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Crisis communication on Instagram: celebrity apologies and the role of image repair strategies in shaping public perception

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ABSTRACT

Visual social media platforms, such as Instagram, have impacted the way public figures communicate with their audiences and manage their reputation, allowing for a two-way flow of information that provides nearly simultaneous feedback from the public. In this context, our study aims to investigate the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies employed by celebrities on Instagram and how they shape public perception. Utilizing Benoit's Image Repair Theory, the research employs netnography and qualitative content analysis to examine 15 crisis statements issued by A- and B-list celebrities between 2020 and 2023, each paired with the top 30 user comments ($N = 450$) under their posts. The results indicate that famous figures most commonly use mortification, or expressing remorse, and this strategy receives the most positive audience feedback on the platform. Conversely, audiences react negatively to denial, demonstrating the risks when celebrities evade responsibility in such situations. Finally, the study shows the importance of celebrities' sincerity, transparency, and pre-crisis reputation in influencing public sentiment on social media during a crisis.


KEYWORDS

Crisis communication; celebrities; apologies; image repair strategies; Instagram

Introduction

Social media platforms contribute to how a crisis develops (Coombs 2015; Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar 2011), making it essential for celebrities and companies to monitor closely online public perception during these situations. As public figures turn to digital spaces like Instagram to address controversies and dispute narratives about events, the strategies they employ can influence their reputation and business prospects (Civelek, Çemberci, and Eralp 2016). According to Coombs (2015), effective crisis communication is crucial to managing public scrutiny, especially in a culture that demands accountability and authenticity. Benoit's Image Repair Theory (1997) also contributed to this discussion, proposing five

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strategies that might rescue or further damage a public figure's image: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

Instagram's combination of visual storytelling and immediate feedback makes it a prime platform for managing reputation (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019; Veloso da Silva and Yiming 2023), offering celebrities and public figures a direct line to their followers without traditional media intermediaries. With over 2 billion active users globally, it provides a stage for public apologies, image repair, and narrative control – yet it also exposes these “stars” to instant, often unfiltered, audience reactions through comments. This two-way circulation and negotiation of meaning can pose challenges for celebrities; rather than resolving the situation, their responses may sometimes escalate the crisis, especially when met with harsh and immediate audience reactions, amplified by the mechanisms of cancel culture.

Taking this background, this study explores the strategies celebrities use to address crises on Instagram and how these strategies affect public perception. In this sense, the investigation addresses three key research questions: (1) What are the prevalent typologies of image repair strategies used by celebrities on Instagram? (2) How do audiences perceive these public statements? (3) How do audience responses vary depending on the nature of the response, and which strategies are most preferred by the public?

We used a combination of netnography, a method based on traditional ethnography to study online interactions and communities (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021), and qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2018) to answer these questions. Our sample includes 15 crisis response statements from A- and B-list celebrities posted on Instagram from 2020 to 2023, alongside the top 30 user comments on each post, resulting in a corpus of 450 comments. An independent research assistant double-coded the content to guarantee reliability in the coding process. In the next section, we provide the theoretical framework that guides this research, followed by the detailed methodological approach, the results, and the conclusion.

Literature review

Crisis communication and image repair theory

Crisis communication is crucial in shaping stakeholder perceptions and focuses primarily on how an entity responds to unforeseen events (Coombs 2010). Therefore, scholars have closely investigated a wide range of topics within this subject, such as the engagement of apologia in the corporate life of managers, the development of theories in the field, and the impact of the internet on crisis management (Coombs 2007, 2010; Nazione and Perreault 2019). Timothy Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as an “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” (2–3). The author emphasizes the importance of strategic communication during crises, pointing out that effective responses involve what is said but also how and when it is communicated. Thus, proper crisis communication must be timely, transparent, and tailored to the specific context.

One of the most influential theories in this field, introduced by William Benoit (1997), is Image Repair Theory (IRT), which outlines five strategies for when one's reputation is damaged: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action,

and mortification. Denial involves rejecting accusations or shifting blame, while evasion of responsibility includes justifying actions as responses or asserting a lack of control. Reduction of offensiveness strategies aims to mitigate perceived harm through bolstering, minimizing, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accusers, or compensation. Corrective action involves promises to rectify issues and prevent recurrence, and mortification entails confessing and seeking forgiveness.

Researchers have claimed each strategy to be either successful or not when restoring one's image, emphasizing the importance of preparation, analysis, transparency, and strategic planning. Early research within interpersonal communication shows that mortification and corrective action led to the most positive feedback from the one receiving an apology, while denial should be avoided (Benoit and Drew 1997). In a corporate context, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) observe the U.S. Air Force's use of IRT strategies and demonstrate that mortification is the most successful. Similarly, Arendt, LaFleche, and Limperopulos (2017) explain that denial has been widely utilized, even though not as effective at gaining the public's favor. Otherwise, corrective action is the most successful (Arendt, LaFleche, and Limperopulos 2017).

In the past decades, the popularization of the internet and social media platforms have exposed more crises, prompting further studies on apologies. In this context, research demonstrates that issuing an official statement regarding the situation, whether in a professional or personal manner, enhances participants' perceptions when compared to strategies such as deleting or ignoring complaints (Nazione and Perrault 2019). Therefore, social media presents opportunities for companies to enhance their image but also presents different challenges. Due to the faster spread of information and less control over what type of data gets out to the public, businesses in a digital age need to act faster and be consistent when facing an issue (Civelek, Çemberci, and Eralp 2016). Hence, scholars highlight the growing number of aspects to consider, such as preparedness, engagement in dialogues, selecting appropriate messages, sources, and timing, active monitoring, taking traditional media into account, using platforms strategically, and honesty (Eriksson 2018; Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar 2011). Some of these aspects are also relevant when addressing crises faced by celebrities, although they are different types of events, as specified in the following sections.

Another important detail when dealing with crisis management is understanding the brand and image behind an organization or a public figure. A strong brand can increase the success of the response strategy (Li and Wei 2016; Sarstedt 2009). Nevertheless, despite the existing research on crisis communication, many organizations still fail to apply recommended practices on social media (Greyser 2009; Roshan, Warren, and Carr 2016). For instance, companies tend to be unsuccessful in providing constant updates on crises, timely disseminating information, showing authenticity, connecting the tactic with a brand, and utilizing appropriate strategies.

Social media and celebrities

Branding strategists view social media as a prominent space that reshapes the relationship between brands and customers. However, previous research on the topic has mostly focused on marketing and sales, whereas the presence of celebrities and their increasing use of digital platforms for crisis management is still overlooked (Johns and

English 2016). Nevertheless, some studies show that social media allow celebrities to broadcast their lives and, therefore, reduce the distance between them and their audience (Jerslev and Mortensen 2018; Johns and English 2016; Valentinsson 2018), with one of the most popular being Instagram (Kowalczyk and Pounders 2016). Moreover, these public figures are now able to collaborate and endorse products, expanding their reach beyond the conventional entertainment industry, which requires utilizing various strategies (Keel and Natarajan 2012; Kietzmann et al. 2011).

The existing literature points out that Instagram can enhance a brand's management due to its high engagement rate, increased popularity (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2016), and a strong focus on visuality, allowing popular users, such as athletes, to depict their daily lives and connect with their audience without the mediation of mass media outlets (Veloso da Silva and Yiming 2023). Other than the visual aspect being important, Cuevas-Molano, Sánchez-Cid, and Gordo-Molina (2022) found positive correlations between engagement and aspects such as the day, time, and message length of the post, which influences the reach of the post.

When it comes to brand management on the platform, Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) argue that there should be a strategic planning of posts to generate a certain image. For example, while observing the Canadian Prime Minister's profile, Justin Trudeau, they notice that diverse interactions with politicians, children, and friends are posted to depict him as a youthful and open-minded individual with high support for feminist causes. Moreover, even though sharing personal life is an essence of Instagram, celebrities still need to filter out what should be posted to both save their boundaries and avoid increased hate speech from the public (Ghaffari 2023; Tse et al. 2018).

Cancel culture and apologies

The rise of social media platforms, where people can communicate with public figures, discuss issues, and openly express their opinions, has favored the development of cancel culture. The term refers to an online movement characterized by users distancing themselves from, and sometimes ostracizing, public figures or celebrities who they believe have broken social norms or committed crimes. Originally intended as a form of activism, cancel culture has evolved into a broader, often misappropriated, discourse (Clark 2020; Pearson 2021).

Janssens and Spreeuwenberg (2022) evaluate the moral implications of cancel culture, distinguishing between its use as a punitive measure, which they argue is morally reprehensible, and as a tool for redistributing attention to marginalized perspectives, which they suggest may be more justifiable. In this context, other scholars believe that those who possess powerful resources, such as PR teams, often evade consequences compared to ordinary people (Najovits 2022; Pearson 2021). There is also a worry about the possibility that personal preferences could overshadow fairness, resulting in fierce debate on trivial matters, and cancel culture might turn into intolerance toward different viewpoints (Burmah 2021; Velasco 2020). Moreover, cancel culture takes away people's entitlement to make mistakes and learn from them (Mueller 2021; Post 2022). For figures such as celebrities, whose careers are built on public perception, these challenges are even more pronounced.

Against this backdrop, celebrities are characterized by their significant influence and recognition in society, often becoming the public faces of organizations. However, this visibility

also makes them vulnerable to being “canceled” (Ng 2022). In recent years, cancel culture has exposed online the behaviors of such figures, often resulting in scandals and posing risks to their reputations. Therefore, effective crisis management has become essential, leading many celebrities or their PR teams to issue public statements seeking to reduce the consequences of their wrongdoing. However, this process is complex, as delivering an apology alone does not ensure success (Cerulo and Ruane 2014).

Apologies have been extensively studied across various contexts, with early research primarily examining the impact of issuing an apology versus not offering one at all (Zechmeister et al. 2004). In other studies, scholars recognized that simply expressing remorse does not guarantee forgiveness. For instance, Bachman and Guerrero (2006) demonstrates that, while the decision to forgive ultimately rests with the victim, the perceived sincerity of an apology is a critical factor in determining its effectiveness. Therefore, the way an apology is delivered, the socio-cultural context in which it occurs, and the authenticity it conveys can influence whether the act of apologizing leads to reconciliation or further alienation (Ebesu Hubbard et al. 2013; Shafa, Harinck, and Ellemers 2017). Beyond authenticity, factors such as timing, communication satisfaction, politeness, and the offender’s prior reputation can determine the success of an apology.

Previous research on online celebrities shows that the scenario seems to repeat some of these contextual characteristics. Choi and Mitchell (2022) analyzed YouTubers’ apology videos using image repair theory, applying a content analysis of 117 videos and a survey with 194 participants. They found that YouTubers carefully crafted their apologies with natural appearances, repeated “I’m sorry” frequently, and used the mortification strategy most often to seek forgiveness. The study also revealed that perceived sincerity was the key predictor of forgiveness, and prior connections with the YouTuber increased the likelihood of audience forgiveness.

Another similar investigation by Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018) assessed the effectiveness of YouTube apologies by public figures in repairing their image and obtaining audience forgiveness. Analyzing 32 apologies and 1,971 comments on the platform, they found that traditional image repair strategies and emotional expressions had limited impact on perceptions of sincerity and forgiveness. Instead, audience responses were largely influenced by their pre-existing opinions of the public figure, with negative reputations leading to perceptions of insincerity and reduced forgiveness.

While apologies on their own were studied very closely, there is a gap in understanding the delivery of an apology by a celebrity, especially in the times of vast social media usage and cancel culture. When met with a crisis, public figures need to make amends not with a single person, but rather a mass group of people to save their reputation. Building on this, this study examines the prevalent typologies of image repair strategies used by celebrities on Instagram, how audiences perceive these public statements in the context of self-branding crisis communication, and which strategies are most preferred by the public depending on the nature of the response.

Methodology

This research focuses on exploring the strategies celebrities employ online to repair their public image in response to crises and how viewers perceive them. To address this

problem, the methodological framework encompasses netnography (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021) and qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2018) of the public statements made by celebrities and the audience's comments.

Netnography is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding interactions within digital media (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021). This type of research is not only concerned with data collection from communication networks but also decodes social actions within online environments. In the context of this study, Instagram serves as a primary source for data collection because of the patterns of how users express their opinions and support or criticism within the platform. By using this method, the research tries to uncover the emergent themes, sentiments, and patterns within the online discourse. Simultaneously, the content of public statements made by celebrities is examined using qualitative content analysis.

Data collection and sampling strategy

Public statements selection

A systematic approach was conducted using news outlets and Google search metrics to identify celebrity apologies with significant audience engagement. When selecting statements made by public figures and, consequently, the celebrities that would be analyzed, various factors were observed to ensure the validity of the results. Firstly, crises were assessed based on their relevance, considering factors such as media coverage, social media discussions, and public discourse surrounding the events. Secondly, the list was refined based on the prominence of the celebrities involved, the social platform used for the release of the statement, and the availability of audience feedback. Selected crises were linked to the timeline of the statement and fame of celebrities, evaluating their following on social media, the success of their work, and overall visibility.

We included statements in the sample only if celebrities released them between 2020 and 2023, made them on Instagram, and allowed user comments, as further explained below. This timeframe was chosen because the period witnessed cancel culture emerging as a prominent factor, motivating audiences to demand apologies from celebrities.

Furthermore, all chosen public figures had a minimum of 2 million followers on Instagram and yielded at least 7 million search results on Google when their names were looked up during the data collection period in January 2024. Another aspect was the platform used to issue a public statement. Instagram was selected due to its capacity for direct communication between the audience and individuals through comments, its global popularity with approximately 2 billion monthly active users (Dixon 2024), and its frequent use by brands and celebrities (McNely 2012).

The final factor considered when finalizing the list was the availability of open feedback from the public regarding the crisis. Consequently, the statements included in the sample had to be in the form of a post with open comments. Initially, 24 responses by celebrities were collected. However, as some of them had restricted the opportunity for the audience to leave comments, the number was reduced to 15 (see Table 1). The sample includes both textual and video-based responses, with 3 out of the 15 statements in video format. More information about each crisis can be consulted in Appendix B.

Table 1. List of celebrities chosen for data analysis.

No	Celebrity	Gender	Instagram account	Date of apology
1	Amy Schumer	Female	@amyschumer	15/09/2023
2	Tory Lanez	Male	@torylanez	11/08/2023
3	Jamie Foxx	Male	@iamjamiefoxx	05/08/2023
4	Lizzo	Female	@lizzobeeating	03/08/2023
5	Jason Momoa	Male	@prideofgypsies	14/05/2022
6	Misha Collins	Male	@misha	26/04/2022
7	Adele	Female	@adele	20/01/2022
8	Alec Baldwin	Male	@alecbaldwininsta	22/10/2021
9	Chrissy Teigen	Female	@chrissyteigen	14/06/2021
10	Naomi Osaka	Female	@naomiosaka	31/05/2021
11	Johnny Depp	Male	@johnnydepp	06/11/2020
12	Anne Hathaway	Female	@annehathaway	05/11/2020
13	Florence Pugh	Female	@florencepugh	26/06/2020
14	Evangelina Lilly	Female	@evangelinelillyofficial	26/03/2020
15	Snoop Dogg	Male	@snoopdogg	12/02/2020

Sentiment collection

The sentiment analysis involved the observation of comments left under the Instagram post of each public statement. To ensure a representative sample, thirty comments with the highest number of likes were selected for each public statement ($N = 450$). The criterion for such a selection was based on the assumption that comments receiving higher likes would likely reflect sentiments that resonate more widely within the audience (Kaur et al. 2019). Additionally, those comments appear at the top, becoming more visible to other users on the platform and potentially influencing broader public opinion. By focusing on the most liked comments, the analysis aims to identify prevailing sentiments that have gathered agreement and disapproval among the public.

We saved the data using both Microsoft Excel and a screen recorder. As a result, statements and comments were saved in text (caption and comments) and in image format. Files of responses were named according to the celebrity who issued an apology. Meanwhile, for audience sentiment, each comment was assigned a number based on the corresponding statement number (see Table 1), along with another number from 1 to 30 based on the number of likes, with 1 representing the most liked comment. For instance, user 1.1, user 1.2, and so forth.

Procedure

After the data collection, the material was included in a spreadsheet and later classified into three categories, whereas, within each category, findings were grouped according to their attributes (see Appendix A). To identify the nature of choosing image repair strategies (Benoit 1997) and answer RQ1, three variables were assessed. The first one is the crisis type, which is categorized into four levels based on HubSpot's Crisis Management Plan, which offers a structured approach to crisis severity. By classifying crises into different levels, ranging from the highest level of urgency (level 1) to day-to-day issues (level 4), the context behind the selection of a specific image repair strategy can be identified. Hence, this variable identifies whether certain image repair strategies are favored in responding to specific crisis levels.

The second variable, the image repair strategies, is based on Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (see *Section 2.1.1*) and is a main variable when it comes to answering RQ1. There are five main types of strategies that represent a specific approach to managing the impact of the crisis, with an additional group, "other," that adds the possibility of the sample not matching with any of the categories. By examining the prevalence typologies across different crisis types, a pattern employed by celebrities in making crisis responses was defined. Moreover, in case of more than one strategy appearing, the prevalent one was chosen based on the purpose of the celebrity statement. Lastly, the tone of the statement variable offers additional context by evaluating the emotions conveyed in the celebrity's response. This helps to understand how the emotional tone of the statement influences audience sentiment, giving a partial answer to RQ2.

Comprehensive details can be found in the codebook (see Appendix A) and are also summarized in [Table 2](#) below:

Similarly, the audience feedback was categorized based on the codebook outlined in the article by Veloso da Silva and Cuesta López (2023) and adapted for use in this study, as shown in [Table 3](#). To answer RQ2, the sentiments of comments were categorized into positive, negative, neutral, and undefined sentiments. Furthermore, the commentator's behavior was taken into consideration. These two variables helped to assess people's degree of approval or disapproval toward the celebrity's statement, as well as to analyze how different types of commentator behavior align with or diverge from other variables. A comprehensive explanation of all coding categories can be found in the codebook (see Appendix A).

By examining the relationship between variables, recurring patterns were discerned, thereby addressing RQ3 and understanding whether a specific image repair strategy results in a particular reaction.

In the second part of the study, which focuses on qualitative content analysis, the data collected during the netnography procedure was independently co-coded with the support of a research assistant, who analyzed 20% of the data, and the results were evaluated with Cohen's kappa coefficient to determine the inter-rater reliability, reaching a substantial agreement among the two coders ($=.736$). The study aims to observe potential

Table 2. Categorization of crises and public statements by involved celebrities.

Crisis type	Image repair strategies	Tone of statement
Level 1	Denial	Positive
Level 2	Evasion of Responsibility	Neutral
Level 3	Reducing the Offensiveness of the Act	Defensive
Level 4	Corrective Action	Apologetic
	Mortification	Sympathetic
	Other	Undefined

Table 3. Categorization of comments under posts with public statements.

Sentiment of comments under the statement's post	Commentator behavior
Positive	Supporter
Negative	Hater
Neutral	Analyst
Undefined	Troll
	Spammer Undefined

relationships between categories from different classifications. For instance, it investigates whether the crisis type influences the choice of an image repair strategy or if patterns emerge regarding audience attitudes toward different crisis responses.

Ethical considerations and transparency

In accordance with ethical principles, as stressed by Kozinets and Gambetti (2021), all Instagram posts selected for analysis were sourced from the public accounts of celebrities, ensuring that the content was openly accessible to the public. Likewise, comments under these posts, essential to the study's analysis, were openly available. To protect the privacy of individuals engaging in online discourse, the usernames of commentators will not be disclosed in the research findings.

Data analysis and results

The analysis categorized celebrity response statements into five image repair strategies from Benoit's theory (Benoit 1997), identifying mortification as the most frequent approach, appearing in seven instances. Such a preference toward apologizing for the actions has been noted by previous research (Benoit and Drew 1997; Holtzhausen and Roberts 2009). Celebrities also utilize denial and reducing the offensiveness of the act, each in three cases, and evasion of responsibility in two cases. Despite findings that support the success of corrective action as a crisis communication strategy, none of the celebrities opted to choose this tactic, indicating a consistent reliance on apology strategies that don't present a direct counter-measurement during crises. Similarly, no other types of Benoit's image repair strategies were identified. Moreover, mortification was prevalent in Level 3 and 4 crises, which was observed in four and three instances, while denial was the preferred strategy in Level 1 crises, where the accusations were more severe. None of the public figures with serious allegations decided to use mortification, highlighting the pattern that celebrities who face harsh crises decide to soothe the situation with tactics other than admitting the mistakes (Table 4).

In several cases, celebrities who apply the mortification strategy employ a combination of strategies to address their crises. For instance, Misha Collins, known for his role in "Supernatural," combined mortification with an evasion of responsibility strategy by explaining that his statement, which led fans to believe he was bisexual, was an attempt to avoid a deeper discussion about his sexuality. The actor pointed to the fact that what led to the

Table 4. Examples of celebrities utilizing image repair strategies.

Strategy	Example
Mortification	Anne Hathaway: "I owe you all an apology for the pain caused. I am sorry."
Reducing the offensiveness of the act	Amy Schumer: "There are deadly storms sweeping our world and a man was convicted of rape. But what got your goat was me saying that Nicole Kidman's pose was not human-like. Breathe, y'all."
Evasion of responsibility	Alec Baldwin: "I'm fully cooperating with the police investigation to address how this tragedy occurred."
Denial	Tory Lanez: "In no way, shape or form was I apologizing for the charges I'm being wrongfully convicted of. I remain on the stance that I refuse to apologize for something that I did not do."

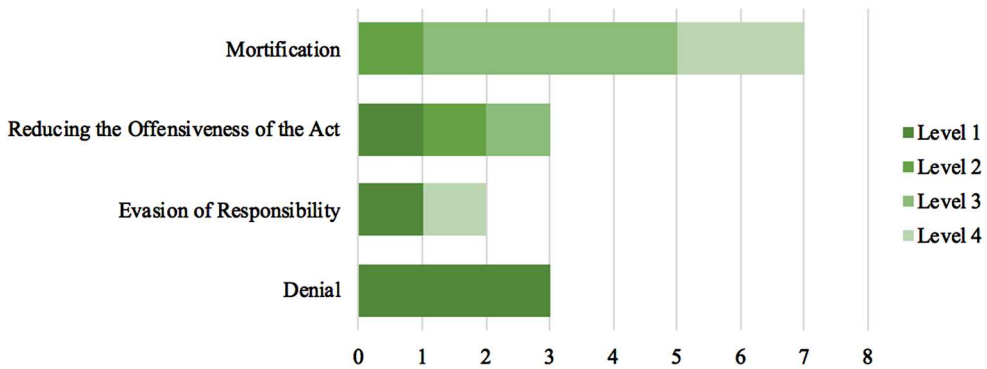


Figure 1. Categorization of image repair strategies in relation to the level of crisis (Source: Authors' own production).

crisis was a response to the acts of others, which is also counted as a provocation strategy within the image repair theory (Benoit 1997). Similarly, Adele's apology combined mortification with corrective action and reduced the offensiveness of the act by acknowledging her lack of control over the situation, citing COVID-19 and delivery delays as reasons for her canceled concert, and promising to reschedule the dates. These examples highlight the flexibility with which celebrities approach image repair. Nevertheless, in all cases where the blending of strategies was present, other typologies were not taken into consideration since the main purpose was to apologize (Figure 1).

The tone of the statement in relation to crisis type

Further analysis of statements revealed that the most common tone utilized by celebrities is apologetic, accounting for 7 instances, where public figures explicitly expressed remorse and acknowledged their actions. This tone has been prevalent across all levels of crises, except for Level 2. For example, Adele, dealing with a Level 3 crisis used an apologetic tone through verbal expressions, such as "I'm really sorry," but also accompanied with the body language shown in her apology video (see Figure 2). Similarly, actor Misha Collins verbally expressed his regret and acknowledgment of the mistake and its impact and stated his support for the LGBTQIA + community.

A defensive tone was utilized three times, mainly coupled with the Level 1 crises and denial strategy. Tory Lanez and Lizzo went against the allegations, where the former showed a defensive tone by protecting their professional character, and the latter indicated this attitude through their refusal to apologize. These two celebrities were also implementing the denial strategy, and such a combination seems reasonable given the individuals' desire to protect themselves.

Other tones were less frequently used. Sympathetic tones, used by Anne Hathaway and Evangeline Lilly in mid-level crises, focused on empathy and the impact of their actions on others. A neutral tone was employed twice in Level 1 and 2 crises by Johnny Depp and Naomi Osaka, where celebrities maintained a composed demeanor, highlighting facts and their personal decisions. Lastly, the positive tone adopted on a single occasion is paired with a Level 4 incident associated with Jason Momoa, whose response utilized

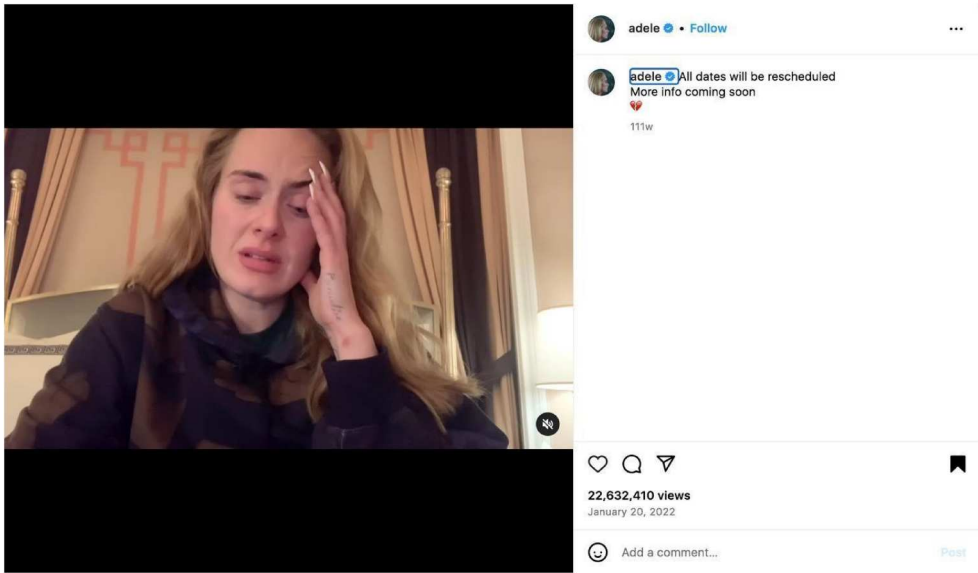


Figure 2. Screenshot from Adele’s apology video (Source: Instagram/@adele/Reproduction).

humor, light-heartedness, and his uplifted spirit. It is argued that the implementation of such a tone within the apology was due to the nature of the crisis and its mildness.

Sentiment in relation to image repair typologies

We divided the 450 comments into categories based on their sentiment and the behavior of the contributors (see Table 3). In terms of total sentiment, positive feedback dominated, comprising 250 instances (55.6%), followed by negative sentiments, with 150 cases (33.3%) identified (see Figure 3). Neutral sentiments were relatively less frequent (8.7%), while 11 comments (2.4%) were categorized into the undefined group, where sentiment expression was too ambiguous.

Looking at the audience’s remarks about the image repair strategies, opinions of celebrities who utilized mortification resulted in the highest average of positive comments per post, around 20, and the lowest average of negative feedback, with 6 per post. In the seven apologies that included mortification, public support for the celebrities was generally strong. Anne Hathaway’s statement, for example, received nothing but praise, with all 30 comments being positive. Conversely, Snoop Dogg, Evangeline Lilly, and Adele received the most criticism, with 39 out of 44 comments being negative.

The strategy of reducing the offensiveness of the act also attracted a relatively high average of positive comments, especially for Naomi Osaka and Amy Schumer, though Chrissy Teigen received minimal support. In contrast, the denial strategy prompted the most negative reactions, averaging 15 critical comments per post, with Lizzo and Tory Lanez facing significant backlash, while Johnny Depp received considerable positive support (Table 5).

Regarding commentator behavior (Veloso da Silva and Cuesta López 2023), a majority of participants assumed a supportive role, with 251 instances (55.8%) of supportive

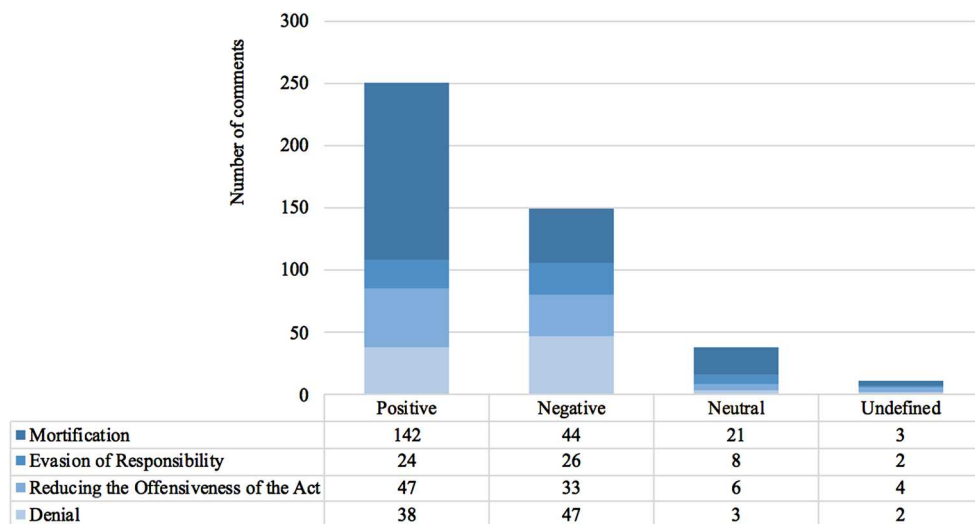


Figure 3. Distribution of audience sentiments by image repair strategy (Source: Authors' own production).

Table 5. Sentiment analysis and examples.

Sentiment:	Example:
Positive	"It's ok, Misha! We love you the same amount [Red Heart Emoji]" "You don't need to apologise at all! Self care [sic] and mental health need to be prioritised. I respect you for setting your boundaries. Take care [Red Heart Emoji]"
Negative	"But only one day before? Just a sh*tty thing to do even if other rich celebs are telling you otherwise." "Enjoy prison."
Neutral	"This is what we had become?" "I'm so tired of this current environment we in [sic]"
Undefined	"oh no" "Some people are really just not eating the right snacks as they scroll social media. I highly recommend the mini Reese's peanut butter cups!"

comments. Haters, expressing opposition or criticism, were identified in 78 instances (17.3%), followed by analysts who provided thoughtful commentary in 100 instances (22.2%). Trolls were recognized in only seven instances (1.6%), while spam comments did not gather any likes from other observers, which might be the reason they were not present. Lastly, the undefined category involved 14 replies (3.1%). Similar to the sentiment, commentator behavior varied among the apologies even with the same strategy, and this will be looked at closely during the further sections of the paper (Figure 4).

In comparing the behavior and sentiment of commentators, the supporters and positive comments displayed a high degree of similarity, with averages per post aligning with specific image repair strategies. A notable distinction occurred between negative and neutral feedback. Specifically, when celebrities utilized the denial strategy, there was a tendency for Instagram users to attack them personally, rather than offer constructive criticism of their actions, averaging 12 comments per post compared to 4 replies. However, given the small sample size, these findings do not indicate a statistically significant difference.

Nevertheless, with other strategies, the role of the analyst (see Appendix A) was more prevalent than that of the hater. It seems that individuals leaving neutral remarks were

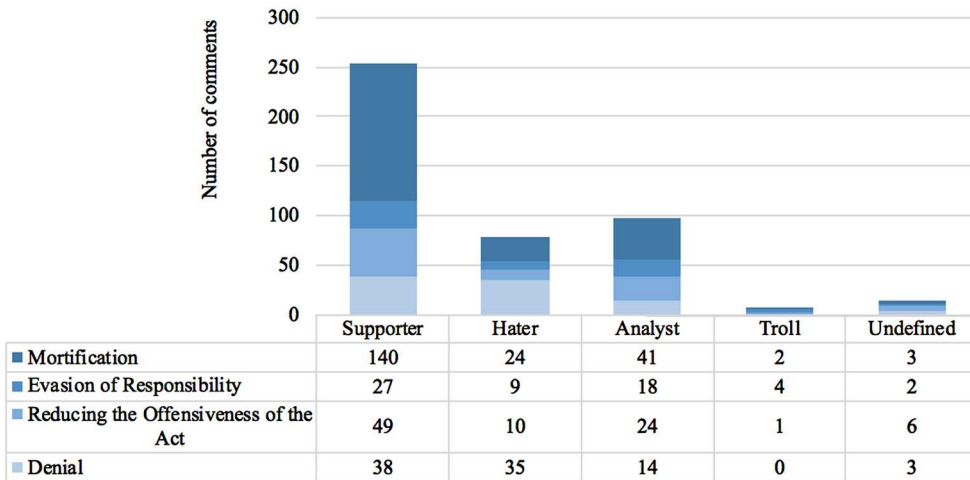


Figure 4. Commentator behavior by image repair strategies (Source: Authors' own production).

more likely to engage in critical analysis of the apology itself than the character of the individual apologizing, which could explain the predominance of the analyst group.

Moreover, our results support previous findings (Bachman and Guerrero 2006; Ebesu Hubbard et al. 2013; Shafa, Harinck, and Ellemers 2017) that the effectiveness of an apology, mainly when using the mortification strategy, depends heavily on the audience's prior emotional connections to the celebrity and the perceived sincerity of the apology. Anne Hathaway and Misha Collins received overwhelmingly positive feedback due to their strong public images and the nature of their apologies. Users praised Hathaway for her meaningful apology, expressing gratitude and admiration for her character. Similarly, Collins garnered support, with users citing their familiarity with his intentions and even apologizing for the backlash. In total, 29 people left positive comments, where they seemed to have a close connection with Collins, stating that they know him and his intentions, writing, "there was no ill-intent and we know that," "you speak from love and that's what matters, we know you."

In contrast, the public statement by Evangeline Lilly was the only apology with a mortification strategy that received mostly negative sentiments – that is, 15 of them. One of the main reasons was timing, as the audience considered it "too late." The first post regarding the actress's decision not to practice self-isolation during COVID-19 was posted on March 16, 2020. After the heavy criticism, Lilly expressed her remorse in a publication on March 26 (see Figure 5). Statements such as "it took ten days for you to admit you were wrong" and "your remaining silent for so long sent a message to others that you were STILL NOT practicing social distancing" support the numerous studies that show that in crises, efficient and fast timing can influence the perception of the apology (Civelek, Çemberci, and Eralp 2016).

Moreover, the late apology also led to the audience questioning the sincerity and motive behind the statement. Those who criticized Lilly believed that she was "trying to save face after all the backlash" and "afraid of losing [her] career," thus the commentators "don't buy [her] apology." However, some people were content with the post, stating the opposite and highlighting that she "[was] able to learn for [sic] [her] mistakes."



Figure 5. Screenshot of Evangeline Lilly’s Instagram apology post with underlined information on dates (Source: Instagram/@evangelinelillyofficial/Reproduction).

In this sense, to ensure full support from the general audience, timing should be strategically thought out, and it is closely connected to the perception of genuineness.

Moving on, Chrissy Teigen’s crisis serves as an example where her decision to delete critical comments and receive support mainly from verified users led to increased public skepticism. Commentators viewed such a strategy as an attempt to manipulate the narrative, resulting in backlash and accusations of insincerity. Many in the public questioned her apology’s genuineness, labeling her a “narcissist” and criticizing her for past behavior. Another mixed case with not very good response from the audience is Amy Schumer’s response to accusations of bullying Nicole Kidman. Schumer attempted to mitigate the offensiveness of her comments by framing them as a joke, which garnered controversial reactions. While some defended her right to comedy and dismissed the criticism as overblown, others claimed that she was using humor as an excuse for mean-spirited behavior.

Contrastingly, Naomi Osaka’s approach, on the other hand, received overwhelming public support. By openly discussing her mental health struggles, Osaka connected with her audience on a personal level, leading to widespread admiration and respect. Her statement sparked a broader conversation about the importance of mental health, with most commentators praising her for prioritizing her well-being over professional obligations. The only negative comment was an isolated critique, showing that her transparency resonated strongly with her audience.

On some occasions, commentators directly stated their discontent with the choice of image repair strategies. Criticizing Alec Baldwin’s choice of evading responsibility, people wrote, “There are two words you can say ‘I’m Sorry’ but no, you make it sound as if you had nothing to do with it,” and commented that the actor “basically [blames] anyone BUT [himself].” Baldwin’s choice of a sub-category named Accident to minimize the severity

of the crisis led to overall dissatisfaction among the general audience, suggesting that mortification was the strategy the public expected. Similarly, in Lizzo's statement, people were dissatisfied with the content of the statement itself, saying "u [sic] didn't address the sexual harassment tho [sic]" and "that's an odd way to deny sexual harassment claims." These results indicate that, in an online context where cancel culture is prevalent and public figures face constant scrutiny, the choice of a specific image-repair strategy to address a crisis can influence whether the audience further criticizes or accepts the apology.

Conclusions

This study examined 15 public statements from celebrities responding to crises, focusing on the strategies they applied to repair their images and how these strategies aligned with the crisis levels. Addressing the first research question (RQ1), mortification appeared as the most common approach, occurring in seven instances, especially in lower-level crises (Levels 3 and 4), which supports previous findings (Holtzhausen and Roberts 2009). Celebrities like Misha Collins and Adele blended mortification with other strategies, such as evasion of responsibility and corrective action, to shape public perception. In contrast, denial dominated high-level crises (Level 1), with Tory Lanez, Lizzo, and Johnny Depp all opting to reject allegations rather than accept responsibility.

Chrissy Teigen, Naomi Osaka, and Amy Schumer used strategies like reducing the offensiveness of the act and evading responsibility, though less frequently. They downplayed their actions by focusing on broader issues or personal growth instead of directly apologizing. Jason Momoa responded to a cultural disrespect incident by uniquely combining three strategies – evading responsibility, mortifying, and taking corrective action. He emphasized his good intentions while sidestepping full accountability. Unlike companies that often utilize corrective action (Arendt, LaFleche, and Limperopulos 2017), the typology did not appear as the main strategy among the sample, possibly because celebrity crises often revolve around personal behavior rather than actions that have physical or financial impacts on others, like those faced by organizations. As a result, celebrities tend to focus their image repair strategies on personal traits, such as sincerity and remorse, rather than on corrective actions.

To address RQ2, the analysis also explored audience reactions and comments to measure public sentiment and identified that statements in response to the crisis generated mostly positive responses. This emphasizes the audience's preference for hearing some kind of explanation about the situation, but also stresses the importance of other factors in the statement, such as sincerity, transparency, and prior reputation. Finally, answering RQ3, our research shows that the most positively received strategy was mortification, while denial generated the highest number of negative replies, which aligns with previous findings (Benoit and Drew 1997; Holtzhausen and Roberts 2009). This suggests that online audiences tend to prefer humbler and more accountable crisis responses, where timing and transparency are viewed positively. Moreover, in line with research emphasizing the importance of engagement, timing, and appropriate sources (Eriksson 2018; Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar 2011), our study further emphasizes that a celebrity's prior reputation and level of transparency also shape audience reactions. Paying attention to these factors can foster a more positive perception during a crisis and potentially reduce online backlash.

It is necessary to note that this research faces some limitations. First, the nature of Instagram and the platform's design pose data collection and preservation challenges, as posts and comments can be updated or deleted, influencing sentiment analysis over time. For example, after the initial data collection, a celebrity deleted a post, preventing further sentiment analysis and requiring adjustments. This demands rapid retrieval of information and adds complexity to research replicability. Second, interpreting online text requires understanding linguistic nuances, as social media users employ slang, cultural references, humor, and sarcasm that vary across communities. Our qualitative analysis sought to prevent misinterpretations by considering contextual information, but that can't be entirely controlled, as the meaning of words, memes, or emojis can shift depending on context and user background.

Future research on this topic could include a comparative analysis of crisis communication strategies across different social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, to explore how platform-specific features influence public perception. Additionally, examining the role of visual elements, like images and videos of crisis statements, could clarify how these components impact audience engagement compared to text-only responses. Finally, investigating audience demographics – including age, gender, and cultural background – would help identify which crisis communication strategies are most effective for specific groups, enabling a more targeted approach to image repair for public figures.

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