

Please Trust Me: Examining Strategies of Celebrity Apologies and Public Responses

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Abstract

In the context of an era when online apologies are becoming increasingly ubiquitous, this article investigates the apologies of female star and male game blogger on social media to reveal how to effectively rebuild trust and maintain reputations through apologies by incorporating apology strategies and apology responses. The study classifies apology strategies as taking responsibility, explanation, making promise, denial of action, and expressing empathy. Findings suggest that a combination of multiple strategies is more effective, with the integration of taking responsibility, reliable explanations, and expressing empathy being most conducive to rebuilding trust. The denial of responsibility strategy, on the other hand, may trigger counterproductive reactions. The present study provides insights for understanding online celebrity apologies and offers suggestions for maintaining the relationship between celebrities and the public.

Keywords

Apology; Apology response; Trust.

1. Introduction

Apology has been one of the hot topics in pragmatics and discourse studies. With regard to social interaction, apology does not exist in isolation; it involves the response of the interacting party. However, the study of apology response has not yet attracted much attention from the academic community. So far, there are only a few scholars who have explored apology responses in English [1] [2] [3] [4]. It can be said that rarely studies have investigated Chinese apology responses, especially the features of apology responses in online communicative contexts. Exploring apology-response in online communication could contribute to revealing the evolution and change of online public opinion and social values, provide useful references not only for image maintenance of individuals and organizations, but also the interpersonal trust repair among members of online communities [5], as well as be of great significance to the harmony and cohesion of online interaction.

The influence of Internet celebrities is on the rise with the rapid development of the Internet and social media, and their speech and acts have been widely observed by the public, which results in the phenomenon that celebrities' apology acts have frequently become the focus of discussion in the media and among the public. However, most of the studies on celebrities' apology strategies have focused on the political context [6] [7] [8] and there have been very few studies that have taken internet celebrities in the entertainment contexts such as stars and bloggers as the research topic. Therefore, examining the apology strategies of such online celebrities is not only crucial to understanding how public figures manage their public image and relationship with the public, but also enhances the understanding of apologies by celebrities who are closer to everyday life.

Apologizing can remedy real or virtual breaches of trust and is of significant importance in maintaining harmony in social relations [9] and reshaping harmonious interpersonal relationships as an important tool to rebuild trust. Similarly for celebrities who are aware that

maintaining their social status and associated power is a struggle [10]. One of the major sources of their power is their fans. Therefore, it is essential for celebrities who act wrongly to take action to mitigate the feelings of betrayal and distress that their mistakes may cause in order to avoid losing fans and salvage their credibility with potential fans. Since apology is one common means of trust repair, a public apology becomes a common choice for celebrities for the purpose of appeasing their fans.

The present study aims to analyse the apology strategies and netizen responses based on celebrity apology letters posted on the Chinese social media platform Weibo to provide empirical evidence for existing apology research. Two purposes are served by this study. On the one hand, the study utilizes data from daily interactions on the Internet in an attempt to elucidate the framework of Bataineh [11] from a new field as well as to integrate it with the reconstruction of trust. On the other hand, we hope to provide insights and suggestions on how to make effective public apologies for trust reconstruction by analyzing public comments. Incorporating celebrities' apologies with their corresponding responses, this paper allows for a more in-depth exploration of apology as a speech act, which contributes to a better understanding of celebrities' apologies, provides a reference for trust restoration in online interpersonal relationships, and is of great significance in promoting the harmony of online communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Apology

Apology has been broadly defined in terms of function: an apology is a speech act oriented towards the victim, a manifestation of the responsibility undertaken with the intention of remedying the offence, which facilitates the restoration of equilibrium between the apologiser and the victim [12]. Appropriate patterns of social behaviour are generally acknowledged to be based on the norms that constitute polite behaviour [13]. Apology becomes necessary when social norms are violated. Nowadays, high-profile celebrity apologies are reported almost daily in all types of media. Apologies have been perceived as a key tool for resolving conflict as well as restoring more productive communication [14]. As a result, it is crucial to take the effectiveness of apologies into consideration due to its widespread prevalence.

Several studies have investigated the question of what constitutes a good apology [15] [16]. One of the highly critical ones is an early model of image repair discourse proposed by Benoit [17]. The framework has been applied to case studies of firms that attempt to repair their image. Furthermore, Benoit modified the framework by proposing five strategies that could be employed for image repair: denial of the action, evasion of responsibility for the action, offering corrective action for the future, reducing the perceived offensiveness of specific act, and mortification [18].

The issue has not been confined to this area and has been extensively researched by multiple fields, representative of which is social psychology [19]. There is still a need to explore how effective apologies are constituted and whether certain components are of greater priority. For instance, Tomlinson, Dineen and Lewicki provide empirical support for the significance of apologies by examining the factors that are important for victims to mediate their relationship after a promise has been broken [20]. Lewicki and Polin investigated whether the effectiveness of an apology is dependent on the structure of the apology itself, taking the example of public apologies made by prominent individuals and organizations that have transgressed the public trust, and the findings have implied that there are certain components that contribute more to the effectiveness of an apology [21]. It can be assumed that the composition of the content of the apology has become the priority of the study. A number of scholars have proposed and summarized the components of an apology, for instance, De Cremer concentrated on the two

components of an apology in his trust repair study, including bearing responsibility and expressing remorse [22]. Accordingly, Lewicki and Polin have analyzed a series of public apologies by well-known celebrities and business leaders, drawing the conclusion that the most effective apologies should include six components; (1) expression of regret, (2) explanation (3) acknowledgement of responsibility, (4) declaration of repentance, (5) offer of repair, and (6) request for forgiveness.

Apologies serve two main functions: firstly, the apologizer apologizes simply out of a social imperative to express understanding of the harm caused; secondly, apologies are often accompanied by an expression of feelings. It is not surprising that of all the studies of the 'components' of an apology, the one that seems to be the most numerous is the acknowledgement of responsibility, which go so far as to say is the 'heart of the apology'. Despite the useful insights provided in these studies of public apologies, the connection between these components and how they combine to influence the effectiveness of the apology, and the achievement of trust rebuilding, has not been fully explored. This is what this study attempts to explore through the case study.

2.2. Why apologizing?

It is commonly acknowledged that apologies are typically made following mistakes. While celebrity apologizes for the their reputation has been significantly impacted and the trust between them and the public is jeopardized as the trust between celebrities and the public serves as a crucial cornerstone to uphold and enhance influence. Trust, as a complex phenomenon, has become a hot research theme in linguistics, psychology, sociology and other disciplines. Various definitions of trust are available. Of these, the widely accepted definition may be: trust is "a function of an individual or group's capacity to trust others in general." [23]. Most of the following studies on trust are based on this definition. For example, Yang defines trust as the willingness of the trustor to forgive the trustee for dishonest behaviour and other transgressions such as offensive speech [24]. According to the above study, the most important component of building trust is the usage of effective linguistic strategies to establish a trustworthy identity.

It has been demonstrated in several studies that language strategies help to build trust. Previous studies on apology-related trust building strategies are numerous, including corporate apologies [25] political apologies [26] and so on. However, most previous research has tended to focus on organizations (e.g., companies) or politicians rebuilding trust through apologies, leaving a gap yet to be filled, namely that very few studies have considered how online celebrities (celebrities, anchors, etc.) rebuild trust through apologies, and even the few that have done so have rarely delved deeper into case-specific analyses. Such celebrities, with both fame and a team of their own, may apologize in a different way from how a company or politician might do so. Therefore, it is important to explore how celebrities use apology strategies to rebuild trust.

Trust is a prerequisite for trust violation, and apology occurs when trust is violated. Trust violation refers to the situation that the trusted party's speech or conduct goes against the other party's assertive, positive expectations of that party and redefines the nature of the relationship in the mind of the victimised party. Following a trust violation, the trusted party usually adopts some restorative measures in order to save his/her face and reputation. Trust repair has become one of the popular topics of interest for linguists [27]. Based on these perspectives, this study discusses how celebrities use apology strategies to achieve trust rebuilding after a violation of trust.

2.3. Apology responses

The response to an apology can provide the apologizer with an indication as to whether the goal of re-establishing harmony or a balance has been achieved. It can be argued that apology responses are important for interpersonal relationships. However, there is still relatively little research on apology responses in pragmatics. Owen, a pioneer in the study of apology responses, used recordings of transactions and telephone conversations as examples to distinguish three broad categories: 'formulaic responses' (acknowledgement, acceptance), 'extended responses' (i.e., remedial responses such as denial, shirking responsibility), and 'refusal responses'[28]. Furthermore, Holmes classified apologetic responses in New Zealand English into six types: accept, acknowledgement, evade, rejection, no anticipatory response and other. Following this study, Robinson categorized apology responses into preferred responses and dispreferred responses [29]. Moreover, Jones and Adrefiza examined apology responses from a socio-cultural perspective. With a slight modification of the taxonomy proposed by Holmes, they proposed four response types: 'Acceptance', 'Acknowledgement', 'Evasion' and 'Rejection'. The above-mentioned studies are of great value, but have some limitations, namely that most of the previous studies employed data that were not naturally occurring in real-life situations [30].

Apology responses have been influenced by a variety of factors, with gender and trust violations being the most highlighted in the research. Holmes has done pioneering work in this area. Her research has indicated that in New Zealand, women are more likely to accept apologies than men. In addition, An et al. proposed a modified taxonomy of apology responses, suggesting that there exists a correlation between the two. On the other hand, Cui probed through an experimental design how effective apologies can be achieved in two separate trust violation contexts [31]. The findings of this study showed that internally attributed apologies were more effective in repairing trust than externally attributed apologies for integrity-based trust violations. In contrast, for competence-based trust violations, externally attributed apologies can be more effective in repairing trust.

In the era of new media, the interactions between celebrities and netizens have become increasingly intense as have trust issues, for which apologies are frequently adopted as a common tool to rebuild trust. The study of trust repair and response between celebrities and the public contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of public apologies, and allows for a better comprehension and resolution of trust concerns in the context of new media interactions. However, few studies have paid attention to the relationship and trust between that pair of new media communicators. Therefore, the present study aims to analyse how celebrities achieve trust rebuilding through apologies as well as how netizen groups respond to celebrity apologies, specifically to examine the following research questions:

- 1)What apology strategies do celebrities employ to more effectively achieve trust rebuilding?
- 2)How do the public respond to celebrity apologies?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The corpus of this study is derived from celebrity apology letters and public comments on celebrity apologies from one of the most well-known social platforms in China, Weibo. First, we searched the topic tag of apology in Weibo and selected 2 celebrity public apology tweets among all retrieved apologies. The first one is an apology by actress Zhou Yutong on Weibo on 4 November 2024 after being questioned by netizens about her selfishness and low IQ regarding her performance in the sixth season of the Divas hit the road. The other is game blogger Hua Shao Bei who issued an apology on Weibo on 16 May 2024 due to an emotional

dispute. Both apology have been caused by the integrity-based trust violations. The celebrities in both cases are highly popular, with the former having 14.45 million Weibo followers as of November 2024, and the latter having 1.73 million followers as of November 2024 (in its live-streaming platform, Bilibili, he had 6.7 million followers by 16 May 2024, and 5.95 million by 11 November). Second, under each celebrity apology blog, we selected the top 150 netizen comment responses according to the heat of the comments, and those with fan logos were removed, and netizen-to-netizen comments were eliminated as well. Therefore, a total of two celebrity apology cases with 300 netizen's apology response comments were collected in this study. Both examples were selected for this study for a variety of reasons, both were different in gender, occupation, and the severity of the mistakes made, which allowed the results of the analysis of the two cases to be compared with each other.

3.2. Data analysis

To answer the research questions, this study used NVivo software to code and analyse the data. First, to address the question of what apology strategies celebrities use to rebuild trust, this study draws on the framework of Bataineh and Bataineh’s study on apology strategies, as well as adopting the framework of metalanguage labels and supportive cues related to trust proposed by Yang, which categorizes apology strategies into metalanguage labels related to apologies and supportive strategies. Meta-language labels are conventional formulas usually applied for the explicit expression of an apology. Supporting strategies are linguistic strategies that support the speech act of apologizing, which are classified in the present study as acknowledging responsibility, explanation, making promise, denial of action, and showing empathy as shown in Table 1. Secondly, in order to analyse apology responses, this paper borrowed Holmes’ apology response framework, with no response strategies not being taken into account, and finally coded five types of apology response strategies, namely: direct acceptance, indirect acknowledgement, evasion of apology, rejection of acceptance, and denial of the necessity of apology (Table 2).

Table 1. The framework of apology strategies

Metalanguage labels	Examples
Apology	I'm sorry
Supportive strategies	Examples
acknowledging responsibility	I'm responsible for the dispute
explanation	It is due to his fault
making promises	I promise I'll support you
denial of action	I haven't done that.
showing empathy	I would be sad if it's true

Table 2. The framework of apology responses

Strategies	Examples
Direct acceptance	The apology is very sincere, never mind
Indirect acknowledgement	A mistake is a mistake
Evasion of apology	Those accuse you don't understand your plight
Rejection of acceptance	Fake apology, I won't accept it
Denial of the necessity of apology	You don't have to apologize, you did nothing wrong

4. Results and Discussion

This section will focus on the results as well as the discussion. The results are presented in two separate cases and then comparatively analyzed. Each case is given an analysis of the apology strategy and the public response strategy.

4.1. Apology strategies

4.1.1. Case 1: actress Zhou Yutong

The English transcription of her apology is provided below.

Hello everyone, I am Zhou Yutong.

I've triggered a lot of anger and sadness in many people because of my behavior during this period of time. I want to apologize to these people: no matter what, as long as this bad feeling is brought by me, I would like to sincerely say "I'm sorry", which is never my original intention, but I'm willing to bear it.

Recently, my feelings have been very complicated, and what is becoming clear is that I am not as good as many people think I am, but I am not as bad as some people say I am either. I've seen my limitations and in the process accepted my shortcomings, admitting that I can't be that good and not pretending that I can.

I think when someone is loved, or misunderstood, or given up on, she probably has to realize for herself what the truth of who she is is, or else she'll always be stuck with those limitations.

So thank you all so much for your scrutiny and feedback. There are still three more episodes to go, but not only in program but also in daily life, I'm going to be more open to your observations, and I'll continue to share anything else that comes to mind.

Based on the apology strategy analysis framework, the above apology was categorized into the following components:

Table 3. Frequency of apology strategies (Zhou)

Categories	Number	Percentage	Word-count	Word-count ratio
Metalinguage labels	2	/	/	/
Supportive strategies	9	100%	303	92.38%
acknowledging responsibility	4	44.44%	108	32.93%
explanation	3	33.33%	125	38.11%
making promises	1	11.11%	50	15.24%
denial of action	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
showing empathy	1	11.11%	20	6.10%

According to Table 3, Meta-language labels appear twice, namely "apologize" and "sorry". Meta-language labels can directly convey the apologizer's remorse, which is conducive to the acceptance of the apology. Based on the meta-language labels, it can be seen that the reason for the apology is that some of the actress's performances have inspired negative emotions in many people, which further triggered the netizens' quarrels and dissatisfaction with her, which is also reflected in the supportive strategy. The strategy "showing empathy" was used (about 11% of the total), where she emphasized that she was responsible for the anger and sadness that she had provoked and consequently had complicated feelings herself, which could soothe the public's emotions and reduce the impact [32]. Moreover, "taking responsibility" was the most frequently used strategy, which is in fact the most important apologizing strategy too. Although "take responsibility" was the most frequently employed, it did not have the highest number of words. "Explain" is the strategy that takes up the most words and is often attached to "take responsibility" [33]. For example, "I would like to sincerely say 'I'm sorry', which is never my original intention, but I'm willing to bear it." Although the actress expressed her willingness to

take responsibility, she had preceded to emphasize that the current outcome was not what she had originally intended, that is to say, she felt that she was not to blame for all of it, and that she was in fact being condescending. The combination of these two strategies works well, with many of the public responses sharing this view and expressing sympathy for her.

Moreover, the use of “making a promise” at the end of the apology indicates that she will listen to the public’s opinion, which makes the apology more sincere. Furthermore, there is no “denial of action” in this case, which is related to the fact that it is difficult to refute its behavior as it is recorded, but it still makes its attitude appear more sincere, and gained the recognition and understanding of some netizens. In addition, the “gratitude” strategy appeared as an uncommon strategy in this case, for example, “So thank you all so much for your scrutiny and feedback”.

4.1.2. Case 2: game blogger Hua Shao Bei

Background: Game blogger Hua Shaobei was found to be using a couple’s cell phone cases, so he announced his girlfriend who is another blogger, Huang Haolihai which is a screen name too. Later, his ex-girlfriend, whose screen name is “fried egg”, posted a weibo saying that she had been in a relationship with Hua Shao Bei for 7 years, and that just after she was broken up, Hua Shao Bei immediately got together with his current girlfriend. Besides, during the 7 years, Hua Shao Bei claimed that he was single to his fans, so as to attract female fans. This matter triggered a heated discussion among netizens, and then a netizen with the name “calm and quiet master” posted many damning materials to the “fried egg”, which was suspected by the public to be Hua Shaobei’s alternative account due to its overly private content. During this period, there were also many blogs accusing Hua Shao Bei of, for example, tricking teenagers into having sex. A week after the “fried egg” blog, Hua Shaobei issued an apology letter on Weibo. Due to the length of the letter, the original text will not be provided, and the following is a strategic analysis of the apology.

Table 4. Frequency of apology strategies (Hua)

Categories	Number	Percentage	Word-count	Word-count ratio
Metalanguage labels	10	/	/	/
Supportive strategies	38	100%	2403	98.69%
acknowledging responsibility	9	23.68%	433	17.78%
explanation	13	34.21%	1120	46.00%
making promises	1	2.63%	23	0.94%
denial of action	7	18.42%	412	16.92%
showing empathy	8	21.05%	415	17.04%

As can be seen in Table 4, the meta-linguistic labels become more numerous due to the fact that the apology is as long as 2,435 characters, with six apologies to the public, especially his fans, and four apologies to his ex-girlfriend, which demonstrates that even though the main target of his harm is his ex-girlfriend, the focus of his apologies is still on his fans, and the intention of his apologies is to regain the public’s trust in him rather than to ask for his ex-girlfriend’s forgiveness. As far as supportive strategies are concerned, all five strategies are deployed, with “explanation” appearing the most frequently and accounting for nearly half of the total number of words in the apology. Although explaining is a strategy second in importance only to acknowledging responsibility, an unconvincing explanation can only invite the opposite effect. Hua Shao Bei explains that he did not know that his ex-girlfriend was sick, borrowed money to buy medicine, and that he did not spend her money who was still a student, nor did he cheat on his ex-girlfriend, as well as not setting up a single persona, but the reasons given are untenable. Below is an example.

Example 1: Concerning the matter of her borrowing money for medication, I only realized it after seeing the screenshots from netizens this time.

Seven years with his ex-girlfriend, and also claimed to have contact after the breakup, however, said that he did not know about his ex-girlfriend's illness and borrowed money to take medication, it is obviously unconvincing, and this reason also proves his indifference to his ex-girlfriend, which contradicts the later explanation that "I am serious about this relationship".

Next, the blogger makes extensive use of the strategy of admitting responsibility, which, as in Case 1, is frequently combined with explanations. Moreover, the number of occurrences of this strategy does not match the word count ratio, which amounts to a small percentage of words, and mostly serves the defense that follows. As shown below:

Example 2: It's really selfish to keep my relationship a secret for these seven years, but I've been serious about it and I never have any relationship with another girl during seven years...

When admitting responsibility and unconvincing reasons are integrated, the effect of the former is weakened, instead making the public feel that the mistake is even more grave than he admitted, as evidenced in the Apology Response section.

In addition, compared to Case 1, which did not deny any behavior, this case denied the accused actions many times (7 times), which is closely associated with the fact that the mistake in this case is more severe, which once admitted, will be scorned, however it will have little effect if not only can't produce credible evidence when denying, but also being questioned about retouching (example: using 2021 chat records to prove that no cheating in 2022). It indicates that acknowledging gross mistakes is threatening, offenders tend to apologize perfunctorily, with denial of action as a strategy regularly used as a result [34]. Furthermore, internally attributed apologies are more effective in repairing trust than externally attributed apologies for such integrity-based trust violations. However, Hua Shao Bei denied that he had established a single persona and attributed it to his followers' acquiescing to his singleness, which triggered the wrath of his fans.

Fourth, this case involved more "showing empathy" strategies (21.05% vs. 11.11%), mainly expressing sadness, regret, and pain, which elicited few sympathetic responses, yet paired with failed explanations making the apology seem insincere. The promise that appears only once in this example is based on a hypothetical situation (If I had known... I would have taken responsibility), which makes the apology even more spurious and this has attracted public flak. It is in line with Kimoga's study that not every apology is based on guilt and that serious promise is considered a necessary ingredient for a sincere apology. Besides, restitution, which is a very common and effective apologetic strategy [35], was absent in both cases, the former could be explained by the absence of actual harm, while the latter was not well justified, which was also slammed in the apology response.

Finally, this case, just like Case 1, presents the "gratitude" strategy. There are two occasions, one to thank the public, especially the fans, for their willingness to see their apology, and one to appreciate the ex-girlfriend's dedication. This phenomenon might be explained as characteristic of celebrity apologies in the online context, as celebrities have an extremely high dependency on their fans.

4.2. Apology responses strategies

This section provides an analysis and comparison of the apology response strategies of netizens in the two cases and correlates them with the content and context of the apologies in order to speculate on whether the two apologies were successful in rebuilding trust.

4.2.1. Case 1: actress Zhou Yutong

In Case 1, the top 150 comments in terms of likes are selected. Five main categories have been identified, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Number and percentage of apology response strategies(zhou)

Types	Number	Percentage
Direct acceptance	42	28.00%
Indirect acknowledgement	17	11.33%
Evasion of apology	10	6.67%
Rejection of acceptance	66	44.00%
Denial of the necessity of apology	15	10.00%
sum	150	100.00%

As can be seen in Table 5, the highest percentage is “rejection of acceptance” (44%), followed by “direct acceptance” at 28%, which is in line with An et al.’s corpus-based study on apology response strategies. Although the two seem to be opposite, they reflect two extreme views. Especially considering that the strategy of “denial of the necessity of the apology” is also found in the responses, which together with direct acceptance is almost equal to the share of rejection of acceptance, reflecting that in this case the apology was very effective, with more than half of the comments accepting the apology, either directly or indirectly. Apologizing without denying one’s mistakes, emphasizing one’s remorse, and offering a willingness to be monitored in the future can effectively evoke public sympathy and make it easier to gain forgiveness.

With regard to the rejection, the number of likes is mainly concentrated between the top 50 and 100 to 150, and it is mostly non-fan comments, which suggests that the public is more inclined to be dissatisfied with the apology. There are several main reasons for it. First, the public is dissatisfied with the apology for letting fans and netizens quarrel, such as, What’s your fault for having fans like that in the front row, it’s all the netizens’ fault. Secondly, the public considered that the apology was not sincere enough, that it was a forced statement due to the pressure of public opinion rather than a genuine recognition of its own mistakes, such as, “Sorry” in double quotation marks? Did the netizens force you to do it? Third, the public felt that a brief apology alone could not repair the harm she had caused, and that she should not be forgiven without practical action.

As for direct acceptance, it can be divided into two parts, one believes that no one is perfect and the actress is already good enough to be forgiven directly, for instance, people have limitations, but you’re already pretty good; the other part is to console the actress for her bad feelings mentioned in the apology and wish her becomes better and more successful. While indirect acceptance is more concerned with expressing feelings of helplessness and disappointment, or offering advice and hoping that the offense will not be repeated in the future. Most of the sources of these two types of responses are online users who have interacted with or are favorably disposed to this actress, indicating that the probability of forgiveness rises substantially where there is an emotional basis for forgiveness [36]. There are also a small number of comments that avoid responding directly to the apology, most of which are about the fond memories that the actress has brought to the public and are often accompanied by expectations for the future. Such responses actually implied an attitude of disappointment with the actress but hope that the matter would soon pass, suggesting acceptance of the apology and forgiveness. This also illustrates the effectiveness of pairing responsibility-taking and empathy strategies in situations where the mistake is not too serious [37].

4.2.2. Case 2: game blogger Hua Shao Bei

As in Case 1, comments with the top 150 likes were also selected for Case 2 and categorized into five main categories, which are represented in Table 6.

Table 6. Number and percentage of apology response strategies(hua)

Types	Number	Percentage
Direct acceptance	5	3.33%
Indirect acknowledgement	29	19.33%
Evasion of apology	9	6.00%
Rejection of acceptance	107	71.33%
Denial of the necessity of apology	0	0.00%
sum	150	100.00%

As shown in Table 6, “rejection of apology” accounts for the majority with a high percentage of 71%, in stark contrast to “direct acceptance” with a percentage of only about 3%, making the former almost 20 times as many as the latter. Even worse, none of the top 150 hot responses denied the necessity of apology. Thus, it can be argued that the apology in this case failed miserably, and the public response to it was overwhelmingly negative, which is quite different from the outcome of Case 1. It is worth noting that the top 10 comments in terms of number of likes are among the rejection tactics, which is a further evidence of the public's anger and dissatisfaction towards it. Therefore, it is valuable to break down the “rejection of acceptance” strategy further.

With regard to the reasons for the rejection, they include the following. First, a large number of responses questioned the fact that the content of the apology was not written by the blogger himself, but was written by professionals who were looking for a substitute. For example, the most liked comment (65,000 likes) is “tell me who wrote it for you”. The reason why the apology letter is suspected of not being written by himself is because the fans are well aware of the blogger's low literacy level, and the probability of writing an apology letter that is more than 2,000 words long and logical with no typos is very low, which undoubtedly makes the apology appear insincere, causing the public to become more frustrated and annoyed with him, it even leads to insults, e.g., “sinful bastard”. Secondly, the apology came too late, as public opinion on the internet had been festering for a longer period of time. In a week between the incident and the apology, the ex-girlfriend of the apologizer provided a considerable amount of evidence, and there were also haters spreading the blogger's previous wrongdoings. As a result, the fans who originally defended the blogger felt tired and became suspicious, and other public developed a preconceived aversion to him or her, all of which had to make the apology more difficult to be accepted [38]. Thirdly, and the most important reason that contributes to the fermentation of public opinion is that many members of the public believe that the blogger used an alternative account to smear his ex-girlfriend before apologizing in an attempt to mislead the public, the current apology was issued because the trick was uncovered. Therefore, there were quite a few comments ridicule it, for example, ‘Master Calm and Quiet’ finally uses the main account to speak. Fourth, this case shifts the blame for the single persona onto the fans when employing the “denial of action” strategy, which only disappoints the followers who originally defended him and intensifies public anger [39], for instance, “The single persona set up on the live broadcast is so ridiculous, now it becomes the fans’ default, I hate you”. Fifth, there are plenty of responses questioning the explanation in apology is unreasonable, and accused him of being irresponsible to ex-girlfriend, revealing a deep disappointment in his character, for example, “Considering your emotional abuse to her, I don't believe you are serious about the relationship and want to marry her”.

While the majority of netizens expressed their dissatisfaction with the apology, nearly 20% of the responses chose to accept it indirectly. The vast majority were either fans or members of the public who upheld the blogger prior to the apology. Though still all hard to hide their disappointment, they nevertheless stated that they finally waited for the apology and hoped that he could turn over a new leaf, as in “Good luck and never see you again”. Some inquired

about what he planned to do next, or asked for further compensation measures, such as “So break up or not?”. It suggests that although the timing and strategy of apologizing is not appropriate, forgiveness is still favored whenever an apology is made [40]. In addition, the bulk of responses that evade apology come from members of the public who are not quite aware of the context of the incident and ask what exactly happened. This is also a characteristic of Internet apologies.

Lastly, regarding the very few replies that accepted it outright, it was mostly about appreciating the blogger for the pleasant memories he had brought to them, and believing that he genuinely realized the mistake, and hopefully, merry meet, merry part.

On the whole, in comparison of the contexts of the two cases, the wrongs in Case 2 are more serious and substantiated by abundant evidence, which reduces the effectiveness of the apologizer’s justification and makes it harder to obtain forgiveness through apology alone without resorting to reparation strategies [41]. Furthermore, considering that apologies are time-sensitive, Case 1 apologized when public opinion was just beginning to simmer, preventing further deterioration of the situation in time and rebuilding trust more effectively. Finally, the genders of the two apologizers differ, with the former being female and the latter male. Actually, female apologies were more likely to be accepted, which may have also had an impact on apology responses.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the effect of apology on social media by celebrities represented by female stars and game bloggers, and takes into account the public’s response to apology. Through comparative analysis, the findings show that multi-strategy combination can more effectively achieve trust rebuilding and obtain forgiveness, especially by integrating “acknowledging responsibility” and credible explanation. Furthermore, it is of significance to make a sincere apology in time. The strategy of denying action needs to be used cautiously. Untenable reasons and shirking responsibility may be counterproductive. In addition, celebrity apologies on social media are characterized by thanking the public, especially fans. It is due to the fact that the social status of celebrities stems from their followers, and the primary means to expand their influence is to convert the public into followers. Thus, in contrast to repentance, the key focus of their apologies is more likely to eliminate negative impacts and acquire benefits [42].

The present study extends the theoretical framework of apology and Holmes’ apology response framework, thereby enhancing the mutual corroboration of findings and providing a more accurate reflection of the effect of apologies. In terms of practical significance, it makes a valuable contribution to the pragmatic exploration of social media communication and serves as an important reference for online apologies. However, there are some limitations that can be addressed through future research, such as expanding the scope of corpus collection and diversifying corpus sources.

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