Please Don't Cancel Me: An Examination of Celebrity Public Apologies in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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21ST CENTURY

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21st-century celebrities (defined as well-known figures in the entertainment, sports, and social media realms) establish positions of power through the negotiation of their public face. Challenges to their power increasingly come in the form of social media driven outcries against past words and/or actions. A shift has occurred in the balance of power between celebrity and their public, with the everyday fan's ability to impact a celebrity's public face with one well-placed tweet or comment online. The public apology, long a tool for celebrity image control, has become more important in meeting and overcoming 21st century challenges to power. Celebrities employ a variety of discourse strategies to increase or maintain power with the general public and their specific fan bases. Word choice, sequencing, use of visuals/design, and control of fan interaction are the key factors that determine the success of the 21st-century celebrity apology.

Signature of Investigator: _____ Shannon D. Reid _____   Date: _August 11, 2022___

Introduction

Bill Clinton intoning that he 'did not have…sexual relations' with Monica Lewinsky. Tiger Woods, watery-eyed and somber, admitting that he had 'let his family down.' Mel Gibson, formerly one of the most likable and charismatic stars in Hollywood, allowing that he used 'vitriolic and harmful words' towards the Jewish community. Without any additional context, many members of the American public can call to mind these moments of public apology that have become part of our collective consciousness. The public apology has become a rite of passage for high-profile individuals as well as corporations. It is seen as a cornerstone strategy in image repair work, and as such, plays a central role in the negotiation of power between a high-profile individual or group and their public.

The study of public apologies intersects with a number of different academic fields: public relations (George, 2020; Kampf, 2009; Sandlin & Graciyanly, 2018), linguistics (Clark, 2020; Croley, 2021), discourse analysis (Beaudin, 2018; Bouvier, 2020; Murti, 2013), and psychology (Kim, et al, 2013) just to name a portion. I will use discourse analysis to evaluate public apologies; this approach provides a comprehensive analysis of language, delivery method, and response to the apology. Since apologies are such a vital control mechanism for those with a public face, it is worthwhile to examine how word choice and order, delivery method, and feedback controls of public apologies are managed as means of increasing or regaining power. This will be done by examining four case studies that fall into the genre of apology rhetoric; all four are 21st century public apologies delivered by entertainment figures via social media channels. These case studies will be analyzed using Benoit's (2014) image repair theory . Additionally, the role of social media communication controls such as comments and likes will

be examined to determine how those elements of the apology discourse can impact the overall success of power negotiation. Lastly, the timing and sequencing of apologies will be discussed in order to assess their impact on the success of power negotiation.

I make a case for the importance of this analysis because my personal discourse has been impacted by elements of celebrity culture. As an avid fan of popular culture, I have watched attitudes towards celebrities and their influence on culture evolve over the last few decades. The impact that fan bases have on celebrity images and careers has also changed over time. This unique interchange between fan and celebrity is one which I find fascinating because of the power dynamics that are visible; if celebrities wield power over trends and social expectations, that power balance has begun to shift due to the ability of the entertainment consumer to drive expectations for celebrity behavior. As a follower of pop culture, I recognize that I play an active role in the creation of popular culture and I believe that this can be clearly viewed by studying the ways in which public apologies are managed online via social media and through coverage in traditional media channels.

The roles of celebrities in our culture continually evolve, and this evolution has been particularly speedy in the 21st century. The rise of social media as a primary communication tool, along with increasing pressure on celebrities to share more of their authentic selves, has created new expectations for what celebrities share with their public. Sharing a version of one's interior life is now expected, but this also creates more opportunities for celebrities to blunder. At the same time, fans have become emboldened in their pursuit of online interaction with celebrities. As progressive social values become more established in popular culture via grassroots movements like #MeToo and # BlackLivesMatter, this increased interaction with celebrities has led fans to demand apologies for past misdeeds, some as long as twenty or more

years prior (Bouvier, 2020). Power negotiations are highlighted through these speech acts, with the celebrity speaker balancing between acknowledging past transgressions without drawing increased focus on their previous public selves that may no longer fit with their desired image. Prior to the 2010s, celebrity apologies would be delivered via traditional media sources such as newspapers, television news programs, or glossy magazines. These media outlets would deliver the press statement, or for larger events cover a press conference, and fan response/interaction with the message would be limited. There was also very little examination of previous misdeeds using the lens of current social mores, so apologies by and large rested on a current event that needed to be neutralized. While this cycle still occurs, the more common media sequence is developed from fan bases via hashtags and digital evidence of past statements or actions that are not considered acceptable under current social mores. The celebrity in question then has to answer this call for a justification of behavior; most choose to do so via their social media channels. A new channel of communication is created, and power is continually negotiated, via this apology exchange. This exchange is worth examining in light of the speedy changes taking place in public discourse; understanding how current celebrity apologies are developed, delivered, and managed can help those interested in popular culture understand the ways in which celebrities must adjust their communication going forward.

Literature Review

In order to fully undertake a discourse analysis of selected celebrity apologies, a background covering multiple fields of study was needed to lay the groundwork for my approach and to properly guide my analysis. I began with the growing field of celebrity studies to anchor this work in an understanding of how celebrity culture impacts society. For the purposes of this paper, social media studies overlap with celebrity due to the proliferation of social media usage to promote celebrity image as well as to negotiate relationships with fan bases. A brief overview of the study of apologia, as well as examples of studies using discourse analysis to evaluate public apologies, provides the framework that I applied to case study evaluation and discussion.

The Culture of Celebrity

21st-century celebrities are impactful on popular culture. The choices celebrities make in their clothing, recreational activities, and speech seep into the day-to-day lives of average citizens, even if they are not ardent celebrity watchers. The influence that celebrities have, and the growth in their influence, is sometimes called celebritization. Celebritization is defined as "societal and cultural changes implied by celebrity" (Driessens, 2013). In other words, the power that a celebrity holds due to their elevated position in society impacts accepted cultural expectations and trends. Reaching the upper echelon of celebrity can bestow upon the celebrity "discursive power or a voice that cannot be ignored" (Marshall, 1997 as cited in Driessens, 2013, p. 642). The phenomena of celebritization can impact even those who are not avid fans of a certain celebrity or project. For example, if a celebrity's influence spreads through the public and media, their mode of dress can impact styles that even non-fans will adhere to in their own

personal dressing choices. The phenomenon of celebritization impacts other, unrelated areas such as politics, with celebrity endorsements and even celebrity candidates becoming de rigueur in the political sphere (West, 2005). While the field of celebrity studies is relatively young, it has shown the significant impacts that celebrity news has on our daily lives. David Marshall's (2014) work highlights the growth of celebrity influence and traces the origins of 'new' celebrity culture to Princess Diana's death in 1997. The news cycle created from coverage of that death, and the subsequent examination of a celebrity's right to privacy, legitimized the importance of this field of study.

Celebrities have been theorized as highly narcissistic compared to the general population (Young and Pinsky, 2006). These tendencies to be self-focused, paired with the intense spotlight that is placed on celebrities within our culture, create a heightened awareness of the power that a celebrity has available within their sphere of influence. Celebrity power is situated in the elevated person's ability to present a self that provides "cultural value" (Marshall, 2014, p. 55). As social media has solidified its hold on mass communication, a new breed of 'micro-celebrities' has developed. Often termed influencers, these micro-celebrities provide the highest level of engagement between their personal lives and their fan community. This open access has arguably created more influence than traditional celebrities (Nouri, 2018). Due to the rise of micro-celebrities, traditional entertainers have been pushed to share more and provide more access to their lives in order to maintain a level of power and currency within the celebrity space. Ferris (2007) found that celebrity culture creates a hierarchical system similar to other sociological hierarchies. Climbing this hierarchy provides increased exposure and a larger fan base. As celebrities become more prominent in their fields, they need to then consider what type of exposure they want and need to their public fan base. Van den Bulck & Classens (2014)

examined the celebrity construct of three personae: professional, private, and 'real'. The private and real certainly have crossover, with the real seeming to represent access to the private. However, by using social media images and captions to build a narrative, a celebrity can attempt to create a version of their private self that still allows a distance from their authentic self. The management of these 'selves' ties into power management, as celebrities continually consider what public facing self will provide the most positive image while still protecting some realm of privacy. Overall, celebrity is valued by modern western culture and as such, those thrust into the role of celebrities wield power and influence both in their own professional spheres as well as outward in the greater culture. Due to this power, any transgressions that celebrities are perceived as undertaking are strongly examined and questioned. The celebrity in question then must craft a discourse strategy to respond to these negative perceptions in order to keep their image and power. In the 21st century, these discourse performances are inexorably tied to the various social media platforms that act as the stage on which these performances are given.

Impacts of Social Media

Meyers (2009) builds on Richard Schickel's work from 1985 and emphasizes the 'illusion of intimacy' that exists between a public figure and their fan base. This illusion has been heightened significantly with the rise of social media as the main communication tool used by famous people to reach their audience. Celebrity Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok accounts allow the perception of unfettered access to a celebrity's real life while still providing controls on the celebrity side that the traditional media model did not allow. Social media platforms allow for instant feedback from an audience; comments and likes that are left on social media posts can represent a celebrity's most engaged fan base and provide valuable feedback on celebrity image.

The ongoing attitude that a fan has about a celebrity impacts their openness to that celebrity's messaging on social media (Sandlin and Graciyanly, 2018).

The darker side of social media for a celebrity lies in the rise of cancel culture. This phenomenon is defined as a boycott of a celebrity (or company) due to their actions (Greenspan, 2020), and it can cause both short and long-term harm to celebrity power. While cancel culture has been associated with negative outcomes, some view it through the lens of shifting power back to the people and away from oppressive structures. Cancel culture can be viewed as an evolution from 20th-century blacklists and boycotts, with language roots in communities of color as well as the queer community (Clark, 2020). The act of canceling a celebrity can be viewed as an appeal to justice that provides a channel to dismantle the power held by a celebrity. Ouevrin, et. al. (2018) discovered that previous attitudes towards a celebrity impacted the success rate of an attempt to cancel that celebrity. Traditional media outlets often use social media callouts to build a story while stripping the hashtags of valuable context and nuance (Bouvier, 2020). Critics of social media driven cancellations opine that the power of social media in this area can lead to "oppression… and false consensus" (Beard, 2020). Out of all social media channels, Twitter has been found to be the most effective in terms of cancellation attempts due to the ability of users to instantly share and reshare opinions without an intermediary (Anderson-Lopez, et. al). Whether one views cancel culture as positive or negative, the power of social media's reach undeniably impacts the balance of power between celebrities and their fan bases. As this power balance has shifted away from celebrity controlled media moments and towards fan generated content, the role of the public apology has grown in importance as a way to dilute the power of social media callouts.

Apologia Rhetoric

The delivery of a public apology is a vital tool in maintaining power when that power is threatened by a public call for cancellation (Murti, 2013). Apologies as speech acts fall under the umbrella of apologia. Apologia refers to the defense of an attack on one's character by using one of four defensive postures: absolution, vindication, explanation, or justification (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Downey (2013, p. 43) illustrates apologia as a "catalog of options available to rhetors" when mounting a defense against a real or perceived attack. Classical apologia was undertaken as a way to mount a true defense against an attack with high stakes such as imprisonment or death; modern apologia does not have the same stakes, and the audience receiving an apology is broader due to mass media (Downey, 1993). The speech act of apology should not be used synonymously with apologia, as an apology requires an admission of guilt while apologia does not (Richards, 2017). An apologia, as originally defined by Aristotle, can be viewed as a defensive speech act and as a reaction to an attack; the opposite of apologia is kategoria, which is the speech act that mounts an attack and rhetorically moves the discourse forward (Ryan, 1982). Celebrity brings notoriety which makes one more vulnerable to attacks; in today's culture, the proliferation of social media and the rise of cancel culture makes those attacks more likely to come from a group rather than an individual.

Apologies have long been seen as a tool for negotiation. I am most concerned with public apologies that are delivered with a specific goal of managing a power balance. The public apology is often linked with the study of image repair, a term coined by William Benoit; it is an umbrella term that contains strategies used to restore a reputation when it has been questioned or damaged. Image repair can be applied to a variety of individuals and larger entities with Benoit paving the way for using image repair strategies in varied case studies. Benoit has applied his

pioneering work to case studies of celebrity(1997), political figures (2006), corporations (2018), and media personalities (2011). Others have taken up Benoit's work and built on it by creating new understandings of public apologies. In a study on Facebook's management of its corporate image, Hall (2020) found that the public apology was used as a tool to separate the images of Facebook as a brand and Mark Zuckerberg as a CEO/public figure. The sports and entertainment figures Tiger Woods and Chris Brown both apologized for personal failures of infidelity; Murti (2013) evaluated the importance of setting and delivery platforms for these apologies and how those elements influenced the apologies' public reception. Ellwanger's 2012 study highlighted how public apologies can provide a split from the previous self (the one that undertook a misdeed) and the theoretical future self (the one that will behave better and offer a more promising path forward).

Benoit's work created a valuable index of strategies that can be used to analyze public apologies and provide a framework for the judgment of successful apologies. The strategies Benoit identified are grouped into the following categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and mortification. Within these categories, he has developed sub-categories that clearly illustrate strategies used. An actor relying on the denial strategy can take one of two approaches: a straight denial of the offense, or an attempt to shift blame to another party. When the strategy of evading responsibility is used, the actor can plead provocation, defeasibility, an accidental action, or good intentions. Instead of straight denial or evasion, many actors choose to minimize the offensiveness of the act through bolstering, minimizing the negative outcomes of the act, attacking the accuser, transcendence (i.e., placing the act in a broader and more acceptable context), or offering compensation.

As apologies have changed over time, the content of the apology became less rigid and more dependent on the desired goals or outcome of the actor (Beaudin, 2018). Public apology goals are driven by the actor's view of how the public sees them (Richards, 2017). The desired outcome for the apology, then, is always paramount to consider when measuring the success of the apology. Success equates to a level of forgiveness from the general public. One vital component of fan forgiveness was found by Cerulo and Ruane (2014) to be the sequence of rhetorical elements. The public is primed to expect and receive elements of an apology in an expected sequence. Apologies that adhere to this order are deemed to be more successful. In addition to word choice and sequencing, the type of offense also impacts how open the public will be to forgiveness. Violations can be divided into competency-based or integrity-based, with competency-based apologies being generally deemed more successful (Lewicki, 2016).

Understanding how celebrity culture and social media communities intersect with the discourse of apology is key in examining power exchanges. Through evaluating four case studies, my goal is to highlight the choices and rhetorical moves of celebrities as they navigate the control of their public image. The discussion of these case studies can provide insight into how public figures in general manage their image and hint at where the shifting balance of power between celebrities and the public may lead in the future. It is worthwhile to consider this changing fan-celebrity dynamic in order to fully examine how both technology and changing social expectations will impact what it means to be a celebrity going forward; the discourse of public apology illustrates how these changes are occurring.

Methods

Celebrity apologies have become a standard part of the daily news cycle that is delivered via social media feeds as well as traditional media channels. Transgressions as diverse as physical assault, use of inappropriate language, public intoxication, and unwanted workplace behavior are called out by the public and/or the media, with an orchestrated apology delivered and reported on soon thereafter. Fan reactions to the apology become part of the news cycle, extending the media event beyond the initial apology statement. Because of this frequency, it can be difficult to isolate apologies that bear closer inspection and analysis. As I reviewed recent celebrity apologies, I honed in on several key criteria which would provide needed parameters for case study selection. I developed these criteria based on what was most important to me in my evaluations:

Transgression category: my interest in examining public apologies is partly driven by the trend of celebrities being 'canceled' due to past actions; often, these actions were either wholly ignored at the time in which they happened, or they were noted but considered acceptable based on social codes of the time period. In light of new social codes being ingrained in our society, celebrities now live with the constant threat of being 'canceled' (i.e., losing power) based on their previous public personas. As such, one criterion used to select case studies for this thesis was that the act for which the apology was needed stemmed from the past and had been previously considered acceptable.

Reason category: the use of social media has changed the power balance between public figures and fan bases; strong evidence of this shift lies in the power average popular culture consumers now have in calling a public figure to task. A second consideration that I used in case study selection was identifying apologies that were almost wholly driven by a public outcry on social

media. All case studies used developed as an effect of trending hashtags demanding a celebrity ouster from their public position of power.

Timing category: I was most interested in examining apologies that had been delivered in the past 24 months. All of the case studies selected developed during a stage of the COVID-19 global lockdowns taking place from March 2020-present. The increased engagement with social media that developed as a byproduct of quarantine placed additional pressure on celebrities, as fan bases and the public, in general, had more time and interest in parsing through the history of celebrity actions and attitudes. An additional factor was the emergence of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement following the death of George Floyd while under police custody in May 2020. Prior to the explosive growth of Black Lives Matter, the MeToo movement that grew out of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's rape allegations had coalesced into a major feminist rallying cry. These social movements concurrently impacted our cultural attitudes and standards at a time when the public had the ability to do research on celebrity images and past misdeeds (Bouvier, 2020).

Another aspect of timing that influenced my selection was the cycle of coverage and interaction that the apology received. The circuital nature of modern public apologies leads to an ongoing discourse that analyzes and comments on the apology; these analyses then become worthy of comment and analysis which continues to stretch out the news cycle of the initial discourse event. One of my selection criteria was identifying apologies that seemed to have completed that cycle so that the full breadth and depth of celebrity to public interactions could be included in the case study.

Based on the above criteria, I initially identified 30 apologies that could be considered for further evaluation and inclusion (see Appendix D). These apologies were coded based on

delivery date and transgression category. From there, apologies were examined to determine the impetus for the initial delivery. I then selected four apologies to use in the case study. All four were delivered in response to social media hashtags that gained steam on Twitter, and they all completed a full cycle of public commentary allowing for a complete evaluation. While case studies are common in examining apologies, I chose to focus on cases that grew out of public outcry because I feel that these most closely align with my goal of examining shifting power balances.

When examining these case studies, the main research questions driving my work were:

What level of power did this celebrity have prior to their apology?

In what ways was the public able to put the celebrities' public face under scrutiny?

Was the celebrity's power as a public figure negatively impacted after their apology?

How did the celebrity's delivery of their apology- including word choice, sequencing, use of visuals, and fan interactions- affect their public reception?

In order to fully answer these questions, I drew primarily on Benoit's image repair theory to provide structure to my analysis. I selected this theory to draw from because of the strong connection between image repair and the need for celebrities to maintain power. Benoit's theory provides the language, context, and analysis structure to examine the ways in which companies and public figures manage persuasive attacks on their image or face. Though this work sits under the umbrella of crisis communication, it is specific to public image and as such connects most directly to my purpose of addressing the role of public apologies in negotiations of power. I used

Benoit's categories of image repair strategies to analyze these cases: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. These strategies will be discussed in detail during each case study analysis.

Another important concept underpinning my analysis was Ruane's work on sequencing in apologies. I drew from Ruane's studies of sequencing as a way to compare and analyze how the order of apology elements impacted the reception of celebrity apologies by the public. Understanding how sequence may affect the discourse exchange of public apologies can provide insight into accepted scripts of apology speech acts. Cerulo and Ruane (2014) studied a corpus of public apologies delivered by sports and entertainment figures to determine if sequencing of common apology elements primed audiences to be more receptive towards their messaging. They found five common sequences: victim-driven, offender-driven, action-ownership, context-driven, and double casting. My case studies will be examined to determine which of these sequences is employed and to evaluate how that sequencing affected the reception of the actor's message.

Lastly, the discourse between fan and celebrity was examined, with special focus on the visuals used in conjunction with apologies as well as the amount of interaction provided via social media channel control mechanisms. While long-term impacts on a celebrity's public face are difficult to accurately measure, the short-term ramifications of apologies were taken into consideration. Research into traditional media reporting and analysis of apologies, along with updates on career success, helped to provide a picture of the post-apology outcomes for each celebrity studied.

Justin Timberlake Case Study

In a prime example of the public turning a critical eye on a previously adored celebrity, Justin Timberlake endured scrutiny of previous behavior and was forced to issue an apology for misogynistic behavior that occurred during the height of his early fame. Timberlake's attempt to quell the rising tide of negative online chatter mostly failed due to his lack of specificity and attempts to distance himself from his previous persona. While Timberlake is certainly still a household name, his rhetorical efforts did not significantly strengthen his position with his fan base and the overall entertainment buying public.

Background

Justin Timberlake's 2021 apology came after many demands from the public for him to answer charges that he acted in misogynistic ways towards Janet Jackson and Britney Spears. These alleged actions took place in the early 2000s; they came to light again in 2021 following a documentary about the media's mistreatment of Ms. Spears. Timberlake's initial offenses were not noted in any prominent way during the early 2000s. From a cultural standpoint, the confluence of mainstream feminism and social media's ability to identify and amplify a social issue had not yet taken place. Timberlake's words and actions were seen as a benign approach to the necessary evil of pop-star self-promotion.

His specific offenses related to Janet Jackson were as follows: during a joint performance at the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show, Timberlake ripped the fabric of Jackson's bodice to reveal her breast, covered only by a nipple shield. As the highest-rated annual television event in the US, this halftime controversy drew an immediate outcry from those who felt the content was indecent. While Jackson was forced to issue an immediate and lengthy apology, Timberlake's initial public statement was given to the syndicated show Access Hollywood; Timberlake stated, "We love giving you all something to talk about" (Susman, 2004). Timberlake later followed up

with a more direct apology that was still much briefer and less scrutinized than Jackson's (Renfro). In the years that followed the incident, Jackson and Timberlake's careers took different paths, with Timberlake winning multiple Grammys the week after the incident and even returning to the Super Bowl halftime stage as the featured performer in 2018. Jackson, while continuing to occupy a key place in pop music, never released another album that performed as well as her previous ones; she was never invited to partake in any future Super Bowl performances.

The outcry surrounding Spears and Timberlake related to their previous romantic relationship which took place between 1999 and 2002. After their breakup, Timberlake continued to dominate the pop culture scene, buoyed by the success of his video "Cry Me a River"; the video appeared to reenact his discovery of infidelity between him and a Spears lookalike. This turned public opinion against Spears, who was painted as disloyal at best and immoral at worst. The following two decades saw Spears publicly struggle with mental health issues while Timberlake continued to thrive in both music and films. In February 2021, the documentary 'Framing Britney Spears' took a critical lens to this history and caused many to see Timberlake's inaction in defending both Jackson and Spears as evidence of calculating misogyny (Metz, 2021).

In February 2021, several Twitter hashtags developed to demand Timberlake's cancellation: #JanetJacksonAppreciationDay and #WeAreSorryBritney. While neither explicitly called out Timberlake's behavior, both hashtags often accompanied messages that highlighted his failure to take accountability for his actions with women. Many social media participants also noted the double standard of Timberlake's treatment by the media versus the women who were involved in these controversies and whose careers suffered post-scandal. A typical tweet of this

time used both the pro-Britney hashtag as well as an anti-Timberlake one:

> @faustguerra Feb 7, 2021Just a reminder that Justin **Timberlake** made his career based
> on destroy (sic) the public image of 2 cultural icons without even apologizing for it. And
> still there's (sic) people who support his garbage #JustinTimberlakeIsOverParty
>
> **#WeAreSorryBritney**

These tweets were quickly picked up by mainstream media, increasing the noise around the calls to cancel Timberlake. The Spears documentary aired on February 5, 2021. As the organic social media noise rose and was amplified by mainstream media coverage, the cries for a response from Timberlake became more urgent. Marie Claire published an online essay on February 10th that detailed Timberlake's past offenses as well as highlighted the growing social media call for cancellation (Park, 2021). From an image control standpoint, the ball was in Timberlake's court to develop a rhetorical response to quell the growing frustration with his past actions and current silence.

On February 12, 2021, Timberlake delivered a general apology that incorporated many hallmarks of the form. This analysis will incorporate Benoit's categories of image repair strategies as well as Ruane's findings on sequencing to evaluate the effectiveness of the apology. Since celebrity apologies are intrinsically tied to their images and fan base perception, an analysis of power dynamics within the apology will also be used with the goal of determining whether Timberlake was able to maintain a positive balance of power to positively impact his future career prospects.

Timberlake's apology was delivered via Instagram- often the chosen medium for public apologies in the 21st century. As of February 2022, the post has 1,188,745 likes; because comments on the post were limited, the total number is not viewable and is not necessarily

indicative of open interaction between the public and Timberlake. The full text of Timberlake's apology can be viewed below, as well as in Appendix A.

I've seen the messages, tags, comments, and concerns and I want to respond. I am deeply sorry for the times in my life where my actions contributed to the problem, where I spoke out of turn, or did not speak up for what was right. I understand that I fell short in these moments and in many others and benefited from a system that condones misogyny and racism.

I specifically want to apologize to Britney Spears and Janet Jackson both individually, because I care for and respect these women and I know I failed. I also feel compelled to respond, in part, because everyone involved deserves better and most importantly, because this is a larger conversation that I wholeheartedly want to be part of and grow from. The industry is flawed. It sets men, especially white men, up for success. It's designed this way. As a man in a privileged position I have to be vocal about this. Because of my ignorance, I didn't recognize it for all that it was while it was happening in my own life but I do not want to ever benefit from others being pulled down again.

I have not been perfect in navigating all of this throughout my career. I know this apology is a first step and doesn't absolve the past. I want to take accountability for my own missteps in all of this as well as be part of a world that uplifts and supports.

I care deeply about the wellbeing of the people I love and have loved. I can do better and I will do better.

Strategies

Denial

Timberlake does not use a straight denial tactic which is unsurprising since the offensive

action took place many years prior to the apology. The strategy of denial relies on a swift reaction to perceived wrongdoing; after many years, denying that a problem existed would seem disingenuous. Another reason that denial may not have been deployed relates to the offense itself. Timberlake, in essence, is being accused of generalized misogyny towards other famous peers (Spears and Jackson). Rather than one specific, direct incident, Timberlake's offense that has been identified by a sector of the general public is one of omission; omission of the truth about his relationship with Britney Spears, omission of his own misdeeds within that relationship, and omission of support towards Janet Jackson in the wake of the Super Bowl halftime scandal.

While Timberlake does not directly deny any wrongdoing, he does employ a related strategy. Benoit outlines several sub strategies of A subcategory of direct denial is to shift blame towards another. Timberlake mentions a "system that condones misogyny and racism," later intoning that the "industry is flawed" and "sets…white men up for success." While Timberlake acknowledges his part in benefiting from such a system, his emphasis on societal structure shifts direct blame away from him alone and towards a larger, more pervasive social ill. This shift subtly aligns him with the online voices demanding accountability since many of them speak of the rampant racism and sexism in our society in general and celebrity culture in particular. In this way, Timberlake employs a sub strategy of denial which attempts to separate his image from that of a privileged and misogynistic star.

Evading Responsibility

Several of Timberlake's linguistic choices display a desire to put forth an apology while avoiding any specifics about his actions or victims. He shows regret by using the modifier "deeply" to profess his level of sorrow, and he repeats clear, active statements of apology ("I am

deeply sorry; I know I failed") throughout the text. More often, though, there is evidence of evasion through hedging. This diminishes the sincerity and value of this apology. For example, when considering how this apology is influenced by the world, the use of "I've seen the messages, tags, comments, and concerns" orients Timberlake in the middle of a swarm of activity without identifying the message or source of the activity. By diminishing the source of controversy, he avoids clearly outlining any grievances that may connect him with negative actions.

Additionally, the phrase "the times in my life where my actions contributed to the problem" is the object of his initial apology; however, because there are no clarifying nouns or modifiers provided (what type of actions? How many times? when did the actions occur?), readers of the apology are left to wonder about what misdeeds Timberlake is referencing. Taking this further, 'the problem' is never directly identified within the text of the apology. In fact, the apology even raises questions about other instances of wrongdoing that the Twitter mob may not have identified; the phrase "I fell short in these moments and in many others" uses the determiner many to provide a blanket apology that could conceivably apply to any moment that one might identify as offensive. This simply attempts to avoid or absolve responsibility for actions taken by Timberlake at any time over 20+ years.

The final instance of evasion occurs in the close of the apology. The last sentence of the apology states that "this is a larger conversation that I wholeheartedly want to be part of and grow from". The topic of the larger conversation is not mentioned, nor are concrete ways that Timberlake plans to take part in said conversation. He again distances himself from any actual wrongdoing by referencing a 'larger problem'; this ties back to his acknowledgment of systemic misogyny and racism. By including both of these references in his apology, Timberlake attempts

to both ask for forgiveness and blame society at the same time. This evasiveness weakens the apology.

Reducing Offensiveness

The lack of specifics regarding his offenses not only tie to evasion but also to an attempt at reducing offensiveness. Since this apology is not clearly tied to one or more named misdeeds, the act of apology itself seems to be an attempt at minimizing any actions or inactions of his that led to negative outcomes towards others. When discussing the "flawed industry" that he has actively participated in and contributed to, Timberlake attempts to use transcendence as a way to minimize the offense through a purported lack of understanding: "Because of my ignorance, I didn't recognize it for all that it was while it was happening". The goal of transcendence is to place the speaker's actions in a broader context, thereby providing some justification for the action. Through claiming ignorance, Timberlake can then align himself with the very people who are calling for his cancellation, saying in essence that he feels as duped as they do with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight and a different cultural perspective.

Corrective Action

The purpose of corrective action is forward-looking; in this instance, that perspective is quite valuable to Timberlake as he attempts to isolate past behavior and separate it from his current and future public self. His initial attempt at corrective action comes in the first half of his apology, as he transitions from the past and looks to the future by stating that his apology is merely part of "...a larger conversation that I wholeheartedly want to be part of and grow from." As with much of his apology, this first hint at corrective action suffers from a lack of specificity. What is that conversation- is it connected to the ongoing effort to recognize gender-based double standards in our society? Does it relate to the phenomena of cancel culture and its impact on

celebrity? The reader is left to wonder both about the conversation itself as well as how Timberlake will actively take part in it.

The back half of the apology continues in a similar vein, with promises to "...take accountability for my own missteps" while working to "...be part of a world that uplifts and supports." One cannot fault the earnestness of these words; ultimately, though, they ring hollow without any hint or outline of the ways in which these new goals could be achieved. As of this writing, no definable participation in any larger cultural efforts to uplift the entertainment industry has been publicly documented. Timberlake continues to support various charitable groups through his foundation, but these endeavors, though valuable, do not seem to have been accelerated after the delivery of this apology.

Mortification

Mortification is a central part of successful apologies because by directly asking for forgiveness, it addresses the party or parties that have been wronged. While apologia speech acts have not always included mortification by definition, it is an essential part of what the public expects when receiving a celebrity apology. Benoit's (1997) analysis of Hugh Grant's apology underscores the importance of mortification for celebrity rhetors since the offenses of celebrities tend to be less consequential for the public than those of politicians or corporations. Timberlake employs mortification in two sections of his apology, though by pairing it with the aforementioned attempts at evasion and reducing offensiveness the validity of these direct apologies is diminished. First, he uses the statement "I am deeply sorry" in the second sentence of his statement. While this clear, direct language is recommended while delivering an apology, his failure to list specific offenses dilutes the power of the word 'sorry'. He then later delivers a

second apology, this time singling out both Britney Spears and Janet Jackson, stating that he wants to apologize to both "because I care for and respect these women, and I know I failed." Timberlake's reason for apologizing to these women is twofold, then: he cares about them as people, and he has failed in some unspecified way. In order for mortification to effectively drive an apology, there must be an earnest understanding of the depths to which the actor has hurt their victim. One of the biggest issues with Timberlake's apology is that it is theoretically directed at Spears and Jackson, yet the language is clearly being selected based on his goal of saving face with the public.

Sequencing

The audience receiving Timberlake's apology is primed with expectations of how a public apology should be delivered, and part of that priming includes anticipation of the order of elements with an apology. Using Cerulo and Ruane's (2014) sequencing models, Timberlake's apology can be classified as offender-driven due to his initial focus on personal motivations and feelings about his own actions. While the specific objects of the apology are mentioned, their mention is brief and only comes after much focus on Timberlake as the offender. This places the focus on his personal feelings and reflections on his own character, rather than on the victims of his actions. The sequencing of his direct apologies places the general statement of mortification first; by placing Spears and Jackson after his umbrella apology, he fails to acknowledge the significant damage that he has been accused of doing to these women's careers and mental health.

Public Reaction

Timberlake's Instagram post drew immediate feedback from fans as well as traditional

media sources. The Chicago Tribune published a column detailing the pitfalls of celebrity apologies, noting that while Timberlake's apology should have been directed solely towards the famous women whose careers he derailed, it was instead done for his fans and as such, felt like an "empty ritual" with a "nonspecific quality" (Mertz, 2021). He was also criticized by other major media outlets for his apologies lack of specificity in wrongdoings (Gonzalez, 2021). Fan response was mixed, and a celebrity's most ardent fan base will often support them through controversies. However, more often then not the online commentary judged Timberlake's apology a failure. Many negative Instagram comments highlighted the shortcomings in his apology:

@cloudyg78

What a scripted PR apology. You are a heartless soul with no conscious (sic). A selfish, egotistical hideous man child. You don't get to apologise (sic) and attempt to free yourself from this. Sit in it for life, you represent a vile part of society and everything that's wrong with it.

@photographerkit

Too little too late. Apologizing doesn't change what happened to those people, only makes you try to absolve your own guilt and look like the good guy. Put your money where your mouth is - they lost millions in revenue and profits.

@tulsimocha

It took exactly 2 decades for you to be a real man. Hope u live with this guilt forever. That's your punishment! U will be served by karma or you are being served? I just wish to enjoy your music without hating on you but, that never happens. Every time I listen to your music, Britney's life flashes in front of my eyes. I just can't enjoy your music even

though it's good. It would have been much easier for you if u remained ignorant like

before. But u r taking blame for what you did that means u must know that u don't

deserve forgiveness as well.

Major lifestyle magazines, many targeted at young, successful females, deemed the

apology as lacking; W magazine's columnist took Timberlake to task for "...lazily [lumping] his

latest apologies into one big vague one" (Eckardt, 2021) while Esquire employed verbal irony in

their headline to emphasize a lack of accountability: "Justin Timberlake is Really Sorry That the

System Hurt Britney Spears" (Covington, 2021). This public reaction plays a large part in the

seesaw of power balance that Timberlake needs to negotiate in order to maintain his A list status.

Power Negotiation

The maintenance of power between a celebrity and their public fan base is a vital aspect

of saving face and cementing career longevity. Timberlake's clearest attempt at gaining control

of the narrative about him is his lack of detail regarding any past wrongdoings. To consider the

issue from Timberlake's perspective, if he goes into detail about definable failures in his

interactions with Spears and Jackson, he runs the risk of highlighting actions that would be

distasteful or even socially unacceptable within the expectations that 2020 era fans have of their

favorite celebrities. On the other hand, if he chose to ignore the growing public outcry against

him that was stoked by the Spears documentary, he would run the risk of being seen as out of

touch and unworthy of continued relevance within the current entertainment world. His apology,

therefore, was designed to walk the line between public recognition of shortcomings and a de-

emphasis of his direct role in the perceived downfall of two beloved entertainment figures. Being

labeled a misogynist in 2021, in the wake of the Me Too movement and increased social

awareness of limitations placed on women, would lead to a significant loss of power with his fan base, particularly since his base overlaps with both Spears' and Jackson's.

Timberlake's word choices, then, display the dance that many celebrity apologies make between conceding some wrongdoing while still keeping their public face split from the most harmful repercussions of their actions. The problem is, in our increasingly media-savvy age, celebrity fan bases have become more adept at sniffing out apologies that feel insufficient or insincere. One only needs to view the sampling of Instagram comments in the previous section to see how swiftly critics of public apologies make their feelings known. Does this negative reaction mean that Timberlake's career was irreparably damaged after this apology? This was a major news story the day of and day after the apology hit Instagram; news outlets such as NBC News, USA Today, BBC News, The Guardian, and Rolling Stone all ran stories summarizing Timberlake's apology. The majority of these articles provided some context for the apology but offered little in the way of critical insight. The rapid-fire pace of digital media in the 2020s allowed the story to slip away quickly, with minimal backlash levied at Timberlake. However, the court of public opinion, which a major star needs to stay in the upper echelons of celebrity, had deemed the apology unworthy. This tarnishes the goodwill Timberlake had spent decades building. Since early 2021, he has filmed one unreleased film and has not released any music aside from appearing on a special Presidential Inauguration song. While Timberlake's career is certainly not over, he is no longer considered one of the top musicians or actors in American pop culture in the wake of his apology.

Hilaria Baldwin Case Study

Unlike Timberlake, the case of Hilaria Baldwin does not involve a household name or any high-profile media events such as the Super Bowl. This case study shines light on a celebrity known more for her personality and lifestyle than traditional entertainment pursuits such as acting or singing. Baldwin's mea culpa was driven by online accusations that stemmed from a growing concern over cultural appropriation. She employed both forms of denial as well as reducing offensiveness; Baldwin did not strongly show mortification, and her apology did not provide enough rhetorical force to positively impact her level of power as a public figure.

Background

Hilaria Baldwin, the wife of well-known actor Alec Baldwin, has a strong presence on social media. She uses her channels to document her life as a mother and yoga instructor and has also repeatedly engaged in posts pointing to their multicultural household and her Spanish heritage. She has regularly guest-hosted and appeared on shows such as *Extra*, the *Today* show, and *Good Morning America*. In 2021, internet sleuths discovered that, despite her documented claims of Hispanic ethnicity and of being born and raised in Spain, Baldwin's real name is Hillary, and she grew up in Boston. Charges of cultural appropriation soon followed, with many critics pointing to Baldwin's exaggerated Spanish accent and consistent references to Spanish foods, music, and language on her Instagram feed (Renfro, 2020). In making the case for why cultural appropriation matters, Rina Arya (2021, p. 4) reminds readers that, "Unpacking cultural appropriation involves thinking about ethical questions concerning ownership and justice and political questions concerning identity and marginalization". Cultural appropriation is an issue that, much like the acknowledgements of sexism and racism in recent years, is being recognized more frequently and called out vociferously on various social media platforms.

The initial public charge against Baldwin was delivered by Twitter user @lenibriscoe, who tweeted on 12/21/20, "You have to admire Hilaria Baldwin's commitment to her decade-long grift where she impersonates a Spanish person." This quickly caught fire, with former high school classmates and even extended family of Baldwin's chiming in to agree that she did not have a Hispanic heritage or any significant connection to Spain outside of extended family vacations. Press outlets began to pick up the Twitter thread and coverage of the story grew. Baldwin initially recorded several Instagram story videos that addressed questions about her heritage; however, they did not include any official apology. Her justifications (her family spent lots of time in Spain and she never purposefully misrepresented her heritage or country of origin) did not quell the online chatter. By early February 2021, six weeks after the initial Twitter controversy, Baldwin issued an official public apology.

Baldwin's apology was delivered on Instagram as the caption of an image: Hilaria and Alec smiling, surrounded by their six children. The choice of using a picture instead of using the text as a stand-alone apology highlights Baldwin's family ties and reminds the audience that she is a mother. Motherhood is often connected with caring, nurturing qualities which Baldwin benefits from in her public image. The text of the apology can be found below; the full image from Instagram can be found in Appendix B.

> "I've spent the last month listening, reflecting, and asking myself how I can learn and grow. My parents raised my brother and me with two cultures, American and Spanish, and I feel a true sense of belonging to both. The way I've spoken about myself and my deep connection to two cultures could have been better explained - I should have been more clear and I'm sorry. I'm proud of the way I was raised, and we're raising our children to share the same love and respect for both. Being vulnerable and pushing

ourselves to learn and grow is what we've built our community on, and I hope to get back to the supportive and kind environment we've built together."

Strategies

Evading Responsibility

While Baldwin does not utilize denial in her apology, she does lean on evading responsibility as a strategy. Late in her apology, Baldwin notes that she is "proud of the way that I was raised" which connects to her earlier statement that her parents "raised my brother and me with two cultures." Rather than centering her apology around the charge of cultural appropriation, Baldwin shifts at least partial blame to her childhood and the environment in which she was raised. Aligning herself with both American and Spanish cultural roots allows Baldwin to justify her repeated use of Spanish signifiers in her public persona.

Reducing Offensiveness

This strategy can be seen in Baldwin's apology in her use of language and in her visual presentation via Instagram. The image of a husband and wife, splayed happily on the floor with their five young children, deemphasizes the negative connotations of cultural appropriation and centers Baldwin as a domestic goddess mother figure who places her family first. This acts as a visual form of transcendence where the audience is asked to allow Baldwin to move beyond the charge at hand and towards a more important and appealing role as wife and mother. Matching that visual are her references to family; first, to her birth family and their own approach to parenting, and later to her family with Alec Baldwin; one in which they are "raising our children to share the same love and respect [for both cultures]."

Bolstering is also seen in the apology when Baldwin references both herself as an individual and as a community leader of online spaces dedicated to growth. Benoit (1997)

identified bolstering as an approach to reduce offensiveness by creating or reminding the audience of positive attributes that the actor possessed. Baldwin begins by focusing on her own role to open the apology: "I've spent the last month listening, reflecting, and asking myself how I can learn and grow." Since this apology was delivered roughly 5 weeks after the initial online furor began, one can assume she is listening to and reflecting on the voices that challenged her alignment with Hispanic culture as offensive. Opening with a description of herself as someone who is actively seeking to learn and change bolsters her reputation without veering into any specific plans for corrective action. Baldwin closes her apology with additional bolstering: "Being vulnerable and pushing ourselves to learn and grow is what we've built our community on, and I hope to get back to the supportive and kind environment we've built together." This, coupled with the visual component, works to reduce offensiveness and save face by evoking a warm and fuzzy idea of supportive communities with her as the leader.

Mortification

Baldwin does not directly apologize for the charges of cultural appropriation; her reference to regret comes in the middle of her apology: "The way I've spoken about myself and my deep connection to two cultures could have been better explained- I should have been more clear and I'm sorry". The use of modal verb phrases 'could have been' and 'should have been' indicate the idea of a missed opportunity in the past; this softens the apology by moving away from direct, active responsibility. There are no mentions of how her actions may have affected those with Hispanic backgrounds who may have felt that their culture was used to exoticize Baldwin's public persona or differentiate her from other budding lifestyle gurus looking to build careers off of their image and family life.

After her brief statement of regret, Baldwin immediately moves towards a statement of

justification, noting that she is "proud of the way I was raised". She then changes her pronoun usage from 'I' to 'we': "...we're raising our children to share the same love and respect for both [cultures]". The use of 'we' reminds the reader that she is speaking as part of a family; this shift connects with the happy family photo that Baldwin chose to accompany her apology post on Instagram. She then shifts the use of 'we' again by orienting it towards a greater community, one that she infers includes the very readers of her apology: "Being vulnerable and pushing ourselves to learn and grow is what we've built our community on, and I hope to get back to the supportive and kind environment we've built together." Here, Baldwin attempts to both remind the reader that she has taken the lead in creating a kind, like-minded space on the internet which has lofty goals that connect with the qualities one would wish a changed person to have- note the use of 'supportive' and 'kind' as modifiers of the environment that she positions herself to have led. By ending on the phrase 'we've built together', Baldwin makes the reader a co-conspirator in the very apology they are receiving. Using the plural form of a personal pronoun automatically creates a connection and in this case, it signifies Baldwin's move away from personal responsibility and change; she uses the form of apology to highlight a desired trait (communal growth) and implies that the reader is on the journey with her and her family.

Sequencing

Baldwin's apology is offender-driven; the placement of herself in the start of her apology sequence focuses on her own qualities and experience as the offender. This lines up with the picture she is attempting to paint of herself as thoughtful and caring- the opposite of one who would purposefully use cultural appropriation to raise her own profile. Baldwin misses the

opportunity to focus on communities of color who may have been personally offended by her words and actions. Nowhere in the apology is a victim (individual or group) mentioned. Context is also heavily featured in Baldwin's apology. The details regarding her family and their background are an attempt at using context to diminish the harmful effects of taking on the persona of a community to which she does not belong.

Public Reaction

Since Baldwin chose to deactivate comments on her apology post, and also limit comments on posts that were sequentially near the apology, there is no direct measurement of the immediate reaction from her specific fan base of followers. Her post received 106,000+ likes, which is nearly double the average she received from posts several weeks prior. An online video from the entertainment show 'ET' details the controversy and apology; this video has 67 comments, with one deemed positive and 66 deemed negative ("Hilaria Baldwin Returns"). Online articles connecting Baldwin to cultural appropriation noted that Baldwin's obtuse attitude towards the controversy was troubling: "Baldwin failed to acknowledge that she allowed the media to present her as an ethnically Hispanic woman, of which she profited off of in terms of being a socialite and gaining internet clout"; the lack of acknowledgement also denied the very real issue of inequality at the heart of the debate:

> While there is nothing inherently wrong with appreciating cultures, it becomes a problem when people of the same ethnic background being appreciated are discriminated against in the same breath. All the while, people like Baldwin who present a fabricated image of such cultures reach success abusing a foreign persona (Martinez, 2021)

Hispanic Americans, and other often marginalized persons who deal with judgment for the very

same otherness that Baldwin falsely emphasized, were surely not satisfied that her apology focused on a caring community and hollow justifications for her multicultural personae. Privilege is at the heart of this issue; Baldwin is accused in part of "...code switching to exaggerate and benefit from a minority culture" (Webb, 2021).

Power Negotiation

As the wife of a well-known actor (who is also no stranger to both political and personal controversies) and a minor celebrity in the world of lifestyle brands, Baldwin's need for power within the celebrity/fan sphere may not seem as great as an A list star such as Timberlake. However, because Baldwin relies so much on social media fan interaction to build her lifestyle brand, the power that comes from generating a positive face online is essential to her continued relevance in the entertainment and influencer world. Baldwin took over a month to formally reply to the cultural appropriation controversy. At that time, the online conversation around her identity had somewhat diminished which allowed her apology to be received with potentially cooler heads (or if nothing else, by an internet public who may have moved on to another controversy). When she did choose to speak out, she did so on a platform that prioritizes visuals and also allows for strong controls over continued conversations. Instagram allows accounts to limit or turn off comments on posts and turning them off is exactly what Baldwin did with this particular post. This gave her message primacy and blocked any immediate feedback within the post itself; given that Baldwin did not have a strong existing fan base to fortify her reputation during this time, turning off comments was the best path for her to combat immediate negative feedback on her apology.

The continued focus on community that Baldwin used in her language choice also aligns with the negotiation of power since the return to her status as an Instagram lifestyle influencer is

her ultimate goal. Because of this goal, she does well to continually shift her message towards the value of community and her essential role in both creating and shepherding a positive community of online voices. On the critical side, Baldwin's lack of specifics in her apology leads to the perception that she does not 'get it;' many comments on the ET YouTube video emphasized this fact, noting that Baldwin does not seem to realize that misleading the public about her heritage feels to some like she was using Hispanic culture to get ahead. Without addressing this truly relevant issue within her apology, Baldwin missed an opportunity to create new fans and connections within multiple cultural communities.

Jimmy Fallon/Jimmy Kimmel Case Studies

The concurrent social media callouts of Jimmy Fallon and Kimmel provide a unique opportunity to contrast public figures who have very similar roles in popular culture. While Fallon chooses to employ a direct apology seemingly devoid of any underlying motives, Kimmel uses his public apology as a way to address wrongdoing while attempting to lambaste those who oppose him on the political spectrum.

Background

Both Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel are highly visible celebrities with identical platforms: late-night talk shows on a major American network. In addition, they have both been working comedians for decades; Kimmel got his start on sketch comedy shows that were popular on the cable network *Comedy Central* while Fallon began on the venerable NBC hit *Saturday Night Live*. While working in sketch comedy, both men used 'blackface' as part of nationally televised comedy sketches. The practice of blackface in entertainment dates to the 1830s when white entertainers first began darkening their skin and using exaggerated makeup and postures to appear black. This practice, which was extremely popular up until the 1930s and in some cases beyond, reinforced stereotypes "of black men and women as ignorant, hypersexual, superstitious, lazy people who were prone to thievery and cowardice" (Holland, 2019). While blackface as a wide entertainment practice was not socially accepted post early 20th century, comedians were still using dark makeup to act as or imitate black people as recently as 5-10 years ago. Fallon and Kimmel both conducted impressions of black entertainers (Chris Rock and Karl Malone, respectively) on nationally broadcast television shows.

These comedy sketches did not attract negative notice or backlash at the time they took place; Fallon's Chris Rock impression originally aired in 2000 (Cordero, 2020) on an episode of

Saturday Night Live and left nary a ripple on the collective pop-culture consciousness. Similarly, Kimmel performed a recurring impersonation of NBA legend Karl Malone from the late 1990s until 2000 on his Comedy Central program "The Man Show". Again, this was not given negative media or public attention when the episodes aired. Both of these blackface impersonations came back to light via Twitter during the summer of 2020. In a contentious, post-George Floyd environment, and one in which many culturally savvy individuals had an inordinate amount of time on their hands due to the COVID lockdown, videos and photos of these impressions re-surfaced and were examined in the light of 2020 morals and values. After repeated tweets were posted and eventually picked up by traditional media channels, both men delivered apologies.

Jimmy Fallon

Strategies

Mortification

Fallon's initial apology was delivered via Twitter in May of 2020, only hours after tweets demanding that he be held accountable for using blackface began trending. The full text of the apology is included below and in Appendix C:

In 2000, while on *SNL*, I made a terrible decision to do an impersonation of Chris Rock while in blackface. There is no excuse for this. I am very sorry for making this unquestionably offensive decision and thank all of you for holding me accountable.

His three-sentence tweet succinctly summarized and sought forgiveness for the offense, primarily via mortification. Fallon describes the decision as "terrible" and states "there is no

excuse for this." Fallon then goes on to deliver a direct apology for his "unquestionably offensive decision" and thanks the general public for "holding me accountable". Fallon does not attempt to reduce offensiveness; he is not evasive at all about his misdeed; he makes no attempt to bolster his image by reminding the public of his nice-guy image or long-standing relationship with Chris Rock. In fact, he makes the rare move of elevating the internet voices calling him to task by thanking them for their activism. By avoiding anything other than mortification in his approach, Fallon makes no attempt to use his apology to maintain or grow power within his industry or fan base. This succinct example of mortification contrasts with my other case studies and highlights how rare it is to see a public figure avoid attempts to reduce offensiveness through various justifications. While Timberlake and Baldwin both used context (past time periods and family cultural differences) to justify their actions, Fallon chose not to fall back on any attempts to paint his actions in a more positive light.

Corrective Action

While his formal apology does not outline any specific corrective action, Fallon used the majority of his June 2nd, 2020, *Tonight Show* broadcast to further address the controversy and to use that as a springboard toward a conversation about race in America. After speaking of his mistakes and horror over the George Floyd case during the show monologue, Fallon invited NAACP President Derrick Johnson and CNN anchor Don Lemon as guests to discuss the issue of race in America and address how white Americans could educate themselves and work towards solutions alongside black Americans. Both Lemon and Johnson praised Fallon for his approach and openness in dealing with issues of race (Andreeva, 2020). This use of his platform to amplify voices of color was seen as a proactive step towards creating real change, something that is often missing in the corrective action celebrities purport to take (Seemayer, 2020).

Sequencing

Fallon's apology follows an action-ownership sequence, wherein the offense is highlighted in the initial sequential spot. Cerulo and Ruane (2014) found this to be the most common sequence used in public apologies, and Fallon's use of this sequence is a strong positive example. This offense is clearly outlined and directly linked with Fallon himself as the sole transgressor. Structuring his apology in this way eliminates any confusion over his transgression or his role in it.

Public Reaction

Anecdotal reaction to Fallon's apology was mostly positive. Twitter users responding directly to Fallon noted that his ownership of the decision to perform in blackface was positive:

> I'm gonna say this, it wasn't cool. Even back then it wasn't cool. What is important is growth. Owning up to the mistakes, learning from them, and not just moving on but using it as a chance to teach others. We love you, but you're right. There is no excuse.

> @ Thirteen Cross 5:03 PM · May 26, 2020

Celebrities also lauded Fallon's apology, with fellow actor/comedian Jamie Foxx, who is African American, defending Fallon by noting that fans should "relax and laugh" and "leave [Fallon] alone" (Trepany, 2020). The overall tone of responses to Fallon's apology, both in social media comments as well as via mainstream media analysis, was one of forgiveness and appreciation. Fallon's willingness to own up to past mistakes without using context or scapegoating to justify his actions showed remorse to his public.

Power Negotiation

Fallon's apology was delivered in answer to a decision he made decades earlier while acting on *Saturday Night Live*. Since his stint on that show, his power within the entertainment world has grown due to his position at the helm of NBC's flagship late-night talk show. Concerns regarding Fallon's past use of blackface had surfaced previously, most notably in 2019 via a public call-out by comedian/host Nick Cannon (Jackson, 2019). At that time, Fallon chose not to respond. However, as social media callouts increased in 2020, Fallon found himself trending with the hashtag #jimmyfallonisoverparty, a common hashtag structure in calls for cancellation. This time, Fallon needed to swiftly respond due to the negative attention he was receiving online. His tweet was sent within 24 hours of the eponymous hashtag reaching trending status in an effort to quell the rising tide of anger against him. If left unchecked, Fallon would put himself as well as his network, NBC, in a difficult position because so much of his talk show persona depends on being liked and trusted. Fallon's choices in the content of his apology- strong mortification, clear ownership of misdeed, and gratitude to the public- display an understanding of the need to sublimate his own ego in order to shift power away from the public. This approach makes it easier for the public to forgive since, as Benoit (1997) notes, "…we often admire those who have the courage to accept blame for their actions" (p. 265).

Jimmy Kimmel

Like Fallon, Kimmel had been called out before for blackface, but public sentiment had not coalesced into an organized call for cancellation until 2020. Kimmel, though, did not respond as quickly as Fallon. Kimmel's lengthier apology, delivered via a press release approximately one month after calls for cancellation, is included here:

I have long been reluctant to address this, as I knew doing so would be celebrated as a victory by those who equate apologies with weakness and cheer for leaders who use prejudice to divide us. That delay was a mistake. There is nothing more important to me than your respect, and I apologize to those who were genuinely hurt or offended by the makeup I wore or the words I spoke.

On KROQ radio in the mid-90s, I did a recurring impression of the NBA player Karl Malone. In the late 90s, I continued impersonating Malone on TV. We hired makeup artists to make me look as much like Karl Malone as possible. I never considered that this might be seen as anything other than an imitation of a fellow human being, one that had no more to do with Karl's skin color than it did his bulging muscles and bald head. I've done dozens of impressions of famous people, including Snoop Dogg, Oprah, Eminem, Dick Vitale, Rosie, and many others. In each case, I thought of them as impersonations of celebrities and nothing more. Looking back, many of these sketches are embarrassing, and it is frustrating that these thoughtless moments have become a weapon used by some to diminish my criticisms of social and other injustices.

I believe that I have evolved and matured over the last twenty-plus years, and I hope that is evident to anyone who watches my show. I know that this will not be the last I hear of this and that it will be used again to try to quiet me. I love this country too much to allow that. I won't be bullied into silence by those who feign outrage to advance their oppressive and genuinely racist agendas.

My summer vacation has been planned for more than a year and includes the next two summers off as well. I will be back to work in September.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to explain and to those I've disappointed, I am

sorry.

Sincerely,

Jimmy Kimmel

Fallon's apology contrasts with Kimmel's in multiple ways. First, Fallon's reaction to the

callouts about blackface was swift and direct; he delivered a timely and sincere apology which

placed the blame squarely on his own shoulders. In contrast, Kimmel did not deliver a formal

apology until June 23rd, 2020, addressing the controversy that had first grown on Twitter the

month prior. Kimmel addressed the delay in his apology (he was on vacation from his show at

the time) as both logistical and related to politics. Unlike Fallon, Kimmel is an outspoken critic

of conservative politicians such as Donald Trump. Kimmel opened his written apology with an

explanation that he had been hesitant to publicly address his past use of blackface due to

avoiding those who "equate apologies with weakness and cheer for leaders who use prejudice to

divide us." Kimmel's longtime criticism of Fox News and conservative Republicans, in

particular Donald Trump, seems to be the focus of much of his apology. The references to

nefarious people who would enjoy his downfall (inferred as conservative media and pundits) add

an unnecessary political element to Kimmel's apology.

In addition to these content differences, Kimmel's apology also stands in contrast to

Fallon's due to the delivery medium. Unlike the vast majority of current celebrities, Kimmel

chose to avoid the social media route (despite having active Twitter and Instagram accounts) by

delivering his apology via press release to traditional media outlets. This matches Kimmel's

seeming desire to gain an upper hand against his conservative critics; without a social media

posting, there is no clear pathway for the public to directly address Kimmel's statements via comments, likes, etc. This choice also aligns Kimmel's apology with legitimate news reporting; this reflects his desire to be an active voice in political discussions.

Strategies

Reducing Offensiveness

Kimmel's apology makes several attempts to reduce the offensiveness of his act. There are two references to outside forces that Kimmel perceives are conspiring against him; in addition to referencing "leaders who use prejudice to divide us", he also takes a near defiant tone late in the apology when stating that "[his past use of blackface] will be used again to try and quiet me." This is a form of evasion because Kimmel is attempting to shift the reader's focus away from his own actions and towards those of political enemies who he believes pounced on some decades-old comedy clips to destroy the reputation of a conservative critic with a large platform. Kimmel uses the sub-strategy of attacking his accuser in his first attempt to reduce the offensiveness of his past comedy skits.

In addition to attacking the accuser, Kimmel also relies heavily on bolstering to minimize his offense. As noted earlier, Benoit identified bolstering as a tool used by actors to remind their audience of their positive qualities. The goal of bolstering is to minimize offenses by emphasizing good qualities and intentions of the actor. Kimmel notes that he has "evolved and matured over 20+ years" and reminds "anyone who watches my show" that they have had a chance to view this change. While specific changes in his character are not outlined, one assumes that he is referencing the evolution of his political outlook. During his time on *The Man Show*, Kimmel often used lewd sexual humor and appeared to be apolitical in his approach to

entertainment. In contrast, his late-night show has often veered into politics in recent years, particularly during the monologue segment. This change is highlighted by Kimmel to create distance between his former self, the one responsible for offensive blackface skits, and his current self.

Similarly, transcendence is used to provide the context of the time period in which his original comedy skits occurred. Kimmel emphasizes the time period (the mid-90s) in which the skits took place, and goes further to place his imitation of Karl Malone as one of many: " I've done dozens of impressions of famous people, including Snoop Dogg, Oprah, Eminem, Dick Vitale, Rosie, and many others." It is telling that the impressions mentioned are a mix of male, female, black, white, young, and old. Placing the specific Malone impression amongst this group is an attempt to lessen the severity of the offense; it was just one of many, all deployed in a less politically correct time period. Kimmel also notes that, at the time, he "never considered that this might be seen as anything other than an imitation of a fellow human being, one that had no more to do with Karl's skin color than it did his bulging muscles and bald head."

Mortification

There are two direct expressions of regret within Kimmel's apology; once as his apology opens and again in the closing sentence. Both instances of mortification offer clear, direct statements of remorse; however, there are several word choices that bear closer inspection. In his initial expression of regret, Kimmel offers mortification to those who were "genuinely hurt or offended". Using the modified genuinely creates a condition for recipients of his apology and appears to address the political enemies that he references to open the apology statement. By adding this condition, Kimmel excludes these enemies and harkens back to his strategy of

reducing the offensiveness of his own action. This lessens the broad appeal of his attempt at mortification.

The second use of mortification closes out his apology; it acts as a restatement of remorse and leaves the reader with a concrete expression of regret. This comes on the heels, though, of a defiant tone just two sentences prior, in which Kimmel intones that he will not "be bullied into silence by those who feign outrage to advance their oppressive and genuinely racist agendas." Placing a mortification statement so soon after this strongly worded rant against his enemies again diminishes the tone of remorse in Kimmel's apology. Therefore, in both cases, mortification is attempted but is not an effectively deployed strategy.

Sequencing

Double Casting sequencing, described by Cerulo and Ruane (2014) as offenders painting themself as both victim and sinner, is employed by Kimmel to lead off his statement. Cerulo and Ruane found this approach to be the least-used sequence in their study of public apologies. By leading with a seeming contradiction, Kimmel immediately places the audience for his apology in a state of dissonance as they try to ascertain the source of this victimhood. Using a sequence that begins with ownership, as Fallon did, would have been a more successful sequencing strategy.

Power Negotiation

Both Fallon and Kimmel occupy unique, powerful roles within the pop culture landscape; they are two of three late-night talk show hosts on major TV networks. Harkening back to the days of Johnny Carson, and later Jay Leno and David Letterman, these hosts have large, visible platforms which reach millions of households each weeknight (though not on the scale seen in

the 20th century). The monologues delivered to open each evening's show, as well as the guests they select to interview and the conversations they lead with those guests, impact the national discussion of matters both vital (political elections, race relations) and trivial (plastic surgeries, celebrity breakups). Coverage of late-night shows moves off of the small screens of television and onto the micro screens of phones, as viral clips increasingly determine the success or failure of each night's broadcast. As such, it is vital for these hosts to maintain control of their public face and establish a base of power with both fellow celebrities as well as the general viewing public.

The contrasting approach to their apologies reflects their knowledge of their own audiences and the public faces they must maintain to satisfy these audiences. While traditional TV ratings fluctuate closely between the three major network shows, Jimmy Fallon's social media presence dwarfs Kimmel's, with 20 million Instagram followers to Kimmel's 2.9 million. While his show does not have the critical acclaim or political edge of Kimmel, he enjoys a stronger viral video presence and broad-based popularity that buoys his show year to year. Within this context, Fallon's approach to his apology for participating in a blackface skit is unsurprising. His goal is to maintain his position of power and public face of affability and political neutrality. Fallon's employment of mortification, delivered with sincerity and brevity, was the best one to take to achieve his power negotiation goals. Attempting to reduce the offensiveness or shift blame for his actions would run counter to what his audience needs from him: a straight acknowledgment of wrongdoing that is in keeping with his public face.

Kimmel is placed in a more difficult position in terms of the approach needed to quell any negative coverage aimed at diminishing his power. Unlike Fallon's, Kimmel's show is more a mix of politics and entertainment, with the host's own liberal-leaning views displayed

frequently during his opening monologues. Kimmel has built a distinctive niche within the celebrity sphere as a politically active yet affable TV host, one who can move from delivering incisive observations about the failures of our political leaders to silly jokes lampooning the latest popular streaming hit. His approach, then, needs to satisfy his fellow liberal thinkers who look to Kimmel as a leader in their anti-conservative beliefs. He needs to maintain his public face without lumping himself in with others who have committed racially insensitive wrongdoings with impunity. In terms of his power negotiation, Kimmel spends most of his apology attempting to lessen the severity of his actions while differentiating himself from those who see no problem with race-based humor. Kimmel's approach did not fully satisfy cultural critics; the Los Angeles Times noted that it was "tough to separate the regret from the subtext" (McNamara, 2020) when analyzing Kimmel's apology.

Discussion

It is important to isolate the study of public apologies to those delivered within the 2020's because of the social and technological factors that have influenced communication in recent years. The value of the public apology has already been established in terms of image repair, primarily via the work of Benoit. However, the study of these apologies needs to evolve and take into consideration the factors of changing social expectations along with increased power and savvy from the public at large, and particularly rabid fan bases in entertainment/the arts. As these factors impact the context in which celebrities operate, the way that public apologies are delivered is also affected.

These four case studies draw from celebrities that occupied different levels of fame and power within 21st century popular culture. It is clear that a household name like Justin Timberlake would occupy a more powerful stature than Hilaria Baldwin who was mostly known for her marriage and her healthy lifestyle online posts. While late night talk shows no longer hold the rarified status that they did in decades past, Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel both hold high visibility, and therefore a measure of power, within the mainstream entertainment information cycle. Someone like Timberlake or Fallon has more to lose in terms of career power than Baldwin. However, in all four case studies, the level of power a celebrity previously held did not significantly alter their approach or success rate in delivering apologies. Whether a celebrity is considered 'A' List (the rarified air occupied by household names such as Tom Hanks or Julia Roberts) or 'D' List (a term often applied to reality stars and others whose fame has come from fleeting online trends), they are in many ways beholden to their public for continued relevancy and success. Therefore, the public apology is a vital persuasive tool for any level of public figure to manage their brand and subsequent power within their sphere of influence.

The rhetorical strategies used in delivering apologies makes a significant difference in how these apologies are received by the public, and therefore how they assist the celebrity in their maintenance of power. These case studies illustrate the frequent use of strategies to shift blame or reduce offensiveness; this makes sense considering a celebrities image is inexorably tied to their self (Marshall, 2014) versus their work. One would expect more attempts at reducing the offensiveness of an act if that act is viewed as a direct extension of a person's values. However, the most successful apology, that of Jimmy Fallon, steered clear of any attempts to justify or make excuses for behavior. Using Fallon's strategies of mortification coupled with

clear, immediate corrective action would provide celebrities with the strongest path towards forgiveness and a growth in power.

Another factor that was shown to be important in these case studies is timing. The importance of timing in rhetorical situations can be traced back to the ancient concept of kairos, which highlights the urgency of selecting the right moment of opportunity to deliver a message (Kinneavy, 2000). Timing occupies an important role in power negotiations, both on the side of the public as well as the celebrity. From the public's standpoint, the timing of social media callouts seems to depend on a host of factors, including the original source of the callout as well as the social context in which the callout is being deployed. For example, in all four case studies, rumblings on social media had popped up previously alluding to the celebrity's misdeeds. It was not until 2020 when the confluence of forced quarantine isolation coupled with an increase in social justice awareness, that each of these celebrities experienced the full power of a call for cancellation from the public. On the celebrity side, responding swiftly is seen as important to address calls for cancellation from the public. Jimmy Fallon, who had the most success with his apology, responded within a day after posts about his use of blackface began to spread exponentially. In the case of Baldwin and Kimmel, their slowness to respond added fuel to the internet fire and created more distrust among the public.

However, in rushing to develop a public apology, celebrities should not be hasty in the development of their content as this can also lead to issues. Justin Timberlake reacted relatively quickly to the media maelstrom surrounding his image following the release of the Britney Spears documentary. That timing was a plus, as it showed he was sensitive to his fan base and their calls for a mea culpa. On the negative side, his use of evasive language sparked distrust and his apology was ultimately deemed unsuccessful by many in the media. Providing a clear, direct

statement of misdeeds and fully accepting responsibility for these actions, as Fallon did, leads to more control over the power balance between actor and audience. Content that displays true mortification both in language choice as well as sequencing of message is necessary to appease shrewd fan bases to whom dissecting apologies has become the de rigueur use of online time.

As delivery methods move to platforms within the social media ecosystem, additional controls over messaging open up as well. As shown in Appendix B, the use of images to accompany a text apology provides more opportunity for a celebrity to emphasize the positive parts of their public face while delivering their apology. In addition to images, the use of feedback controls (limiting or closing down likes and comments) allows for some semblance of the more one-sided conversation that existed in these exchanges in the 20th century. By limiting or eliminating the ability of the public to directly comment on apology posts, a celebrity may feel that they are able to maintain more power within the discourse exchange. However, this can also be perceived as disingenuous since it goes against the spirit of the celebrity-fan relationship that social media engenders. Consideration needs to be given over how a message will visually appear as well as what level of interaction a celebrity is willing to open themselves up to online.

One factor that will continue to impact the delivery of public apologies is the continued growth of social justice movements worldwide. Benoit (1997) noted in his analysis of Hugh Grant's apology that the public did not have a strong interest in prolonging punishment for Grant's sexual misdeed. With the rise of social justice movements, this may no longer be the case. By elevating the examples of Timberlake, Baldwin, Fallon, and Kimmel, social justice warriors were able to shine a light on the perils of misogynistic and racially/culturally insensitive behaviors. As technology continues to allow for amplification of issues, the public's willingness to quickly accept boilerplate apologies from public figures may be waning. This lengthening of

the conversation surrounding celebrity apologies may affect a public figure's ability to control power going forward.

Power can be institutionally defined but can also be negotiated (Johnstone, 2011, p. 145). Unlike institutional power that does not change (for example, as in royalty), celebrity power contains a constant level of negotiation to either maintain or grow the influence it wields. Because public figures are so reliant on their fan bases to keep their power, taking a stance of humility can act as a necessary part of negotiating back their power in the celebrity-fan relationship. Social justice movements will continue to dictate what behaviors and speech are considered unacceptable from those in the public eye, and technology tools will continue to allow past behaviors to be highlighted and used in calls for cancellation. With this relatively new tug of war between public figures and their public, apology discourse should continue to be studied to better understand how these negotiations influence public image studies as well as social conventions. Possible future avenues of study include the use of specific platforms within the social media ecosystem to deliver apologies, how specific fanbases (sports vs music, for example) react to apologies, and the long-term effects of cancellation on celebrity careers.

Justin Timberlake apology posted February 12, 2021; currently 1.18 million likes

I've seen the messages, tags, comments, and concerns and I want to respond. I am deeply sorry for the times in my life where my actions contributed to the problem, where I spoke out of turn, or did not speak up for what was right. I understand that I fell short in these moments and in many others and benefited from a system that condones misogyny and racism.

I specifically want to apologize to Britney Spears and Janet Jackson both individually, because I care for and respect these women and I know I failed.

I also feel compelled to respond, in part, because everyone involved deserves better and most importantly, because this is a larger conversation that I wholeheartedly want to be part of and grow from...

The industry is flawed. It sets men, especially white men, up for success. It's designed this way. As a man in a privileged position I have to be vocal about this. Because of my ignorance, I didn't recognize it for all that it was while it was happening in my own life but I do not want to ever benefit from others being pulled down again.

I have not been perfect in navigating all of this throughout my career. I know this apology is a first step and doesn't absolve the past. I want to take accountability for my own missteps in all of this as well as be part of a world that uplifts and supports.

I care deeply about the wellbeing of the people I love and have loved. I can do better and I will do better.

Appendix B

Hilaria Baldwin apology posted February 5, 2021; 107,237 likes

hilariabaldwin ✓ · Follow

hilariabaldwin ✓ I've spent the last month listening, reflecting, and asking myself how I can learn and grow. My parents raised my brother and me with two cultures, American and Spanish, and I feel a true sense of belonging to both. The way I've spoken about myself and my deep connection to two cultures could have been better explained – I should have been more clear and I'm sorry. I'm proud of the way I was raised, and we're raising our children to share the same love and respect for both. Being vulnerable and pushing ourselves to learn and grow is what we've built our community on, and I hope to get back to the supportive and kind environment we've built together.

71w

Appendix C

Jimmy Fallon apology

Fallon.eth ✔
@jimmyfallon

In 2000, while on SNL, I made a terrible decision to do an impersonation of Chris Rock while in blackface. There is no excuse for this.

I am very sorry for making this unquestionably offensive decision and thank all of you for holding me accountable.

4:58 PM · May 26, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

3,487 Retweets   **4,389** Quote Tweets   **76.9K** Likes

Categories of social issue: Sexual in nature, Workplace/Harassment, Racist Behavior/Language, Cultural Appropriation, Public Health

Public Figure	Category	Public Figure	Category
Harvey Weinstein	sex, workplace	Vanesa Hudgens	public health
Louis C.K.	sex, workplace	Evangeline Lilly	public health
Kevin Spacey	sex, workplace	Bryan Adams	public health
Al Franken	Sex, workplace	Hannah Brown	race, cultural appropriation
Roseanne Barr	race	Doja Cat	race
Lady Gaga	workplace	Jimmy Fallon	race, cultural appropriation
Moby	workplace	Alia Shawkat	race, cultural appropriation
Miley Cyrus	cultural appropriation	Spike Lee	sex, workplace
Gina Rodriguez	cultural appropriation	Florence Pugh	race
Justin Bieber	race, cultural appropriation	Ellen DeGeneres	workplace
Camilla Cabello	race	Hilaria Baldwin	cultural appropriation
Terry Crews	workplace	Tyler Joseph	race
Wendy Williams	race	Morgan Wallen	race
Victoria Fuller	race	Jimmy Kimmel	race, cultural appropriation
Scheana Shay	public health	Justin Timberlake	sex, workplace

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