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Seeking sincerity, finding forgiveness: YouTube apologies as image repair[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Social media have become important communication tools for organizations and public figures, particularly in times of crisis. Public figures are frequently advised to use social media platforms to apologize to publics, and their apologies are often posted by news outlets or individual social media users. However, evidence suggests social media may function on an interpersonal level, yet traditional image repair strategies are based on a mass media model. Using image repair strategies based in theoretical frameworks from mass mediated and interpersonal communication, this research examined the verbal behaviors and emotions displayed by public figures apologizing on YouTube and the relationships these had to audience perceptions of sincerity and forgiveness as expressed via YouTube comments. Two studies analyzed 335 segments of video from 32 public apologies on YouTube spanning from 2009 to 2014, and 1971 posted responses. The interpersonal strategies and expression of emotions were largely unrelated to the perceptions of sincerity and forgiveness; and the image repair strategies were limited in their relatedness. However, the content of the comments, a majority of which focused on the reputation of the public figure, was associated with perceptions of sincerity. Reducing offensiveness was associated with perceptions of insincerity, as was the combination of reducing offensiveness, denial and evasion. Negative comments regarding the offender's reputation were also associated with perceptions of insincerity. Audiences were non-forgiving if the apology was perceived as insincere, but forgiving if they perceived the apology as sincere. Implications of these results in relation to the practice and scholarship of public relations are discussed.

1. Introduction

As far back as 2006, the report from the Commission on Public Relations recognized the impact of social media on crisis management, "The contemporary practice of public relations requires practitioners to immediately respond to … crisis situations via Web sites, blogs and other new media" (VanSlyke Turk, 2006). However, there is no consensus among scholars on the effectiveness of apology for image repair and crisis management (Brown, Billings, & Devlin, 2016; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). The varied conditions under which apologies are made (e.g. guilty vs. not guilty, history of prior offenses, etc.) make it challenging to measure effectiveness, yet apology continues to be a broadly

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accepted practice in public relations (PR) strategy, and an ethical mandate if the offender is truly at fault (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

Today, public figures are frequently advised to use social media platforms to apologize to audiences, particularly when the offense originated on social media (Baer & Naslund, 2011; Matejic, 2015; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2013; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). Even if public figures do not initially post their apologies on social media, the public and news outlets often do. For example, singer Chris Brown's videotaped apology, posted on YouTube by On Demand Entertainment (2009), received more than 1.5 million views and more than 4000 comments. Celebrity chef Paula Deen's video, posted on YouTube by The Young Turks (2013), received more than 723,000 views and 5000 comments (as of March 2018). Unlike a one-to-many media environment where users have limited interactions with producers or other users, social media is interactive and users recognize their potential influence over other users (Kang, 2014; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011).

The use of social media in public relations practice has increased in each of the last 12 years, and PR professionals strongly agree that new media have changed the way PR is practiced (Wright & Hinson, 2017). A survey of more than 4400 PR professionals worldwide identified the top three issues affecting their communication strategies and practices as 1) dealing with the speed and volume of information flow, 2) being prepared to deal effectively with crises and 3) managing the digital revolution and rise of social media (Meng & Berger, 2017).

As they strive to meet these challenges, PR professionals and scholars must also consider the points of incongruence between traditional image repair strategies that use a mass media framework and social media's ability to function on an interpersonal level (Caplan, 2001; Kelleher, 2009; O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017; Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Schultz et al., 2011; Walther et al., 2010). This is an important distinction because research on effective interpersonal apologies differs significantly from image repair strategies recommended by PR scholars (Gracyalny & Mongeau, 2010; Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster, & Montada, 2004). Emotions, typically seen as the purview of interpersonal scholars, impact crisis management, yet PR professionals have just begun to scratch the surface of their role in crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2010; Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; Nabi, 2003; Roschk & Kaiser, 2013; Utz et al., 2013; ten Brinke & Adams, 2015; Zhang, Wang, Wu, Wang, & Buck, 2017).

Using image repair strategies based in theoretical frameworks from both mass mediated and interpersonal communication research, we conducted two studies to examine the verbal behaviors and nonverbal emotions displayed by public figures apologizing on YouTube, a video-enabled social media platform, and the relationship these behaviors may have on perceptions of sincerity and forgiveness of the online commenting audience. Fostering a better understanding of the online environment, including the perceptions of the commenting public, will help PR professionals more effectively counsel clients in today's dynamic media environment when a public apology may be a strategy for image repair or crisis management. It also offers scholars and educators an additional lens through which to critique image repair strategies.

2. Literature review

Apology research has interested PR scholars and professionals, particularly as part of image repair strategies and crisis management. A variety of disciplines and approaches have informed apology scholarship, and a growing number of resources provide a comprehensive view related to crisis communication (Austin & Jin, 2017; Benoit, 2014; Blaney, 2016; Coombs, 2011; Hearit, 2006). This literature review is narrowly focused on three main factors that have converged to add a sense of urgency in providing a deeper understanding of online apologies for the PR profession. One factor is the increased accessibility and use of social media. Another related, but separate consideration is the ability of social media to enable publics to directly communicate with each other, at times in very visible ways such as leaving comments. Finally, interdisciplinary research suggests that social media communications may be perceived as interpersonal, rather than mass media, or some unique combination of the two (Caplan, 2001; Morris & Ogan, 1996; O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017; Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Walther et al., 2010). Therefore, we consider interpersonal theory, specifically the components of an effective apology within interpersonal communication. To understand how a shift to a more interpersonal or masspersonal approach (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017) might impact the framework of apologies in the practice of public relations, it is helpful to understand one of PR's most influential guiding theories related to apologies–Benoit's image repair discourse (1995, 1997, 2000, 2014).

2.1. Benoit's image restoration/repair discourse as a starting point

Benoit's seminal work on the theory of image repair (1995, 1997, 2000, 2014) has shaped the work of PR scholars and professionals, especially in the area of crisis management response. Benoit described it as a theory to be "used by practitioners to help design messages during crises and by critics or educators to critically evaluate messages produced during crises" (1997, p. 177). Although Benoit's theory has been criticized for its descriptive nature and speculative conclusions, critics also admit that the theory and research supporting it merit critical commentary because of its depth and breadth (Burns & Bruner, 2000; Coombs, 2007; Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010).

Benoit's theory focuses on message options for organizations and individuals accused of wrongdoing, and identifies five categories of image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, corrective action, and mortification. *Denial* includes simple denial and shifting the blame. *Evasion of responsibility* includes: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Benoit defines *defeasibility* as the lack of information or ability. *Reducing offensiveness* includes: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accusers and compensation. When bolstering, an organization stresses the good traits over the offensive act. For example, in the case of an oil spill, the company would stress the quick response to cleanup the spill–bolstering

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