

“I have made a severe and continuous lapse in my judgment” –
Image repair strategies and non-apology features in apologies on
YouTube

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Abstract

In recent years, the number of video-form apologies posted on the video-sharing platform YouTube has greatly increased, up to the point where they have started to form their own genre. However, there is little research on video-form apologies in particular and social media apologies in general. The purpose of my study is to identify and analyze image repair strategies that emerge in content creators' apologies on YouTube, and also to determine how frequent non-apology features are in the videos. I analyzed 26 videos and placed them into three categories based on the offense that the accused mainly apologized for: racist actions, public feuds, and offensive or harmful content. The method used in the study is qualitative content analysis. In addition, quantitative observations are provided. The findings reveal that both image repair strategies and non-apology features are common. Overall, the most common strategies were 1) corrective action, 2) defeasibility and 3) good intentions. Strategies listed under Benoit's (2014) "reducing offensiveness" were the most common across all categories. Corrective action was used as much as reducing offensiveness in the racist actions category, and in the other two categories corrective action was the second least used strategy. The rest of the strategies were used similarly across all categories.

Furthermore, 13 of the 26 apologies contained at least one of Lazare's (2004) eight "non-apology" features. The only non-apology features that did not occur at all were an apology to the wrong party or for the wrong offense. Although there were no features that would have been significantly more or less common than others, the findings show that non-apology features are frequent in apologies. Finally, I also discovered five additional strategies in the apologies that were not mentioned in Benoit's (2014) image repair theory. In conclusion, the study reveals that Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies and Lazare's (2004) non-apology features are common, and that there seem to be various recurrent strategies that are unique to video-form apologies.

Tiivistelmä

Anteeksipyyntövideoiden määrä on kasvanut huomattavasti viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana, ja sen seurauksena ne ovat alkaneet muodostaa oman genrensä YouTube-videonjakopalvelussa. Siitä huolimatta niin videomuodossa olevia anteeksipyyntöjä kuin sosiaalisessa mediassa esitettyjä anteeksipyyntöjä ylipäänsä on tutkittu vain vähän. Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus on tunnistaa ja analysoida anteeksipyyntöstrategioita, jotka tulevat esille sisällöntuottajien anteeksipyyntöissä YouTubessa. Sen lisäksi tutkin, kuinka yleisiä niin kutsutut pseudoanteeksipyyntöt ovat videoissa.

Analysoin yhteensä 26 anteeksipyyntövideota, ja jaoin ne kolmeen kategoriaan sen perusteella, mistä aiheesta syytetty henkilö pääosin pyysi anteeksi: rasistisista teoista, julkisista riidoista ja loukkaavasta tai haitallisesta videosisällöstä. Tutkimuksen löydökset paljastavat, että sekä anteeksipyyntöstrategiat että pseudoanteeksipyynnöt ovat yleisiä. Kaiken kaikkiaan yleisimmät strategiat olivat 1) ongelman korjaaminen tai sen uusiutumisen estäminen, 2) vetoaminen siihen, että syytetty ei ollut tietoinen teon haitallisuudesta tai siitä, miten teko oltaisiin voitu estää, ja 3) vetoaminen siihen, että syytetyn aiheet olivat hyvät. Strategiat, jotka Benoit'n (2014) teorian mukaan vähentävät teon loukkaavuutta, olivat kaikista yleisimpiä kaikissa kategorioissa. Ongelman korjaamista esiintyi yhtä paljon kuin teon loukkaavuuden vähentämistä anteeksipyynnöissä, jotka koskivat rasistisia tekoja, ja muissa kategorioissa sitä esiintyi toiseksi vähiten. Muita strategioita esiintyi suunnilleen yhtä paljon kaikissa kategorioissa.

Näiden löydösten lisäksi 13 anteeksipyyntöä sisälsi vähintään yhden Lazaren (2004) kahdeksasta "pseudoanteeksipyynnön" piirteestä. Ainoat piirteet, jotka eivät nousseet aineistossa esille, olivat anteeksipyyntö väärälle henkilölle tai väärästä teosta. Vaikka mitkään yksittäiset piirteet eivät olleet huomattavan yleisiä, löydökset osoittavat silti, että pseudoanteeksipyynnöt ovat yleisiä. Löysin anteeksipyynnöistä myös viisi ylimääräistä strategiaa, joita ei ole mainittu Benoit'n (2014) anteeksipyyntöstrategioissa. Kaiken kaikkiaan tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että sekä Benoitin (2014) anteeksipyyntöstrategiat että Lazaren (2004) pseudoanteeksipyynnön piirteet ovat yleisiä ja että on olemassa myös muita strategioita, jotka vaikuttavat olevan yleisiä videomuotoisissa anteeksipyynnöissä.

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1. Introduction

As the number of social media influencers rises, accusations of varying offenses also emerge. Video-form apologies have been on the rise for the past decade, up to the point where it could be said that they have started to form their own genre on YouTube, which is an online video-sharing platform. In this study, I analyze apologies that content creators have posted on YouTube, and attempt to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Which image repair strategies are the most common in the apologies?
2. How common are non-apology features in the apologies?
3. Which image repair strategies are the most common in the different categories?

I carry out the study by drawing on Benoit's (2014) image repair theory. In addition, I utilize Lazare's (2004) non-apology theory and his more profound understanding of apologies, which complements Benoit's theory. I also examine in detail two separate studies conducted by Eisinger (2011) and Smith (2005), who have shown that non-apology features occur frequently and should be paid attention to.

Although apologies presented on social media platforms have become rather common, it is an area that has not been studied to a great extent. In the past, some studies have been conducted concerning social media apologies (see Hambrick et al., 2013; Moody, 2011), but especially video-form apologies seem to be an area that has been little explored in the field of image repair. Gracyalny and Sandlin (2018) have studied image repair in Youtube apologies, but they did not take possible non-apology features or additional strategies into account. In the present study, I discovered various image repair strategies that are unique to video-form apologies, which will be discussed in section 4.3.5.

In general, image repair and apologies are interesting and important areas of study. It is useful to understand what constitutes a genuine or "a full apology" (Eisinger, 2011, p. 138), and what strategies are used in order to evade responsibility. Sometimes it may be difficult to recognize if someone attempts to make themselves look better instead of offering a genuine and remorseful apology, but it should be noted that determining what constitutes a genuine apology is beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, it is important for researchers in the field to also take non-apology features into account, as they are common in apologies (see Eisinger, 2011; Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2005).

The data for my study consists of 26 video-form apologies that were posted on YouTube. After analyzing the videos and identifying the used image repair strategies, I discovered that they occurred frequently and that there were some strategies that were used often and others that were less frequent. Non-apology features were also common. There was also variation in the frequency of strategies used depending on what kinds of issues the apologies concerned. In the process, I also discovered a few recurrent image repair strategies that Benoit (2014) does not mention in his theory.

Section 2 will introduce and discuss Benoit's (2014) image repair theory, Lazare's (2004) non-apology theory, and studies conducted by other researchers in the field. Section 3 discusses the data and method used in the present study. Section 4 first discusses the types of accusations that emerged, and then presents the analysis and findings of the study, which are divided into quantitative and qualitative findings. The quantitative findings present the distribution and frequency of strategies featuring two illustrative figures. The qualitative findings include in-depth analysis of the image repair strategies featuring examples from the data, and other common strategies not mentioned in Benoit's (2014) theory will be discussed in addition. Finally, some necessary reflections on the analysis will also be discussed under the qualitative findings. Last, section 5 will provide a conclusion of the findings, reflections on the study, and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

Image repair has been studied extensively in various fields such as politics (see Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012; Sheldon & Sallot, 2009), the corporate sector (see Benoit, 2009b; Benoit, 2013), and entertainment (see Benoit, 2009a; Len-Ríos et al., 2015). Apology research is, in fact, only one sub-field of image repair (Benoit, 2014). Overlap between different fields seems to be common and challenging to avoid, and many researchers have their own understanding of image repair strategies.

According to Meier (1998), most researchers seem to agree that image repair strategies can be roughly divided into apology expressions and excuses (p. 217). In the past, Ware and Linkugel's (1973) theory has been rather well-known. Arendt et al. (2017) discuss Ware and Linkugel's (1973, as cited in Arendt et al. 2017) four image repair strategies: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence (p. 518). These strategies can also be found in Benoit's (2014) more recent and extensive theory, which includes 14 strategies.

Benoit (2014) has not only combined other researchers' theories on image repair strategies together, but has also identified many additional strategies. His image repair theory seems to be one of the most well-known theories, and it is widely relied on among researchers in the field. Although it is extensive, his theory does not touch upon so-called non-apology features. This section will first discuss Benoit's (2014) image repair theory in detail, and explain what the different strategies entail. Then, section 2.2 will shed light on several researchers' understandings of non-apologies and discuss related research done on the topic.

2.1 Benoit's image repair theory

According to Benoit (2014), when someone's image is under threat, the accused often either knowingly or unknowingly utilizes various image repair strategies such as explanations, defences, justifications, and excuses in addition to possibly showing remorse when apologizing (p. 3). Eisinger (2011) adds that apologies play a significant role in society as they help maintain social bonds and trust between the accused and the public, and that is why different strategies are commonly used when repairing one's image (p. 136). Benoit (2014) organizes image repair strategies into five different categories: *denial*, *evasion of responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness*, *corrective action*, and *mortification* (p. 22). The strategies are presented below in Figure 1.

Denial	Evading responsibility	Reducing offensiveness	Corrective action	Mortification
Simple denial	Provocation	Bolstering		Apology
Shifting blame	Defeasibility	Minimization		
	Accident	Differentiation		
	Good intentions	Transcendence		
		Attacking the accuser		
		Compensation		

Figure 1. Benoit's image repair theory (2014)

2.1.1 Denial

Benoit (2014) divides denial into two strategies: simple denial and shifting blame (p. 22). He explains that *simple denial* means pointing out that there is not enough evidence to support the accusation, and therefore, denying the offense (Benoit, 2014, p. 22). Benoit (2014) adds that the accused may also provide explanations or simply deny the act altogether without further thought (p. 22). When *shifting blame*, on the other hand, the accused does not only deny the entire occurrence but also accuses someone else for it (Benoit, 2014, p. 22).

2.1.2 Evasion of responsibility

Benoit (2014) divides the category of *evading responsibility* into four strategies: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions (p. 23). *Provocation* means that the act was done in response to another offensive or harmful act (Benoit, 2014, p. 23). Simply put, the accused was provoked by someone else. Regarding *defeasibility*, the accused may state that they were not knowledgeable enough to prevent the offense, or had no control over the act (Benoit, 2014, p. 23). Third, the act may have been an *accident*, meaning that the accused had no control over the situation (Benoit, 2014, p. 23). Last, the accused may argue that they had *good intentions*: they may state that an offensive slur was meant to be taken as a joke, for instance (Benoit, 2014, p. 23). In conclusion, all of these strategies are used to reduce responsibility.

2.1.3 Reducing offensiveness

According to Benoit (2014), there are six strategies to reduce the offensiveness of a harmful act: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation (p. 24). Benoit (2014) states that *bolstering* is used to make the audience see the accused in a more positive light (p. 24). Benoit (2014) points out that this strategy does not necessarily reduce the offensiveness of the act committed, but that it can make the audience see the accused in a more positive way, resulting in an improvement in the accused's reputation (p. 24). The second strategy, *minimization*, means that the accused argues that the act did not cause as much harm as it may seem (Benoit, 2014, p. 24). When using *differentiation*, the accused attempts to distinguish the act from other similar mistakes made by other people (Benoit, 2014, p. 24).

Fourth, the accused may use *transcendence*, and attempt to make the audience see the act in a broader positive context, such as when the accused attempts to justify stealing by stating that it was done in order to help their poor family (Benoit, 2014, p. 25). Benoit (2014) states that when *attacking the accuser*, the accused may argue that the accuser was a part of the act, and as a result, shift the attention away from themselves (p. 25). Last, the accused may attempt to *compensate* for the act, and offer a bribe, which is particularly common in corporate apologies (Benoit, 2014, p. 25). In conclusion, all the strategies discussed above are used to reduce the offensiveness of the act.

2.1.4 Corrective action

There are no specific strategies under corrective action. According to Benoit (2014), when using the strategy of *corrective action*, the accused promises the audience that they will fix the problem or prevent it from happening again (p. 26). Benoit (2014) specifies that the accused may restore the situation to normal or make concrete changes to ensure that the act would not occur again (p. 26). He also points out that although the accused may address the offense when using the strategy of corrective action, it is still possible for them not to show any remorse (Benoit, 2014, p. 26).

2.1.5 Mortification

Benoit (2014) explains that when showing *mortification*, the accused admits the harmful act, and shows remorse (p. 26). Benoit (2014) also points out that this is potentially the most complex image

repair strategy out of the five categories, and that it is often also the hardest to analyze as a display of remorse requires more than simply saying “I am sorry” (p. 26). He mentions that it is often difficult to be certain which act the accused is referring to when admitting guilt, and the accused may purposefully choose to be vague about it (Benoit, 2014, p. 27). This will be discussed in more depth in the following section.

2.2 Non-apology features

Although Benoit’s (2014) theory can be considered to be rather comprehensive, he does not mention non-apology features. It could be said that Lazare’s (2004) non-apology theory complements Benoit’s understanding of image repair strategies.

Lazare (2004) analyzed apologies in newspapers during a 12-year period from 1990 till 2002. In particular, Lazare (2004) concentrates on shedding light on ingenuine apologies, also referred to as pseudo-apologies or non-apologies. According to Lazare (2004), a person who offers a non-apology does not show remorse or acknowledge the offense (p. 27). Lazare (2004) defines eight signs of a non-apology: 1) an incomplete acknowledgement of the offense, 2) use of passive voice, 3) phrasing the offense as conditional, 4) questioning the harm caused, 5) minimizing the offense, 6) an empathic offer instead of an apology, and even an apology 7) to the wrong party or 8) for the wrong offense.

Acknowledging the offense, according to Lazare (2004), is an integral part of apologizing, and he further argues that an apology cannot even begin without an acknowledgement of the offense (p. 62). He points out that although it may seem like a simple task, it often proves to be challenging because an acknowledgment of the offense should include recognizing the impact that the offense had on the victim, and agreeing that the offense violated social or moral rules (Lazare, 2004, p. 62). The feature of *an incomplete acknowledgement of the offense* is related to the second non-apology feature: *the use of passive voice*. The accused may say “Mistakes were made”, for instance, instead of owning up to what they did (Lazare, 2004, p. 70). *Phrasing the offense as conditional* may often include passive voice, but the accused adds a conditional and may utter, for example, “If mistakes were made” (Lazare, 2004, p. 73). In both cases, the accused avoids responsibility, which is one of the categories in Benoit’s (2014) theory.

Questioning the harm caused to the victim, according to Lazare (2004), often consists of an utterance such as “If you were offended” (p. 74). This kind of utterance may even make it seem like

the victim was the cause of the offense, or suggests that the victim should not feel hurt or offended (Lazare, 2004, p. 74). *Minimizing the offense* is a similar strategy where the accused either minimizes the offense or questions whether an offense was even committed in the first place (Lazare, 2004 p. 76). Both of these features are used to minimize the offense, which is also a strategy mentioned in Benoit's (2014) theory.

According to Lazare (2004), when giving *an empathic offer* instead of an apology, the accused may say "I am sorry you are hurt" (p. 27). When saying this, the accused does not acknowledge the offense, accept responsibility, or show remorse, which are the main elements of a full apology (Lazare, 2004, p. 27). According to Lazare (2004), a genuine apology should be more specific than "I feel bad for hurting you" (p. 27). To give an example, if the accused were to lose an item that someone had lent them, the apology should sound like "I am so sorry for losing the item. I feel terrible. I should have been more careful. I will replace it before we meet again" rather than solely giving an empathic offer (Lazare, 2004, p. 27). This kind of apology contains an acknowledgement of what happened, an acceptance of responsibility, and a display of remorse, and it is therefore genuine (Lazare, 2004, p. 27).

When *apologizing to the wrong party*, the accused may apologize to the public instead of the person they offended because the public holds the power to limit the accused's future options, according to Lazare (2004, p. 80). Lazare (2004) continues by stating that when it comes to *apologizing for the wrong offense*, the accused may often choose to apologize for offenses where they share the blame, and may even attempt to make it look good for themselves (p. 80). However, Lazare (2004) points out that this tactic is often ineffective as it has the risk of offending even more people (p. 80). For instance, the accused may only acknowledge the victim's distress but leave out the acknowledgement of the actual offense (Lazare, 2004, p. 81). Finally, Lazare (2004) concludes by stating that all the non-apology features discussed above are essentially failed acknowledgements of the offense that was committed (p. 83). All of the non-apology features contain either denial, minimization or evasion of responsibility that Benoit (2014) also mentioned in his theory.

Eisinger (2011) has studied non-apologies in a political context and has shown that non-apologies are highly common. He also provides several reasons for this. Eisinger's data in his 2011 study consisted of 32 individual apologies given by American congressmen, and he divided the apologies into three categories: full apologies, denials, and non-apologies (p. 138). In the study, Eisinger (2011) sought to find out if non-apologies are a norm among public officials, and why that may be the case (p. 136). He found out that 11 of the 32 congressmen presented non-apologies, which proves that genuine apologies are rarer than they seem (Eisinger, 2011, p. 139). Eisinger

(2011) provides several reasons for this: non-apologies are often used as a rhetorical tool, and they also seem to restore the reputation of the accused, and work better than simply denying the act (pp. 137–139). In short, the accused can often escape blame by offering a non-apology. In Benoit’s (2014) theory this is referred to as reducing the offensiveness of the act.

Finally, Smith (2005) offers his view on the topic of apologies while providing analyses of various well-known public apologies. He argues that Lazare’s (2004) view on non-apologies is too descriptive, but agrees with Eisinger’s (2011) statement that so-called full apologies are far rarer than many seem to think (Smith, 2005, p. 473). Similarly to Eisinger (2011) and Lazare (2004), Smith (2005) states that apologies often contain deceptive sentiments, but rather than simply describing them, Smith attempts to “prescribe a better means of apologizing and decoding apologies” (p. 474). He adds to Eisinger’s (2011) and Lazare’s (2004) theories by stating that the offender must not only acknowledge the offense but also make sure that both parties agree on the facts surrounding the offense: there should be no discrepancy (2005, p. 476). Smith (2005) further argues that the accused must even recognize why their act is morally wrong (p. 479). In conclusion, he points out that apologies are demanding ethical acts, and that people should learn to distinguish a non-apology from a full one (2005, p. 492).

Based on this discussion, it can be concluded that there is a fine line between genuine and ingenuine apologies, and that it is important to be able to recognize the features of a non-apology as they occur frequently. In fact, Kuusilehto (2018) suggests that Benoit’s (2014) mortification category in the image repair theory could contain two strategies instead of one: a genuine and an ingenuine apology, i.e. a non-apology (p. 8). In conclusion, drawing on Kuusilehto (2018), other researchers’ non-apology theories could complement Benoit’s theory to form an updated and more critical understanding of image repair strategies. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

Denial	Evading responsibility	Reducing offensiveness	Corrective action	Mortification
Simple denial	Provocation	Bolstering		Apology
Shifting blame	Defeasibility	Minimization		Non-apology
	Accident	Differentiation		
	Good intentions	Transcendence		
		Attacking the accuser		
		Compensation		

Figure 2. A combination of Benoit’s (2014) and Lazare’s (2004) theories

3. Data and method

The data for this study consists of 26 public video-form apologies on YouTube, which is an online video-sharing platform. In my study, I am concentrating on apology videos posted by content creators whose videos usually concentrate on entertaining the viewer. All of the videos were posted between the years of 2014 and 2020, and all of the creators are active on YouTube, and have a fair amount of subscribers varying from 100 000 to 100 000 000 at the time of the study. It is important to note that YouTube is a platform where content creators can delete their videos or make them private at any time, but all of the videos used in the study were publicly available when the data was collected.

The data collection process began on September 15th and ended on September 29th in 2020. The data originally consisted of 45 videos, but after in-depth analysis, I narrowed them down to 26 videos. Upon closer inspection, 14 of the original 45 videos did not contain remorse, and 5 of the videos could not be placed in any of the accusation categories, resulting in 26 videos. It must be noted that it is not my intention to bring negative publicity to any of the content creators apologizing for their actions. Therefore, I do not provide direct links to any of the videos, and I will not disclose any information about the accused apart from providing several direct quotes from the apologies as examples. In the examples, I have given pseudonyms to any people or companies that the accused mentions, and I have also omitted other parts where the accused may say something that would reveal their identity.

To find suitable apologies, I used the search words “apology”, “apologize”, and “sorry” on Youtube, and sorted the results by relevance. I ignored all reuploaded apology videos. Before analyzing any possible image repair strategies the accused may have used, I checked whether I could place the apology in any of the three categories. If this was not possible, I ignored the apology. I also ignored all apologies where only denial was used. After deciding that an apology is suitable for the study, I analyzed the content of the videos several times concentrating on one of Benoit’s image repair categories at a time. Then, I concentrated on finding non-apology features, and finally, I looked for additional strategies that were not mentioned in Benoit’s (2014) or Lazare’s (2004) theories. Although the video format of the apologies provides an opportunity for further analysis of the intonation, body language, and facial expressions of the accused, I did not concentrate on those as it is out of the scope of the present study. I only concentrated on what the accused said in the videos.

Eisinger (2011), Lazare (2004) and Smith (2005) agree that a full apology should consist of an acknowledgement of the offense, an acceptance of responsibility, and a display of remorse. However, my data consists of apologies where the accused shows remorse, but may not fully acknowledge the offense or accept responsibility. I have still decided to include apologies that are regarded as incomplete according to Lazare's (2004) theory, because the purpose of this study is to analyze image repair and non-apology strategies, not the features of a full apology. Therefore, my data consists of apologies where it is obvious that the accused shows remorse but may not show other features of a full apology in addition.

The research method used in my study is qualitative content analysis. In addition, I will provide quantitative observations, which will be presented in Figures 3 and 4 in the following section.

4. Analysis and findings

This section will present and discuss the analysis and findings of my study including the overall frequency of strategies including non-apology features, and the distribution of strategies in three different categories. First, the different categories will be discussed. Second, the quantitative findings will be presented, and then, the qualitative findings will be discussed along with several quotes from the apologies. Then, my own reflections on the analysis will be discussed. Finally, other recurrent strategies will be presented and discussed in relation to Benoit's (2014) theory.

4.1 Types of accusations

Before analyzing image repair strategies in the apologies, I categorized the apologies based on what the accused mainly apologized for: racist actions, public feuds, and offensive or harmful content. There are 10 apologies in the racist actions category, 8 in personal feuds, and 8 in offensive and harmful content.

The first category contains apologies regarding racist actions, racial slurs, and racist content that the accused had posted on their social media accounts. The racist content was usually in video-form on YouTube, but some creators were also accused of writing racist posts.

The second category contains apologies on starting public feuds. In this category, the offenders accused or exposed other YouTube creators, which then backfired and made the offenders look bad. Exposing is a term that is often used on YouTube, and it means revealing shocking, private or otherwise unfavourable information about another creator, which gives the creator a negative image and may even threaten their career as a content creator. This kind of situation is rather common on YouTube, and it is often referred to as YouTube drama, where multiple creators start accusing and exposing each other through written posts or videos. Usually these accusations are either false, exaggerated or taken out of context. In conclusion, the category of public feuds could be described as personal feuds that have gone public, and where the viewers can watch the situation unravel. The offenders often end up apologizing for their actions to repair their own image because, in many cases, they may have spread false rumours which may have even ended up in lawsuits against the offender. They may also wish to repair their image because they realize that

they went too far with the accusations and they do not want to lose their subscribers' and other people's respect.

The last category contains apologies on offensive or harmful video content that the accused had posted on their Youtube channel. However, this category does not contain apologies about racist actions or starting feuds, and is therefore not to be confused with the other categories. The category of offensive or harmful content contains a great amount of variety. To provide examples, it includes offenses such as promoting gambling for children, which can be considered harmful content, or attempting to live on a one-pound budget for a day, which the viewers found offensive towards poor people. To conclude, the accusations in the category vary both in type and severity, but they were all found to be either harmful or offensive, or both, by the viewers.

4.2 Quantitative findings

This section will present the quantitative findings of the study. First, the overall frequency of image repair and non-apology strategies will be presented. Second, the distribution of strategies in the different categories will also be presented.

4.2.1 Overall frequency of image repair strategies and non-apology features

As I discarded apologies that did not include a display of remorse, all of the apologies contained *mortification*. The most frequent strategy, found in 46% of the apologies, was *corrective action*. The second most used strategies in the data were *defeasibility* and *good intentions*, which both occurred in 27% of the apologies. The strategy of *bolstering* was used in 19% of the cases. Other strategies also emerged in the apologies, but they did not occur frequently, as shown in Figure 3. However, all of the image repair strategies identified by Benoit (2014) occurred in the apologies.

As shown in Figure 4, altogether 50% of the apologies contained one or more of Lazare's (2004) eight non-apology features. The non-apology feature of *offering a vague acknowledgement of the offense* was used in 12% of the apologies. *Minimizing the offense*, which is also an image repair strategy mentioned by Benoit (2014), also occurred in 12% of the apologies. *Use of passive voice*, *phrasing the offense as conditional*, and *giving an empathic offer* were all individually used in 8% of the apologies. *Questioning the harm that befell the victim* occurred only in one of the

apologies. The only non-apology features that did not emerge in any of the apologies were an *apology to the wrong party* and *for the wrong offense*.

4.2.2 Distribution of strategies depending on the type of accusation

In addition to showing the overall frequencies of the different image repair strategies and non-apology features found in the data, Figures 3 and 4 show the distribution of different strategies depending on the type of accusation. In the racist actions category, *corrective action*, *defeasibility* and *transcendence* were the most common strategies: *corrective action* was used in 70%, *defeasibility* in 40% and *transcendence* in 30% of the apologies. *Bolstering* and *good intentions* emerged in 20%, and *provocation*, *accident* and *attacking the accuser* in 10% of the apologies.

In the public feuds category, *good intentions* and *corrective action* were both used in 38% of the apologies, and *simple denial*, *bolstering*, *minimization*, and *accident* in 25% of the apologies. *Shifting blame*, *differentiation* and *provocation* all emerged in only one apology in the category.

In the third category, in apologies for offensive or harmful content, *defeasibility* was used in 38% of the apologies, and *good intentions* and *corrective action* were both used in 25% of the apologies. *Simple denial*, *bolstering*, *minimization*, *differentiation*, *transcendence* and *compensation* all occurred in only one apology.

Non-apology features occurred throughout all categories: in 40% of the apologies in the racist actions category, 50% in the public feuds category, and 63% in the offensive and harmful content category. In the racist actions category, *the use of passive voice* occurred in 20% of the apologies, and *phrasing the offense as conditional* and *the use of an empathic offer* occurred in one apology. In the public feuds category, *offering an incomplete acknowledgement of the offense*, and *minimizing the offense* both occurred in 25% of the apologies. In the offensive and harmful content category, *offering an incomplete acknowledgement of the offense*, *phrasing the offense as conditional*, *questioning the harm that befell the victim*, *minimizing the offense*, and *using an empathic offer* all emerged in one apology. The distribution of image repair strategies is shown below in Figure 3, and Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of non-apology features.

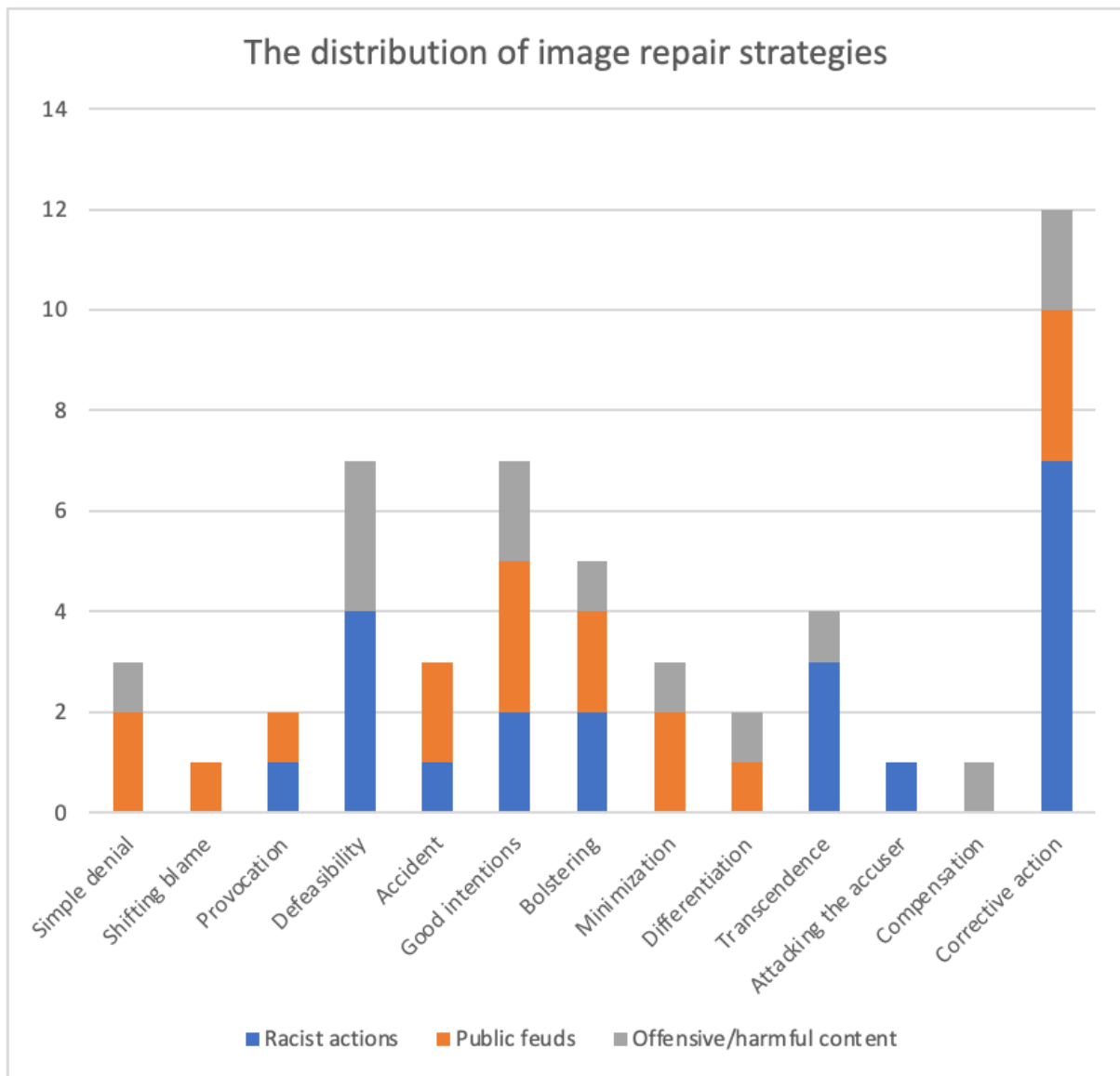


Figure 3. *The distribution of image repair strategies*

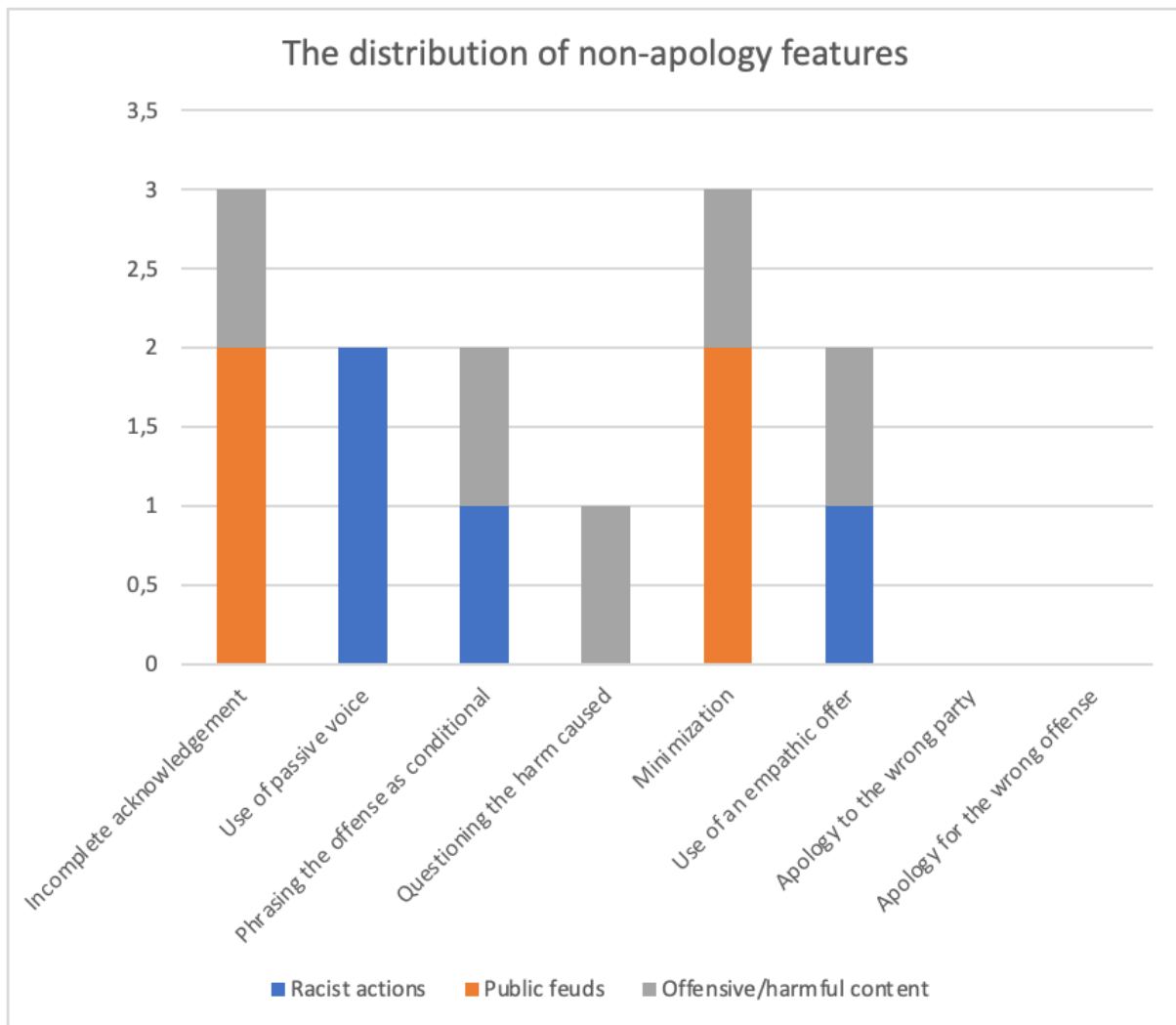


Figure 4. *The distribution of non-apology features*

4.3 Qualitative findings

This section will discuss the qualitative findings of the study. The section includes my own reflections on the analysis, plausible explanations for the findings, and general discussion along with illustrative quotes from the apology videos. Last, other recurring strategies that were not mentioned in Benoit's (2014) theory will be analyzed and discussed.

4.3.1 Strategies in accusations of racist actions

Regarding accusations of racist actions, the most used strategy was to delete the racist content on the social media platform where it was posted, and also possibly posting content that speaks for

racial equality instead. In this way, the accused would use the strategy of *corrective action* as discussed in section 4.3.6. Furthermore, the accused often assured the viewers that they would educate themselves on the history of, in particular, the oppression of the race that they had offended. Some creators also said that they have become activists for racial equality, and they would make up for their hurtful content in that way.

The second most prominent strategy in the category was *defeasibility*, which showed in the accused saying that they were not knowledgeable that the act would be considered racist at the time of posting the content, as discussed in section 4.3.6. The accused often pleaded that if they had known better, they would never have created such hurtful content. Defeasibility shows in the following quote (1) from one of the apologies.

- 1) I didn't really know what it was up until literally like a month ago, I knew the term, I didn't quite know any of the historical background and any of that. I just knew, in my head, that that's not what I'm doing. What I'm doing is I'm person x [...] I'm just becoming a character, I'm not making fun of them for being black.

Last, *transcendence* was the third most common strategy in the category. The accused often stated that they have many friends of different ethnicities, while perhaps hoping that that would make the viewers view the act as less offensive. In some cases, the accused stated that the act was a part of a larger context such as an inside joke, and that it had been misunderstood. In this way, they would attempt to make the audience see the act in a broader context where it would hopefully be seen as less offensive.

4.3.2 Strategies in public feuds

Corrective action in the category of public feuds emerged in similar ways with the previous category: the accused would delete the content where they exposed or accused the other person, stated that they had apologized to the person in question, and fixed the issue out of the public eye. The *good intentions* strategy emerged when the accused stated that they did not mean to bring any harm to the person they accused, which is admittedly highly suspicious. Nevertheless, it was the most common strategy in the category along with corrective action.

The second most common strategies were *bolstering*, *minimization* and *accident*. Bolstering emerged when the accused reminded the viewers that they have always been a loving and caring

person, and that their YouTube channel is all-inclusive, as shown in the quote (2) below. In this way, the accused attempts to make the audience see them in a more positive light and direct the viewers' attention away from the offense.

- 2) I'm so fucking proud to own an inclusive company. I've created products for everyone [...] most importantly, I want you guys to remember that all beauty matters. You are accepted in company x. I will always use my platform and my voice for good. I always stood up for what is right and I always will. Sometimes it can be misconstrued for drama, or tea, but the message was always no, you have to do right.

Minimization showed in many ways in the apologies. To give an example, some of the accused stated that they had been about to do something even worse, but did not do it. Some claimed that the person they accused or exposed had been warned about it beforehand. Some simply stated that they think that the offense is not serious. In this way, the accused minimized the offense while hoping that the audience would think that the offense is not as harmful as it seems.

Some of the accused also attempted to appeal to the viewers by saying that the act was an *accident* and that it simply happened in the heat of the moment, or blaming the fact that they had accidentally consumed too much alcohol and were not thinking clearly, with the result that they had falsely accused or exposed others.

4.3.3 Strategies in accusations of offensive and harmful content

There were no significant differences in the image repair strategies used in the category of offensive and harmful content when compared with the other categories. There were not many frequently occurring strategies in the category, and many of them were used in only one apology. The most common strategies will only be briefly discussed, as they have already been touched upon in the previous sections.

As in the racist actions category, *defeasibility* emerged in the accused stating that they did not know that the act would be regarded as harmful or offensive. Other recurring strategies in the category were *good intentions* and *corrective action*. Good intentions showed in the accused saying that the actions they performed in the offensive video that they posted were meant to be taken as a joke, and that the only goal of the accused was to entertain the viewers. Lastly, corrective action

showed in the accused promising that they would take action to educate and better themselves so that the act would not happen again. This is shown in the following quote (3).

- 3) I have done everything I can to right my wrongs. [...] That's exactly why I should be talking about it and realize how harmful and hurtful that can be. I need to make a difference so other people won't make the same mistakes I did. [...] I am going to be the proof that people can change.

Here the accused assures and convinces the audience that they will change and even make other people change to prevent the offense from happening again.

4.3.4 Frequency of non-apology features

Regarding non-apology features, *use of passive voice* occurred only in apologies regarding racist actions, and *questioning the harm caused to the victim* occurred only in the offensive and harmful content category. The following quote (4) from one of the apologies in the offensive and harmful content category contains various non-apology features, including *phrasing the offense as conditional*, *giving an empathic offer*, and *giving an incomplete acknowledgement of the offense*.

- 4) I'm sorry if I offended anyone by saying that I wasn't excited to do, like, schoolwork, and anything else I said that made me sound like, kind of like an idiot.

Non-apology features were the most common in the offensive and harmful content category, which could be due to the fact that the offenses in the category also had the most variation. It is difficult to make generalizations based on the findings, but it is notable that the frequency of non-apology features was rather high in the data as they emerged in half of the apologies. The findings correspond with Eisinger's (2004), Lazare's (2011) and Smith's (2005) arguments that non-apology features are common in apologies, and also show that it is important to take non-apology features into account when studying image repair strategies.

4.3.5 Other recurrent strategies

When analyzing the apology videos, I also discovered a few strategies that were not mentioned in either Benoit's (2014) or Lazare's (2004) theories. Even if they cannot be considered to be image repair strategies, they were recurrent in the data, and they seemed to be used to aid the image repair process of the accused.

In around half of the videos the accused made sure to emphasize that their actions happened a long time ago. In addition, the accused simultaneously said that they have no idea who the person that committed the offense was, which they probably said in order to *reduce offensiveness* and to *differentiate* their past actions from the present while *minimizing the offense*. Furthermore, some of the accused said that they were in a bad place at the time of committing the offense, or that they had a difficult childhood, which has no connection to the offense itself but is rather used to make the audience feel sorry for them. Seeking sympathy could go under Benoit's (2014) *reducing offensiveness* category.

Another interesting strategy was either showing how much power the accused has in comparison to the viewer, or showing vulnerability. This showed in the filming location and in the appearance of the accused. There was a big contrast: some creators decided to show their luxurious mansion or car in the background in the video, and some filmed the apology in an everyday environment such as their bathroom or bed. In both extremes, the filming location often differed from their other, earlier videos. The accused's appearance also matched the background: if the filming location showed how much financial power the accused has, they also often wore clothes by luxury brands. By doing this, the accused probably hoped that the viewer would be more willing to forgive the offense. This could be related to *bolstering* in Benoit's (2014) *reducing offensiveness* category.

If the video was, on the other hand, filmed in a more humble environment such as a standard bathroom, the accused also had no makeup on, and they wore regular everyday clothes or pajamas. In these cases, the accused perhaps hoped that when they show vulnerability and relatability, the audience may forgive them. This can also be related to the strategy of seeking sympathy discussed above.

Being a content creator on Youtube is a career for many people, and many creators seem to treat their channel as a kind of a business. The last recurrent strategy I discovered was the accused promoting their own channel at the end of the apology. To give an example, some of the accused who did this said that they will be making many interesting videos in the future, while probably

hoping that the viewer would come back to watch the videos despite the accusations that the creator faced. A few creators also added a merchandise advertisement at the end of the apology video. The purpose of this is unclear, as it is unlikely that the viewer would support the accused financially after viewing the apology video. The strategy of the accused promoting their own channel could be linked with *bolstering*. It could also go under the *evading responsibility* category in Benoit's (2014) theory because the accused attempts to turn the viewer's attention away from the offense and the apology, and focuses on something positive instead, and therefore, attempts to evade responsibility. The following quote (5) is from one of the apologies in the public feuds category where the accused ends the apology by promoting their channel and advertising merchandise.

- 5) We're fandom x, thank you to all who belong in fandom x. Keep on dabbing on them haters, merch link in bio. I will see you tomorrow because [the slogan of the channel], peace! [...] What's popping, check out this new merch, that merch is hot boy! [...] Limited time. Check out yesterday's vlog because it's super lit. Plus, I've a second channel.

In total, I discovered five recurrent image repair features that were not explicitly mentioned in Benoit's (2014) or Lazare's (2004) theories: 1) *emphasizing that a lot of time has passed since the offense*, 2) *seeking sympathy*, 3) *showing power*, 4) *showing vulnerability*, and 5) *promotion*. Although many of these strategies are unique to video-form apologies, they could still be added to complement Benoit's (2014) image repair theory.

4.3.6 Reflections on the analysis

When I analyzed the apologies and attempted to discover image repair strategies and non-apology features, I encountered difficulties with interpreting what exactly I could place under the corrective action and defeasibility strategies. The strategy of *corrective action* occurred in apologies where the accused stated that they would be taking time off of social media in order to reflect on their actions, and they further assured the viewer that they would change, and become a better person as a result. The accused also added that they would educate themselves to prevent the act from occurring again. It can be argued that this is questionable as the viewer has no way of knowing whether the person is actually taking on concrete corrective action or not. Nevertheless, it can still be considered to be an image repair strategy that occurred frequently in the data.

Defeasibility was another frequently occurring strategy that was challenging to analyze. In the cases where defeasibility emerged, the accused pleaded that they did not know that the act they committed would be regarded as offensive or harmful when they committed it. As shown in Figure 3, this was common in accusations of racist actions and offensive or harmful content. In Benoit's (2014) theory, defeasibility is used to make the audience think that the accused cannot be held accountable due to their lack of knowledge or control over the situation (p. 23). In my study, the accused who pleaded that they were not knowledgeable of the harmfulness of their actions did not express that they should not be held accountable for the action. However, I decided to put cases where the accused claimed to have lack of knowledge over the offense under the defeasibility strategy.

Regarding non-apology features, the finding that *an apology to the wrong party* did not occur in any of the apologies requires clarification. Especially in public feud cases, the accused often apologized to the audience although it can be agreed that they should have apologized to the person they offended. In these cases, it is likely that the accused did, in fact, apologize to the person they offended in private, but also decided that they owe an apology to the audience as well in order to repair their own image. Thus, I decided not to count these apologies as apologizing to the wrong party as it is likely that the accused did apologize to the victim personally as well, and there was no proof that the accused would not have done that.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the study revealed that both Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies and Lazare's (2004) non-apology features were common in the data. All image repair strategies discussed in Benoit's (2014) theory emerged in the apologies, and non-apology features occurred in exactly half of the apologies. The findings also show that some strategies were more common than others, and many themes emerged.

The most common image repair strategy was corrective action, and defeasibility and good intentions were also frequent. The least popular strategies were attacking the accuser, compensation, and shifting blame. Strategies under Benoit's (2014) reducing offensiveness category were the most common across the categories, and denial was used the least. Corrective action was used as much as reducing offensiveness in the racist actions category, and in the other two categories it was the second least used one.

Half of the apologies contained non-apology features in some form. Although there were no features that would have been significantly more or less common than others, the findings still show that non-apologies are a frequent occurrence in apologies. Furthermore, they show that the variety of different strategies that emerge in apologies is large and is not limited to the 14 strategies discussed in Benoit's (2014) theory. The additional findings regarding other recurrent strategies in the data also correspond with that finding.

I recognize that the data set used in this study is small, and it is therefore difficult to make generalizations based on the findings. Moreover, the qualitative content analysis method used in the study provides a possibility for multiple interpretations of the image repair strategies and non-apology features used in individual apologies, and other researchers may challenge some of my interpretations. As for the different categories, the category of offensive or harmful content included apologies on many different kinds of offenses, which makes it a vague category when compared with the other two, which contain more specific types of offenses. Although the study could perhaps be improved in these respects, the overall findings are nevertheless interesting and provide room for further investigation of video-form apologies.

Finally, there is further research to be done especially when it comes to apologies on social media and video-form apologies. In this study, I did not consider how the apologies were received or the success of the different strategies. The audience is a crucial factor in the apology process, and it requires further investigation. Analysis of gestures, intonation, and facial expressions and how they may relate to the sincerity of the apology and to the strategies in video-form apologies could

also be carried out. The additional strategies I discovered also require more research to determine how frequent they actually are, and whether they could provide a better understanding of some of the image repair strategies discussed. To conclude, there is little research done on social media apologies, especially those in video-form, and the findings of this study show that there is more work to be done in the field.

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