, as well as the characteristics of the culture they are referring to. For instance, it is important for a firm to know that, when addressing an Italian audience, it is preferable to feature a clear conclusion to the humorous situation, since, as supported by numerous studies (Clearly Cultural), Italy may be considered as an uncertainty avoidant country. At the same time, the company should be aware that Western nations appreciate the use of humour in critical situations as means to decrease tension, differently from Eastern nations. Still, this kind of research should be carried out every time the organization intends to use humour in its communications. Indeed, cultural differences in the perception of humour exists not only between Western and Eastern countries that are generally perceived as fairly different, but also among Western and Eastern nations. Therefore, some Western countries may favour a particular kind of humour, which however could not be welcomed or understood by other Western nations, and the same holds true for Eastern countries. For example, according to Chen and Dewaele (2021, as cited by Schneider, 2024, p. 37), British humour, ironic and sarcastic in nature, is usually not appreciated by Americans, who prefer more direct jests.

2.2 Humour as a Growing Trend in Communication

Humanity has always known and used humour. Indeed, research confirms the presence of humorous messages and amusing lines in ancient cultures and societies. For instance, a multitude of jokes were found represented on pottery that dates back to the ancient Egypt. Today, humour has expanded and become

a fundamental aspect of our everyday life, characterizing both the private sphere and the working one.

There are various hypotheses that can explain the increasing popularity of humour, especially among younger generations. The main theory, supported by researchers, sees humour as the result of a release of nervous energy, which increases pleasure and decreases tension (Meyer, 1993). Coherently, Freud (1960) and Schaeffer (1981) suggested that humour is the outcome of the dissolution emotional or psychological tensions that has been stored and suppressed by the subconscious over time, and which are due to sociocultural inhibitions. Such tension can also originate due to cognitive dissonance and critical situations that people experiment during their lives. For sure, the past few decades have been all but dreamy for our society, leading people to higher levels of distress and anxiety. Since through humour such negative feelings can be, at least in part, resolved, individuals have increasingly adopted it while communicating with others.

2.2.1 The Increasing Importance of Humour in New Generations' Way of Communicating

As already stated, humour is adopted especially by younger generations, such as Gen Z. Indeed, they deal with even the most serious situations using humour, often in its darker forms. For this generation, humour is an effective way for coping with dramatic events, which have characterized their lives since the very beginning. Through humour, they can avoid being overwhelmed by the grief and the emotional strain associated with tragedies and crises. Humour, especially in its sarcastic form, overshadows the gravity of the event, making facing adverse situations easier (Dey, 2025). Indeed, according to VICE Media survey (2020), 72%

of Gen Z and 62% of millennials claimed humorous content shared on social media has helped them facing the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. Another example involves the myriads of memes that populated social media platforms at the beginning of 2020, when the whole world was discussing about a possible World War III. Therefore, what could be perceived by others as an insensitive way of acting in front of critical situations is simply a shield that protects Gen Z's wellbeing.
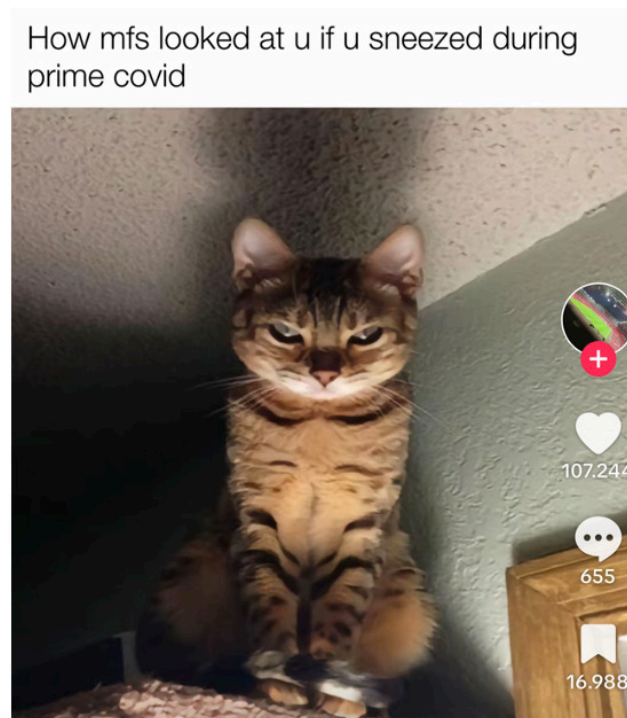
Figure 8. Screenshot of a humorous post regarding Covid-19 published by @JJokatcha on TikTok (2025).

2.2.2 Humour as a Means to Generate New Meanings

The increasing use of humour in interpersonal communication has had an impact also in the way organizations communicate. As a matter of fact, firms have started

to integrate humour in their corporate communication strategies. Indeed, it is of fundamental importance to align a company's communicative style with the one of its stakeholders, so as to increase the possibility that the message will be welcomed. Therefore, it can be said that firms need to speak the same language of their publics. This concept is at the core of the CML model, which is a typical negotiating tool aimed at building trust. CML is based on three key components, notably (1) calibration, (2) mirroring, and (3) leading. By calibrating, meaning observing and listening to the interlocutors, paying attention to the images and the words they use, as well as to their physical and emotional manifestations, the speaker will understand which behaviours to mirror. Mirroring means entering someone's communicational sphere, seeing things from their point of view, speaking their language, knowing their feelings. Not only with words, but also with attitudes, the tone and speed of voice, and the body language. Basically, here the speaker reproduces the style of the interlocutor. By reproducing one or more behaviours of the interlocutor, the speaker will be able to communicate similarity and form a connection. Lastly, leading is the moment in which the speaker stops mirroring the interlocutors' style and, with sweetness, not all of a sudden, they start guiding them towards the goal. By following the steps provided by this model, companies will be able to comprehend which are the traits of its audience that they desire to adopt and to reproduce in their communication, to foster positive and deep relationships with its publics.

Organizations can benefit from the use of humour, as it can fulfil various communicative goals. For instance, humour generates new meanings. This function is particularly beneficial in times of change, for instance when the company is proposing a new perspective, a new route to be explored, or when it is repositioning itself in the context in which it is operating. Moreover, through humour, the company could even question or reaffirm social structures (Austers et al., 2017). Therefore, humour is an extremely useful tool for organizations

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wanting to challenge the status quo and disrupt conventions, standards, or even protocols. Indeed, the grooming firm Old Spice, in an attempt to move away from it being viewed as a "dad brand", decided to create numerous humorous commercials in which it portrayed attractive young men as typical consumers. An example is the 2010 advertisement "The Man Your Man Can Smell Like", in which the company addresses women, comically stating that by using Old Spice products their partner would become incredibly good-looking. Moreover, humour improves rememberability and advertising effectiveness, as stated by Alden et al. (1993), who underline the benefits that brands such as Bud Light and Isuzu cars obtained from the inclusion of humour in their commercials. For instance, Isuzu cars has become internationally renowned, thanks to its approach to advertising, which allowed the car-making company to catch the public's attention and be relevant. The organization was able to fulfil such goal through the personification of the brand into a fictional character: Joe Isuzu. Joe Isuzu was the protagonist of numerous commercials, adding a touch of humour to them. In every advertisement, Joe would claim the most unbelievable things, such as that the company's cars could go faster than a bullet flying at 950 miles per hour, just to be discharged by the firm which would often state that Joe was lying at the end of the commercials. The Joe Isuzu saga lasted from 1986 to 1990 and enormously increased the organization's brand awareness, as well as its sales and market share, which went from 0.65 in the year before the beginning of the campaign to 0.8 in 1990 (Gianforti, 2018). Indeed, suggested by Gürkaynak et al. (2011), humour is an effective communication tool for attracting attention, cut through the advertising clutter, building emotional bonds and thus, brand equity and creating buzz. Standing out is fundamental in today's overcrowded media landscape, where individuals are overwhelmed by the enormous quantity of content shared every minute, both online and offline, which is much more than what they could possibly process. Therefore, only noteworthy messages will actually gain stakeholders' attention and consideration. Furthermore, after

comparing humorous and non-humorous advertisements on their ability sustain viewers' attention, Cline and Kellaris (2007, as cited in Romell & Segedi, 2022, p. 12) discovered that humour does not only grab the public's focus, but it is also able to maintain it. This aspect is crucial nowadays, since individuals' attention span has decreased to 8.25 seconds (Samba Recovery, 2025), less than the one of a goldfish. Moreover, humour fosters emotions and connections, thus enhancing the relationship between the company and its stakeholders and fostering positive associations with the firm itself. Lastly, humorous content is relevant for younger audiences, because it aligns with their way of communicating and expressing feelings, which increases the possibility of it being shared organically among users, amplifying the reach of the company's message and the firm's awareness.

2.2.2.1 The Use of Humour in Corporate Messaging as a Growing Trend

The use of humour in corporate communication can be traced back to the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, numerous companies employed this technique in their advertisements, especially because of its ability to make a message more memorable, enhance its evaluation, improve the image of the brand, and stimulate affection and purchase intention (Alden et al., 1993).

Recently, after the exponential growth and adoption of social media as a means to communicate with an organization's publics, the use of humour expanded to different branches of corporate communication, overcoming its confinement to advertising and becoming an effective communication and marketing tool (Chiew et al., 2019; Duong et al.,2020, as cited in Romell & Segedi, 2022).

There are firms that focus their communication mostly, or even entirely, on the use of humour. Think of Ryanair: the Irish airline has been sharing hilarious messages, bringing the use of humour in corporate communication to the extreme. Online, Ryanair genuinely roasts its consumers and jokes about its own policies, known for being extremely strict, especially when it comes to luggage dimensions. This strategy has allowed the firm stand out, achieving also a remarkable following on its social media channels. Furthermore, Ryanair has been able to create a "insider game" with its consumers and followers, in which they leave provoking comments under the organization's posts hoping to get an unforgettable response.

Figure 9. Screenshot of a humorous post by @Ryanair on TikTok (2024).
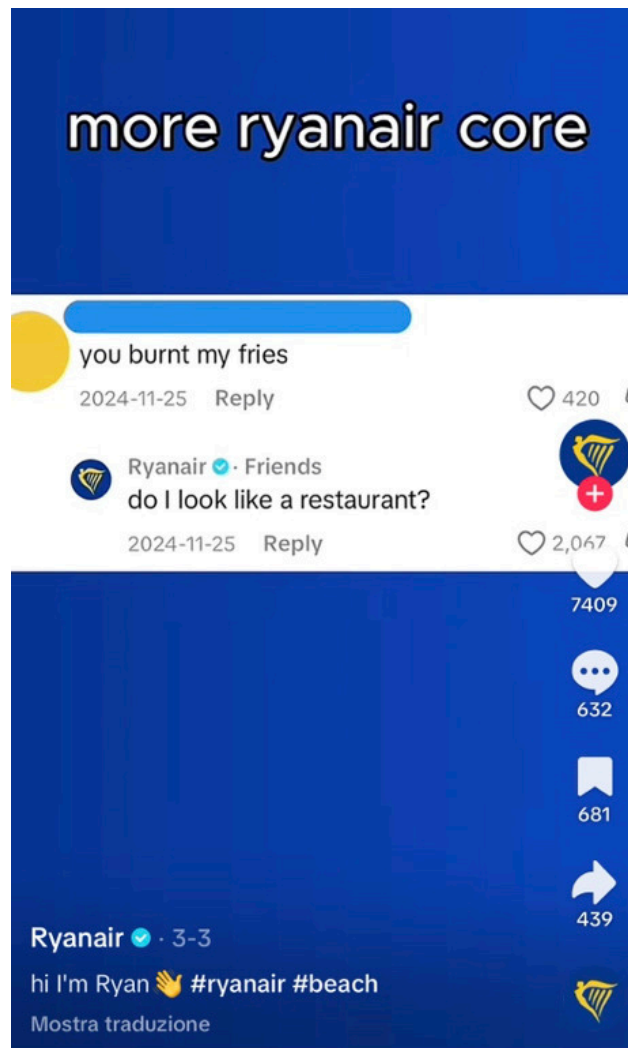
Figure 10. Screenshot of a humorous post by @Ryanair on TikTok (2024), roasting its customers.

Many companies have been following Ryanair's lead, rearranging their communications in a humorous key. Some communication masterpieces that blend humour and real-time marketing involve F1 teams and their reactions to events occurring in the sport, which are found to be very engaging by their followers.

Figure 11. Screenshot of a humorous post shared by @Redbullracing on Threads (2025),

Another renowned example of a company that has integrated humour in its communication strategy is Duolingo, which, with memorable memes, invites its audience to use its app and make steps forward in learning new languages. On Instagram, the firm's most recent humorous saga involves a series of humorous posts where the company firstly announced the death of its mascot, the beloved owl, and then encouraged online users to complete their lessons to bring it back to life. The saga ended with a few posts that comically showed Duo going back to life. Even though such strategy involved a slightly darker form of humour, it aligned perfectly with the organization's target, meaning new generations that favour such approach to humour. For this reason, Duolingo's campaign was able,

not only to grab the attention of millions of users, but also to receive support from them.
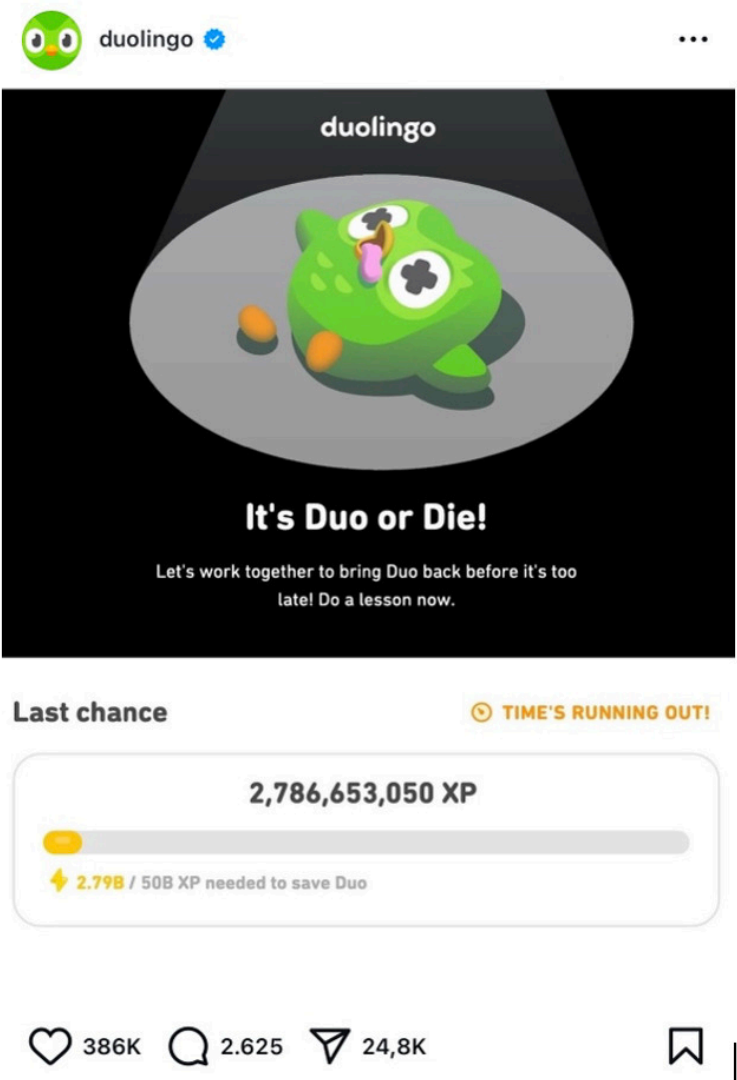
Figure 12. Screenshot of a post shared by @Duolingo on Instagram (2025) regarding the humorous saga involving the death of its mascot Duo.

Figure 13. Screenshot of a post shared by @Duolingo on Instagram (2025) regarding the humorous death of its mascot Duo.

Figure 14. Screenshot of a humorous reel shared by @Duolingo on Instagram (2025),
regarding the return to life of its mascot Duo.

Still, for humour to be used effectively, firms need to follow a strategy that
features precise steps and goals. Starting from a focus group's results, Rolle
(2012) suggests a 5-stages guide to the organizational use of humour. At first,
companies need to engage in foreshadowing. Indeed, professionals must try to

anticipate users' likely reactions to their humorous message, both positive and negative. Then, the practitioners must analyse the context in which the company is operating in, considering all the nuances, including the public they will be talking to. As a matter of fact, humour is not spontaneous but carefully planned and the humourist is an attentive observer able to perceive beliefs, paradoxes, and contradictions (Panini, 2012). Moreover, before issuing the humorous communication, an affirmation of authority and competence is necessary. Indeed, the firm needs to underline that, despite their humorous approach, it is competent. As a matter of fact, stakeholders will accept such playful inclination, only if they feel they can trust the organization. The following step involves sharing the humorous message. As a last step, the organization must claim its seriousness back, highlighting the concreteness of its intent and actions. In fact, humour can be extremely useful for companies, however below a humorous message a sincere effort must exist.

2.3 Humour in Crisis Communication

Humour has become a fundamental asset in the workplace. Professionals have started to recognise its value and to adopt it in different communication instances. In particular, humour could be exploited by firms for its ability to defuse critical situations (Witkin, 1999). Indeed, when used properly, humour can reduce stress, which is one of the main emotions felt during a crisis. Moreover, maintaining a positive and amusing attitude helps retaining a sense of control and keeps individuals from being overwhelmed by the critical event (Witkin, 1999). As a matter of fact, as previously mentioned, humour can help stakeholders deal with the happenings, therefore increasing their overall wellbeing. Not by chance, various researchers have underlined people's extensive use of humour in coping with COVID-19 during the pandemic and the consequent lockdown. During that

period, even organizations inlcuded humour in their communications, in particular in their social media strategy, both to stay relevant and to help people detach from the dramatic conditions we all were living in. For instance, Netflix published a myriad of humorous contents aimed at making people smile and promoting at the same time the company's TV series and movies.

Figure 15. Image retrieved from Contentworks (2020), showing Netflix engaging in the publication of humorous social media posts.

Humour can fulfil a multitude of aims during a crisis. For instance, during a negotiation or a challenging debate, a humorous glimpse, such as a smile, or even a small laugh can decrease tension and facilitate further interaction between the parties (O'Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983, as cited in Meyer, 2000, p. 312). In such contexts, humour can serve a twofold aim. First of all, humour is one of the most common tools for emotional release, therefore during a crisis it can help both the organization and its publics to lower the negative and disturbing feelings. Moreover, humour enables practitioners to form connections with their

stakeholders, which is fundamental to create empathy for the firm involved in the critical event and for mitigating conflicts.

2.3.1 The Role of Humour in Corporate Apologies

Considering its numerous benefits and its popularity among newer generations, humour could become an extremely beneficial tool for firms to use in their corporate apologies. Indeed, humour would allow organizations to reframe an issue, highlighting a different perspective, and proposing an unconventional and maybe unexpected reaction to a crisis. Instead of communicating sadness, the firm could accept responsibility for the event and ask for forgiveness in a more light-hearted way, inviting its stakeholders to smile and laugh together of the mistake made, thus lowering the perceived tension. Here, a useful example could be the Obama and its administration's apology after the failed attempt to launch the website for Obamacare in 2013 and 2014. Indeed, the website faced numerous technical issues, which prevented many from signing up to the healthcare benefits before the deadline. After issuing a sincere apology and extending the deadline for submitting to the programme, former President Obama realised a humorous interview with comedian Zach Galifianakis, where the President had the opportunity to address the critical event with a lighter approach, through which he as able to diffuse the strain of the situation. This effort proved successful, as following the interview, traffic on the HealthCare.gov website increased by 40% (Social Press Kit).

Figure 16. Image retrieved from The Hollywood Reporter (2014) showing a snap of Obama's humorous interview with comedian Zach Galifianakis.

In particular, self-deprecating humour can be effective in corporate apologies, as it makes the brand appear as down-to-earth and approachable. As a matter of fact, Zhung and Wang (2024) suggest that self-deprecating humour allows organization to acknowledge responsibility for a critical event in a relatable manner, which fosters understanding and consumer forgiveness. Moreover, as highlighted by Rolle (2012), by issuing a humorous apology, the organization will also communicate its desire to move, not only on, but also forward in its relationship with the publics, leaving behind the mistake made.

However, to be exploited effectively, humour needs to be suitable to the specific situation the company is facing. Indeed, humour is circumstantial, and it is not appropriate in every situation. Sometimes, when the firm is apologizing for an extremely dramatic event, maybe in which some have even lost their lives or have been severely injured, humour must be avoided. Thus, when facing a delicate situation, it is advisable for organization to avoid humorous messages and simply

issue a genuine apology offering support to the victims and highlighting the intent of reform.


2.3.2 Positive Uses of Humour

Greco (as cited by Panini, 2012, p. 27) underlines that managers are undermining humour's potential as an organizational resource. Humour is not simply joking around or laughing, it is also a fundamental asset for improving relationships, as well the general wellbeing of all those who are exposed to it. Indeed, the etymology of the Latin word "divertimento" ("amusement" in English), which is the intended direct result of humour, stresses its connection to distancing from stressful concerns. Therefore, by "getting" the humorous nuances of a given corporate apology, publics can detach from reality for a moment and confront the issue with a serener attitude. Such distancing is beneficial not only for external stakeholders, but also for internal ones, such as employees. Indeed, humour's consequent decrease in mental strain favours an improved working climate, which in turn, increases productivity and reduces absenteeism and sick leave. For the company, these results translate into lower costs and greater profitability (Télefonica, 2023), highlighting a further benefit of organizational use of humour.

Moreover, according to Panini (2012), humour favour divergent thinking, which is not only a fundamental asset during a crisis, but also when crafting an apology. Indeed, one of the main features of corporate apologies is the intent of reform, expressed through a series of actions that the firm aims to accomplish to solve for the damage done and to prevent the critical situation from representing in the future. Divergent thinking may facilitate the identification of innovative, unconventional, and more effective measures to be implemented, that may

contribute to the apology being positively accepted by stakeholders because of the effort demonstrated.

Probably the most important positive use of humourism is connected to its ability to create novelty. Indeed, as already stated, in an apology, humour could be used to provide a new view, both of the apologizing organization and of the event. By offering a fresh perspective, a humorous apology can initiate a revolution in the way the firm operates, in how it is perceived by stakeholders, and in its relationship with them. For instance, Zopa, a British online banking and peer-to-peer lending company, adopted a humorous social media strategy to fulfil its main objective, which is proposing a more understandable and less complicated view about finance, therefore helping individuals in investing and asking for loans. By adding a humorous touch to their communications, Zopa was able to engage users, while at the same time educating them.
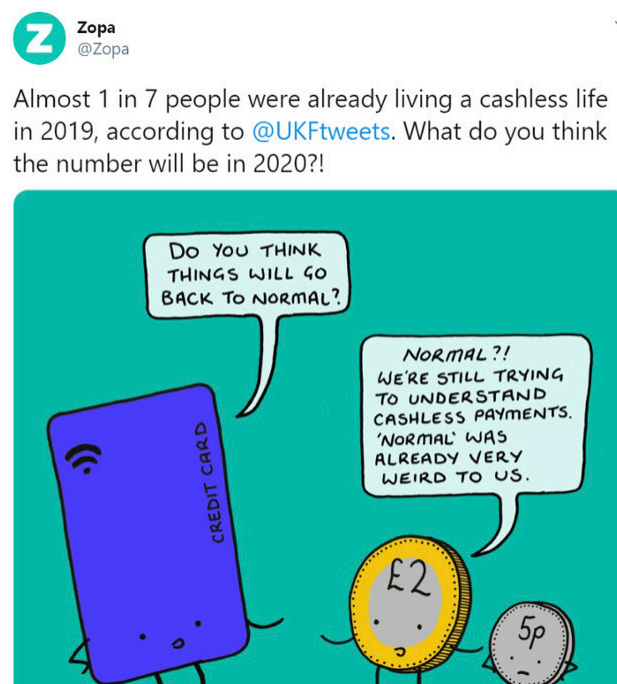
Figure 17. Image retrieved from Contentworks Agency (2018) showing one of Zopa's humorous yet educational social media posts.
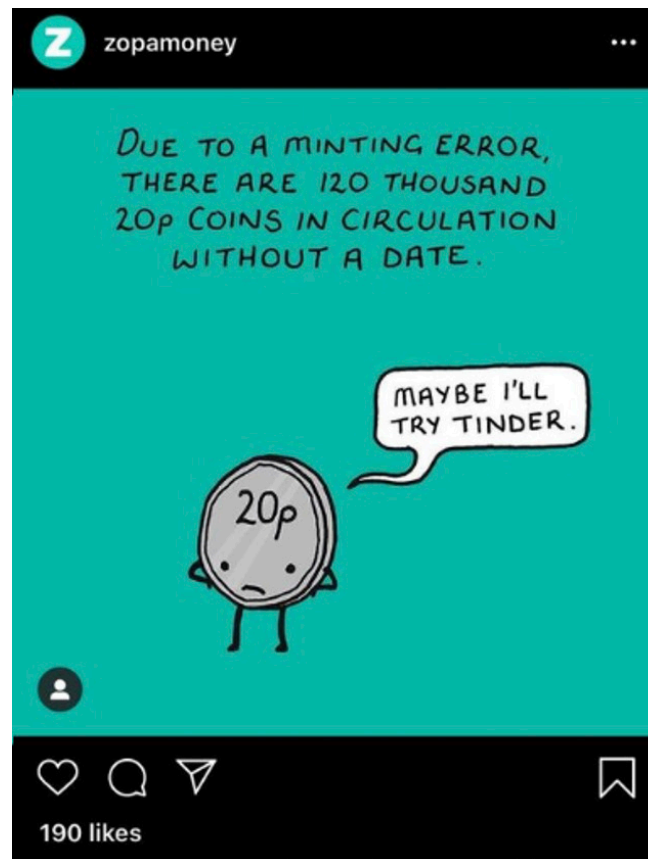
*Figure 18. Image retrieved from Mint Studios (2023) showing a humorous post by
@Zopamoney on Instagram.*

2.3.3 Humour as a Means to Connect with the Public through Positive Emotions

Humour can be used by organizations to connect with their publics by leveraging positive emotions. Indeed, if welcomed, humour generates a sense of amusement in the receiver of the communication, and this emotional response is often combined with a feeling of joy (Wu et al., 2020, as cited by Schneider, 2024, p. 18). Such positive emotions can overcome the negative feelings associated with the event for which the company is apologising. Therefore, it

could foster forgiveness by speaking to the emotional, rather than rational side of individuals.

Moreover, humour humanizes the firm, which is fundamental in corporate apologies. Indeed, as previously mentioned, studies prove that individuals are more inclined to forgive and trust other people than organizations. Thus, by using humour to make the firm appear more human, there will be a higher possibility that the public accepts the apology. Indeed, humour makes corporate apologies less formal, diminishing the perceived distance between stakeholders and the firm itself. Going back to the Taco Bell case, their humorous apology was able to increase the approachability of the company, by portraying it not solely as a formal and rational organization, but as a community of human beings, capable of smiling through critical situations and of seeing things from an unconventional and creative perspective.

Lastly, a humorous apology may increase stakeholder engagement (Schneider, 2024). As a matter of fact, humour adds relevance to the organization's communications, aligning them with the kind of content the audience normally consumes and shares. Therefore, publics will be encouraged to spend a greater amount of time interacting with the firm and its contents, since they are considered entertaining. As a result, stakeholders will develop a deeper bond with the organization, from which the company can benefit.

2.4 How Humour Can Help Restore Trust and Reputation

McKnight (2002, as cited by Zhang & Wang, 2024, p. 423) defines trust as a mental state where individuals hold positive expectations about others' actions and behaviours. Obtaining trust is a long and complex process, comprised of a

multitude of positive and transparent actions and behaviours on the part of the organization towards its stakeholders. When a company is involved in a crisis and it is viewed by its publics as accountable for event, a breach in trust may occur. Such erosion can lead to a reputational loss, which could have serious economic consequences for the firm. In such instances, the organization is required to issue an apology. In particular, considering humour's ability to release tension and foster positive emotions, scholars have underlined the strategic role it could play in corporate apologies. Indeed, as suggested by Zhang and Wang (2024), featuring a humorous touch in a company's apology can foster trust rebuilding and consumer forgiveness. Thanks to the firm's ability to reframe the issue and smile about the mistakes made, it will be perceived by stakeholders as transparent and humble. In this context, it could be useful to consider Will Smith's apology post after the 2022 Oscar's slap-gate, when during the Oscars' ceremony, Smith walked on stage and slapped presenter Chris Rock after he made a joke about Smith's former wife Jada Pinkett and her bald head, which was the result of alopecia. The day after the event, Will Smith published an apology on its Instagram account, where an elegant touch of humour can be noticed. Indeed, he concluded the apology saying "I am work in progress". This humoristic note helped fostering forgiveness, as it underlined Smith's sincere effort and desire to become a better person, acknowledging that he is not perfect and still has work to do. This line is a perfect conclusion to a sincere apology that helped lightening the mood and fostering understanding.
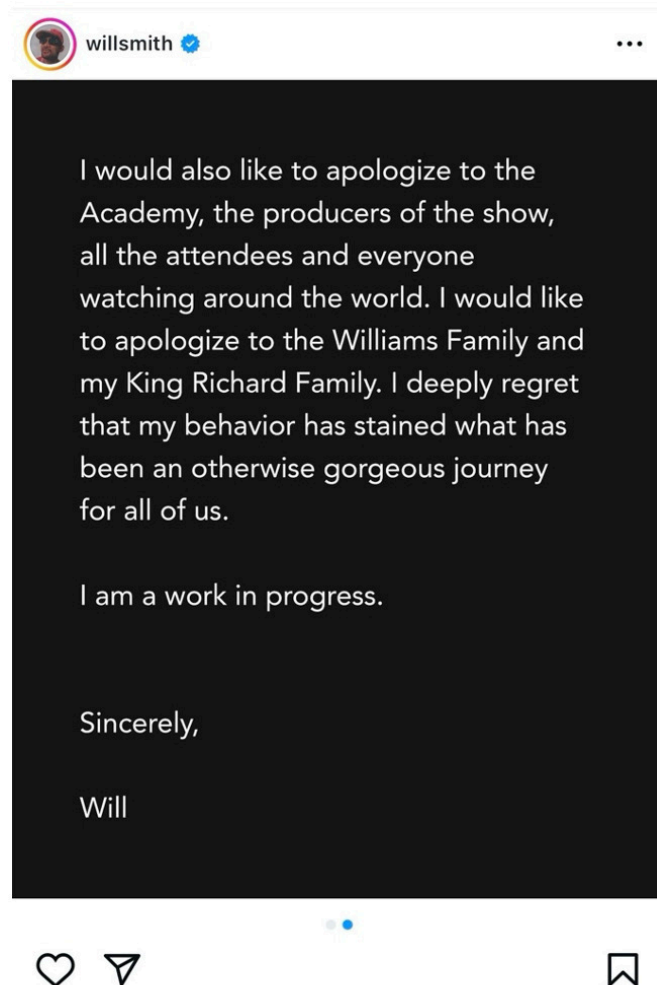
Figure 19. Screenshot of the apology post shared by @Willsmith on Instagram (2022) after the "slap-gate".

In their study, the researchers discovered that corporate apologies featuring self-deprecating humour obtain higher levels of consumer forgiveness if compared to non-humorous strategies, because of their ability to accept responsibility, while at the same time maintain a positive attitude. After all, it is a long-known truth that people tend to avoid situations filled with negativity.

Moreover, a humorous apology may help translating stakeholders' attention from the critical event to the message itself and to the unconventional attitude of the organization, therefore reducing distress. Indeed, as suggested by Shin and Larson (2020), when answering a consumer complaint using humour, the company can leverage on its unexpectedness. Therefore, when the conditions are right, featuring humour in a corporate apology will positively surprise stakeholders and improve the firm's reputation, as the company will be praised for its creative traits.

2.4.1 Potential Pitfalls

Professionals need to master the ability of effectively using humour in the business context, especially in corporate apologies, if they want to avoid its potential pitfalls. Indeed, if not appropriately used, humour might offend stakeholders or even undermine the credibility of an organization (Schneider, 2024). Indeed, humour is a double-edged sword that, if not used correctly, can and will be self-defeating.

First, practitioners must consider the fact that humour is not appropriate in every situation. For instance, as already mentioned, when the company is facing a very serious issue, it may be better to address it using a more traditional approach, leaving humour out of the picture. Indeed, some topics or events may be perceived by the public as extremely delicate, and any association with any form of humour may be judged as insensitive. It is fundamental for firms to calibrate the context they are dealing with before issuing a humorous apology, since if on the one hand successful humour has the potential to reinforce social connections, on the other hand, a failed attempt can damage relationships (Martin et al. 2003; Meyer 2000, as cited by Béal & Grégoire, 2021, p. 244). In particular,

stakeholders' reaction to an inappropriate use of humour will be grievous if they believe that the firm's intent was to make fun of or attack the audience or a third party (Joireman et al. 2013, as cited by Béal & Grégoire, 2021, p. 243). Indeed, crises provoke negative feelings, both in those directly involved in the event and in those exposed to it, and companies should avoid increasing such adverse emotions. In such context, a noteworthy case involves Ellen DeGeneres, and her public apology issued in 2020 after being accused of promoting unfair and toxic working conditions on the set of her famous series: The Ellen DeGeneres Show. During her apology, Ellen used humour to dismiss the gravity of the allegations, which was found by many as inadmissible, as she laughed about other people's trauma, which is indeed a very delicate subject. Indeed, what started as a sincere apology, quickly took a humoristic turn, which was noy appreciated by the public:

"As you may have heard, this summer there were allegations of a toxic work environment at our show and then there was an investigation. I learned that things happened here that never should have happened. I take that very seriously and I want to say I am so sorry to the people who were affected. I know that I'm in a position of privilege and power and I realized that with that comes responsibility, and I take responsibility for what happens at my show. This is The Ellen DeGeneres Show, I am Ellen DeGeneres. My name is there, my name is there, my name is on underwear."

It is of fundamental importance that the use of humour reasons with the overall brand identity. Indeed, if a company that is considered as extremely serious by its stakeholders decides to react to a critical situation with a humorous apology, its publics may evaluate the action as incoherent. As a matter of fact, the extent to which stakeholders will welcome a company's humorous approach depends on the coherence of such strategy with the key traits of the firm itself. Therefore,

in its crisis response attitude, an organization should always be genuine, otherwise its audience will dismiss the apology as irrelevant and insincere.

Moreover, McBride and Ball (2022) suggest that a pre-existing relationship between the firm and its public is necessary for a humorous apology to be accepted. Such pre-established connection is useful to offset another risk associated with the use of humour, notably its subjective nature. Indeed, when a company is already familiar with the key traits and preferences of those who will receive the apology, it has higher chances of aligning the use of humour to their expectations and avoid unfortunate and undesirable misinterpretations.

3 An Analysis of some Key Case Studies

3.1 Introduction to Case Studies Analysis

As previously mentioned, when a firm commits a misbehaviour, it should apologise for it to all those involved, in order to offset its potential negative consequences, such as the adverse reputational impact. Considering the numerous benefits the use of humour can have in the corporate context, the hypothesis of featuring humour in an organization's apology has been advanced in the previous chapter.

To add relevance and concreteness to such hypothesis, it could be useful to analyse some real-world cases of companies that have included a humoristic touch in their apologies and the effect it has generated. It is fundamental to examine case studies, as they can provide guidance to practitioners. Coherently, to get further insights about the use of humour in corporate apologies, the benefits this action can have, as well as the risks that cannot be overlooked, three case studies will be analysed. The first case study to be examined will be KFC's "FCK" campaign, which will provide an overlook of how humour can be an extremely beneficial and effective tool in apologies, as well as of the importance of embracing humour when the conditions are right and the presence of humour in the situation is clear to all those involved. Then, Three's UK apology after the "Feel at Home" initiative will be analysed to explore how humour can be used to build and foster positive relationships and to add relevance to an organization's communication. The third case study that will be analysed involves Ryanair. This example will show how the decision to use humour in an apology must be deeply reasoned. Indeed, even a company that has based almost entirely its

communications on humour can fall into the trap, worsening the damage the critical situation has caused, especially in terms of reputation.

3.2 The "FCK" Campaign

The first case worth analysing involves the fast-food company Kentucky Fried Chicken, commonly known as KFC, and its "FCK" campaign, which was the organization's response to a crisis involving the shortage of various key ingredients, including chicken, and that affected several KFC restaurants all over the UK.

3.2.1 Context and Background

In February 2018, KFC's supply chain in the UK collapsed, leaving various of its restaurants completely out of chicken and other essential ingredients. Of course, for a franchise specialized in fried chicken, that was a big issue. As one could easily expect, KFC's customers were not satisfied, and online the #ChickenCrisis hashtag went viral.

To understand how a fried chicken company was left with no chicken, a step back must be taken. Indeed, the chaos started in October 2017, when KFC signed a contract for food delivery with Quick Service Logistics and DHL, replacing its formal partner Bidvest Logistics. However, such collaboration did not provide the expected results, as DHL found itself struggling with timely delivery of key products, including chicken. By the 18th of February 2018, more than 500 restaurants were obliged to close their doors, because of the lack of some essential ingredients, a number that increased to 750 during the following days.

The shortage quickly got to the public's attention. News-media were covering the story and on social media people were constantly commenting on the situation, demanding a quick solution to the organization. Indeed, according to Brandwatch, on the 21st of February alone there were 53,000 mentions online of KFC running out of chicken, alongside hashtags such as "#ChickenCrisis" and "#KFCCrisis" (Brownsell, 2018). Thus, KFC found itself dealing not only with a financial loss, because of the closed restaurants, but also with a reputational one. Indeed, the situation was much more critical than one could expect: KFC's customers even called the London police complaining about the closed salespoints, and the employees of the few restaurants that remained open were constantly being attacked by consumers, because of the lack of some ingredients.

Figure 20. Screenshot of a tweet posted by @CH_0099 using the hashtag #ChickenCrisis (2018). Retrieved from X.

Figure 21. Screenshot of a tweet by @Harjsethi using the hashtag #ChickenCrisis. Retrieved from X (2018).

3.2.2 KFC's Response and Analysis of the Humorous Element

From the very beginning, the humorous component of the situation was evident. After all, thinking about a fried-chicken fast food franchise running out of chicken could be used as a textbook example of incongruity humour. Online, many started sharing memes and laughing at KFC and its nightmare. However, not all customers saw the irony of the situation. Indeed, many were enraged by the impossibility of eating their beloved fried chicken. Therefore, KFC found itself dealing with a complex situation that required a prompt response. In its crisis

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management plan, the organization set out two objectives: a widespread public apology and transparent and truthful explanation of its solution to the issue (Aguada, 2023).

A first apology attempt arrived quite quickly, as soon as the first restaurants were forced to close down, because of the lack of some key ingredients. This first apology was communicated through signs that appeared on the windows of these closed outlets, which stated:

"Sorry, we're closed. We deliver our chickens fresh into our restaurants, but we've had a few hiccups with the delivery today. We wouldn't want to be open without offering our full menu, but we'll be back at the fryers as soon as we can."

Even if in this apology the humorous component is not extremely underlined, it can still be felt. Indeed, this apology would classify as exploiting a lighter form of self-deprecating humour, which, as stated before, is incredibly useful to portray the firm as approachable and humble, therefore fostering consumers' forgiveness. Such use of self-deprecating humour allowed the organization to acknowledge liability for the event, still maintaining the positive attitude that has always characterised it. Moreover, by using the pronoun "we" and the possessive adjective "our", KFC portrayed itself as a community of human beings, rather than a cold organization. By emphasising the collective component of the firm and humanising it by presenting the company as a group of people, KFC was successfully able to arouse empathy in the public, again fostering forgiveness and understanding. Indeed, as mentioned in the first chapter, research has proved that people are more inclined to forgive other individuals rather than organizations.

The humorous approach adopted by KFC in its reaction to the critical event quickly became more evident, especially thanks to a post on former Twitter on KFC UK official account, which stated:

Figure 22. Screenshot taken from About Resilience showing the KFC's first public statement on social media regarding the chicken shortage (2024).

Even though this post cannot be considered as an apology, as it lacks the necessary elements that characterise corporate apologies, it still exemplifies how humour can be used to address a critical situation while maintaining a light-hearted mood. Thanks to the witty and humorous opening of the post, KFC was

able to attract users' attention and spark their curiosity, encouraging them to continue reading it. Once again, KFC employed self-deprecating humour, emphasizing the unexpectedness and incongruity of the event. Such use of humour was coherent with the first apology issued by the company and contributed to humanising the firm, further fostering a positive reaction from the public and stimulating stakeholders' forgiveness. Light humour was adopted also in the caption of the post, notably "The Colonel is working on it.", where, with a brief sentence, KFC was able to communicate the organization's concrete effort to solve the situation, without adding emotional weight to it, but maintaining a positive and easy-going attitude. Moreover, even if they shifted liability on their delivery partner, notably DHL, they still maintained an understanding tone, highlighting the complexity of moving fresh ingredients across the country and avoiding adding further negativity to the situation.

The above-mentioned post, published on February the 20th, preceded the company's much more renowned apology strategy: the FCK campaign. Indeed, after a few days, KFC sent out an apology to all its customers through a full-page ad which featured its iconic bucket with a re-invented logo.

Figure 23. Image retrieved from Big Ideas That Work showing KFC's "FCK" full-page ad (2023).

As a matter of fact, on the 23rd of February, the firm published a full-page apology in two popular British newspapers, notably the Metro and the Sun. The choice of exploiting such a traditional media was connected to the company's willingness to reach a sizeable minority of UK customers who still favoured newspapers over social media to get information, as well as linked to the fact that individuals tend to trust information they find on newspapers more than the one they are showed on social media. In this apology, the organization portrayed its iconic chicken bucket, making a subtle, but humorous change: they played with the KFC logo and modified it to form the acronym "FCK". This choice was extremely bold for KFC. Indeed, in the last decades, a company's logo has become a symbol of its identity, and it is profoundly connected to its values. Therefore, a company's logo is deeply linked to what the brand aims at communicating, both internally and externally, and to what it stands for in the consumers' minds. For this reason, altering one's logo is a choice that is not taken lightly, but carefully considered. Moreover, the bucket had no chicken in it, a clear, but witty and funny reference to the critical situation the firm was living. Below the image, a short, but genuine apology was featured, which gained widespread media attention thanks to its amusing component (Schneider, 2024).

In line with the structure of a traditional apology, KFC's statement started with a first apology to the organization's publics, notably "We're sorry". This expression of regret is underlined by the position it occupies on the page, as well as by the bigger font size used. Such choices give more importance to this initial apology and underline the company's genuine remorse. Still in line with the framework of a sincere corporate apology, KFC proceeded by explaining what had happened and what had caused the crisis. Moreover, it underlined its effort to solve the situation. Even at this stage of the apology, KFC, not only welcomed, but also emphasised the humoristic component of the situation, acknowledging the

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incongruity of a fried chicken franchising left without chicken. The apology ended with the company expressing gratitude to its publics for "bearing" with them through such a critical moment. Therefore, KFC employed humour to address the critical situation and ask for forgiveness, without adding to the negative climate. Through humour, the organization invited all its publics to smile about the situation, lowering the perceived tension. Moreover, it is important to underline the fact that humour was not addressed only to KFC's external clients, but also to its internal ones. Indeed, the organization decided to address also its employees, recognising the impact that such a critical moment may have had on them.

At the end of the full-page apology, the public was invited to visit an ad-hoc micro website created specifically for the crisis. Even in this case, a humorous nuance was present. Indeed, the URL of the website was "kfc.co.uk/crossed-the-road", again making an explicit, witty, and comic reference to the chicken shortage, in an attempt to alleviate negative emotions and disarming customer frustration (Brownsell, 2018).

Moreover, KFC decided to speak the same language as their publics, by adopting an informal tone and by using expressions from everyday language to communicate its message. Indeed, the choice of using humour is consistent with such desire to align the firm's tone of voice with the one of its audiences. As a matter of fact, as previously mentioned, in the last decades humour has characterised individuals' communications, penetrating all aspects of their lives. Using an informal language, characterised by humoristic nuances was also useful to diminish the perceived distance between the firm and its stakeholders, as it helped KFC appear more down-to-earth and human.

It is worth pointing out that in their apology, KFC did not shift the blame on their new logistic partner DHL. As a matter of fact, the organization took full responsibility for the happenings.

3.2.3 Results and Audience Reaction

Thanks to its humorous component, the apology went instantly viral, becoming a transmedia phenomenon in just a few hours. Therefore, the number of people who entered in contact with the apology was not limited to the 6 million readers of the two above-mentioned newspapers. Thanks to the enormous coverage it received, both on traditional media and on social media, more than 1 billion people were exposed to the "FCK" empty basket, worldwide and in just three months, from February to May 2018.

KFC's effort proved effective, and online, users quickly forgave the organization. Indeed, in a short time, individuals went from criticising and attacking the company for the shortage to praising it. Indeed, while analysing the public's response to KFC's humorous apology, Schneider (2024) discovered that out of 307 tweets reacting to it, 81% of them were positive. Users appreciated the humorous approach taken by the firm, and applauded KFC's PR and social media teams, who they thought responsible for the witty crisis response.

Stakeholders' reaction proves that humour can be an effective tool to adopt during crises, especially in corporate apologies. Thanks to its ability to portray the firm as human, down-to-earth, and approachable, humour helped fostering forgiveness and understanding. Indeed, as Farren, the former manager director of KFC UK and Ireland, claimed, one of the most positive results of the corporate apology was that it helped stakeholders understand that KFC's employees were

not the ones at fault for the shortage, therefore they should not have been attacked. In this context, it is necessary to underline that, as already mentioned, before the "FCK" campaign was issued, KFC's employees were constantly being harassed for the lack of ingredients, and this was having an impact on their wellbeing. Moreover, the humorous apology allowed KFC to propose an unexpected response to the crisis, for which the company was celebrated. Indeed, the extremely positive reaction by KFC's public was also linked to the fact that the use of humour to address a crisis, and in particular, while issuing an apology, is unexpected.

Furthermore, the humorous nuance of this apology allowed KFC to release the tension associated with the issue, therefore mitigating negative emotions in favour of more positive ones, which fostered forgiveness and trust rebuilding. Moreover, humour also played a role in shifting stakeholders' attention from the critical situation to the company's creative response. Indeed, KFC was praised by its publics for its innovative and visionary reaction. As a matter of fact, the majority of the online reactions to the apology only addressed KFC's humorous approach, without mentioning the chicken shortage.

What really made the difference and overturned public's perception of KFC's shortage was the company's ability to use humour to own its mistake and to be transparent about what was happening. Indeed, humour was used by the organization also to constantly engage stakeholders and provide them with continuous updates. Furthermore, through the multiple humorous messages that the brand shared, and, in particular, through the "FCK" campaign, KFC portrayed itself as humble and in charge of the situation, underlining the efforts taken, without hiding the irony of the situation, but using it as its advantage. This contributed to establish a connection between the firm and its stakeholders, which encouraged the acceptance of the apology. Indeed, even though KFC

employed humour in its corporate apology, it always underlined its serious intent to solve the issue as quickly as possible.

Ultimately, KFC's humorous, witty, and brave crisis response proved effective. Indeed, according to YouGov, even though the franchise' brand perception decreased drastically in February 2018, by May of the same year, it had returned to pre-crisis levels, with a positive sentiment that went from -17% during the shortage to +31% by the end of 2018. (Your Story, 2025). KFC's apology success was even proved by the increase in market share, which rose from 7.3 % in 2017 to 8.1% in 2019 (Your Story, 2025).

It must be underlined that one of the reasons why KFC's humorous apology was so welcomed and celebrated by its stakeholders is that it was in line with the identity and overall tone of voice of the brand and with the approach the company had adopted since the very beginning of the crisis. Indeed, as previously underlined, humour had characterised KFC's response to the critical event from the very start. Beginning with the notices on the windows of the restaurants to the posts on social media, the organization was able to maintain a light-hearted attitude, reducing formality, and remaining true to its brand identity throughout the whole crisis. A fundamental and distinctive aspect of effectively using humour is that it must be coherent with the overall strategy and identity of the company. Indeed, what matters the most in the audience's perception of every message, and especially humorous communication, is it being perceived as genuine and true to the organization's way of being.

In his study, Schneider (2024) underlines that such a positive reaction to KFC's humorous apology may have been linked to cultural factors as well. Indeed, the kind of humour employed by the company, slightly sarcastic in nature, was

extremely successful with the British audience, precisely because it was in line with the style of humour appreciated by them.

After the crisis, KFC hired back its original delivery partner Bidvest Logistic. Such decision can be interpreted both as showcasing the company's humility, as they were able to admit they made the wrong choice changing partners and opting for a more cost-effective option, and as a sign of reform, communicating to KFC's customers that the firm was determined to take actions to avoid the critical situation repeating itself in the future. Both humility and desire to change are fundamental aspects for the success of a crisis management plan that further encourage stakeholders' forgiveness.

Finally, thanks to the use of humour in its corporate apology, the organization was able to offset the tension associated with the critical event, both internally and externally. Indeed, as already mentioned, humour helped fostering consumer forgiveness and understanding, therefore reducing the negative feelings connected to the firm and the critical event.

3.3 Three Mobile and the #Holiday Spam Apology

Another case study worthy of attention involves Three UK and its #HolidaySpam apology, meaning firm's response to the exponential oversharing of holiday snaps that UK was witnessing in the summer of 2014, as a result of Three's "Feel at Home" campaign, which eliminated roaming costs abroad.

3.3.1 Context and Background

Three UK is a British telecommunication company, and it is part of CK Hutchison Holdings, a multinational organization operating in the field of technology and innovation. Three UK was founded in 2003, and it is now one of the biggest mobile network operators in the UK. However, it has not always been like this. In 2014, Three UK was struggling to convince mobile users to commit to its services, as adopting a penetrating strategy, characterised by low-cost fees, did not seem effective in attracting new customers. Therefore, the company decided to adopt a different approach, starting from a powerful insight focused on an extremely pervasive issue: mobile networks commonly charged users for data roaming costs when they used their phones abroad, and consumers were not happy about it (IPA, 2016). To gain a competitive advantage, Three UK decided to eliminate roaming costs for customers when they utilized their devices in other countries. Their initiative led to an oversharing of holiday photos on social media, which caused the discontent of those who remained at home. Instead of ignoring the unhappy non-customers, Three UK exploited this situation to win their favour and to further advertise its policy. Indeed, the company launched the #HolidaySpam campaign, in which apologised to all UK citizens who were receiving a multitude of images from their loved ones showing off their vacations thanks to Three's roaming cost-free services.

3.3.2 Three UK's Response and Analysis of Humorous Element

Removing data roaming costs for users abroad led to a global epidemic of "holiday oversharing", that became widely known as #HolidaySpam on social media. After a myriad of complaints received online, Three UK decided to issue an apology, entirely based on humour.

As a matter of fact, in July 2014, Three UK issued its corporate apology; a one-minute video published on its official YouTube Channel, and then also showed on national television, in which a man, dressed in formal attire, asks for forgiveness on behalf of the company:

"Hello. I'd like to take this moment to sincerely apologise on behalf of Three. Our customers recent actions overseas rest entirely on our shoulders. We're sorry. We thought allowing customers to use their phones in 16 destinations worldwide, like they would at home, was a good thing. No extra costs for calling and texting back home. No extra cost for data. But we failed to consider the consequences. The holiday spam. We're sorry. Sorry for all the sunsets... The fancy cocktails... For plane wing, after plane wing, after plane wing. Sorry for the mini-monuments.... The beach feet... The street food... The #nofilters... The hot-dog legs. We deeply regret the frustration this has caused, and we urge all Three customers, when abroad, please brag responsibly. Thank you."

The video starts as a sincere apology. Indeed, the first image we see is a blank page with the writing "We're sorry." and Three UK's logo. Coherently, the first thing the spokesperson says, just after a brief greeting, is "I'd like to take this moment to sincerely apologize on behalf of Three". The speaker appears anxious and emotionally strained. Indeed, his body language, as well as his para-verbal communications, do not appear confident. Considering that, during a crisis, the spokesperson should be able to communicate security and diffuse the message that the organization is in control of the critical situation, issuing an apology using such a hesitant speaker may create some controversies. Actually, this choice was strategical, as it was a tool to further highlight the humorous nuance of the apology.

Figure 24. Screenshot taken from @ThreeUK's apology video on YouTube (2014).

The apology then proceeds with the company taking full responsibility for the Holiday Spam epidemic and for its consumers' actions, underlining that Three was acting in good faith when it removed roaming costs, allowing its service users to use their mobiles "in 16 different countries, just like they would at home". The company acknowledged the distress it was causing to all the victims of the Holiday Spam, who were receiving endless pictures of friends and relatives enjoying their time abroad, and it apologized for these happy images that were irritating all non-customers, fuelling them with jealousy. Indeed, by the end of the humorous apology, it becomes clear that the real target of the campaign was those who were not Three users yet, and therefore, who were not able to share their joyous holiday snaps, because of the high costs other mobile networks charged for roaming aboard. The video ends with the company inviting all its customers to brag responsibly when on holiday.

Figure 25. Screenshot taken from @ThreeUK's apology video on YouTube (2014).

Figure 26. Screenshot taken from @ThreeUK's apology video on YouTube (2014).

Later during that summer, Three UK issued further humorous apologies via posters that started to appear all over the United Kingdom and through open letters and full-page advertisements published on the most popular British newspapers. The campaign went on with a series of educational videos published on YouTube, where the aim of the company was increasing awareness of different kinds of holiday spams. Three UK also created an ad-hoc micro-website,

called stopholidayspam.com, where visitors could find information, not only about the Holiday Spam, but also connected to the "Fell at Home" campaign. Even on social media, Three UK was incredibly active on the topic, exposing potential holiday spammers and keeping their followers updated on current holiday spam levels.

Figure 27. Image retrieved from Beverly et al. showing one of the posts shared by Three UK on social media during the #HolidaySpam campaign.

*Figure 28. Screenshot from D&AD showing one of the billboards that followed the
#HolidaySpam apology video (2015).*

With the #HolidaySpam apology and the subsequent campaign, Three UK decided
to address what was a critical moment for many people, notably the holiday
period, using humour. As already suggested, online many were complaining
about the enormous quantity of snaps they were receiving from their
acquaintances, who were enthusiastic about the possibility of sharing their joyful
holiday moments. Therefore, the company decided to face such a critical
situation, using humour to empathise with those who stayed at home and who
were obliged to see the others relaxing miles away. This example could be useful
to show how humour can provide innovative ideas, helping practitioners to
approach different situations from an unconventional perspective. Indeed,
through its apology, Three UK was able to advertise its newest service in a
creative way, significantly increasing its popularity among British consumers.
Moreover, here humour was used also to create a connection with all the
individuals who had to see thousands of images of happy travellers, while they

were constrained in the rainy UK. Indeed, Three UK wanted to build a relationship with them, based on shared feelings. Thanks to this connection, the company was able to win the favour of many British citizens, who soon turned into Three's customers.

The humorous nuance of the apology stands, once again, in the incongruity of the situation. The firm was apologizing and taking full responsibility for something that was actually caused by Three UK itself, notably the holiday spam, but that for the company and for its users did not have a negative impact, but that was a joyful experience. As a matter of fact, both Three UK and its consumers were benefiting from it. Indeed, for Three UK, the Holiday Spam was proof of the success of its "Feel at Home" initiative, whereas for the holiday spammers, having the opportunity to share images of their cheerful moments abroad without any additional costs was an added value. Therefore, while apologizing, Three UK was considering the point of view of those stakeholders who were not directly related to the firm, but that were still affected by Three's actions, as they were suffering the spam. For Three UK issuing a humorous apology was a bold choice, as it was completely unexpected. Still, humour allowed the company to think outside of the box, fuelling creativity and innovation. Indeed, the humorous apology allowed Three UK to acknowledge a portion of stakeholders which is often overlooked, making them feel considered and involved.

3.3.3 Results and Audience Results

After the apology, the hashtag #HolidaySpam became a trend, and online, thousands of people online started to use it. As a matter of fact, in 2014, before the campaign there were only 96 mentions of the hashtag, a number that, after the apology was issued, increased to more than 40,000 on Twitter and Instagram

alone (Beverley et al.). The campaign was also effective in promoting Three UK's "Feel at Home" initiative, since at the very beginning of the apology the company's spokesperson listed all the benefits of Three's roaming cost-free promotion. Indeed, thanks to the viral humorous apology, Three UK acquired exponential visibility and its popularity among British citizens vertiginously increased. The company's customers almost doubled, resulting in over 9.8 million users in the UK and 1 million consumers abroad. Even Three UK's market share drastically increased to 13.1%, reaching an all-time high (Beverly et al.).

The humorous apology and the subsequent campaign were effective as they allowed Three UK to form a connection with the affected party, notably the non-users, by speaking directly to them. The firm invited the whole audience to smile, and maybe even laugh, together about the happenings, fostering the creation of a positive climate. Such favourable climate encouraged the creation of positive associations with the company, which may have stimulated much of the public to change network provider and start using Three UK.

Moreover, the firm studied its audiences and its consumer base before issuing its humorous apology. This factor helped ensure its success. Indeed, Three UK employed a more sarcastic form humour, which involves exaggeration and saying the contrary of what one's really means, and which is greatly appreciated by British people. Moreover, the company based the humoristic component of its apology on a cultural phenomenon that already existed and which the "Feel at Home" campaign amplified: the ever-increasing time people spent on social media, both sharing and keeping up with their acquaintances' updates. Indeed, users were sharing an overload of perfectly-filtered, prolifically-hashtagged, hilariously-clichéd images on their social media pages (Beverley et al.). This phenomenon exponentially increased when people were abroad, exploring unseen places and enjoying their free time. Although the spammers loved posting

hundreds of snaps of their joyous holidays, those who received them did not. Therefore, by exploiting the Holiday Spam phenomenon, and adding a humour and a little bit of exaggeration, Three UK created a relatable campaign, in which both the spammers and the receivers could see themselves. This element further increased the audience's positive reaction to the apology, as Three UK used a shared encyclopaedia and talked about something the public could relate to.

3.4 A Failed Attempt: Ryanair's 2018 Apology for Flight Cancellations

In August 2018, Ryanair apologized to almost 200 of its customers after erroneously sending them unsigned compensation checks. The airline owed these passengers money for the numerous delayed and cancelled flights of the previous days, coherently with what is stated by the European Union flight regulation which entitles customers a compensation when flights are severely delayed or cancelled (Pascus, 2018).

After receiving numerous customer complaints and being exposed online by the unsatisfied passengers, Robin Kiely, Ryanair's former Head of Communications, apologized on behalf of the company. Such corporate apology featured a nuance of humour, which however, was not appreciated by the public. Indeed, Kiely stated:

"*Due to an admin error, a tiny number of cheques (less than 190 out of over 20,000 compensation cheques in July) were posted without a required signatory. These cheques were re-issued last week, and we apologise sincerely for this inconvenience which arose out of our desire to issue these compensation cheques quickly to our customers.*"

Here, the use of humour, which concerned the number of unsigned cheques issued, was meant to amuse the audience and attempt to smile together at the company's mistakes, which was perceived by Ryanair as a minor error. The humorous nuance of the apology was coherent with Ryanair's communication style, which, as previously mentioned, is almost entirely based on the use of humour, both in its lighter and darker forms. However, in this instance Ryanair's humoristic tone was not welcomed. Indeed, as already stated, the successful use of humour is strictly connected to the situation in which the organization intends to use it. In this case, Ryanair's passengers were enraged by the delayed and cancelled flights which disrupted their plans, maybe even leading some of them to miss an important event which they looked forward to attending. As a consequence, the humorous nuance of the apology was perceived as insensitive to other people's agendas and appointments, since the rescheduled flights represented a great inconvenience for most of them. For this reason, stakeholders' negative emotions prevailed over the company's humoristic attempt, and ended up being amplified by it. Moreover, in Ryanair's apology, Kiely humorously underlined that "only" 190 checks were issued without the required signature. This element contributed to worsening the public's reaction, as any company, including Ryanair, should be focused on providing the best services and assistance possible to all its customers, not just to a part of it.

The failed attempt at using humour had severe consequences for Ryanair. Indeed, if a successful use of humour can have incredible benefits for organizations, including positive effects on their corporate reputation and image, such erroneous use of humour had a concrete negative impact on the airline's reputation. Online, many exposed Ryanair, amplifying the reach of the crisis and further worsening its negative consequences.

Moreover, here humour was used to undermine the issue and to avoid taking full responsibility, which resulted in the public discarding the apology as insincere. Indeed, humour should be used in corporate apologies to accept accountability for a critical event while maintaining a light-hearted mood, not to avoid facing one's liabilities.

Ultimately, even if humour resonates with the overall brand identity, it is not always the best choice. Adding humour to a corporate apology can have many benefits, such as fostering consumer forgiveness and releasing tension, but it is a decision that needs to be deeply considered and evaluated.

3.5 A Comparison of the Case Studies

Starting from comparing the two successful humorous apologies, one could notice that both in the KFC's "FCK" apology and in Three UK's #HolidaySpam apology, humour has been an efficient tool to add relevance to the firms' communications. Indeed, by using humour, both companies were able to align their communication style to the one of their publics, therefore reproducing their stakeholders' way of communicating and developing content they usually consume and share. In this way, KFC and Three UK were able to foster their audience's engagement, as the apologies were considered amusing and worth sharing with others. Moreover, speaking the same language as the one of their publics allowed the organizations to foster understanding, which led to a positive reaction to the apology.

Moreover, both firms exploited humour as a means to connect with their publics through positive emotions. In particular, in KFC's apology, by adding a humorous touch to its apology, the company invited its stakeholders to distance themselves

from the negative feelings associated with the crisis, and to smile together about the situation, looking at it from a different perspective.

Of course, there are some peculiar aspects that differentiate these two successful humorous apologies. First of all, KFC relied on humour to humanize the firm, so as to foster consumer forgiveness. This aspect is not so visible in Three's apology, where the main aim of humour was to create a connection with non-consumers and to increase the visibility and popularity of its "Feel at Home" initiative. Moreover, the kind of humour employed by these two organizations was slightly different. Indeed, even if both KFC and Three UK decided to adopt light humour in their communications, KFC opted for self-directing humour, whereas Three UK's employed affiliative humour, aimed at laughing with the audience of an every-day situation. This difference could be traced back to the fact that KFC was sending out a sincere apology, where humour was used to foster positive reactions to it and to stay true to the firm's brand identity, whereas Three UK's employed humour to foster and strengthen a relationship with the public and increase the relevance of the company's communications. Lastly, the use of humour was incredibly well-suited with KFC's brand identity and tone of voice, whereas it was more of a novelty for Three UK.

Comparing the two successful apologies with Ryanair's failed one, there is a key factor that distinguishes them and that has played a central role in securing the positive reactions to KFC's and Three UK's corporate apology, while have doomed Ryanair's one. Indeed, KFC and Three UK studied their publics and carefully considered the situation in which they intended to use humour. On the other hand, Ryanair's attempt at using humour seemed much more improvised, and not as thoughtfully studied. If the airline had attentively examined the context, it would have probably understood that using humour in such an adverse climate and with such enraged customers was incredibly risky. Therefore, in all likelihood,

the organization would have given more thought to the humorous component of its apology.

Lastly, focusing on KFC's apology, as opposed to Ryanair's one, KFC exploited humour to communicate its sincere effort to repair for the damage and inconvenience caused in a light-hearted way. On the other hand, apart from saying that the checks had been re-issued, the airline did not feature any concrete proof of action taken to solve for the damage caused or to prevent it from representing in the future. This missing detail further contributed to aliment the negative reactions of the public, as Ryanair did not portray itself as truly engaged to solve the critical situation and make up to those who had been affected by it.

Conclusions

One of the mantras of every crisis communicator, which has been repeated several times throughout this project, is that in its lifetime no organization can escape the threat of critical situations, which if not correctly managed, will escalate into crises that could have serious reputational and financial consequences for the company. During a critical situation, the public perception of an organization tends to decrease, especially if the firm is considered liable for the event. Such an adverse view of the organization is likely to result in a reputational loss, which can have a severe impact on the overall performance of the company. The repercussions of a crisis can be as severe as to even threaten the survival of the involved organization, because of the loss of support from its internal and external stakeholders. For this reason, correctly managing and communicating during a critical situation is not only highly recommended, but necessary.

Part of accurately managing a crisis involves apologising for the event occurred to all those who have been exposed to it. And no, unfortunately, saying "We are sorry" is not enough. Corporate apologies are an essential tool for firms, as they have the power to offset the negative outcomes of a critical situation. Indeed, they can help save the company's reputation and its relationship with its stakeholders, thus preserving its present and future viability. Still, in order to craft a powerful and effective apology, some general rules need to be followed. Accepting accountability for the crisis itself, expressing regret for what has happened, clearly stating the actions undertaken to solve for the damage done, and communicating a sincere intent of reform are necessary elements for the realisation of a successful corporate apology. Indeed, these elements will encourage the public to accept the apology, fostering forgiveness and trust

rebuilding. After all, even if apologizing is often difficult, it can really make a difference.

In today's society, characterised by numerous crises and critical situations, such as economic crises, pandemics and epidemics, wars, and climate change, humour has been adopted by many as a way to release tension and cope with stressful events. This trend is particularly true for younger generations, whose way of communicating is increasingly based on the use of humour, often in its darker forms. Because of its growing popularity, many organizations have started to feature a humorous nuance in their communications.

At first, humour was principally used in advertising and marketing campaigns to engage with the public, to portray everyday life situations in a relatable and fun manner, and to further stand out from competition. Still, because of its ability to relieve negative emotions and to foster the creation of a positive climate, the hypothesis of exploiting humour in a firm's crisis communication, and in particular, in corporate apologies has been advanced.

By analysing humour and its numerous potential benefits, it has emerged that it could be used as a strategic tool in times of crisis for a number of reasons. First of all, because humour creates novelty, featuring it in a corporate apology could help the organization to frame the issue from a different perspective, trying to find the positive or maybe even the funny side of the situation, and emphasising it. By underlining such amusing aspect of the critical event, the firm can invite its stakeholders to smile and, why not, even laugh together about the company's mistakes, fostering positive emotions and easing tension. Therefore, featuring a humorous nuance in a company's corporate apology could allow the organization to accept responsibility for the issue and ask for forgiveness in a light-hearted

way, reducing, instead of adding, the emotional distress associated with the event.

Moreover, by using humour, especially in its self-deprecating form, the company will appear as more approachable and down-to-heart, reducing the perceived distance with its publics and fostering the creation of a connection with them. Establishing a connection with stakeholders is fundamental in times of crisis to foster empathy, and, consequently, forgiveness. Indeed, by making fun of itself, the firm will appear as more relatable and humbler, conscious of its mistakes, and ready to move on and forward in its relationship with the audience. This concept is linked to the fact that including a humorous tone in an organization's apology can help humanising the firm, portraying it not as cold and distant, but as made of a group of people working together. Representing the organization as made up by a group of individuals is important to communicate the idea of a company which is not infallible, but that as a social entity, can and will make mistakes, but that will always bounce back, more conscious and willing to improve.

Furthermore, humour encourages divergent thinking. Therefore, approaching a critical situation in a humorous way could help practitioners to develop unconventional and innovative ideas to deal with the crisis and, also, to craft a corporate apology. Considering that the use of humour in an apology is unexpected, the company could even be applauded for its reaction, moving the attention from the critical situation to its response to it. Moreover, since a fundamental element of corporate apologies is to communicate a sincere and tangible intent of reform, also stating the actions undertaken to solve the damage done and to prevent the crisis to represent in the future, humour could be used by professionals to foster singular and uncommon ideas to offset the negative consequences of the crisis which could be perceived by the publics as sign of the

organization's concrete effort to repair for the harm caused, therefore fostering forgiveness.

Still, some conditions need to be met in order to craft an effective humorous apology. It is like cooking: without the right ingredients, the cake won't be delicious, it will just be a mess. As a matter of fact, featuring humour in a corporate apology certainly carries some risks, which need to be carefully evaluated by practitioners. First, humour is not suitable in all situations. For example, when dealing with a severe crisis, where many have been injured or worse, it is advisable to stick to a sincere, genuine apology, as the use of humour would likely be perceived as insensitive and inadequate. Moreover, it is necessary that the use of humour is coherent with the overall brand identity of the organization. As a matter of fact, publics' reaction to a company's humorous approach depends on the coherence of such strategy with the key traits of the firm itself. Therefore, in its crisis response attitude, an organization should always be genuine, otherwise its audience will dismiss the apology as irrelevant and insincere.

After having analysed three real-world cases of the use of humour in corporate apologies, some further key points emerged, especially linked to the audience's reaction to humorous apologies.

The first case analysed was KFC's "FCK" apology, which was issued in 2018 by the fast-food franchise following a chicken shortage that affected hundreds of its restaurants. This episode was useful to underline how humour can add relevance to a company's apology, even distorting the attention from the critical event and encouraging the public to focus on the reaction to it. Since the very beginning, the company adopted a humorous stance, embracing the comic aspect of the situation. After all, we are talking about a fried-chicken franchise left with no

chicken. In its notorious apology, KFC highlighted the humorous side of the crisis by representing an empty chicken basket with a re-arranged version of its logo on it, forming the acronym "FCK". Whether there is no need to explain what the acronym stands for, it is worth highlighting that KFC's use of humour was incredibly bold. Indeed, the company went so far as to manipulate its logo, which is a symbol of the brand's identity, the holy grail of corporate communication. The distorted logo became the focal point of the humorous apology, creating an intense buzz both on social media and on traditional media. Moreover, the humorous nuance of KFC's apology added relevance to the firm's communications. Indeed, humour aligned with its audience's communication style, who, for this reason, found the apology worth sharing, therefore amplifying the reach of KFC's message. Considering that the use of humour in an apology is often unexpected, the organization was celebrated online for its reaction, which was considered as disruptive, brave, and innovative. Thanks to the humour touch of the apology, the organization was able to move stakeholders' attention from the critical situation to the company's response, overshadowing negative emotions and comments with positive feelings generated by the humorous apology. It is fundamental to underline that, despite the humorous nuance of the apology, the organization sincerely asked for forgiveness to its consumers, expressing its regret for the damage caused and highlighting its effort to solve it.

The second case study analysed involved Three UK and its "Holiday Spam" apology, which employed humour as a way to build relationships in a critical situation. This could be used a textbook example of how humour can foster divergent thinking and add relevance to a company's communication. Indeed, the mobile network provider decided to exploit what was a critical moment for many, notably the holiday period, to foster a connection with its non-consumers. The company decided to address a common and disturbing phenomenon which characterises the holiday period, meaning the oversharing of joyous holiday

images, taking accountability for it and asking forgiveness to all those who had fallen victims of such holiday spam. Indeed, in its apology, Three UK decided to speak directly to all those who were receiving plenty of holiday snaps from friends and family thanks to Three UK's Feel at Home initiative, which eliminated roaming costs when using mobile devices abroad. Three UK used humour to craft an apology which allowed them to promote their initiative and to connect in a creative way with its non-consumers, inviting them to smile about the happenings, fostering the creation of a positive climate and positive associations with the company.

However, as previously suggested, the use of humour in corporate apologies must be accurately calibrated and reasoned. Indeed, a failed attempt at using humour will have severe consequences for the organization. Using humour when it is not perceived as suitably by an organization's publics will increase their anger and negative feelings, damaging the relationship even more. The analysis of the third case, involving Ryanair's apology after having issued un-signed recompensation checks to hundreds of its passengers was trivial to underline this point. The use of humour in a corporate apology can be extremely beneficial to light up the general mood, but it cannot be used to avoid accepting liability for one's own mistakes. In its apology, Ryanair's former CMO, Robin Kiely, decided to downplay the impact the effects of the un-signed checks they issued exploiting humour, not considering the consequences for almost 200 passengers. This choice was perceived as inconsiderate of other people's agendas, and for this reason the apology was not welcomed, but discarded as insincere.

Therefore, for the analysis of these case studies it has emerged that, coherently with what had been stated after a careful literature review, when using humour, companies need to have a clear strategy in mind. Humour cannot be used just on a whim, in the mere hope to go viral. The use of humour in a critical situation, let

alone in a corporate apology, is incredibly risky. For this reason, the context in which the organization intends to use humour, as well as the benefits and risks, need to be carefully evaluated.

Thus, if there is anything we can learn from this overview of the use of humour in corporate apologies is that understanding and being capable of using humour in a critical situation can be a useful resource. Humour used not just for the sake of it, but with a specific purpose. Humour, which should be the result of a concrete and profound study of the audience to which the organization is talking to and of the context in which it is operating. In other words, humour that simply fits the situation.

For practitioners, mastering the art of using humour is fundamental, not only to communicate in an up-to-date manner, but also to acquire a notable competitive advantage from stronger emotional connections with stakeholders. As a matter of fact, through humour they could foster a sense of empathy, humanise the organization and create a positive association with it during a crisis. Moreover, given the overcrowded nature of media today, humour offers a way to stand out and win stakeholders' attention. This is particularly important in a situation of crisis, where the company wants to be perceived as the main source of information. Lastly, humour can help crafting apologies that speak the same language of social media, making the apology relevant and in line with the way the audience communicates, mirroring their style, which is fundamental when trying to create a positive connection and solve the critical situation.

Therefore, the next time your company messes up, do not only think "FCK", say it.

Future Research

The present thesis mainly focuses on the Western world. Indeed, even though the theme of the difference in the cultural perception of humour was discussed, the examples used mainly came from the West side of the hemisphere. Therefore, subsequent studies on the use of humour in corporate apologies in the Eastern world would be beneficial.

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