

## Article

# “So, Why Were You Late Again?”: Social Account’s Influence on the Behavioral Transgression of Being Late to a Meeting

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**Abstract:** People often offer an excuse or an apology after they do something wrong in an attempt to mitigate any potential negative consequences. In this paper, we examine how individuals employ social accounts when explaining their interpersonal transgression of meeting lateness to others in actual work settings. We examined the different combinations of social accounts and the social outcomes (forgiveness, helping behaviors, and intentions to continue interaction) of being late to a meeting. Across two studies using complementary experimental and survey methods, we found that a majority of late arrivers’ explanations included remorse and that including remorse significantly influences helping behaviors. Furthermore, we found no interaction between excuses and offering remorse. Implications of these findings and future directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** explanations; excuses; meetings; interpersonal relationships



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## 1. Introduction

Behavioral transgressions in the work environment are common, and the ramifications for those who commit them can range from weakened relationships with coworkers to lower work performance [1]. Behavioral or social transgressions occur when an observer views someone’s behavior as harmful, violating a social norm, or against a formal law [2–4]. Examining behavioral transgressions in the workplace allows for the study of work team function [1], trust among coworkers [5], and managing conflict in organizations [6] when such behavior occurs. When such behavioral transgressions occur, individual and team productivity as well as overall relationships tend to suffer. Rather than harm their individual well-being as well as others, people who engage either deliberately or accidentally in a behavioral transgression may look for ways to mitigate those undesirable outcomes. One method transgressors use to attenuate negative consequences of their behavior is offering a social account (SA) (e.g., an explanation for the behavior) [7–9]. SA is a communicative element deployed to preserve social standing, image, and possibly a relationship [3,10,11]. Individuals use both verbal (e.g., “I’m sorry”) and nonverbal (e.g., a shrug) communications to provide their social account.

In general, SAs are effective in reducing the negative effects of a behavioral transgression [10], but what remains unclear is how SAs are used in everyday social interactions. That is, what properties are required across accounts to promote acceptance and decreased negative reactions [3]. Further, in general, there is little or no research on what kinds of social accounts emerge naturally independently and together.

To help address this gap and to be more specific about the kinds of SAs needed, we focus on one particular type of social transgression, meeting lateness [12–14]. Meeting lateness refers to an attendee arriving after the identified start of a meeting [12]. This can be in reference to a set clock time or it can be more relationally defined [14]. Previous research confirmed that people are upset when their colleagues arrive late to meetings and thereby

delay work being accomplished [12,13]. SAs may be a useful tool for mitigating this anger and frustration. Thus, identifying which SAs are actually used by late meeting attendees and how punctual attendees react can help answer this question.

This paper examines the social accounts of apologies and excuses in the context of the all-too-common social transgression of arriving late to a meeting or meeting lateness. Using a two study approach, we begin by investigating the real-life perceptions of meeting lateness from workers, including how they describe the SAs that occur naturally in their environment. Based upon those findings, we then seek to understand the effects of the more common SAs in a controlled experimental study. This mixed methods approach allows for realizing both a field study with actual employees (Study 1) and a control effects analysis of an experiment (Study 2).

By filling this gap in the literature, we make several contributions to the literature. First, we provide a systematic study of how individuals employ social accounts when explaining their interpersonal transgression of meeting lateness to others in their actual work settings. Second, by focusing on two particular types of accounts, excuses and apologies, we provide a greater understanding of the effects of these specific SAs on a very common workplace behavioral transgression. Third, by using a mixed methods design, we contribute to the meaningful triangulation of findings across field and experimental work in the area of meeting science. These and other contributions are further discussed within the paper.

### *1.1. Interpersonal Behavior, Social Accounts, and Social Transgressions*

People interact in multiple settings every day, and we can capture some of that interaction within the workplace. Meetings specifically provide context for key features of collaboration among workers including interaction and managing time [15]. Weiner's attributional theory of interpersonal behavior includes multiple stages that conjointly explain individuals' affective, behavioral, and motivational responses after experiencing or witnessing an interpersonal offense. The central propositions of the theory have been replicated across many studies, contexts, and methodological approaches [16].

As derived from original work by Heider and Kelley [17,18], the offended person first engages in a causal search to establish the cause for the offense. Individuals have an inherent bias to assign causality to the results of a person's actions, even though many causes are unintentional [19,20]. The offended person cognitively evaluates the identified cause across the three properties of locus, controllability, and stability to determine whether the transgressor is responsible for what happened [21–23]. Locus, or the perceived location of the cause, refers to whether the offended person believes the cause to be internal or external to the transgressor [24]. The perceived degree of control the transgressor had over the cause informs whether the offended person thinks the behavior was intentional [16,25]. Stability refers to whether the cause is expected to vary over time [22].

Then, the offended person will make a judgment regarding the transgressor's responsibility for what happened [26]. This decision determines the offended person's affective response to the transgression [27], which will often be anger if the transgressor is thought to be responsible and sympathy if they are not [28]. The offended person's judgment leads to the formation of behavioral intentions toward the transgressor [29]. A negative intention, such as punishment or aggression, follows an experience of anger [26,30–33]. Pro-social and helping behaviors follow a judgment of non-responsibility and the experience of sympathy [25,28,34].

In the workplace, meetings are a conduit for behavioral transgressions. Meetings are a social aspect of the workplace and inherently the venue for behavioral transgression. One transgression that is all too common is the late arrival of a meeting participant or leader. In these instances, the offended meeting participants will make judgments akin to Weiner's attributional theory and try to determine the locus, controllability, and stability of the individual late to the meeting. The offense can be cleared up rather quickly if the late arriver offers an excuse, but that is not always the case. It is important to consider the

effects of the transgression on the social outcomes described above in the context of the workplace and workplace meetings.

### *1.2. Social Accounts to Mitigate Transgression Offenses*

When examining interpersonal conflict and relationships in the work environment, it is necessary to explicitly account for how people explain their behavior to others, as those explanations are common and have the capacity to affect any component of the broader attributional process [8]. SAs are one tool individuals use to provide context and details about why they behaved the way they did. For this paper, we focus on apologies and excuses as two forms of SAs commonly used to mitigate negative consequences of interpersonal transgressions.

Apologies are one of the most common ways people react after they perceive that another person perceived their behavior negatively [35]. They are one of the most powerful mechanisms that transgressors use to reduce the consequences of their behavior [36]. For the purposes of this paper, an apology includes expressing sorrow, acknowledging the wrongfulness of the act, and accepting responsibility for it, while promoting a sense of remorse, repentance, and humility [37,38]. Numerous studies have indicated that apologies increase forgiveness and prosocial behaviors while reducing anger, aggression, and a desire to punish the transgressor [39–41]. By including an expression of personal responsibility, an apology suggests an internal and controllable cause [5]. The cause can influence stability as apologies can include a promise to behave better in the future and promote the perception that the behavior is unlikely to reoccur because the transgressor has reformed [42].

An excuse attempts to minimize the offended person's perception that the transgressor was responsible for the negative event [10,43,44]. The goal of excuses is to persuade others that the negative event arose because of sources less central to the transgressor's sense of self and not under their control [44]. This shifts perceived responsibility for the event to an external or uncontrollable factor [3].

Excuses have been found to produce near-consistent advantages for the excuse-giver and the excuse-receiver [1,3,8,44,45]. For the excuse-giver, a successful excuse can enhance self-esteem and task performance and reduce anxiety and depression [44]. Successful excuses also promote increased cooperation [25,46,47] and reduced punishment or retaliatory behaviors [25,28,32].

Excuses have the ability to mitigate a social transgression and enhance the social experience for those involved [28,44,46]. Excuses aid the offended person in making a decision about the person who committed the behavioral transgression. In the workplace, it is thought that excuses are used for an array of behavioral transgressions. This paper's behavioral transgression of interest is arriving late to a meeting.

### *1.3. Mitigating the Negative Consequences of Meeting Lateness*

This paper examines how individuals explain their behavior to others within the context of arriving late to a workplace meeting. A meeting, in this case, refers to a work-focused interaction among at least two or three individuals that may be scheduled in advance and lasts around 30 to 60 min [48–50]. Meetings offer an ideal environment to study social transgressions because most employees have experience attending, leading, and/or planning meetings [51], and meetings are one of the primary sites where work teams interact. Meeting experiences can influence employees' relationships with coworkers and work behaviors outside of the meeting setting [52].

Of the 55 million meetings in the United States each day [53], approximately 37% start late [12]. Meeting lateness damages interpersonal relationships [28], negatively affects the ways in which groups communicate [54], and harms group performance [13]. It has been demonstrated that the negative effects of meeting lateness are similar across cultures [13]. Two studies demonstrated that arriving late to a workplace meeting is a large enough social transgression to initiate negative responses among attendees [28,55], so late arrivers should be motivated to provide a SA [7].

Despite the clear theoretical definitions of types of SAs, evidence is beginning to accumulate that suggests that individuals may combine features of various explanation types into their own explanations. Schumann suggested that a multi-account response to a transgression was possible [42], and Mroz and Allen found that real SAs tended to combine aspects of apologies and excuses [55]. Furthermore, participants in the latter study viewed accounts that combined an apology and an excuse as more successful than those with properties of only one or neither type [55]. However, the focus of their study was not to explore how SAs are used in real social interactions, and the analyses and results were exploratory.

Combining excuses and apologies in actual speech is not a completely alien concept. Saying “sorry” after another person expresses that a behavior was inappropriate is a common and expected component of speech [45,56,57]. It is easy to think of examples where someone might say they are sorry for what happened and then offer an excuse, yet the SA literature has largely classified remorse as an aspect of apologies [5,58]. For these reasons, this paper addresses the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** *Social accounts in response to meeting lateness will include an expression of remorse more often than not, regardless of how the account addresses responsibility.*

All SAs share a more basic purpose: to repair the relationship affected by the transgression [3]. For this paper, a repaired relationship is defined as one wherein the offended person believes the SA offered by the transgressor and (a) forgives the transgression; (b) expresses a willingness to continue interacting with the transgressor in the future; and (c) would be likely to help the transgressor in the future, if asked. Each of the above factors has been used in prior work to operationalize what it means for a SA to be “successful” [59–61].

On the basis of that definition, many studies have attempted to identify which type of SA is best, often to mixed effect [1,3,59,60,62–65]. One reason for the contradictory findings may be that explanations used in experimental settings are inconsistent with how participants use and experience accounts in true social interactions. An expression of remorse has typically not been included in “excuses” in much of the SA literature, even though it is a common part of speech employed in a variety of circumstances [45,56,57]. An expression of remorse may actually bolster excuses because doing so conforms with expectations of speech. Given these findings, this paper addresses the following:

**Hypothesis 2a–c:** *Excuses will be more successful in promoting (a) forgiveness, (b) continued interactions, and (c) helping behaviors when prefaced by an expression of remorse compared to excuses without such an expression.*

Past work has not considered how an enhanced excuse with apology components compares with a standalone apology. Addressing this could provide insight into why results have been inconsistent when comparing SAs. Furthermore, as proposed by Schumann, the results of what happens when an account contains an acceptance (apology) and shifting of responsibility to an external force (excuse) is unclear [42]. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** Which properties of social accounts will co-occur in explanations of meeting lateness?

**Research Question 2a–c:** Assuming RQ1 is supported, which combination of apology (expressing remorse and taking responsibility) and excuse (offering excuse) components will produce the enhanced explanation most effective in promoting (a) forgiveness, (b) continued interactions, and (c) helping behaviors?

The hypotheses and research questions were tested across two studies. The first study used a survey of employees who had experienced meeting lateness in a work setting. This study addressed the hypotheses and research questions concerning real-world use and effectiveness of SAs. In contrast, the second study used an experimental design to further analyze the effectiveness of SAs in both their “pure” and enhanced forms.

## 2. Study 1

The purpose of this study was to test our hypotheses through participants' reflections on past meetings. This correlational design was chosen as it represents real workplace situations and interactions. However, there are limitations to this study design, including its cross-sectional nature, participant data being based on perceptions, potential for recall bias, and other factors. In addition to Study 1 we also retested the hypotheses using an experimental design in Study 2. We chose this to combat some of the limitations from Study 1. The results of Study 2 have reduced generalizability because participants are responding to a created environment rather than their typical workplace interactions. We felt this dual methodological approach had potential to provide stronger evidence when testing our hypotheses [66,67].

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

Five hundred seventy-three participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online panel of workers who complete tasks and receive compensation. MTurk has been reported as more diverse and representative of the overall U.S. population compared to other convenience samples [68–70]. Participants were compensated USD 0.40, and the study was advertised as one focused on social interactions. Participants were required to be 19 years of age or older, be full- or part-time employees in the United States, attend face-to-face meetings at least once per week at work, and have experienced someone arriving late to a meeting within the last two weeks. A power analysis was conducted with an effect size of 0.07, an alpha of 0.05, and a power set at 0.80. This effect size has been used in previous literature regarding similar constructs [25]. The power analysis revealed that 102 participants would be required to detect a similar small effect.

The sample comprised 500 full-time employees (work hours:  $M = 39.39$ ,  $SD = 8.48$ ) with slightly more women (54.2%). The majority were White (72.5%), followed by Asian (9.8%), Hispanic (8.0%), African American (7.0%), and other (2.6%). Most participants had attained a college degree or higher (68.9%). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 75 years old ( $M = 35.28$ ,  $SD = 10.26$ ), and they had been in their current jobs for 5.63 years on average ( $SD = 5.69$ ). Many participants were at the individual-contributor job level (46.6%), but the majority were supervisors (21.3%), managers (22.5%), directors (6.6%), or senior/top managers (3.0%).

### 3.2. Procedure and Design

Participants were asked to recall a time within the last two weeks when someone arrived late to a face-to-face workplace meeting. The participants provided information about the person who arrived late and how that person responded in terms of an SA. Then, participants completed several measures evaluating the late arriver.

### 3.3. Measures

**Explanation by late arriver.** The characteristics of the late arriver's explanation for their lateness, if any, were reported. If an explanation was not provided, respondents skipped this section. If an explanation was recalled, the participant wrote about what the person said. In addition, participants read a list of characteristics of SAs and selected which ones applied to the explanation the person offered.

**Forgiveness.** Participants completed the forgiveness measure developed by Aquino, Tripp, and Bies, capturing emotional forgiveness, revenge, and reconciliation with an 11-item scale [71]. In this use, Cronbach's alpha was 0.93 for revenge, 0.79 for reconciliation, and 0.88 for emotional forgiveness. Participants read each statement and indicated how well it described what they did after someone committed a workplace transgression, from 1 (*not at all accurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*).

**Intentions to continue interacting with late arriver.** Intent to continue interacting with the late arriver was measured using the avoidance subscale of the Transgression-

Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) inventory [72–74]. Participants read a series of seven statements about the transgressor and indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the current study, estimated internal consistency for this measure was 0.94.

**Helping behaviors.** Helping was measured using a three-item scale developed by Mroz and Allen [28]. Participants read three situations that described the transgressor asking for help in an unrelated work situation and then indicated how likely they would be to help the late person from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 5 (*extremely likely*). Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was estimated at 0.88 in an earlier use [28] and 0.87 in the present study.

**4. Results**

*4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Scale Analyses*

The descriptive statistics for all focal variables are displayed in Table 1, and the correlations between variables are shown in Table 2. Revenge, reconciliation, and the TRIM all exhibited a degree of skewness, with many responses clustered near the low end of the scale. This is not surprising given the nature of the study, and similar findings have been reported elsewhere [28].

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of variables in Study 1.

Variable	N	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min.	Max.
Helping	499	3.86	0.96	−0.72	−0.09	1.00	5.00
Emotional Forgiveness	500	3.41	1.25	−0.43	−0.89	1.00	5.00
Revenge	499	1.49	0.93	1.82	2.04	1.00	5.00
Reconciliation	500	2.76	1.16	0.10	−0.95	1.00	5.00
TRIM	471	2.05	1.02	0.64	−0.73	1.00	4.57

Note. TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations inventory—avoidance scale.

**Table 2.** Intercorrelations of Study 1 variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	-						
2. Gender	0.01	-					
3. Helping	0.04	0.00	<b>(0.87)</b>				
4. Emotional Forgiveness	0.04	0.04	0.17 **	<b>(0.88)</b>			
5. Revenge	−0.20 **	−0.06	−0.16 **	−0.03	<b>(0.93)</b>		
6. Reconciliation	−0.18 **	0.04	0.17 **	0.49 **	0.28 **	<b>(0.79)</b>	
7. TRIM	−0.01	−0.02	−0.44 **	−0.21 **	0.57 **	−0.08	<b>(0.94)</b>

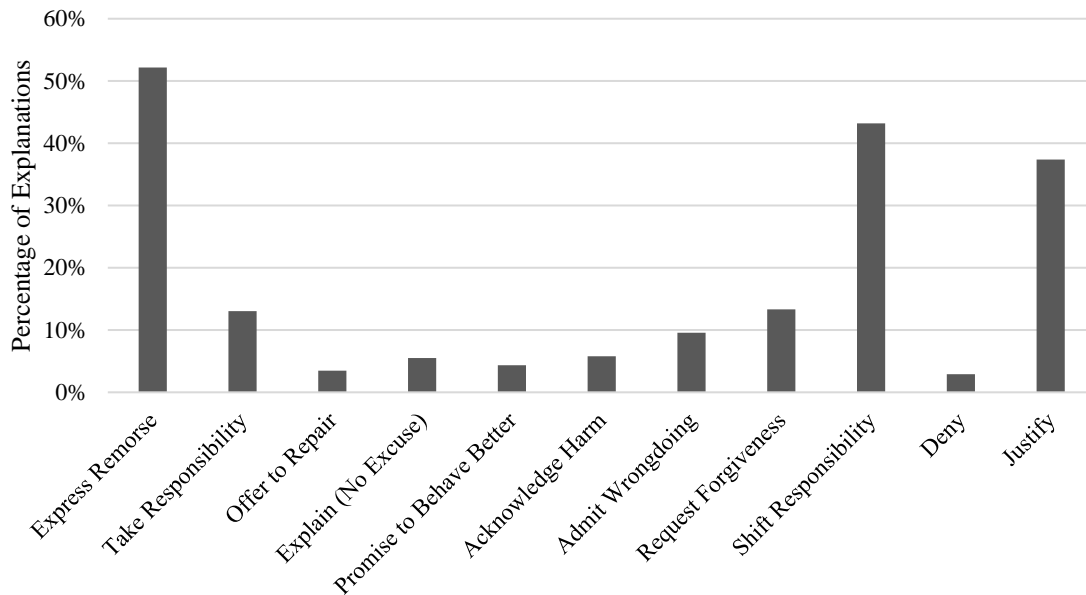
Notes. N = 500. For gender, 1 = male, 2 = female. \*\* p < 0.01.

The first set of analyses explored the response distribution for each scale, as previous uses of some scales, such as revenge, tend to be range-restricted [71]. Best practice recommendations for samples of a similar size to the one used in this study were used to evaluate normality [75,76]. Based on all evaluations of the data, all scales were determined to have an adequate distribution for conducting parametric tests.

The five scales (helping, forgiveness—emotional, forgiveness—revenge, forgiveness—reconciliation, and TRIM) were examined using a confirmatory factor analysis with latent variables [77,78]. The fit of each of the five models was compared using the Satorra and Bentler method [79], and in each comparison, the five-factor model demonstrated significantly better model fit than any other model. The fit of the five-factor model was acceptable ( $\chi^2(179, N = 500) = 507.54, p < 0.001, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.96, SRMSR = 0.05$ ), and all indicators (survey items) were significantly related to the hypothesized factor with all parameter estimates exceeding 0.70.

### 4.2. Nature of Explanations

The majority of participants (69%,  $n = 345$ ) reported receiving an explanation from the late arriver. A breakdown of the percentage of participant-reported explanations that included each characteristic is displayed in Figure 1. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 1, which was that an expression of remorse would be the most frequently occurring component across SAs. An expression of remorse was present in 52.2% of explanations.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of social accounts containing each of the characteristics of social accounts as reported by participants.

Research Question 1 asked which properties of social accounts are likely to co-occur in explanations for meeting lateness. Crosstabs and frequencies tables were analyzed to address this research question. Shifting responsibility was paired frequently with expressing remorse (22.9%) and justifying (10.1%). The findings were similar for justifying in that it tended to co-occur most frequently with offering remorse (19.1%) and shifting responsibility (10.1%). More detailed information on property co-occurrences is included in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Co-occurrence of social account properties in Study 1.

Property	Number of Pairings	Pairing as a Percent of All Accounts *
Remorse with	-	-
Taking responsibility	26	7.5%
Admit wrongdoing	19	5.5%
Request forgiveness	29	8.4%
Give excuse	79	22.9%
Justify	66	19.1%
Giving excuse with	-	-
Justify	35	10.1%

\* All other pairings occurred at less than 5%.

### 4.3. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 2a–c were analyzed by comparing excuses that were combined with expressions of remorse to excuses that did not include an expression of remorse. These comparisons were made via a series of  $t$  tests. There were 190 explanations that included an excuse and no remorse and 81 explanations that included both. The  $t$  tests showed that there were no significant differences in forgiveness (emotional  $t(269) = 0.19, p = 0.85$ ;

revenge  $t(269) = -0.66, p = 0.51$ ; reconciliation  $t(269) = 0.63, p = 0.53$ ) and avoidance ( $t(255) = 1.89, p = 0.062$ ) between the two groups of excuses, thereby not providing support for Hypothesis 2a,b. For helping, excuses that also included an expression of remorse ( $M = 4.13, SD = 0.79$ ) were rated more highly than excuses without remorse ( $M = 3.85, SD = 0.96$ ), ( $t(269) = 2.26, p = 0.025$ ). Hypothesis 2c was supported.

## 5. Study 2

Study 2 was designed to provide an extension of Study 1 using an experimental design. Study 1 focused on participants' recall of personal events and could have been influenced by a variety of uncontrollable factors such as participants' personality, the severity of the lateness, and a wide variety of other unknowable factors. The purpose of Study 2 was to further explain the relationship among taking responsibility, offering an excuse, and expressing remorse for a behavioral transgression.

## 6. Method

### 6.1. Participants and Design

Participants were recruited via MTurk and were compensated USD 0.50 for completing the study, which was described as a survey focused on social interactions. Participants were required to be 19 years of age or older; be full- or part-time employees in the United States; attend face-to-face workplace meetings at least once per week; and have completed no other meeting-related studies, including Study 1, within the last year. Several power analyses were conducted to evaluate the necessary sample size. Each analysis included 28 pairwise comparisons with an alpha of 0.05 and a power level of 0.80. Using the smallest effect size in Mroz and Allen [55], 361 participants were needed to detect the effect.

Fifty-three participants were excluded from the analysis as they did not advance beyond the first portion of the survey. The final sample included 547 participants who worked an average of 39.32 h per week ( $SD = 8.71$ ), ranged in age from 19 to 66 years old ( $M = 33.81, SD = 9.84$ ), and were primarily women (55%). The majority were White (76.4%), followed by Asian (7.5%), African American (7.3%), Hispanic (6.3%), and other (2.5%). Approximately 68% of respondents had attained a college degree or higher. The average job tenure of participants was 5.69 years ( $SD = 5.55$ ), and the majority of participants (51.5%) were at the supervisor job level or above. The data collection system, Qualtrics, randomly assigned participants to the eight conditions.

### 6.2. Procedure and Design

A 2 (expression of remorse: yes, no)  $\times$  2 (acceptance of responsibility: yes, no)  $\times$  2 (excuse: yes, no) design between participants was used. After entering the study, providing informed consent, and verifying eligibility criteria, participants were randomly assigned to each of the eight conditions. Participants were given instructions to watch a video showing a workplace meeting, imagine that they were an attendee, and think about how they would respond in that situation.

After the instructions, all participants watched the same video (~1 min) derived from a series of videos used in a prior study [55]. This video showed meeting attendees arriving to a meeting, discussing who was not there yet, mentioning what time the meeting was intended to start, and then waiting eight minutes for the person to arrive. The eight minutes of waiting were sped up and shown in 30 s of real time. This decision was made to reduce participant drop-out, fatigue, and inattention, which are likely when participants are not interested in or engaged with study stimuli [80–82].

In the video, meeting attendees reviewed and shuffled papers on the table, used their cell phones, and made small talk while waiting. After the person arrived to the meeting 10 min late, the video ended, and a text-based explanation appeared (or did not appear, in the condition of "not present" on all factors). The content of the explanation was determined by the condition to which the participant was randomly assigned (please see Table 4 for the list of conditions). Lastly, participants rated the late arriver on a variety of



factors. Following the video and the text-based explanation provided by the late arriver, participants completed a series of questions regarding the explanation and the late arriver.

**Table 4.** List of eight conditions participants were randomly assigned to in Study 2.

Condition	Language Used
Expresses Remorse × Accepts Responsibility × Offers Excuse	Okay, I made it. I'm so sorry [remorse]. <i>It was completely my fault that I was late</i> [accept responsibility], <b>but the traffic was bad, and I couldn't get here on time</b> [excuse]. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?
Expresses Remorse × Does Not Accept Responsibility × Offers Excuse	Okay, I made it. I'm so sorry [remorse]. <b>The traffic was bad, and I couldn't get here on time</b> [excuse]. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?
Expresses Remorse × Accepts Responsibility × Does Not Offer Excuse	Okay, I made it. I'm so sorry [remorse]. <i>It was completely my fault that I was late</i> [accept responsibility]. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?
Expresses Remorse × Does Not Accept Responsibility × Does Not Offer Excuse	Okay, I made it. I'm so sorry [remorse]. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?
Does Not Express Remorse × Accepts Responsibility × Offers Excuse	Okay, I made it. <i>It was completely my fault that I was late</i> [accept responsibility], <b>but the traffic was bad, and I couldn't get here on time</b> [excuse]. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?
Does Not Express Remorse × Does Not Accept Responsibility × Offers Excuse	Okay, I made it. <b>The traffic was bad, and I couldn't get here on time</b> [excuse]. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?
Does Not Express Remorse × Accepts Responsibility × Does Not Offer Excuse	Okay, I made it. <i>It was completely my fault that I was late</i> [accept responsibility]. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?
Does Not Express Remorse × Does Not Accept Responsibility × Does Not Offer Excuse	Okay, I made it. Thanks for waiting. Ready to start the meeting?

### 6.3. Measures

The same measures for forgiveness, intentions to continue interacting with the late arriver, and helping behaviors were used again in Study 2. The estimates of internal consistency for the scale in this study were 0.87 for helping, 0.85 for emotional forgiveness, 0.94 for revenge, 0.79 for reconciliation, and 0.94 for the TRIM-Avoidance (intentions to continue interacting with the late arriver).

## 7. Results

### Descriptive Statistics, Manipulation Checks, and Scale Analyses

The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 5, and the correlations between variables are in Table 6. As in Study 1, normality of all measures was assessed using best practice recommendations for evaluating normality with samples of a similar size to the one used in this study [75,76]. All measures were sufficiently normal to continue with the analysis. Similar to Study 1, responses to the revenge measure were somewhat skewed, although not substantially, and many responses were clustered near the low end of the scale.

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics of variables in Study 2.

Variable	N	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min.	Max.
Helping	529	3.56	1.00	−0.61	−0.16	1.00	5.00
Emotional Forgiveness	529	3.47	1.02	−0.44	−0.47	1.00	5.00
Revenge	529	1.61	1.03	1.65	1.53	1.00	5.00
Reconciliation	529	2.86	1.03	−0.03	−0.70	1.00	5.00
TRIM	531	2.31	1.00	0.41	−0.69	1.00	5.00

Note. TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations inventory—avoidance scale.

**Table 6.** Correlations between variables in Study 2.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	-									
2. Gender	0.05	-								
3. Offer Remorse	0.05	0.02	-							
4. Accept Responsibility	0.04	0.00	0.00	-						
5. Offer Excuse	−0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00	-					
6. Helping	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.13 **	0.03	<b>(0.87)</b>				
7. Emotional Forgiveness	0.11 **	0.11 *	0.05	0.18 **	−0.01	0.48 **	<b>(0.85)</b>			
8. Revenge	−0.12 **	−0.17 **	−0.02	0.02	0.01	−0.05	−0.01	<b>(0.94)</b>		
9. Reconciliation	0.03	0.03	0.11 *	0.15 **	0.03	0.39 **	0.57 **	0.32 **	<b>(0.79)</b>	
10. TRIM	−0.10 *	−0.12 **	−0.03	−0.09 *	−0.02	−0.34 **	−0.28 **	0.60 **	−0.07	<b>(0.94)</b>

Notes. N = 547. For gender, 1 = male, 2 = female. \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Three independent sample *t* tests were performed to examine the effect of the experimental manipulations for remorse, accepting responsibility, and offering an excuse. Participants in the remorse condition ( $M = 4.01, SD = 1.12$ ) were much more likely to perceive that the late arriver expressed remorse than participants in the no-remorse condition ( $M = 2.39, SD = 1.41$ ), [ $t(532) = 14.72, p < 0.001$ ]. Likewise, participants in the accepting responsibility condition were more likely to perceive the late arriver as accepting responsibility ( $M = 4.28, SD = 1.18$ ) than did participants in the no-acceptance of responsibility condition ( $M = 2.04, SD = 1.21$ ), [ $t(531) = 21.71, p < 0.001$ ]. Additionally, participants in the excuse condition ( $M = 4.50, SD = 1.86$ ) were much more confident that the late arriver offered an excuse compared to participants in the no-excuse condition ( $M = 1.86, SD = 1.23$ ), [ $t(532) = 28.21, p < 0.001$ ] conditions.

Next, the five scales (helping, forgiveness—emotional, forgiveness—revenge, forgiveness—reconciliation, and TRIM) were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the same procedure outlined in Study 1. Across all comparisons, the five-factor model demonstrated significantly better model fit than any other model. The fit of the five-factor model was acceptable ( $\chi^2(179, N = 533) = 497.20, p < 0.001, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.96, SRMSR = 0.05$ ). All indicators were significantly related, with  $p < 0.05$ , to the hypothesized factor, with all parameter estimates exceeding 0.72. Factorial ANOVAs were used to test the effect of each manipulated factor, and the interactions between factors, on each of the five dependent variables. The results of all analyses are displayed in Tables 7–11. The overall model for helping was significant [ $F(7, 521) = 2.13, (p = 0.039)$ ], and there was a main effect of responsibility such that taking responsibility was associated with increased helping intentions [ $F(1, 521) = 8.61, (p = 0.003)$ ]. The same pattern of results was true for emotional forgiveness in that the overall model was significant [ $F(7, 521) = 3.24, (p = 0.002)$ ] and taking responsibility was related to increased emotional forgiveness [ $F(1, 521) = 18.56, (p < 0.001)$ ]. The omnibus model for revenge was not significant, so no additional tests were examined, [ $F(7, 521) = 0.13, (p = 0.99)$ ]. The overall model for reconciliation was significant [ $F(7, 521) = 2.99, (p = 0.004)$ ], and expressing remorse [ $F(1, 521) = 6.07, (p = 0.014)$ ] along with taking responsibility [ $F(1, 521) = 12.59, p < 0.001$ ] were associated with increased

reconciliation. Lastly, there were no significant effects with respect to TRIM-Avoidance [ $F(7, 521) = 1.02, (p = 0.41)$ ].

**Table 7.** ANOVA results of helping in Study 2.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	$\eta_p^2$
Overall	14.63	7	2.09	2.13 *	0.03
Remorse	2.06	1	2.06	2.09	0.00
Take Responsibility	8.46	1	8.46	8.61 **	0.02
Offer Excuse	0.46	1	0.46	0.47	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility	0.48	1	0.48	0.49	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Excuse	0.16	1	0.16	0.16	0.00
Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	0.02	1	0.02	0.02	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	2.88	1	2.88	2.93	0.01
Error	512.25	521	0.98		
Total	526.88	528			

Note.  $N = 529$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 8.** ANOVA results of emotional forgiveness in Study 2.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	$\eta_p^2$
Overall	23.08	7	3.30	3.24 ***	0.04
Remorse	1.60	1	1.60	1.57	0.00
Take Responsibility	18.91	1	18.91	18.56 ***	0.03
Offer Excuse	0.07	1	0.07	0.07	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility	0.04	1	0.04	0.04	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Excuse	0.96	1	0.96	0.94	0.00
Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	1.54	1	1.54	1.51	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	0.14	1	0.14	0.14	0.00
Error	530.86	521	1.02		
Total	553.94	528			

Note.  $N = 529$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 9.** ANOVA results of revenge in Study 2.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	$\eta_p^2$
Overall	0.99	7	0.14	0.13	0.00
Remorse	0.33	1	0.33	0.31	0.00
Take Responsibility	0.15	1	0.15	0.14	0.00
Offer Excuse	0.06	1	0.06	0.06	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility	0.01	1	0.01	0.01	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Excuse	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	0.00
Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	0.32	1	0.32	0.30	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	0.12	1	0.12	0.11	0.00
Error	562.68	521	1.08		
Total	563.67	528			

Note.  $N = 529$ .

In all cases, there were no significant interactions between offering remorse and giving an excuse (remorse  $\times$  excuse), thereby not supporting Hypotheses 2a–c, which stated that excuses would be more successful when prefaced by an expression of remorse. Research Questions 2a–c asked if an enhanced explanation with both excuse and apology components would be more successful than a pure apology. Because there were no significant interactions between apology and explanation components for any of the outcomes, the enhanced explanation was no more successful than a pure apology.

**Table 10.** ANOVA results of reconciliation in Study 2.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	$\eta_p^2$
Overall	21.60	7	3.09	2.99 ***	0.04
Remorse	6.25	1	6.25	6.07 **	0.01
Take Responsibility	12.98	1	12.98	12.59 ***	0.02
Offer Excuse	0.42	1	0.42	0.41	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility	0.20	1	0.20	0.19	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Excuse	0.06	1	0.06	0.06	0.00
Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	0.01	1	0.01	0.00	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	1.73	1	1.73	1.68	0.00
Error	537.08	521	1.03		
Total	558.68	528			

Note.  $N = 529$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 11.** ANOVA results of TRIM-Avoidance in Study 2: combined with other ANOVA tables.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	$\eta_p^2$
Overall	7.20	7	1.03	1.02	0.01
Remorse	0.48	1	0.48	0.48	0.00
Take Responsibility	3.92	1	3.92	3.90	0.01
Offer Excuse	0.30	1	0.30	0.30	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility	2.12	1	2.12	2.10	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Excuse	0.16	1	0.16	0.16	0.00
Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	0.06	1	0.06	0.06	0.00
Remorse $\times$ Responsibility $\times$ Excuse	0.12	1	0.12	0.12	0.00
Error	526.26	523	1.01		
Total	533.46	530			

Note.  $N = 531$ .

## 8. Discussion

### 8.1. Summary of Findings

In Study 1, the majority (52%) of late arrivers' explanations included an expression of remorse, which supports Hypothesis 1. This suggests that meeting attendees first recognize that meeting lateness is a social transgression and then engage in behaviors to mitigate the potential negative impact their lateness may have caused [13]. The findings also suggest that individuals often combine components from opposing account types, and some components co-occurred more often than others (Research Question 1; Table 3). We infer from this that people are motivated to reduce the impact of this social transgression beyond a simple explanation. In other words, simply saying "I'm sorry" is not enough for many of the meeting attendees. They proceed to explain the situation further, providing some combination of behaviors (e.g., express remorse and apologize).

With regard to Hypothesis 2a–c, Study 1 found that excuses with an expression of remorse did not significantly influence forgiveness or avoidance behaviors but did increase helping behaviors. In contrast, Study 2 found no interactions between excuses and offering remorse. Lastly, Studies 1 and 2 did not support the notion that enhanced social accounts would significantly affect any of the measured outcomes (Research Questions 2a–c). In short, expressing remorse may inspire others to be helpful to the transgressor. This is meaningful, particularly if the transgressor could discontinue the undesirable behavior, their meeting lateness, if they received some help from their coworkers. More detailed analyses of specific occurrences of the expression of remorse need to be performed in order to explore that idea.

### 8.2. Theoretical Implications

The findings of the two studies reported in this paper contribute to the theoretical understanding of social accounts in a variety of ways. Study 1 challenges the strict, mutually exclusive lens by which social accounts have previously been theoretically defined [42].

The results demonstrated that offering remorse is not an aspect solely of apologies. This finding supports the proposition provided by Schumann, suggesting that it is possible for any individual social account to consist of seemingly contradictory components [42]. Specifically, expressing remorse, which has been considered an aspect of apologies and not excuses [5,58], often co-occurred with shifting responsibility (an excuse), and when the two were combined, they resulted in more positive helping behaviors compared to an excuse alone.

Second, these results have broad implications for previous studies that have attempted to determine whether excuses (which have *not* included an expression of remorse) are more or less effective at promoting forgiveness or less negative reactions following a behavioral transgression [1,59]. When an experimental manipulation or other study stimulus material poorly resembles participants' experiences in actual social interactions, their responses and subsequent behaviors of interest may be heavily influenced by various response biases and random error [83,84]. Therefore, a portion of the contradictory findings concerning the relative effectiveness of types of social accounts is likely attributable to how well a study context aligned with participants' experiences of accounts outside of the laboratory or study setting.

Study 1 suggests that nearly all types of social accounts prompted by a transgression similar to meeting lateness ought to be prefaced by an expression of remorse if they are to have high external validity. This finding corresponds with the preliminary findings Mroz and Allen reported [55]. Although the social accounts literature did not originate within the field of management or industrial/organizational psychology, the work has been increasingly migrating to these areas [1]. These fields have been classified as having a "crises of confidence" in terms of the meaningfulness of research output [85], and by seeking to make the work on social accounts more applied and resembling of real social interactions, researchers can more clearly make innovative and meaningful contributions.

Third, these studies also lend insight into which elements of social accounts are best at reducing the negative effects of a behavioral transgression. In Study 1, excuses that were prefaced by remorse were associated with better helping behaviors. In Study 2, expressing remorse was associated with better reconciliation, and taking responsibility was associated with better helping behaviors, emotional forgiveness, and reconciliation. These characteristics have been classified as an aspect of apologies [86–89], meaning that across Study 1 and Study 2, only apologies were associated with a significant reduction in the negative reactions of offended persons following a transgression. Indeed, in the case of the meeting lateness studied here, providing a pure excuse for the behavior had *no effect* on any of the outcome variables.

Fourth, with respect to the literature on workplace meetings, these studies contribute to a stream that indicates individuals have negative interpersonal reactions when someone is late to a meeting [12,13,28,55]. However, meeting lateness is the source of only mild interpersonal distress, resulting in mild negative outcomes in Study 1. There may be other behaviors in meetings, such as complaining [90], interrupting, or criticizing [54], that have larger implications for the ways in which teams and individuals function. Also, workers from various cultural backgrounds may not rate meeting lateness as severe of a transgression compared to U.S. workers [14,91].

### 8.3. Practical Implications

A unique feature of the present studies when compared to others on social accounts is that a very common, yet relatively minor, transgression served as the impetus for providing an account. Few other studies have used a transgression of similar type and severity [5,42,89], and recommendations for how to issue a strong apology may differ depending on the transgression and context. In contrast with other studies from which authors concluded that more comprehensive apologies are generally better [86,92], the findings seemed to indicate the opposite. From a practical perspective, these results indicate that the comprehensiveness of the apology must be matched with the severity of

the transgression. An overly long or complex apology may draw additional attention to the behavior or seem inauthentic because it is not proportionate to the offense. Apologies or social accounts that offended persons believe to be inauthentic or “fake” have been demonstrated to generate negative effects [61]. In the case of small behavioral infractions, this paper suggests the best approach is to express remorse without over-complicating the apology by including many other components.

Regarding the transgression of meeting lateness itself, the results demonstrated that employees who experienced a coworker arriving late to a meeting had unfavorable reactions toward that late person. In some cases, employees indicated that they engaged in revenge-focused behaviors toward the late person by trying to get even, gossiping, or purposefully trying to make the late person’s work unpleasant or difficult. Although arriving late to one meeting is likely only a small component driving the offended person’s negative behaviors toward the late arriver, one way to mitigate a portion of the negative responses is to arrive to meetings on time. Therefore, arriving to meetings on time can effectively avoid poor meeting outcomes [13] and interpersonal conflict.

#### *8.4. Limitations and Future Directions*

There are several primary limitations concerning the two studies reported in this paper that must be considered before drawing any firm conclusions from the results. Following from the notion that individuals are more likely to dwell on and remember negative events than positive events [93], it is possible, and perhaps quite likely, that Study 1 participants who remembered the most about the social account were also those who were particularly upset by the late arriver’s behavior. As such, the mixed evidence across both studies regarding whether more comprehensive, exhaustive accounts were more successful than less comprehensive accounts may be attributed to a difference in event salience among participants.

Revenge may have been associated with this feature in Study 1. The participant may have viewed the stimulus prompting the social account as highly negative and was therefore likely to remember what the offender did and said. Additionally, an offender may be most likely to deploy multiple aspects of an apology or social account when the offender and the offended persons perceive the behavior as particularly wrong or negative [92]. Future research must account for the perceived severity of the transgression in more detail.

Next, Study 2 also suffered from a broad methodological limitation. Study 2 was an experiment that used video vignettes as stimuli. This type of experimental design strikes a balance between internal and external validity because it maintains the internal validity and control of traditional experiments, while enhancing external validity by orienting participants toward realistic situations [83]. Nonetheless, external validity is still a challenge, as participants in Study 2 imagined how they would react if someone (whom they do not know and will never meet again) arrived late to a (fictional) meeting and provided some form of social account. Participants did not actually wait for a meeting to start or experience a transgressor personally offering them a social account. This study should be viewed as a very conservative test of the hypotheses and examination of the research questions. Fortunately, Study 1 complemented the lack of artificiality in Study 2 because participants in Study 1 described a time when they personally experienced the targeted transgression along with how they actually behaved toward the transgressor after the event.

In addition, both studies may have been affected by common source bias. Common source bias, also referred to as common method variance [84], common method bias [94], or monomethod bias [95], is systematic error variance attributed to using the same or similar measurement methods when measuring two or more constructs or the same construct multiple times. Concrete measures that require little judgment may be less affected by common source bias, whereas multiple measures of abstract variables that require complex judgments may be more vulnerable to the bias. In the case of Study 1, common source bias may not be a very large concern given that most survey questions were concrete in that they asked participants to simply report what happened and what they did in a given

situation. However, in Study 2, the entire experimental manipulation was more abstract, potentially resulting in increased exposure to bias.

Lastly, the studies described in this paper involved face-to-face meetings only, but workplace meetings have changed in response to the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. In 2020, a survey of U.S. employees found that 70% of respondents were working from home during the pandemic. The number of video meetings increased by 50% compared to pre-COVID numbers, and 79% of surveyed employees responded that video meetings were as productive or more productive than in-person meetings [96]. According to a similar survey in 2021, only 39% of employers required in-person work exclusively and 70% of surveyed employees found virtual meetings less stressful than in-person meetings [97]. It appears that remote work and video meetings have remained common even after the peak of the pandemic, and many workers prefer video meetings to in-person meetings.

Despite the shifting landscape of workplace meeting modes, previous findings in meeting science may still be applicable. Karl et al. found that frustrations encountered during video meetings are similar to those encountered during face-to-face meetings, including meeting lateness, lack of an agenda, long meetings, and multi-tasking coworkers [98]. Additional sources have reported similar results [99,100]. Additional frustrations mainly involved issues with technology and working from home. Similar difficulties in video and face-to-face meetings may make these findings of this paper relevant for both meeting modes. More research is needed to see if prior meeting science findings are applicable in the era of video meetings.

## 9. Conclusions

In summary, the study's purpose was to systematically evaluate how individuals use social accounts when explaining a relatively mild transgression (lateness to a meeting) in actual work settings. Study 1 indicated that the majority of social accounts included at least an expression of remorse, whereas a large percentage included an excuse or a justification. In about 25% of the social accounts recalled by participants, offering remorse was paired with an excuse. Furthermore, combining remorse with excuses resulted in better helping behaviors. Study 2 found that there were no effects of combining properties of multiple types of accounts into one comprehensive account. Only aspects of an apology (expressing remorse or taking responsibility) were associated with reduced negative reactions following the transgression. Future research should see how this phenomenon occurs in the virtual setting and see if these findings hold up.

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