

# The Red Yellow Blue Event: How the timing of an apology affects the effectiveness of it

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**Abstract.** Many theorists have analyzed factors that will moderate the effectiveness of a certain apology, but few studies discuss whether the timing of an apology would affect its effectiveness and how does this process happen. The aim of this paper is to examine how the timing of an particular apology influence the effectiveness of itself by analyzing one of the most intensively discussed social issue happened in China in 2017, the Red Yellow Blue event. It is clear that when one want to make an apology as effective as possible when facing with perplexing problems and rumors, the timing of making the apology is worth notice. It would be better for his/her to apologize or make announcement when the truth is all clear, in order to avoid having new accuses, like apologizing insincerely and trying to evade responsibility.

## 1. Introduction

Apology has become such a strong and widely used remedy for interpersonal and public relations. It is said that we are now living in the Age of Apology (Brooks 3; Cunningham 292; Gibney et al. 1; Govier and Verwoerd 67; Harris et al. 716; Kampf 2257, Lakoff 23). Apology is a strategy to amend conflicts, which can be both efficient and low-cost when carefully designed. (e.g., Darby & Schlenker 742; Folkes & Whang 79; Frantz & Bennigson 201; Pavlick 841; Risen & Gilovich 418; Ryan, Michele, & Monisha 894; Tamar, Dina & Ronit 1446, Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki 169; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas 308).

Many theories have analyzed the components of an apology and what makes an apology more effective. Lynne Tirrell divided the components of an apology into two parts: (1) the account, including the acknowledgement of defense and the explanation of it, and (2) the response, including the attitude of the offender towards his/her misdeed and what he/she can do for reparation, with part of the reparation being promised behavioral changes (Lynne, 170). In terms of a good apology, or in other words, an effective apology, it should be able to amend conflicts, or even lead to forgiveness, which allows the restoration of the relationship after offenses (McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal 321; Ryan, Michele, & Monisha 909).

Many theorists have analyzed factors that will moderate the effectiveness of a certain apology, including the severity of the misdeed (Bradfield & Aquino 613; Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough 341; Liao 478; Tamar, Dina & Ronit 1446), the intent of the offense (Struthers et al. 983; Tamar, Dina & Ronit 1446), the perceived sincerity of the apology (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee 326; Tamar, Dina & Ronit 1446), the history of the relationship and so on. However, few studies discuss whether the timing of an apology would affect its effectiveness and how does this process happen.

The aim of this paper is to examine how the timing of an particular apology influence the effectiveness of itself by analyzing one of the most intensively discussed social issue happened in China in 2017, the Red Yellow Blue event. To achieve this aim, the paper will start by introducing the event, the announcement of the apology and the contents of it; then in the second part, there will be detailed analysis of public responses, which reveal their attitude, to the announcement, and we will consider how the timing of that announcement influence the effectiveness of the apology overall.

## **2. The review of the Red Yellow Blue event**

### **2.1 Process of the event**

The Red Yellow Blue Education (RYB), founded in 1998, is an education company in China focusing on the education of children between 0 and 6. Now there are around 1300 nurseries and 500 kindergartens of RYB, accommodating and educating children all around China. It had been a dominant company in childhood education industry until its image collapsed in 22 November 2017, when around 10 pairs of parents called police for finding needle holes on their children's bodies after they returned home from a RYB kindergarten. There were also parents saying that their child was fed white pills at school, which they had no idea about. Police Department quickly founded a special investigation group and the kindergarten are closed and all teachers were suspended for investigation. This event caused intense discussion and resentment among the public, especially after the appearance of two pieces of breaking information. The first one implied that there were children being sexually abused in RYB kindergarten by people from a nearby army group, the Tiger; the second information was from a mother of a child studying in that kindergarten. She claims that her daughter told her that her bare body was "examined" by "uncle doctors and grandpa doctors" in that kindergarten. What made things worse was that the monitors' record in that kindergarten was not complete and school officers refused to show the record to the public. Consequently, the majority of people believed that children were certainly sexually abused, fed pills without their parents being informed and were pricked, with the evidences being destroyed with the loss of the record of monitors.

In 25 November, however, police posted two pictures of notice on the internet which were the results of their investigation. The first notice, in chronological order, said that they had arrested a teacher called Liu, who was 22, in the name of abusing children, while in the second notice the police said that the information about the Tiger was made up, and the rumormonger was arrested as well. Three days later, in 28 November, the police posted a longer notice and addressed every suspicious points in this events. In this notice the police did not only explain that the loss of part of the monitor record was due to the mandatory cut of electricity in almost every night by a monitor officer, who hated the noise the monitors made, but also said that the pills the child were taking were actually given by his/her parents and the video that was used as an evidence was taken at the child's home. In addition, the most severe accuse, which was about sexual assaults committed by "uncle doctors and grandpa doctors", was also a baseless rumor.

### **2.2 Apologies from the RYB Education**

Facing intense accuses and endless criticism, RYB Education seemed to be anxious and wanted to make public apologies, or at least public announcements as soon as possible. Therefore, following the notices from the police in 25 November, RYB posted an announcement concerning this event, putting those tow notices from police but in the reverse order. In this announcement RYB showed their shock and apology, and declared their measures taken to deal with this event, including firing Liu and the president of that kindergarten, actively cooperating with government departments for further investigation and hiring experts for the physical and mental recovery of victims. However, this announcement did not comforted the public but was met with sharp criticism and more questions. More than 84 thousand people left their comments under this announcement showing that they did not believe a word of it and wanted to know the truth.

Later, in 29 November, after all the dubious points in this event were addressed by police, RYB posted a letter of apology on the internet, in which they acknowledged Liu's crime, emphasized their willingness of shouldering the whole responsibility and declared measures they would take to avoid this kind of events from happening again. They even said directly that they did not deserve forgiveness. According to the theory from Lynne Tirrell about the components of an apology (Lynne 170), and the success of the apology from Henry Rollins, in which he said he did not deserve forgiveness (Mark 237), this apology should have been an effective one. Unfortunately, it turned out that it did not earn public's understanding neither. Although the original posted letter was deleted by RYB and therefore it is impossible to look at the comments of this letter to see whether it was

accepted by the public, we can know that the resentment of public has not perished, as now there are still people writing criticizing comments under the announcement RYB posted in 25 November 2017.

### 3. Research analysis

#### 3.1 Research method

##### 3.1.1. *The choice of analyzed material*

In order to find out reasons why a seemingly effective apology turned out to be a total failure, we can look at the comments of the announcement. By examining the comments from people, and thereby examining attitudes they held towards this announcement and things they discussed most, we can find out what they wanted and what they were criticizing, and eventually find out why this apology was not an effective one.

Comments are found directly under the announcement posted by RYB in 25 November 2017 as materials for analyzing. There are more than 84 thousands comments there, but the time scale was large (from 25 November 2017 to 30 December 2018). Therefore, in order to exclude the influence events happening during this time, only the comments posted in 25 November 2017 can be selected for analysis.

After that, according to the rank of “heated level” of these comments, the top 100 are chosen to be the materials to be analyzed. The “heated level” is determined by standards including the posted time of it (the early the better), the number of times it is read (the more the better) and the number of “like” and comments it receives (the more the better). Therefore, by choosing the top 100 heated comments that were all posted in 25 November 2017, we can make sure that the analyzed contents are both the most representative and discussed comments among all without any influence from other outer factors.

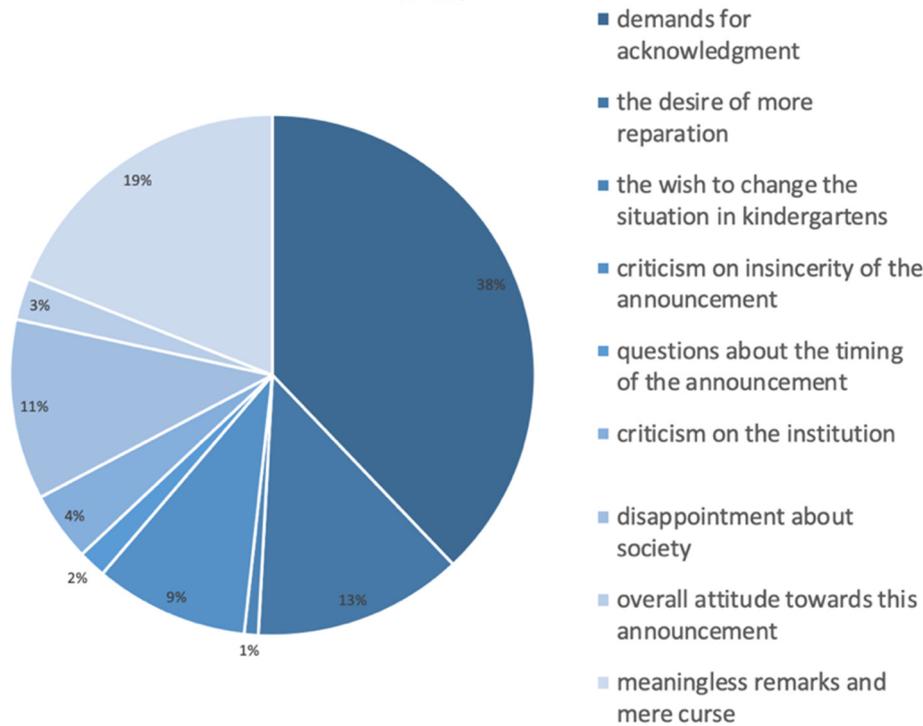
##### 3.1.2. *Method of analysis*

I looked through these 100 comments and divided their contents into 9 groups according to the meaning of them, which are demands for acknowledgment, the desire of more reparation, the wish to change the current situation in kindergartens, criticism on insincerity of the announcement, questions about the timing of the announcement, criticism on the RYB company, disappointment about society, overall attitude towards this announcement and meaningless remarks or mere curse. Since some of the comments include contents from more than one of these groups, the total number of contents analyzed is 116 (N=116).

##### 3.1.3. *Result*

Below is the pie chart of the result of the analysis. It is clear that the contents that are most often mentioned is demands for acknowledgment (n=44), which is the acknowledgement of the existence of “uncle doctors and grandpa doctors” or other culprits. They refuse to believe that Liu, a 22-year-old woman teacher, was the only criminal. Therefore, before the longer notice from police in 28 November, the identity of criminals was the thing that people cared most about. Meaningless remarks (“I wanted to write some words, but due to limited ability, I really did not know what to write”) and mere curse expressing anger and resentment made up almost one fifth of the contents (n=22), which is understandable due to the severity of this event. The desire for more reparation (n=15) includes demands for severer punishment to Liu and the president of kindergarten. Another demand is a new explanation for the whole event so that the victims and public can be comforted. These comments did not show any care about the truth of the event, but concerned only about what RYB could make up for the victims and the public with their announcement and apology, so these were not demands for acknowledgement. Criticism on the insincerity of the announcement (n=11) is also worth notice. Most of the comments in this group showed anger about the changed order of police’ s notices in this announcement, which put the one about rumors first, and believed this was a sign of insincerity of this announcement and reluctance of RYB for shouldering responsibility.

The proportions of different contents in the top 100 heated comments  
N=116



### 3.2 Discussion

Although the announcement used notices from police as reliable evidences of the truth, and carefully included all necessary components in to its apology, both the announcement and the apology in it was not effective, and due to the strong skeptical attitude held by people, the reliability of the police was doubted (“normal people can never win their battle with officers and governments”). So why did not people believe anything in this announcement and even the police? Why did they refuse to accept the acknowledgement of offense shown in the announcement but continued to question the identity of criminals? Why did this announcement and apology fail to fulfill any of their goals but caused intense criticism?

I think the most important answer of these questions is the timing of the announcement and the apology. At first, there were at least 5 suspicious points about the whole event (pills, needle holes, the Tiger, “uncle doctors and grandpa doctors” and the monitor record), but in 25 November, the police only addressed two of them (needle holes and the Tiger). It was not until 28 November did the police declare the investigation results of all these questions. However, the announcement of RYB was posted quickly after the police’s notice in 25 November, so it was totally reasonable for the public to be skeptical about the contents and the sincerity of the announcement and the apology, as it left out so many desirable contents. People questioned the identities of the criminals because they did not believe that the mother claiming her daughter was sexually assaulted by “uncle doctors and grandpa doctors” and parents saying their children were fed pills without their awareness were lying, and therefore they draw the conclusion that the record of monitors in the kindergarten was destroyed deliberately to cover up these things. People were still confused about the whole event, when RYB posted their announcement and apologized and showed their measures for their problems like the whole event was clear enough for people to move on and look forward to their promised changes. Their active attitudes towards solving existing problems and making up for victims may earn them some understanding and tolerance from people if the announcement was made after police addressed all suspicious points, but when only part of the event is clear, things that remained confusing diminished the reliability and sincerity of both the announcement and the apology in it. Therefore, the wrong timing of the announcement resulted in the ineffectiveness of the announcement and the apology. What is more, the influence of the timing did not end there. The reliability of police in this

event was also weakened, as people believed the left out things in the announcement were signs showing that police were covering up for RYB by ignoring “uncle doctors and grandpa doctors” and the incomplete monitor record.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Although it may seem to be more sincere by apologizing as soon as possible after an offense, when dealing with events which were severe and complex, the immediate apology made when the truth is still not clear is not a good choice, because even if the questions that are left out are all untrustworthy rumors, they can be of vital importance for the receivers of the apology, for they may see the missing parts as evidences of reluctance of taking responsibility. In the RYB event, there is no doubt that the severity of the offense (Bradfield & Aquino 613; Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough 341; Liao 478; Tamar, Dina & Ronit 1446) did have detrimental influence on the effectiveness of the apology, the wrong timing of the announcement also made it more difficult for the apology to be considered sincere.

Therefore, it is clear that when one want to make an apology as effective as possible when facing with perplexing problems and rumors, the timing of making the apology is worth notice. It would be better for his/her to apologize or make announcement when the truth is all clear, in order to avoid having new accuses, like apologizing insincerely and trying to evade responsibility. What is more, no being in a hurry to push receivers of an apology to accept the apology but giving them time to express their censure and concern can make the apologizer look more sincere and therefore make the apology more effective, as the receivers would feel they are heard and understood (Frantz & Bennisson 206).

Last but not Least, I feel the need to note that there are limitations in this research. One significance drawback is the analyzed materials may not be representative in terms of all people, but can only show the general attitudes of people who are willing to express their thoughts on the Internet. In addition, the categorizing of contents may not be always valid, as I divided them into groups according to the meaning of them but not the exact words. This is because the informal writing style of comments makes it difficult to define specific words that can fully represent one meaning but not another. Further studies may find other categorizing methods or standards due to different aims and different perceptions.

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