

“I’m Sorry.” vs. “I’m Sorry!”: The Effect of Punctuation on Sincerity and Accountability**Perceptions**

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Ethical AI Usage Statement: *The students in this group attest that AI (ChatGPT offered through OpenAI, 2026) was used only in ethical and appropriate ways throughout the development of this project. AI was used to assist with brainstorming research ideas, organizing the structure of various sections, refining wording in survey measures and manipulation materials, and improving clarity in draft writing. We recognize that AI tools may introduce bias and inaccuracies. Therefore, all AI-assisted content was carefully reviewed, fact-checked, and verified against original scholarly sources. AI functioned as a supplemental support tool and did not replace the group’s independent reading, theoretical reasoning, or critical thinking.*

Abstract

This study examined how punctuation in a text-based apology influences perceptions of sincerity and accountability in digital communication. Based on Language Expectancy Theory, the purpose was to test whether the use of exclamation points versus periods would affect how a sender is evaluated in a high-conflict text message exchange. The study utilized a posttest-only experimental design where 60 participants were randomly assigned to view one of two simulated iMessage conversations depicting an apology text. Both simulations were identical regarding the content; however, one used solely period marks while the other utilized only exclamation points. After viewing the received text message, participants completed items assessing perceived sincerity and accountability. It was predicted that punctuation would affect perceptions of the sender's tone, specifically impressions of sincerity and accountability. The findings of the study reflect how message content may play a larger role compared to subtle punctuation cues when interpreting levels of sincerity and accountability in digital communication.

Keywords: Punctuation, sincerity, accountability, language expectancy theory, digital communication

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Text messaging has become one of the primary ways romantic partners communicate, yet small features of digital messages (such as punctuation) can significantly shape how those messages are interpreted. Research on computer-mediated communication suggests that punctuation functions as a social cue that conveys tone, warmth, and relational meaning beyond words themselves (e.g., Gunraj et al., 2016). Even subtle differences, such as ending a message with a period versus an exclamation point, may alter how the sender’s intent is perceived. These small linguistic cues may play a greater role in text-based/digital communication, where vocal tone and facial expressions are absent.

Because apologies rely heavily on tone and relational meaning, punctuation may meaningfully influence how sincere and accountable a message appears. In romantic relationships, perceptions of sincerity and accountability are central to conflict repair, yet little research has examined how simple punctuation variations shape these evaluations. Therefore, an important question emerges: How does punctuation in apology text messages influence perceptions of sincerity and accountability?

The goal of this research is to examine the effect that punctuation (periods versus exclamation points) in apology text messages has on perceptions of sincerity and accountability. Before accomplishing this goal, a literature review will provide an overview of past research related to (1) punctuation as a communicative cue in digital messaging; (2) perceived sincerity in communication; (3) accountability and responsibility judgments; and (4) Language Expectancy Theory as the theoretical framework guiding this study.

Literature Review

Punctuation in Digital Communication

In computer-mediated communication (CMC), punctuation serves as a cue that substitutes for nonverbal signals such as tone, facial expression, and vocal inflection (Riordan & Kreuz, 2010). Punctuation refers to marks used in writing to separate sentences to specify and clarify their meaning (commas, exclamation points, parentheses, etc.). Rather than exclusively being used for grammatical purposes, punctuation in texting conveys emotional and relational meaning. In this study, punctuation refers to whether a romantic apology text, including periods only or exclamation points only, alters perceptions of its meaning.

Riordan & Kreuz (2010) performed a study that examined how nonverbal cues function in CMC. Their goal was to determine how cues such as punctuation and capitalization shape meaning by analyzing online communication datasets. Their findings showed that punctuation helps express emotion, clarify tone, and reduce miscommunication. This use of punctuation is similar to what is analyzed in this study.

A study by Kelly & Miller-Ott (2018) examined perceived miscommunication in friends' and romantic partners' texting interactions. Their goal was to understand how textual features influence relational interpretation. They conducted a survey-based study, and their findings showed that textual features affect how tone and meaning are interpreted in romantic texting contexts. This study examines punctuation within this same context; however, the present study adds additional variables.

Kemp, Kovacic, & Beyersmann (2025) performed a study that examined whether sentence-final periods influence tone perception in digital communication. Their goal was to

assess how terminal punctuation affects message interpretation. They conducted an experiment manipulating punctuation. Their findings showed that periods can influence emotional tone perception in brief messages. Period use is one of the two conditions used in this study's experiment; this piece of literature was useful for forming the hypotheses.

Yin, Appel, & Wakslak (2025) performed a study that examined how exclamation point use affects impression formation. Their goal was to determine whether expressive punctuation changes social judgments. They performed a series of experiments manipulating punctuation. Their findings showed that exclamation points increase perceptions of friendliness and warmth. The nature of expressive punctuation found in this study helped us form our hypotheses. Since exclamation points prompt these perceptions, it was assumed that they would generate higher perceptions of sincerity, one of our variables, as well.

Perceived Sincerity

Clementson et al. (2022) describe sincerity as the perception that language and demeanor are genuine rather than evasive. The study distinguishes between sincere language (clarity and relevance) and insincere language (evasion and obfuscation), showing that sincerity is evaluated based on how a message aligns with authentic intent. In this study, sincerity refers to the extent to which an apology appears genuine and authentic. A sincere message is said to provide honest explanations and straightforward responses.

Referring back to Clementson et al. (2022), they performed a study that examined how sincere versus insincere language and demeanor affect message evaluations. Their goal was to determine how communication style shapes perceptions of sincerity and responsibility. They conducted a randomized controlled experiment using interview clips. Their findings showed that

clear and relevant language increased perceived sincerity and influenced responsibility attributions. Testing the study's varying conditions, showing a message using only periods or exclamation points, may reveal a varying perception of these factors of sincerity, overall affecting the strength found in the results.

Gunraj et al. (2016) performed a study that examined whether a sentence-final period influences perceived sincerity in text messages. Their goal was to determine how punctuation affects message interpretation. They conducted an experiment manipulating the presence or absence of a period. Their findings showed that text messages ending with a period were rated as less sincere than those without a period. The study done by Gunraj and colleagues heavily informed the hypotheses for this study, as they tested the variable of sincerity with a similar method.

Reynolds et al. (2017) performed a study that examined punctuation as a marker of sincerity in texting. Their goal was to test whether periods and exclamation points alter perceived tone and sincerity. They conducted an experimental texting simulation, and their findings showed that messages ending with periods were perceived as less sincere, while exclamation points increased perceptions of politeness and sincerity. Their findings also informed this study's hypotheses directly and align with the method's manipulation.

Lim et al. (2025) performed a study that examined how relational tone influences apology evaluations, specifically in those made by AI. Their goal was to determine how warmth cues affect perceived sincerity. They conducted an experiment manipulating apology tones. Their findings showed that warmer language increased perceived sincerity. Although the study was not

designed around AI, it is relevant in the realm of digital messaging, examines the variable of sincerity, and was also used in the context of an apology exchange.

Perceived Accountability

Bovens (2007) defines accountability as a “relationship between an actor and a forum,” where the actor has an obligation to explain and justify their behavior, and the forum poses questions and passes judgment. Witvliet et al. (2023) also conceptualize accountability as involving responsibility-taking behaviors such as welcoming being held responsible and being willing to explain one’s actions. In the context of this study, these conditions are necessary for a message to be considered accountable. The sender must appear to take ownership and responsibility for their actions, and failing to do so should prompt the receiver to evaluate them as unaccountable.

Witvliet et al. (2023) performed studies examining the definition and measurement of accountability. Their goal was to operationalize accountability as a measurable construct. Using large national survey samples, participants completed items to measure accountability, and the results were then analyzed by the researchers. As mentioned previously, their findings showed that accountability includes responsibility-taking and willingness to explain one’s actions. This helped inform our hypothesis around accountability and helped us properly define the variable.

Salisbury et al. (2022) performed a review examining accountability in intervention contexts. Their goal was to distinguish accountability from simple reminders, and they conducted a literature review. Their findings emphasized that accountability involves factors of responsibility and justification. This is relevant to the current study because apology messages

often function as attempts to take responsibility for actions, and punctuation differences may influence perceptions of whether the sender is taking responsibility for their actions.

Mohr et al. (2011) performed a study that examined supportive accountability in eHealth interventions. Their goal was to explain how accountability enhances adherence. They developed a theoretical model based on empirical research. They concluded that accountability involves responsibility expectations within interpersonal systems. Similar to the findings by Salisbury et al. (2022), this study ties accountability to responsibility perceptions within interpersonal relationships and further informs and strengthens our variable.

Theoretical Framework: Language Expectancy Theory

To better understand how small differences in language cues affect message interpretation, the current study draws from Language Expectancy Theory, which provides a solid framework explaining how people evaluate messages based on their existing anticipations and beliefs. Language Expectancy Theory (LET) proposes that individuals develop normative expectations regarding appropriate communication behavior in specific contexts (Averbeck, 2023). These expectations are shaped by social norms, relational context, and perceptions of what is considered appropriate or effective communication. When a message conforms to expectations, it is processed more favorably. When it violates expectations, the evaluation of the communicator depends on whether the violation is perceived as positive or negative.

In interpersonal contexts such as romantic apologies, receivers likely hold expectations about appropriate tone. Since punctuation functions as a cue in digital communication, the inclusion of exclamation points or periods may signal different levels of warmth and seriousness, and could affect whether the message violates or conforms to the receiver's expectations. Thus,

Language Expectancy Theory provides a framework for predicting that punctuation differences in apology texts may influence how receivers evaluate both sincerity and accountability.

Hypotheses

The research suggests that punctuation functions as a meaningful cue in digital communication, shaping how tone and relational intent are interpreted. Experimental findings show that sentence-final periods can reduce perceived sincerity in text messages (Gunraj et al., 2016), while exclamation points increase perceptions of politeness, warmth, and sincerity (Reynolds et al., 2017). Because sincerity refers to whether a communicator appears genuine and authentic, punctuation differences may directly influence sincerity perceptions in apology texts. At the same time, accountability is defined as the perception that a communicator accepts responsibility and provides justification for their actions (Salisbury et al., 2022). Since exclamation points signal warmth and emotional expressiveness and periods may signal seriousness in certain contexts, differences in punctuation may shape both sincerity and accountability judgments. Based on the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: An apology text message with exclamation points will result in higher interpretations of sincerity than an apology text message with periods.

H2: An apology text message with exclamation points will result in lower interpretations of accountability than an apology text with periods.

Method

This study utilized a posttest-only experimental design to manipulate punctuation in the context of a hypothetical apology text message between a partner in a hypothetical relationship. The independent variable was punctuation type (periods versus exclamation points), and the

dependent variables were perceived sincerity and perceived accountability. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two apology text messages that varied only in punctuation. Participants then answered questions about how sincere and accountable they believed the sender was, and responses were compared between conditions. The goal was to examine whether punctuation, used here as a cue that communicates tone in digital messages, influenced perceptions of sincerity and accountability.

Participants

Sixty participants were recruited from a large Western University (primarily Communication Studies courses). Some participants were offered a nominal amount of course extra credit as an incentive for completing this study. Participants reported their gender as 78.3% females, 20.0% males, and 1.7% nonbinary with a mean age of 28.28 years old ($SD = 15.64$). Additionally, participants who identified as students represented the following years in school: 6.7% first years, 13.3% second years, 40.0% third years, 16.7% fourth years, and 23.3% not currently in school. For ethnicity, 70.0% identified as white, 21.7% as Asian American or Pacific Islander, 1.7% as Hispanic/LatinX, and 6.7% as multiracial.

Procedures

Participants were recruited using volunteer and convenience sampling techniques. The questionnaire link was distributed to online group pages (Kappa Kappa Gamma academic chat) and group chats with roommates, friends, and family members. We also asked university professors to share the link with their students for extra credit. Upon self-selecting to participate, respondents clicked the link and were directed to an online questionnaire hosted by Qualtrics. The questionnaire started with a consent form notifying respondents that their participation was

voluntary and confidential. Second, random assignment sorted participants into one of two manipulated stimulus conditions in which participants saw an apology text message from their “partner” that either contained (a) periods or (b) exclamation points. Following the manipulation, participants completed outcome measures to assess their perception of the perceived accountability or sincerity of the sender. Lastly, participants completed a measure of demographics.

Stimulus Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to view and analyze one of two possible apology text messages from their hypothetical “partner.” Depending on the condition, participants either read a text message with periods ($n = 27$) or exclamation points ($n = 33$). In terms of the text message, everything stayed the same except for the end of the sentence, which would either have a period or an exclamation mark. To enhance the realism of the hypothetical scenario, before viewing the text message, the hypothetical candidate read and imagined themselves in the following scenario: “Imagine that you have a work party to attend tonight. You recently received a promotion at work, and this party is to celebrate you and your accomplishments. At the last minute, your partner tells you they cannot go. You later find out that your partner went out with their friends instead of celebrating with you at your party. After this has happened, your partner later reaches out to you over text to begin apologizing.” The specific context in this situation was constructed to appear as a real-life relationship issue that required immediate attention. The two responses were created to be as similar in approximation as possible, with the speaker using the same wording. The only difference between the two groups was their use of periods or exclamation points at the end of each sentence. (see Appendix A for full-text transcripts).

Measures

Perceived Sincerity. Our first dependent variable measured levels of perceived sincerity from the given text message. We used a four-item Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Four items assessed levels of sincerity. We designed these items to evaluate which participants interpreted the apology text as someone who was being genuine and truthful. These are some examples of our items: “If I were to receive this message, I would perceive it as sincere” and “The message felt genuine rather than forced” (see Appendix B for full scale). The reliability for this scale was satisfactory ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 2.95$).

Perceived Accountability. Our second dependent variable measured levels of perceived accountability from the given text message. We used a four-item Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Four items assessed levels of accountability. We designed these items to evaluate which participants interpreted the apology text as someone who was taking ownership and responsibility for their actions. These are some examples of our items: “I view the text message as someone who is taking accountability,” and “This text message seems to be someone taking ownership of their actions” (see Appendix B for full scale). The reliability for this scale was satisfactory ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 2.91$).

Results

SPSS version 31.0 was utilized to analyze experimental data. Given the proposed hypotheses, statistical analyses were performed to examine the impact of punctuation on perceptions of sincerity and accountability. Results and conclusions are subsequently discussed.

Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis one predicted that an apology text message with exclamation points would result in higher interpretations of sincerity than an apology text message with

periods. A t-test was conducted to examine differences between groups: findings indicate that participants rated the apology text with periods ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.48$) than the apology text with exclamation points ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.35$). Differences were not statistically significant, $t(58) = 0.096$, $p = 0.462$. Therefore, hypothesis one was not supported.

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis two predicted that an apology text message with exclamation points would result in lower interpretations of accountability than an apology text with periods. A t-test was conducted to examine differences between groups: findings indicate that participants rated the apology text with periods ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.48$) about equally to the apology text with exclamation points ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.35$). Differences were not statistically significant overall, $t(58) = 0.095$, $p = 0.462$. Therefore, hypothesis two was not supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how punctuation in apology text messages influences perceptions of sincerity and accountability. Specifically, the study tested whether apology messages using exclamation points would be interpreted as more sincere but less accountable than messages only using periods. The results of the independent samples t-tests indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between punctuation conditions for either sincerity or accountability. Participants evaluated messages with exclamation points and periods similarly, suggesting that punctuation alone may not strongly influence how apology messages are interpreted. The findings do not support the proposed hypotheses. H1 predicted that exclamation points would increase perceived sincerity, and H2 predicted that exclamation points would lower perceived accountability. However, the mean ratings for both sincerity and accountability were nearly identical across the two conditions, suggesting that message content

may outweigh punctuation when individuals evaluate sincerity and accountability in relational conflict, or possibly other high-stakes interpersonal situations.

A possible explanation for these findings can be understood through the current study's theoretical framework, Language Expectancy Theory (LET). LET suggests that people develop expectations of how language should be used in communication, and message evaluation depends on if these expectations are met or violated (Averback, 2022). In this study, the use of punctuation may not have violated participants' expectations of how an apology text should be written. As both periods and exclamation points are used in everyday texting, participants could have evaluated both messages as appropriate linguistically, and as a result, neither condition created a strong enough violation to significantly change perceptions of sincerity and accountability.

Although the findings differ from prior research suggesting that punctuation can influence tone perception in text-based communication, they may indicate that the influence of punctuation is subtle or context dependent. Research on computer-mediated communication suggests punctuation functions as a cue that helps convey tone and emotional meaning in digital messages (Riordan & Kreuz, 2010). In the present study, however, punctuation alone may not have been a strong enough variable to significantly alter perceptions of sincerity or accountability.

Despite the lack of significant differences, these results still offer meaningful insights. In everyday texting situations, individuals in everyday interpersonal dating contexts may worry about punctuation use and how their messages are interpreted. The current results suggest that small punctuation differences, such as using periods as opposed to exclamation points in an

apology, may not meaningfully change how sincere or accountable a message appears. The information gathered may be useful for individuals navigating communication in interpersonal relationships, and suggests that the content of the message itself is more significant than small punctuation choices.

Limitations

Our study was created for a posttest-only experimental design using random assignment; however, we do have some limitations that exist when interpreting our findings. The study utilized convenience sampling as well as volunteer sampling, which are both forms of non-representative sampling (Adams, 2026). Participants were mainly recruited from social group chats, classes, and personal networks. Given only these populations, it is evident that the greater population of society was not accounted for, as they did not have the chance to participate. Going back to Adams (2026), we can see how this would lower the external validity, or in other words, the ability to generalize our findings to greater populations. Due to the fact that the majority of the data was gathered from one Western University, the results may not apply to people from different age groups, backgrounds, or relationships.

Another limitation found was related to the experimental control. Adams (2026) explains that in order to maintain strong internal validity, it is necessary for researchers to control the study. They need to ensure that the independent variable is completely isolated in the study. Given that our study is examining punctuation (periods versus exclamation points), we are able to manipulate these variables. However, a possible limitation can arise since punctuation can oftentimes go undetected. Participants are most likely more observant of the actual content in the apology text rather than the punctuation. Due to this, it is possible that a new confounding

variable was found. Overall, this weakens the internal validity since we cannot be confident that punctuation was the only thing participants were perceiving.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should continue to examine how digital cues influence perceptions of apology messages; however, researchers should explore additional variables beyond just punctuation. Since our current study suggests that punctuation differences may be too subtle to significantly affect perceptions of sincerity or accountability, researchers could investigate how interpretations change when punctuation is combined with other cues such as emojis, capitalization, or length of the message. These non-verbal cues may help provide additional context that could potentially influence how an apology is interpreted.

Additionally, the findings of our study suggest that participants may rely more heavily on the content of an apology rather than small punctuation cues when looking at its meaning. Due to this, future research could manipulate the actual content of apology messages and test whether apologies that include clear responsibility statements are perceived as more accountable than those that provide explanations or shift blame. Since our study suggested that the content and context of the message matter more than the punctuation, playing around with these variables could reveal which parts of an apology text matter most for affecting how people feel.

Finally, researchers may get more accurate results by using a more diverse and representative sample to better understand how different populations of people interpret digital apology messages. Because the present study relied largely on participants from one Western university, future research could examine whether age, cultural background, or texting habits

influence how punctuation cues are perceived. This would help show whether punctuation in digital apologies affects different groups differently, depending on the context.

Final Thoughts

Overall, our study explored whether punctuation in apology text messages influences perceptions of sincerity and accountability. Ultimately, our results did not support our hypotheses. Our data suggests that small punctuation differences, such as using exclamation points or periods, may not change how an apology is interpreted. Instead, participants seemed to rely more heavily on the content and meaning of the message itself when looking at perceptions of sincerity and accountability. This shows that in digital apologies, people may focus more on the overall message than on small textual cues, such as punctuation, when interpreting tone and intent. As text messaging becomes a common form of interpersonal communication, understanding how people interpret apology messages can help individuals push through conflict and repair relationships more effectively, especially in computer-mediated situations.

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Appendix A1

Manipulated Apology Text Message – Periods

Instructions

Please read the following instructions in detail. This is important. If you do not examine these materials closely, this study will not make sense to you. Imagine that you have a work party to attend tonight. You recently received a promotion at work and this party is to celebrate you and your accomplishments. Last minute, your partner tells you they cannot go. You later find out that your partner went out with their friends instead of celebrating you at your party. After this has happened, your partner later reaches out to you over text to begin apologizing. Closely read the following text message from your partner. Then, answer the questions based on how the text message made you feel in this situation.



Appendix A2

Manipulated Apology Text Message – Exclamation Points

Instructions

Please read the following instructions in detail. This is important. If you do not examine these materials closely, this study will not make sense to you. Imagine that you have a work party to attend tonight. You recently received a promotion at work and this party is to celebrate you and your accomplishments. Last minute, your partner tells you they cannot go. You later find out that your partner went out with their friends instead of celebrating you at your party. After this has happened, your partner later reaches out to you over text to begin apologizing. Closely read the following text message from your partner. Then, answer the questions based on how the text message made you feel in this situation.



Appendix B

Outcome Measures

Dependent Variable 1 (1-7 Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

1. If I were to receive this message, I would perceive it as sincere.
2. After reading the text, I thought it came off as truthful.
3. Based on my intuition, I interpreted the text as thoughtful.
4. The message felt genuine rather than forced.

Dependent Variable 2 (1-7 Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

1. I view the text message as someone who is taking accountability.
2. If I received this apology, I would think that this person is taking responsibility.
3. This text message seems to be someone taking ownership of their actions.
4. Based on the apology, I believe this person is holding themselves liable.