"GIRL, YOU'RE STILL CANCELLED": ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC 'CANCEL CULTURE' APOLOGIES AND RESPONSES

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Julkisten anteeksipyyntöjen määrä on kasvanut viimeisten vuosikymmenten aikana. Tiedot ja huhut erilaisista julkisuudenhenkilöiden tekemistä rikkeistä leviävät nopeasti sosiaalisen median alustoilla, minkä lisäksi 2020-luvun alun "cancel-kulttuuri" voi toimia pelotteena sille, että tiedon leviämiseen on reagoitava nopealla julkisella lausunnolla. Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan neljää julkisuudenhenkilön esittämää anteeksipyyntöä sekä niihin sosiaalisen median palvelu X:ssä (ent. Twitter) reagoivia kommentteja. Tutkielman tavoitteena oli selvittää, kuinka anteeksipyynnöissä käytettiin interpersonaalisten anteeksipyyntöjen elementtejä sekä imagonkorjausstrategioita, ja kuinka anteeksipyyntöjen hyväksymistä tai torjumista perusteltiin sosiaalisessa mediassa. Lisäksi tutkittiin, millaisia teemoja tutkimusmateriaalissa esiintyi.

Analyysissa selvisi, että anteeksipyynnöissä hyödynnettiin laajalti interpersonaalisten anteeksipyyntöjen elementtejä ja imagonkorjausstrategioita, mutta kaikki anteeksipyynnöistä eivät olleet teknisesti hyväksyttäviä. Anteeksipyyntöjen temaattisessa analyysissa nousi esiin erityisesti ihmisen erehtyväisen luonteen, henkilökohtaisen kasvukyvyn ja virheistä oppimisen korostaminen. Enemmistö twiiteistä suhtautui anteeksipyyntöihin kielteisesti: X:n käyttäjät kokivat anteeksipyyntöjen olevan huonoja, riittämättömiä ja teennäisiä, ja erityisesti julkisuudenhenkilöiden välinpitämättömiksi ja itsekeskeisiksi arvioituihin ilmauksiin suhtauduttiin negatiivisesti. Anteeksipyyntöjä, jotka saivat myös positiivista palautetta ja jotka olivat teoriassa hyväksyttäviä, arveltiin julkisuudenhenkilöiden pr-tiimien kirjoittamiksi. Vastaustwiitteihin sisältyi myös anteeksipyyntöjen ja niiden tekijöiden pilkkaamista sekä anteeksipyyntöjen arvioimista aiempiin, negatiivisen vastaanoton saaneisiin anteeksipyyntöihin verraten. Tutkimuksen löydökset tukevat aiempia tutkimustuloksia, joiden mukaan julkisuudenhenkilöiden anteeksipyyntöihin suhtaudutaan usein negatiivisesti, koska niiden autenttisuutta on vaikea todentaa ja koska "cancellattaviin" henkilöihin voi olla suorastaan katarttista kohdistaa kielteisyyttä ja loukkauksia.

Asiasanat public apologies, cancel culture, content analysis, thematic analysis, twitter

Säilytyspaikka Jyväskylän yliopisto

Muita tietoja

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1   INTRODUCTION

The concepts of public shaming and social ostracizing are not new: they have existed in some form for centuries in many different societies and were often used as both legal methods of punishment and as a source of entertainment for the common people. For example, the pillory and stocks are well-known examples of devices which were used for punishment and public humiliation: the apparatuses were especially designed to confine prisoners by their neck and hands or feet and thus, rendering them helpless and exposing them to public humiliation (Scott 2009: 234-235).

Badges of shame are another, less physically confining method of public shaming and ostracizing. Badges of shame or stigmas are distinctive symbols or pieces of clothing which specific groups or individuals are required to wear for humiliation, persecution, or distinguishment ("Badge of shame" 2024). Famous examples of this form of shaming include the dunce cap, which was placed on the head of English and American schoolchildren who were slow to learn or disrupted the lessons, and different pieces of clothing, such as striped prison uniforms, or armbands and badges, most notably utilized in German-occupied Europe in the mid-1900s ("Badge of shame" 2024).

Although literal pillories or badges of shame are not similarly used in today's modern world, the concept of public shaming has not disappeared: instead, it has changed and is now performed online in a rapidly increasing manner (Muir, Roberts & Sheridan 2020: 1). "Canceling" is considered a type of online shaming, and according to Merriam-Webster (2024b), canceling is a colloquial term for withdrawing support from someone because of their harmful or offensive behavior, especially on social media. The term has become so well-known and widely used in the late 2010s and early 2020s even outside of social media, that canceling in this context has been added to English dictionaries.

Furthermore, canceling has become such a widely recognized practice that it is now often referred to as an act of "cancel culture", the phenomenon of engaging in "mass canceling" (Merriam-Webster 2024c). However, the discourse surrounding

cancel culture and its definition is currently divided: some view the manifestations of the phenomenon as witch-hunts and mob mentality with the aims of censoring and stifling free speech, whereas others consider it as actions which intend to achieve social justice by demanding accountability and addressing abuses of power (Vogels et al. 2021; Bouvier & Machin 2021: 323–324; Merriam-Webster 2024c; Lewis & Christin 2022: 1633).

As the term *canceling*, as it has been defined in dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster (2024b), means withdrawing support from someone by means such as publicly boycotting, blacklisting, unfollowing, or shaming them, it has a strong negative connotation. Therefore, a seemingly more neutral term for the phenomenon, which is sometimes used, is "call-out culture": the term *call-out* refers to people questioning or pointing out — "calling out" — someone's morally or socially unacceptable or offensive behavior with the goal of getting the called-out person to reflect on their wrongdoings, change their behavior, and apologize (Brock 2020: 220).

As cancel culture and "cancelations" — the processes of canceling — have become more prevalent, so has the people's need to avoid getting canceled. Thus, public figures, companies and other facets tend to offer public apologies for different misdemeanors more often today than a decade or two ago to safe face and to avoid negative social media attention (Lazare 2005: 12). As a cancelation could be detrimental for business or reputation, public apologies have recently been offered for even decades-old offenses (Ironmonger 2022). Simultaneously, it has been debated whether cancel culture makes people face actual consequences for their actions, or if the phenomenon is a "paper tiger": seemingly powerful, but in reality, ineffectual (Merriam-Webster 2024d).

In this thesis, my aim is to analyze celebrities' apologies and the public's reactions to said apologies to find out information about contemporary public celebrity apologies which relate to the phenomenon of cancel culture. I am interested in seeing whether the apologies are theoretically effective and acceptable as interpersonal apologies, and what kind of image repair strategies the celebrities use when discussing their offensive acts. I also wish to examine if the public accepts or rejects the apologies, and what sort of themes can be observed from the data.

Both public and interpersonal apologies have been studied extensively, for example by Lazare (2005) and Benoit (2014). When it comes to the reception, for example Ruane and Cerulo (2014) and Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018) have studied public apologies' acceptance. According to Ruane and Cerulo (2014: 144), celebrities' elevated status in the society does not mean their apologies' acceptance is given; on the contrary, Bouvier and Machin (2021: 317–318) claim they are more often rejected, because the offenses are seen as distinct violations of societal moral values.

Public apologies have also seemingly become a constant and regular topic in media. Apologies are regularly given by different public figures and companies, and in following, the apologies are reported and discussed on both traditional and social media platforms. The phenomenon of providing public apologies and discussing them seems to be global; for example, in Finland the year 2023 has included news reports revolving around apologies given by politicians, such as Minister of Finance Riikka Purra, and celebrities, such as actor Aku Hirviniemi. The news articles have included commentary and analysis on the celebrities' apologies, for example expert assessments regarding their authenticity and success (Kononen 2023), and subsequently, reports on the effects the apologies and their receptions have had on the careers and lives of the celebrities—whether they have been canceled (Pitkänen 2023).

The results of the apologies' analysis can offer insight into the style and topic choices of contemporary public apologies, such as how the celebrities appeal to their audience to earn forgiveness. Additionally, the analysis of the apologies' responses could shed more light on what kind of qualities are expected from effective public apologies, especially during times when those statements are more public, and perhaps under more scrutiny, than ever. Furthermore, the findings could strengthen Ruane and Cerulo's (2014) and Bouvier and Machin's (2021) conclusions on the low acceptance rate of public apologies, as the analysis could show whether the online commentary seemingly aims to actively cancel the celebrities to publicly shame and ostracize them, or "call them out" to hold them accountable for their actions. As cancel culture is a relatively new phenomenon, its different aspects have not yet been studied extensively.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Defining social media and new media

The so-called "Web 2.0" started to gain traction in the early 2000s, when internet usage and accessibility became more common. Web 2.0 refers to internet or network which is more developed, versatile, and multifaceted platform compared to the early internet, "Web 1.0" (Fuchs 2017: 34-35, Zappavigna 2013: 2). One major difference between these "webs" has been the change from a static informational network to an interpersonal resource, where users communicate with each other online and participate in content creation (Zappavigna 2013: 2, Fuchs 2017: 46). According to Fuchs (2017: 46), the most recent concept, "Web 3.0", refers to a network system of "human co-operation"—communication which involves developing and adding to existing entities.

The development of Web 2.0 has led to the development of social media. *Social media* is an umbrella term for internet-based applications which can be used to socially interact with other users, and most commonly the term refers to social networking services (Zappavigna 2013: 2, 5). Social networking services or SNSs have basic functions which include profile creation, the possibility to affiliate to other users in some manner (e.g., friending, subscribing, or following), viewing those users' activities, and privacy customization (Zappavigna 2013: 5). Thus, today's most popular social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter) and TikTok all classify as SNSs.

Furthermore, according to Boyd (2011: 39), SNSs are "networked publics" with an "imagined collective" which arises, for example, from the practices of its users and affordances of technology. These affordances include persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability (Boyd 2011: 46). Persistence refers to the way how content on SNSs can be captured and archived; replicability to the way contents can be duplicated;

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scalability to the broad visibility the content can achieve; and searchability to how content can be accessed via search (Zappavigna 2013: 5). For example, contents can be categorized with the use of hashtags to make them easy to access.

As digital media has become more accessible, more and more people, especially younger generations, use digital media sources to consume news content (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2022: 42). Digital media platforms, which have also been referred to as new media, have started to produce news (especially related to entertainment) by searching trending social media topics (Nieborg & Poell 2018: 4275). Thus — as discussed by for example Hess and Waller (2014: 106) — new media uses content originally produced by social media users to create news. Media can also interpret and recontextualize the original material to showcase viewpoints or narratives which will engage their audience the most (Hess & Waller 2014: 106). Media builds the picture we have of our society and therefore, the judgements individuals face for their actions on media can have an impact on a larger scale. For example, according to Lewis and Christin (2022: 1636), tabloid news organizations have treated celebrity scandals as violations of existing cultural norms.

It has been said that media has a role as a watchdog of society: journalists have an important task in revealing corruption and misuse of power in governments and elsewhere where power is held in a democratic society. Hess and Waller (2014: 104-105) suggest that in modern societies this watchdog-role has extended from journalists to ordinary people equipped with technological devices and social media access. Hess and Waller (2014: 105) also argue that as ordinary people can upload anything they see — including bad behavior, misdemeanors, and crimes — online in photo, audio, and video format, they have a growing role in the surveillance of the digital age. According to Hess and Waller (2014: 106-107), in their role as a watchdog of society, new media can use this "surveillance material" gathered by ordinary citizens to expose and shame individuals, both public figures and private people, on digital spaces to patrol the borders of society, uphold moral values, and discourage bad behavior. Thus, new media can also function as a platform for public shaming — as a digital pillory (Hess & Waller 2014: 105).

2.1.1 Parasocial relationships on social media

Parasocial relationship refers to a one-sided relationship which can form, for example, through a television screen or on social media; in a situation where a person can feel they are in a real, interpersonal interaction, even though the communication is not directed towards them specifically (Reinikainen 2019: 103). The concept of parasocial relationships was first introduced regarding radio and television personalities, but today the topic is often researched in relation to social media (Reinikainen 2019: 103-104). Reinikainen (2019: 105) describes that parasocial relationships can be formed, for

example, with social media influencers, representers of different businesses, and even artificial intelligence, robots, and avatars. A parasocial relationship can include strong emotional experiences and increase media engagement (Reinikainen 2019: 104).

Traditionally a parasocial relationship has been defined by containing little to no interaction or reciprocity, as parasocial relationships mostly developed in situations in which interactions were targeted to large audiences, such as news broadcasts or radio programs (Reinikainen 2019: 105). Simultaneously, social media has been defined inherently as social, but according to Reinikainen (2019: 105-106), social media can still produce parasocial experiences. Reinikainen (2019: 106) states that even a possibility of an interaction can help to establish a parasocial relationship: if a social media influencer responds to their follower's comment on social media, the other followers' parasocial relationships with the influencer can strengthen as well.

A good parasocial relationship can help better the public image of the relationship's focus, meaning the celebrity or social media influencer the audience is engaging with. Reinikainen (2019: 107) also defines parasocial relationship as capital which a celebrity, brand, or another party, whose content is being consumed, can benefit from. By *capital* Reinikainen (2019: 107) refers to a situation in which for example a social media influencer has developed a good parasocial relationship with their followers (i.e., the followers feel close to the influencer and value their opinion) and as a result, can get collaborations and sponsorships from brands who are interested in "borrowing" the parasocial capital the influencer has gained. The negative side of parasocial relationships lies in their restrictiveness: as an image of a person perceived only through (social) media is partial, fragmented, and almost always lacking, the image can easily become negative and result in harassment or bullying (Reinikainen 2019: 106).

2.2 Cancel culture

Merriam-Webster (2024b, 2024c) defines *cancel culture* as "the practice or tendency of engaging in mass canceling (to withdraw one's support for someone […] publicly and especially on social media) as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure". In other words, individual social media users can loosely agree to stop supporting and following a person or a company who has in some way acted offensively or against common morals, meaning either illegal activities or some other kind of unethical or unwanted behavior. The antecedents and similar terms to canceling are for example *boycotting* and *blacklisting* (Clark 2020), but in the early 2020s, canceling is the contemporary, colloquial expression used to describe withdrawing support: like different services and subscriptions can be canceled, so can the support of individuals.

As canceling is defined as a withdrawal of support, at least for the purposes of this study cancel culture and canceling will be considered as something that only affects celebrities, public figures and companies, as individual private people do not have the same public recognition or support as public figures. However, public online shaming does happen to private people as well. For example, in 2018, a US government employee was filmed acting out and harassing a flight attendant on an airplane and in following, getting removed from the flight. The video gathered millions of views and it resulted in the said government employee being fired from their job (McCahill 2018).

The term canceling originates from queer communities of color and more specifically, Black Twitter, which is an internet community of mostly Black American individuals, who use the social media platform X — formerly known as Twitter — to discuss matters of black community and trending cultural topics (Brock 2012: 529, Clark 2020). Although canceling and a related term, calling out, were originally used on Black Twitter in relation to critique problems and inequality on a broad, societal scale, the terms' meaning has since been switching towards to pointing out (or "calling out") individual transgressions, sometimes with an approach resembling a mob mentality - like aggression (Brock 2020: 220). As canceling has become a familiar term on social media, I have personally observed it also being used in a more lighthearted manner, such as warning others to mind their words so they "do not get canceled" or by stating "please do not cancel me for saying this" before expressing controversial opinions — however, this lighthearted manner of using the term as a disclaimer also seems to somewhat acknowledge the existence of cancel culture and its impact.

While others view cancel culture as a form of public shaming, others consider it method of attaining social justice and accountability. Bouvier and Machin (2021: 323–324) point out that according to their findings, the people who participate in cancel culture can see themselves as activists fighting for social justice, and as part of a movement with a "voice from below" because of the equalizing nature of social media. Ng (2020) further defines cancel culture as a way for the "previously silenced groups", such as minorities, to influence the power held by the traditionally privileged. Furthermore, as shown by a survey done in 2020, some see canceling as means to hold people accountable for their actions and as an act of social justice, especially in cases where judicial consequences are not possible — simultaneously others see canceling as a punishment, and as an unfair method of silencing people using mob mentality (Vogels et al. 2021). As presented in chapter 2.1, media can function as an executioner for these punishments of canceling by reporting of the misbehavior of individuals.

According to Bouvier and Machin (2021: 308, 324), social media discussions are often polarized rather than nuanced, and narratives and stances become more binary and black-and-white online: people who are perceived to act against social norms and

morals can become "folk devils" in the eyes of the public. In addition, Brooks (2019, cited in Ng 2020) mentions the "zeal for ideological purity" in these online judgements and how it leads to different offenses being judged the same way: it does not always seem to matter if a person made a one-time lapse in judgement a decade ago or several criminal offenses, the consequences are the same. Cancel culture in general and the attitudes towards it also correlate with political views. A survey by Vogels et al. (2021), which was conducted in the United States in 2020, showed that conservative Republicans were more likely to define cancel culture as a form of censorship, whereas liberal Democrats were more likely to describe it as actions taken to hold a person accountable.

Some of the most well-known targets of modern-day cancel culture have been for example J.K. Rowling, the author of *Harry Potter* series, who was canceled for her allegedly transphobic comments, and Kevin Spacey, an actor who faced multiple sexual assault allegations (Gardner 2023; McNamara 2023). When it comes to actual consequences, it is questionable how well canceling works. In case of Rowling, the author's posts on X (Twitter) related to sex and gender were first criticized as being transphobic and ignorant in 2020, but they continue to be brought up in relation to Rowling years later (Gardner 2023). For example, a *Harry Potter* related video game named *Hogwarts Legacy* was released in early 2023, and its long-anticipated launch was colored by controversy surrounding Rowling's perceived views of the LGBTQ+ community: some parties chose to boycott the game refusing to purchase it or to release any related content or reviews (Martens & Parvini 2023).

Different companies and brands have also faced cancelation for reasons such as racism or racial insensitivity, going against their own values, or mistreating employees. As a recent example, the fashion house Balenciaga faced controversy in 2022 for an advertisement campaign featuring children posing with teddy bears which were dressed in bondage harnesses and costumes; many considered the campaign as exploitative to children and thought it was condoning pedophilia, and the hashtag #cancelBalenciaga started to trend on social media (Issawi 2023).

The collaborators, business partners, or other factions related to a canceled party are often asked or feel the need themselves to comment on the topic as well, as an offensive act can cause harm and repercussions to people associated with the perpetrator (Benoit 2014: 66). These associates can for example express their support or choose to distance themselves from the canceled party and their opinions in some way: in J.K. Rowling's case, several actors and the producer of the *Harry Potter* movies released statements in which they expressed that they do not share Rowling's views (Gardner 2023).

2.2.1 Cancel culture as a form of entertainment

Cancel culture is a social media phenomenon, so the process of canceling mainly takes place on social media platforms although it is often discussed on digital news media as well. Lewis and Christin (2022) examine the entertainment value of "platform drama" which can occur on different social media platforms. As an example, Lewis and Christin (2022: 1632-1633) use the case of James Charles and Tati Westbrook, two popular make-up artists and influencers, who engaged in a very public feud on YouTube in 2019. Both Charles' and Westbrook's videos relating to the "drama" gathered tens of millions of views and it affected their subscriptions amounts on the platform, as both Charles and Westbrook got canceled in the process (Tietjen 2019). Thus, Lewis and Christin (2022: 1638) conceptualize "platform drama" and cancel culture as a hybrid genre which combines the genres of gossip and scandal journalism, and the broader role of media in cultural and political debates: cancel culture is both entertainment and a way to negotiate social and moral values in a society.

As an example of the entertainment aspect, some news sites seem to report regularly which celebrities have been canceled and why (Thomas 2021, 2022). On YouTube, some channels focus solely on reporting and commenting on "platform drama", and videos listing, rating, and mocking celebrities' apologies can have tens of millions of views (Lewis & Christin 2022: 1633; penguinz0 2020; PewDiePie 2018). Furthermore, Bouvier and Machin (2021: 320–321) discuss the use of humor, memes, and mockery as a part of cancel culture: as the canceled person is othered from the social group and/or is perceived not to share the same moral values as others, they become an easy target for ridicule. This again relates to the aspect of public shaming and to the concept of the "ideological square" defined by van Dijk (1998: 267), which further discusses the othering nature of in-group and out-group polarization. According to van Dijk (1998: 267), when a person is placed outside of an ideological square, i.e., is one of "them" instead of one of "us", all their negative qualities and attributes are emphasized, and positive qualities and attributes are correspondingly minimized.

Using humor is both an important part of the bonding process of affective communities, and a common type of communication on social media, so it can easily become a part of the "us against them" -narratives of cancelation processes (Bouvier & Machin 2021: 321). Bouvier and Machin (2021: 320) report that during a cancelation process social media can fill with humorous posts about the situation and its participants, both lighthearted and malicious ones: another discernible theme in cancel culture discourse is aggression and insults, and some targets of cancelations have even received death threats. As the offenses related to cancel culture and cancelations are more often moral errors than criminal violations, these kinds of extreme reactions are most likely both linked to and the result of the offenders' othering and placement outside of the ideological square.

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that social media discussions do not necessarily reflect public opinions related to the canceled people and their situations: individuals who engage in active cancelations by commenting the situations on social media are only a minority (Sandlin & Gracyalny 2018: 402). According to Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 402), not every social media user actively posts or comments on social media platforms, and the ones that do can have a predetermined opinion on the canceled individual which influences them to, for example, defend or condemn the canceled party. Furthermore, the viewpoints presented online—whether given by individuals or by news media—may influence the opinions of social media users, and negative viewpoints are often more engaging than positive ones (Sandlin & Gracyalny 2018: 394, 401).

2.2.2   Consequences and impact of cancel culture

The actual consequences of cancel culture and its impact on the canceled parties are unclear, and it is debatable if cancelations have any real repercussions—for example Garel (2018) states canceling does not have any meaningful effect on the canceled persons' life. However, losing followers and subscribers on social media platforms usually affects a social media influencers' income, as the amount of affiliation and earnings on SNSs are often connected. Reportedly, many celebrities have lost financial opportunities because of their cancelation or involvement in "platform drama": for example, James Charles took down his online merchandise store and canceled his tour after the feud with Tati Westbrook (Tietjen 2019).

Then again, it could be argued that on a larger scale the losses are not permanent: following the feud, Charles lost 2.6 million subscribers on YouTube, but has 23.8 million subscribers today—over 10 million more than in 2019—even after being canceled again in 2021 (Garrity 2021; James Charles 2023). "Platform drama" and offensive acts garner a lot of attention and views, which can be transformed into earnings (Garel 2018). Furthermore, previously mentioned J.K. Rowling has made a vast fortune with *Harry Potter* franchise, and keeps earning income as new films adaptations, merchandise and other products related to the "Wizarding World" are published—thus, it is arguable that Rowling's cancelation has had the wanted impact. On the other hand, the actor Kevin Spacey's career has been effectively halted for several years after his initial assault accusations and cancelation in 2017 (Bansinath 2022). It should also be noted that Spacey's alleged actions were against the law whereas Rowling's were not, which is probably one of the reasons for the inequality of the consequences they have faced.

Concrete consequences such as financial losses, legal actions and lost business opportunities are easy to grasp, but the consequences of a cancelation to the canceled person's personal life or mental health are rarely discussed. Hess and Waller (2014:

102) discuss the toll a public shaming can take on an ordinary person's life: in their article's example case, a woman suffered from a depression and was medicated after being publicly shamed and humiliated for urinating on her stadium seat during a sports match. Hess and Waller (2014: 103, 108) also argue that whereas historical and physical forms of public shaming—pelting, branding, pillories, and stocks—might have left physical marks on a person's body as a punishment, current forms of online shaming leave a digital mark that cannot be removed, as a person's shame and humiliation can be easily found online, digitally stored, years and years after the initial incident.

Even though cancel culture's effects can be debatable, it is recognized as a real phenomenon by celebrities and public figures. In 2020, a letter titled *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate* was published online by Harper's Magazine: the letter spoke against cancel culture, which was defined as "restriction of debate" and making "everyone less capable of democratic participation", and it was signed by over a hundred authors, writers, journalists, and members of different institutions (Harper's Magazine 2020). During the 2022 Oscar Awards gala, actor Will Smith hit the comedian Chris Rock after Rock made a joke about Smith's wife during his speech. The incident started a conversation about Will Smith's cancelation with the hashtag #CancelWillSmith on X (Twitter), and later Smith personally expressed fear of being "fully cancelled" (Grebenyuk 2022). Conversely, YouTuber Shane Dawson, who was canceled for his offensive content and involvement in the previously mentioned Charles-Westbrook feud, has claimed he was glad he was canceled as the process gave him time to reflect and go to therapy (Duribe 2022).

Lewis and Christin (2022: 1651) define cancel culture as cyclical, reoccurring communal ritual where morals and values are repeatedly negotiated: "they are moments of accountability *and* spectacle, interpersonal *and* political conflict, individual *and* shared meaning-making". Thus, Lewis and Christin (2022: 1651) argue that the purpose and function of cancel culture is the renegotiation of morals, and that even a performance of taking accountability for condemned actions can be seen as satisfactory and cathartic by the audience or the social media users participating in the cancelation. In other words, according to Lewis and Christin's theory, people might find satisfaction in the process of canceling itself as it "clears the air", and not even expect actual consequences to take place.

2.3   Apologies

Apologies are meant to heal and restore. They are most commonly an interpersonal exchange where both the offender and the offended parties can try to find solace in

the offending situation: for the offender, an apology might alleviate the feelings of guilt, remorse, and the fear of retaliation, and simultaneously help them to safe face (Lazare 2005: 10). For the offended party, an apology can offer many things: apology can, for example, help to restore self-respect and dignity, repair the harm caused by the offense, assure that the involved parties share the same values, and that the offenses were not the offended party's fault (Lazare 2005: 33). Furthermore, an apology can give the offended party a chance to have a meaningful dialogue with the offender and the satisfaction of seeing the offender suffer in some way—this can mean simply seeing the offender express guilt and shame over their actions (Lazare 2005: 33, 42).

On the other hand, when it comes to public apologies, Ruane and Cerulo (2014: 125) state that "celebrity apologies are, first and foremost, media events". Celebrity apologies are public apologies which are either directly published on social media platforms or shared on them by mass media outlets (Sandlin & Gracyalny 2018: 394). An often-mentioned example of a public apology is the apology given by the former president of The United States, Bill Clinton, after accusations of him having an affair with a White House intern Monica Lewinsky (e.g. Benoit 2014: 7). This so-called *Clinton-Lewinsky scandal* from the 1990s demonstrates how massive media events public apologies can be. Public apologies can be seen both as apologies—sometimes to an individual, but usually to a larger audience—and as attempts to repair the image of the offending party, whether it is a celebrity, a public figure, or a company. In other words, according to Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 401), public apologies often utilize both image repair strategies and elements of an effective interpersonal apology.

Public apologies seem to be on the rise: in 2005, Lazare (2005: 12) argued that apologies had started to appear in media more frequently, which was before the breakthrough of social media and its fusion with traditional media platforms. Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 393-394) contend that the impact of social media in managing of public relations has been recognized since 2006, and that social media has since become a very important tool in crisis management, even though there is no clear consensus on the effectiveness of an apology as a crisis management tactic. Because of the emergence of cancel culture, the fast-paced nature of social media, and the fear of public humiliation, it could be argued that today public apologies are made more than ever. Some public figures have openly apologized for decades old offenses: for example, Marta Kauffman, the co-creator of television show *Friends*, apologized in 2022 for the show's lack of diversity in the 1990s (Ironmonger 2022). Furthermore, public apologies have been started to be treated as a source of entertainment as has been done with cancel culture (discussed in section 2.2.1): many online news media sites regularly publish articles about celebrity apologies for example by listing the most notable or bizarre apologies of the year (Yang 2020, Maloy 2023).

2.3.1 Definitions of effective interpersonal apologies

As children we are taught to apologize to fix our wrongdoings. Children are strongly encouraged or even pressured to utter the words "I am sorry" and to accept an apology presented to them without question, perhaps even to "hug it out", often immediately after an offense has been committed—the exchange can be mechanical and forced, and it does not really reflect the way apologies work, as effective apologies require that the offender recognizes what they have done wrong, take responsibility for their actions, and express remorse (e.g. Lazare 2005). Effective apologies have been studied and defined for example by Kador (2009), Lazare (2005), and Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster and Montada (2010), and their respective theories share many elements. Table 1 provides an overview of the three theories.

Table 1. Definitions of the elements of an effective interpersonal apology

Lazare (2005)	Acknowledging the offense	Remorse and related attitudes	Reparations	Explanations	(n/a)
Kador (2009)	Recognition	Responsibility	Remorse	Restitution	Repetition
Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster & Montada (2010)	Admitting fault	Admitting damage	Expressing remorse	Offering compensation	Asking for pardon

First, all three definitions of an effective apology establish that the offense should be acknowledged, and fault should be admitted (Lazare 2005: 50, Kador 2009: 49, Schmitt et al. 2010: 466). Second, all definitions similarly determine that the apologizing party should express remorse and related attitudes such as sincerity, humility, and shame (Lazare 2005: 67-72, Kador 2009: 85, Schmitt et al. 2010: 466). Third, theories suggest that an effective apology includes an offer for compensation or restitution: this could mean reimbursing, returning, or replacing items, or otherwise fixing what has been damaged (Lazare 2005: 77, Kador 2009: 97, Schmitt et al. 2010: 467). These three aspects of an effective apology seem to be the most salient.

Beyond the shared characteristic, Schmitt et al. (2010: 467, 469) establish asking for pardon as an element of an effective apology, meaning that the offender clearly states they are sorry or apologizing. Lazare's (2005: 73-74) definition of an effective apology includes an explanation for the offending act, such as stating that the offense does not reflect on the offender's "real self". Furthermore, this explanation aspect might include a mention that the offense will not be reoccurring because the circumstances were somehow unique, which is similar to Kador's (2009: 113) definition's final

aspect, in which the offender will reassure the offended that the offense will not be happening again.

2.3.2 Lazare's elements of an effective interpersonal apology

To further explore effective interpersonal apologies, I will focus on Lazare's definition, as I found it the most comprehensive for my study. According to Lazare (2005: 50), the most important part of an apology is acknowledging the offense, as without it, the process of apologizing cannot even begin. Lazare's (2005: 50) definition of acknowledging the offense can include up to four parts: it can correctly identify either the offending party, who is doing the apologizing, the offended party, who the apology is owed to, or both of those parties. The acknowledgement can also include a description of the offending act(s), and a recognition of how the said act impacted the offended party (Lazare 2005: 50). Finally, the acknowledgement can confirm that the offense was a violation of a moral or social value or contact established between the involved parties (Lazare 2005: 50). Lazare (2005: 50) asserts that an effective apology needs to include all four parts, but it is common that some of the parts are implicit instead of verbally stated. Simultaneously Lazare (2005: 50) states that a failure to reach agreement concerning the acknowledgment is one of the most common reasons for an unsuccessful apology.

Lazare (2005: 55) introduces seven different ways in which the acknowledgement of the offense can fail. First, the acknowledgement can be unsuccessful because of vagueness: if the apology giver does not specify what they are apologizing for or what they have done, the apology may be perceived as inadequate. Furthermore, if the apology giver uses vague and emphatic language, such as stating "I am sorry" without further specifying what they are sorry for and without taking responsibility for the offending act, Lazare (2005: 62) considers it a "non-apology". Similarly, if the apology and the offense are portrayed as conditional, if passive language is used, or if the damage caused to the victim is questioned, such as "if you were insulted, I am sorry" (instead of "I am sorry I insulted you"), the acknowledgement can fail (Lazare 2005: 56-59).

Minimizing the offense, i.e., attempting to make the offense seem less harmful or even questioning whether it was committed in the first place, is another way in which the acknowledgement can be unsuccessful (Lazare 2005: 61). The apology can also fail if it is targeted towards the wrong party, such as the public instead of a specific person who has been offended, or if it is given for the wrong offense: according to Lazare (2005: 63-64), apologizing for the wrong offense can be a tactic to avoid taking blame for certain offenses. Apologizing for wrong offense can also be a sign that the apologizing party has not understood the impact of their behavior and what they should be apologizing for.

The second of Lazare's (2005: 67) four elements of an effective interpersonal apology is the expression of remorse and other related attitudes, such as shame, humility, and sincerity. Lazare (2005: 67) defines remorse as deep regret, self-punishment, and an attack of one's conscience, which will act as forbearance and aid in abstaining from similar behavior in the future—as a promise of change. In addition, if the offense is nevertheless repeated after the apology, the apology can be looked back and perceived as manipulative and insincere (Lazare 2005: 67). Lazare (2005: 71-72) finds humility a necessary part of an apology, as expressing it demonstrates the offender has acknowledged they have made a mistake and shows that they are taking the situation seriously. Expressing humility can also help to restore the offended party's dignity and show that the offender has been "brought down" from their previous position and humbled—oppositely, if the offender expresses hubris or arrogance in their apology, it can turn into an insult (Lazare 2005: 71-72).

Lazare (2005: 68) suggests that lack of remorse can signal that the offender does not share the same moral values with the rest of the society and is thus in risk of repeating their offensive behavior. Similar concepts of social othering were also discussed in section 2.2.1 by Bouvier and Machin (2021: 320–321) and van Dijk (1998: 267): as an offending party is viewed as being outside of the ideological square, they become easy targets for ridicule, and their negative qualities are emphasized. Furthermore, the perceived risk of repeating the offending behavior can make the offender an interesting topic in the media (Lazare 2005: 68).

The third element Lazare (2005: 73) presents for an effective apology is offering and receiving explanations for the committed offense. According to Lazare (2005: 73), the offended party can view explanations as a debt the offender owes them: without an explanation for the offending act, an apology can be perceived as inadequate. Moreover, an explanation can send messages to the offended party, such as that the offense was not the victim's fault, that the offense will not reoccur, or that it was not intentional or personal towards the victim (Lazare 2005: 74). Giving an explanation can benefit the offending party as well, as it might help to diminish the seriousness of their act and gives them a chance to clarify that their offense and behavior does not reflect on their "real" character (Lazare 2005: 74). However, Lazare (2005: 75) also declares that not offering explanations at all is still more dignifying than being insincere and giving false or manipulative statements—if the offender accepts their responsibility and states there is no excuse for their actions, the apology can be valid without an explanation.

Lazare's (2005: 77) fourth and final apology element is reparations, meaning making amends or restoring loss. Concrete examples would be financial reimbursement, buying a new item to replace a broken one, or paying for the laundry services to clean an item of clothing after dirtying it. In instances where the harm has been less

tangible, such as an insult or a humiliation, Lazare (2005: 78) suggests that the reparation could be more symbolic in nature, such as treating the victim to a dinner or donating to a charity. The function of reparations is to send a message to the offended party that the offender is taking the situation seriously and wants to fix what has been broken, either literally or figuratively (Lazare 2005: 77).

2.3.3 Benoit's image repair strategies

Even though theories about effective interpersonal apologies mostly focus on repairing the relationship between the offender and the victim of the offense, according to Lazare (2005: 81), one motive for apologizing is to help the offender to restore their public image, and to influence how others perceive them. Image restoration and saving one's face plays an important role in apologizing, especially when an apology is made in public. Benoit's Image repair theory (2014) presents several specific strategies for image repair, which have been used in public statements on different fields such as in politics, business, and in sports and entertainment. Image repair strategies have also been used in public apologies, and many studies relating to public apologies have used Benoit's work as theoretical background (such as Lazare 2005, Ruane & Cerulo 2014, Schmitt et al. 2010, and Sandlin & Gracyalny 2018).

Benoit (2014: 22) presents five different image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. *Denial* is an image repair strategy which straightforwardly refers to a person outright denying a wrongful act they are accused of (Benoit 2014: 22). The strategy of denial can be divided into two different tactics: the accused party can either use *simple denial*, straightforwardly denying their culpability, or *shift blame* to someone else (Benoit 2014: 22). However, as stated in the previous chapter, a successful interpersonal apology usually requires admitting culpability—therefore, the strategy of denial is rarely present in interpersonal apologies, at least in the ones deemed effective or adequate.

As its name suggests, the strategy of *evasion of responsibility* means in some way evading accountability for the offense in question. Benoit (2014: 23) identifies several subcategories or tactics of evasion of responsibility: the first one, *provocation*, refers to the way the accused person can claim the action they performed was a response to another, perhaps even more wrongful act, thus reducing the offensiveness of their own action, as it was performed because of provocation. A person can also claim their action was done with *good intentions* or "for the greater good" (Benoit 2014: 23). If a person blames lack of information or control over the situation relating to their offense, they are using the *defeasibility* tactic to shift the responsibility, or in a similar vein, they can claim their actions were an *accident* (Benoit 2014: 23).

Reducing offensiveness is a strategy where culpability to an act is admitted, but there is an attempt to reduce its effects. According to Benoit (2014: 24), reducing

offensiveness has six different variants from which the first one is *bolstering*: when an accused person is bolstering, they are attempting to portray themselves in a more positive light by bringing forward their good qualities or past actions. The accused might also try to *minimize* the negative effect of their offense, *differentiate* between their own offense and other similar offenses to make it seem less severe, or use the variant of *transcendence*, which refers to them placing their wrongful act into a different context where it can be shown in a more positive light (Benoit 2014: 24-25). The accused can also *attack their accuser* either to shift the blame or to discredit them, or they can offer *compensation* for their actions, such as giving a gift or other monetary reimbursements to the person they are apologizing to (Benoit 2014: 24).

The strategy of *corrective action* is similar to an act of compensation, and it resembles the element of reparations in Lazare's (2005: 77) theory of effective interpersonal apologies. However, Benoit (2014: 26) points out that a compensation is offered as a gift to counterbalance the harm done, such as causing damage or an injury, whereas corrective action addresses the source of the caused harm. A corrective action can even be taken without admitting actual culpability: for example, a building can better their security measures without taking responsibility for a robbery which took place in the said building (Benoit 2014: 26).

Finally, the strategy of *mortification* refers to the offender admitting culpability to a wrongful act. Mortification may include an acceptance of guilt and/or expressions of remorse, and the offender might ask for forgiveness (Benoit 2014: 26). Benoit (2014: 26) mentions that as an image repair strategy, mortification is especially complicated, as accepting blame for an offensive situation makes the accused party particularly vulnerable to the audience's judgement, as the audience will then decide if the guilty party will be forgiven. As Benoit (2014: 16) states, "maintaining a favorable reputation is a key goal for communication", and admitting culpability can harm one's reputation. Furthermore, a request for forgiveness can be very ambiguous regarding what the offender is confessing to (Benoit 2014: 27). For example, the phrases "I am sorry I hurt you" and "I am sorry you feel hurt" carry a very different meaning, but stating the latter might feel like an easier option as it is apologetic without having to accept the blame entirely and needing to rehash embarrassing or shameful circumstances relating to the offensive act (Benoit 2014: 27). Table 2 offers a summary of the image repair strategies and their tactics.

Table 2. Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies and tactics

General strategy	Tactic
Denial	Simple denial
	Shift blame
Evade responsibility	Provocation
	Defeasibility
	Accident
	Good intentions
Reduce offensiveness	Bolstering
	Minimization
	Differentiation
	Transcendence
	Attack accuser
	Compensation
Corrective action	(n/a)
Mortification	(n/a)

2.3.4 Public apologies, sincerity, and acceptance

Responses to public apologies, i.e. if the apologies are accepted or rejected, has been studied for example by Ruane and Cerulo (2014) and Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018). Ruane and Cerulo (2014: 144) argue that the acceptance of a public apology is rarely automatic, as for example Slansky and Sorkin (2006: 2, as quoted by Ruane & Cerulo 2014: 144) have previously claimed. Similarly, Bouvier and Machin (2021: 317–318) mention that the apologies of canceled people are often rejected because they do not seemingly share the public perception of moral values based on of their immoral behavior. Ruane and Cerulo (2014: 126, 145) theorize that the acceptance of an apology depends, for example, on how the apology is built, and that the way an apology is sequenced is as important as the actual content of the apology. Ruane and Cerulo (2014: 126, 128) view apologies as narratives which the public have preferences to — thus, some narratives or sequences in apologies are preferrable than others, as they respond to audience's expectations.

Another factor which can affect the outcome of a public apology, according to both Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 401) and Ruane and Cerulo (2014: 127), is the pre-existing relationship the audience has with the apology giver, i.e., a possible parasocial relationship between a celebrity and their audience. Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 401-402) propose that a positive perception of a celebrity's reputation can lead to a perception of their apology's sincerity, which in following can lead to forgiveness, as there is a correlation between the apologies which are seen as sincere and the apologies which are accepted. Thus, people might engage in confirmation bias by evaluating an apology based on their pre-existing opinion or perception of the celebrity who is offering the apology (Sandlin & Gracyalny 2018: 402).

Lewis and Christin (2022: 1649) point out that authenticity is held as an imperative moral value of content creation on many social media platforms. However, authenticity is fleeting, as practically any type of created content can be viewed as "fake" as it is performed in front of active, engaged audiences, and every action can be monetized (Lewis & Christin 2022: 1649). Thus, Lewis and Christin (2022: 1650) argue that especially public apologies on these communal, commercialized platforms are often seen as unauthentic and staged. As previously mentioned, cancel culture can be seen as a way to negotiate cultural and societal norms and values on social media and simultaneously, according to Lewis and Christin (2022: 1651), these negotiations include a negotiation of truth and what it means in the given community. Lewis and Christin (2022: 1651) further argue that in these negotiations, the truth's meaning can transform from "what is accurate" to who gives the most convincing version of the truth and the best performance of authenticity.

3   PRESENT STUDY

3.1   Aim and research questions

The aim of my study is to research apologies related to canceling and cancel culture, and the audience's reactions to the apologies in question. Apologies in general and apologies given by public figures have been previously studied, e.g. by Lazare (2005) and Benoit (2014), but not apologies specifically in connection to cancel culture, as it is a relatively new concept (even though the phenomenon itself is not). In the light of the theoretical framework, it could be argued that the emergence of cancel culture and online public shaming have been accelerating the number of public apologies made during the past decades. Furthermore, it could also be argued that the apologies have an important role in determining the outcome of a cancelation, i.e. whether a person is canceled or not: according to theories related to interpersonal apologies (see section 2.3.1), admitting culpability is a key element of an effective apology, and as Benoit's (2014: 26) points out, admitting culpability similarly exposes a person to face the judgement of their audience, who will decide if the person is forgiven.

Researching public apologies related to the threat of being canceled and to cancel culture as a phenomenon could offer information about the current styles of public apologies. I believe that the acknowledgement of the threat of cancelation, the increased amount of publicity the apologies get, audiences' expectations, and fear of humiliation could influence the way public apologies have been formulated in recent years. As demonstrated in section 2.2.2, cancel culture and its repercussions are recognized by celebrities, and it is also known that public apologies can be heavily critiqued and even ridiculed both in news and on social media platforms for the public's entertainment. As Lewis and Christin (2022: 1649) also note that authenticity is held in high regard in content creation, I believe that when it comes to current public

apologies, importance is placed on constructing them to come across as personal and sincere.

My research questions are the following:

1. What kind of image repair tactics and elements of effective interpersonal apologies do celebrities utilize?
2. What themes can be identified from the apologies and their responses?
3. How are the apologies' acceptance or rejection reasoned?

I am interested to see if and how the apologies correspond to Lazare's (2005) elements of effective interpersonal apologies—i.e., are the said apologies theoretically effective—and to Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies to see which ones are utilized. Furthermore, I would like to find out if there are any repeating topics, arguments, or other patterns in the apologies which the celebrities are using to ostensibly earn forgiveness. In addition to researching the apologies, I will be looking into the responses given to them, as I believe analyzing both the apologies and their responses will give a better overview of how the apologies succeeded in practice. I am interested in finding out if the responses to the apologies are positive or negative, and what reasoning the responders offer for accepting or rejecting the celebrities' apologies. As cancelation processes occur on social media, the public's reactions to the celebrities' apologies are readily available, for example on X with specifically assigned hashtags.

3.2   Data selection and collection

The data of the present study consists of public apologies which have been published by public figures on social media platforms, and their respective responses on social media. For the purpose of this study—researching apologies related to the phenomenon of cancel culture—I decided to only choose public apologies which can be specifically linked to canceling, meaning that the apology itself acknowledges cancel culture in some manner, or that there is an existing social media discussion (such as a dedicated hashtag) or media coverage which recognizes the apology giver's status as "potentially canceled". This kind of link between cancel culture and the apology function as a definition for an "apology related to cancel culture" or a "cancel culture apology".

After defining the aforementioned "cancel culture apology", I browsed old news articles and social media to find suitable cases and apologies, as the cancelations and celebrity apologies are often discussed online. I also regularly followed entertainment news and social media platforms to find new or ongoing cases for my study. Because celebrity apologies are usually published on the celebrities' personal social media accounts, they can be available on different platforms and in different formats, such as

in video or text, depending which platforms the celebrities use—for example, a YouTuber most likely would apologize on YouTube—and I chose to include both text and video-based apologies in my data.

The other prerequisite for the data was the existence of responses, i.e., the apology itself had to have been discussed on social media. As X (Twitter) is often used as a platform for discussing cancelations, I chose it as the platform to search for data. When it comes to the name of the social media platform, the present study refers to it with its current name, X—however, X was still known as Twitter at the time of data collection (June of 2023), and the data itself can refer to "Twitter" and these mentions have not been changed. I searched X for discussions related to the apologies I had found for my data, and tweets which were posted as a reaction or a response to a certain apology. Depending on the apology, this could have meant that the tweets either mentioned the name of the celebrity who apologized or had tagged the celebrity's X account in the tweet.

To narrow down the number of tweets, I utilized X's advanced search option and searched for tweets which had been posted within two days after the initial publication of the apology—so that they could be more easily established as responses to the apology—and had a minimum of 50 likes; this at least somewhat demonstrated the tweet's popularity and that the opinion shared in the tweet had been shared by others. From the results I received with these search options, I screenshotted the first 25 tweets which were in fact responses or reactions to the apology in question. In practice, this meant that the tweets either responded to the apology by accepting or rejecting it, or that they somehow commented on the apology and its content. I left out tweets which did not comment the apology in any way, or tweets which were posted by the celebrities themselves. I settled on the number of 20 corresponding tweets per apology, because it was an amount which was accessible in all the cases I chose, as the number of tweets varied. On some cases I had to narrow the search even further because of the number of tweets by adding search words such as "apology" to get accurate responses.

With these data selection requirements, I chose five different "cancel culture apologies". All the data's apologies have been published between the years 2018 and 2023, so they are relatively recent and thus shed light both on the current ways celebrities construct their apologies, and on how the public reacts to them. Even though my data first consisted of five apologies, two in video format and three in text, after careful consideration I chose to narrow the amount down to four. The reason for this was that the data from four apologies provided me more than enough information for my study, and that the fifth apology was slightly different from the others, as it was apology for several different topics and was thus more difficult to analyze and categorize in comparison to the others. Therefore, the current study's data consists of four

apologies (three in written and one in video format) and twenty responses respectively, 80 in total. Table 3 shows basic information of the chosen apologies.

Table 3. Apologies in the present study

Apologizer	Logan Paul	Chrissy Teigen	Will Smith	Colleen Ballinger
Occupation	Social media personality	Model, television personality	Actor	Comedian
Reason for apology	Filming a dead person	Online bullying	Physical assault	Grooming allegations
Apology platform	X	Personal blog on Medium	Instagram	YouTube
Apology format	Picture post	Blog post	Picture post	Video (duration: 10 min 19 sec)
Date	January 2, 2018	June 14, 2021	March 29, 2022	June 28, 2023

3.3   Research ethics

When it comes to the ethics of the research, I have chosen only public data which is available for anyone to see. The apologies of the data have been given by celebrities, which means they are intended for large audiences: they have been published on the celebrities' personal social media platforms, which often have millions of followers and subscribers. Thus, the apologies are publicized to begin with, and at the time of writing, all the chosen apologies are still available on the platforms they were originally published in. I have chosen not to include apologies which had been removed since publication, even though they could be found from the internet as reposts, because I want to respect the apology giver's right to remove their content.

As for the responses on X, I have chosen tweets which are publicly available and furthermore, are at least a year old, which means there has been a considerable amount of time for the X users to remove their tweets if they were, for example, made in haste. To further protect the privacy and identity of the data subjects, I have anonymized the tweets included in the data by censoring usernames, profile pictures, and other clearly identifying information. I do recognize that this action does not fully anonymize the tweets, as they could still be found online.

Although the present data is publicly available, it is still defined as personal data in EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as it considers any information relating to an identified or identifiable person as personal (Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman 2024). The processing of personal data requires consent, but as it is impossible or at least very difficult to acquire consent personally from the data subjects of a study which processes data from social media, I have drafted a privacy notice

informing the possible data subjects of the processing of their information and of their rights, and posted the notice on X.

3.4   Methods of analysis

The current study utilized the methods of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018: 103), content analysis is a basic method which can be applied to all traditions of qualitative studies. The purpose of qualitative content analysis is to describe a phenomenon in a written form by clearly and concisely categorizing the research data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018: 122). As Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018: 117) explain, qualitative content analysis is a textual analysis method resembling discourse analysis: however, the difference between the two is that content analysis focuses on exploring the meanings of text whereas discourse analysis studies how the said meanings are produced.

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018: 108-111) introduce three forms of qualitative content analysis: content-based analysis, theory-based analysis, and theory-guided analysis. Theory-based content analysis is guided by an existing theory or model, and the purpose of the analysis is usually to test the pre-existing theory in a new context (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018: 110). In comparison, content-based form of content analysis focuses on finding new information from the study data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018: 108). For this study, I used the form of theory-based analysis guided by Lazare's (2005) definition of effective interpersonal apologies and Benoit's (2014) theory of image repair strategies. As public apologies are defined as both apologies and media events which aim to restore one's image, I used both models as theoretical framework to study the apologies' effectiveness.

The method of content analysis closely resembles the method of thematic analysis, discussed by for example Braun and Clarke (2006). According to the comparison done by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018: 141-142), the methods mainly differ in their approach to conducting content-based analysis. Both analysis processes begin with close reading of the chosen data, but Tuomi and Sarajärvi's (2018: 104, 142) model of content analysis highlights the intent on what is being researched in comparison to Braun and Clarke's (2006: 88) model, where the close reading and familiarization with the data is used to find interesting initial themes for research. Next, both methods reduce or code their data to simplify it for further analysis, but the methods differ again afterwards, as content analysis utilizes more hierarchical approach by tabling data beginning with subcategories and moving upward, whereas thematic analysis searches for themes by mapping the coded data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018: 142, Braun & Clarke 2006: 88-89).

Braun and Clarke (2006: 84) state that thematic analysis can be used to analyze data on both semantic and latent levels, meaning that the themes can be identified both on surface level and by looking beyond the semantic meaning and interpreting the underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies of the text. As discussed in section 2.2.1, cancel culture can function as a form of entertainment, and according to Bouvier and Machin (2021: 320–321), discussion around the topic can involve humor, memes, and mockery. Thus, when analyzing comments and reactions to cancel culture apologies, it can be important to not only look at the semantic level of the responses but also what the responses represent, and for the analysis of the apologies' responses, I used the method of thematic analysis.

Before starting the analysis, I converted all data into text, as both content analysis and thematic analysis are methods of textual analysis. When it comes to Ballinger's apology, which was in video format, this meant I transcribed the verbal data of the apology with the help of YouTube's automatically produced transcript. I also wrote down the contents of the response tweets excluding images and GIFs without text, but including, for example, screenshots of texts and videos with speech — anything that could be transcribed into an accurate text. The data does include phrases which can be considered crude or inappropriate, such as profanities, but as the current study focuses on language use and textual analysis, such words and expressions have not been censored.

As the first step of the analysis, I used the method of qualitative content analysis and conducted a theory-based analysis referring to Lazare's (2005) and Benoit's (2014) theories. To conduct the analysis, I carefully read through the apologies and searched for expressions which corresponded with the apology elements and/or image repair strategies. I gathered all fitting expressions, coded them into a simpler form and arranged them to tables featuring the elements of an effective interpersonal apology and image repair strategies, respectively.

Next, I moved on to the thematic analyses following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 87), thematic analysis can be conducted in six phases, which include familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming them, and finally reporting the findings. I began the thematic analysis by dividing the responses roughly into positive and negative ones and then moving on to finding other themes. When it comes to the divide into positive and negative responses, it should be noted that it was done based on my personal, subjective opinions and interpretations of the data, and that those interpretations do not necessarily reflect the original opinions and intentions of the response tweets' authors. When determining the responses' positivity and negativity, I evaluated the tweets on a semantic level, meaning that for example responses which stated that they did not accept the apology were evaluated as

negative, and the ones which complemented the apology were evaluated as positive. When I was unable to clearly determine if the response was either positive or negative, I categorized them as ambiguous. Next, I analyzed the responses on two levels: first, searching themes from the responses on an apology-level, i.e., from the twenty responses to a single apology (level 1) and second, on a general level, meaning from all the responses combined (level 2).

As a final step, I conducted a thematic analysis of the apologies as an addition to the theory-based qualitative content analysis. In practice this meant analyzing the parts of the apologies left "untouched" while conducting the first analysis, as I wanted to avoid overlapping the analyses, and simultaneously pay equal attention to different parts of the apologies.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section I present the study's findings. I begin by presenting the celebrity apologies and the results of the theory-based qualitative content analysis, i.e., the analysis of the apologies based on Lazare's (2005) elements of effective interpersonal apologies and Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies. Next, the findings of the thematic analysis are discussed, presenting the results from the apologies first, followed by the analysis of the response tweets.

4.1 Theory-based content analysis

4.1.1 Logan Paul's apology: "Dear Internet, …"

Logan Paul, an American social media personality, published a vlog titled "We found a dead body in the Japanese suicide forest…" on his YouTube channel on December 31st, 2017 (Meyer 2018, Vincent 2018). In the video Paul and his crew explored Aokigahara, a forest in Japan sometimes referred to as a suicide forest, as it has been a known location for attempting suicide (Meyer 2018). During their visit in Aokigahara, Paul and his companions happened to encounter a suicide victim and Paul proceeded to film the deceased—although their face had been blurred in the published video—in a manner which was said to have included "exaggerated reaction shots and nervous laughter" (Bromwich 2018). According to Bromwich (2018), the video vlog Paul published received extensive backlash because of his decision to film and show the deceased and for "his capering afterward". Following the critique, Paul deleted the video from his channel and issued an apology on his X account on January 2nd, 2018. Paul's apology tweet consisted of the words "Dear Internet," and two images of his apology text written in the iPhone Notes app. In the text Paul addressed the deleted video and his intentions behind making and publishing it (see Appendix 1).

According to Lazare's (2005: 50) definition of an effective interpersonal apology, the apology should include the acknowledgement of the offense that was committed. Acknowledging the offense can include up to four elements: identifying both the offending and offended parties, acknowledging the offending behavior, recognizing the offending behavior's impact, and confirming that the offending behavior in some way violated existing moral or social codes shared by the parties involved (Lazare 2005: 50). Paul's apology did not acknowledge the offense clearly, as he was continuously vague in his statement when referring to his offending act as, for example, "a mistake", "it" (as in "I didn't do *it* for the views"), and as mishandling of his power.

Paul referred to the reactions of his viewers and other offended parties as "criticism" and "a monsoon of negativity" — Lazare's (2005: 62) theory states that vagueness in acknowledging the offense constitutes as a failure. Furthermore, while apologizing, Paul used an emphatic "I'm sorry" instead of clearly pointing out what he was apologizing for. As the statement was ambiguous, it could not be classified as Paul expressing the image repair tactic of mortification: the reader could not know what Paul was sorry for and who he was apologizing to, as there was no mention of the specific offense or the recipient of his apology. Thus, it could be assumed that the apology was targeted to Paul's general audience and to the people who had viewed the YouTube video, and not for example the next of kin of the deceased person on the video.

Paul explained his offense, and according to Lazare (2005: 73), giving and receiving explanations is an important part of an apology. Paul explained that he intended to "make a positive ripple on the internet" and "raise awareness for suicide and suicide prevention". Paul also claimed he was "misguided by shock and awe" and got "caught in the moment" in the situation he faced in Aokigahara. Thus, Paul used the image repair strategy of evading responsibility by reasoning his intentions for the offending act were good and positive, and by appealing to lack of control in the situation (Benoit 2014: 23).

Paul discussed the extensive audience and reach he has on YouTube and stated that "with great power comes great responsibility", quoting a proverb popularized by the Spider-Man franchise. In the end of his statement, Paul wrote that "for the first time in my life I'm regretful to say I handled that power incorrectly", again referring to the power he had over his audience. Although Paul stated in the clause that he was "regretful", he did not seem to express remorse or other related attitudes, which Lazare (2005: 67) considers to be meaningful and necessary parts of an apology. The manner in which Paul repeatedly referred to his offense being a first-time error ("I've never made a mistake like this before", "I can be wrong") made the statement come across as more arrogant than humble. As Lazare (2005: 71) states, "apologizing without humility, and even worse, by expressing arrogance or hubris, transforms the intended apology into an insult".

Relating to arrogance, Paul utilized the image repair strategy of reducing offensiveness by bolstering, i.e., bringing forward his positive attributes and actions. In addition to stressing the mistake he made was his first, Paul discussed his YouTube fame ("I get views"), power, and the large amount of content he produces for his viewers daily. According to Lazare (2005: 72), the meaning of expressing remorse, humbleness and related attitudes in an apology is to demonstrate how seriously the offender regards the offense: as Paul spent time bolstering and ended his apology by stating "I'm out here. Peace ✌ #Logang4Life", his attitude towards the offense did not appear serious or remorseful, but casual.

In summary, Paul's apology did not fulfill Lazare's (2005) definition of an effective interpersonal apology, as only the element of offering explanations was implemented—furthermore, Paul's statement came across as arrogant instead of humble and regretful. Simultaneously, Paul engaged in the image repair strategies of evasion of responsibility and reducing offensiveness. In his apology Paul did not offer any reparations or corrective action beyond stating "it won't happen again".

Paul's apology received negative responses and social media attention, and in following, Paul published another apology on his YouTube channel on January 2nd, 2018, only few hours after the publication of the initial apology on X. The video apology received heavy criticism as well and as a result, YouTube removed Paul from their preferred advertising campaign and issued a statement condemning Paul's actions (Jones 2023, Vincent 2018). Following the controversy, Paul took a break from social media and upon his return, published a video about suicide awareness and pledged to donate one million dollars for the cause, however it is unknown if this promise has been fulfilled (Jones 2023). According to Jones (2023), Paul has since stated that the incident taught him to consider what to post online—thus, the backlash and repercussions of the incident did result in Paul performing reparations and corrective actions.

4.1.2 Chrissy Teigen's apology: "Hi again"

Chrissy Teigen, an American model and a television personality, faced controversy in 2021 after the resurfacing of her decade-old tweets in which Teigen had verbally bullied several people, for instance a reality-TV personality Courtney Stodden, who had been 16 years old at the time (Lampen 2021). After Teigen's past activity was brought to light, Teigen publicly apologized to Stodden on X, but Stodden responded with their own social media post by showing Teigen had blocked them on the platform and by stating that Teigen had not reached out to them personally, which made Teigen's apology seem disingenuous (Lampen 2021). The controversy caused several brands associated with Teigen to end their contracts with her, and Teigen withdrew from social media for a month before apologizing for her actions on a blog post titled "Hi again" on June 14th, 2021 (Lampen 2021).

Teigen stated on her post (see Appendix 2) that she had already "apologized publicly to one person" and was "in the process of privately reaching out to the people" she had insulted with her old tweets, which made it seem like the blog post apology was not targeted to the same individuals, but for Teigen's audience and fans. This was supported by Teigen's manner of seemingly addressing her audience directly as "you" and talking about "us", for example "lord knows you don't want to hear about me", "we've shared so much", and how she had connected with "so many of you" on social media. Teigen seemingly wished to explain ("I am telling you this for context") and apologize for her behavior in general, while not naming any specific people hurt by her actions.

Following the required elements of Lazare's (2005) effective interpersonal apology, Teigen succeeded in acknowledging her offense. In her post Teigen acknowledged her offending behavior by explaining she used to "snark at some celebrities" on X and masked her "meanness" as "casual, edgy humor". Furthermore, Teigen seemed to recognize the impact of her behavior by wondering how she was able to post the tweets which she called "horrible", "cruel", and "awful (awful, awful)". Teigen also stated that words have consequences, and her tweets were targeted to real people, who were hurt as a result. According to Teigen, there was no excuse or justification for her behavior, and she wrote "I was a troll, full stop. And I am so sorry" to further acknowledge herself as the offending party.

Teigen expressed remorse and other related emotions in several parts of her post. In the beginning, Teigen referred to her experience related to the controversy as "VERY humbling" and claimed she had been "sitting in a hole of deserved global punishment" and felt "the crushing weight of regret" for her old behavior. Teigen also stated she cringed remembering her "asshole past", which she was "truly ashamed of". Additionally, Teigen acknowledged the irony of herself being "on the receiving end of incredible vitriol" for her actions.

Teigen declared there was no excuse for her behavior and that she was "not seeking or deserving any sympathy". As determined by Lazare (2005: 74-75), offering an explanation is a necessary part of an effective apology, but if the explanation would be false or manipulative, it would be better for the offending party to accept the blame explicitly and sincerely for their behavior. Even though Teigen stated she would not try to explain her behavior, she nevertheless told that she used to be "insecure" and "immature" and thought it made her "cool and relatable" if she "poked fun at celebrities" on X. Furthermore, Teigen explained she wanted attention trough social media and saw her tweets as "harmless quip" at the time of writing them.

When referring to Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies, the strategy Teigen utilized the most was mortification. As Benoit (2014: 26) defines mortification as an explicit acceptance of blame, an expression of regret and remorse, and a request for

forgiveness, there is considerable overlap to Lazare's (2005) elements of remorse and related attitudes and acknowledging the offense. Teigen also engaged with the strategy of reducing her act's offensiveness. In her post Teigen claimed she was not "mean" in her "everyday life" in comparison to posting online, and people had told her she was "much nicer in person". As Benoit (2014: 24) defines bolstering, which is a variant of reducing offensiveness, as the offender bringing forward their positive attributes or deeds, it could be determined Teigen used the tactic of bolstering in her apology. In addition, Teigen utilized the variant of differentiation, which means creating a new belief about the offending act to make it seem less offensive than similar acts (Benoit 2014: 24). Teigen explained she considered her old tweets clever jokes at the time — thus, reducing their offensiveness, as Teigen claimed that the tweets were created for fun and were meant to be harmless, not offensive.

In her apology, Teigen also described corrective actions, i.e., things she had done to prevent the offensive act of reoccurring (Benoit 2014: 26). According to Teigen, she was no longer the person she was when she had published "those horrible things", referring to the offensive tweets. Teigen explained that she had since matured, started a family, and sought therapy, and that life and its experiences had made her more empathetic. Teigen also promised to "keep working to be the best version" of herself and asked her audience for a chance to own her mistakes and to improve and change. In addition to explaining her corrective actions, Teigen further discussed the changes she had made in her life and her family and children, who she wished to be the best possible example for.

Following Lazare's (2005) definition, Teigen's apology appeared to be an effective interpersonal apology, as Teigen acknowledged her offense, expressed remorse, and explained her behavior. However, Teigen did not offer any concrete reparations in her apology, but as the apology was seemingly targeted to a large audience whose members had not been personally offended by Teigen's acts, the lack of specific reparations seemed more acceptable than in an interpersonal apology. In reference to Benoit's image repair strategies, Teigen mostly engaged in expressing mortification for her actions and explaining the corrective actions she had taken to prevent a reoccurrence.

4.1.3 Will Smith's apology: "Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive"

During the 94th Academy Awards Ceremony, also known as the Oscars gala of 2022, the American actor Will Smith hit the comedian Chris Rock on live television. Smith participated in the Academy Awards event as a nominee for the award category of best actor for his role in *King Richard*, where he portrayed Richard Williams, the father of tennis players Venus and Serena Williams (Ellis 2022). The host of the event,

Chris Rock, made a joke about Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, during one of his presentation speeches stating that he could not wait for Pinkett Smith's appearance in a sequel to *G.I. Jane*, a movie about a female soldier (Ellis 2022). This was a reference to Pinkett Smith's shaved head, which was—unbeknownst to Rock—a result of Pinkett Smith's hair loss because of alopecia areata, a medical condition also referred to as spot baldness (Grebenyuk 2022). After hearing the joke, Smith walked onto the stage, slapped Rock's face, and yelled "keep my wife's name out of your fucking mouth" after returning to his seat.

After the incident, Smith won the Academy award for best actor and gave his acceptance speech without specifically apologizing to Rock (Ellis 2022). As the event was televised, the incident between Smith and Rock drew a great deal of attention and was both widely covered on traditional media and heavily discussed on social media platforms. According to Ellis (2022), Rock's joke about Pinkett Smith's shaved head also drew its own portion of critique, as it was viewed as tactless and insensitive. Nevertheless, most of the discussion seemed to revolve around the "Oscars slap" and Smith's behavior (Ellis 2022). The day after the gala, on March 29th, 2022, Smith issued a public apology on his personal Instagram account. Smith's apology post included two pictures of his apology text and had the same text pasted as the image caption as well (see Appendix 3).

In his apology Smith mostly succeeded in acknowledging his offense: Smith admitted his behavior was wrong and unacceptable, and condemned the use of violence—however, Smith did not directly and explicitly state what his offending action was. Instead, Smith briefly explained his behavior by stating that a joke on his wife's expense crossed the line for him and that made him "react emotionally". Thus, the actual act, i.e., slapping Chris Rock, was not mentioned. Smith issued several interpersonal apologies in his post by apologizing to Chris Rock, to the Academy and the producers of the awards gala, to all the Academy Awards attendees and viewers, to the cast and crew of *King Richard*, and to the Williams family, whose lives the film was based on. Thus, Smith seemed to recognize the wide impact his actions had, and that his behavior was harmful in several different ways. Smith also expressed remorse and related attitudes for his actions by stating he regretted his behavior and that he was embarrassed.

When it comes to image repair strategies, Smith almost exclusively utilized the strategy of mortification in his apology by accepting the blame for his actions and expressing regret. However, Smith's explanation for his actions, meaning referring to them as an emotional reaction to a joke about his wife, could be categorized as an evasion of responsibility. As Smith stated that "jokes at my expense are a part of the job, but a joke about Jada's medical condition was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally", he suggested that he was provoked into action and that his

reaction to the situation was emotional, i.e., somehow irrational. Thus, Smith's explanation for the incident could be classified as either provocation (a response to another offensive act, as in the joke about Pinkett Smith), defeasibility (lack of control in the situation, as in irrational behavior), or both. Smith did not offer reparations in his apology statement besides stating he was "a work in progress", thus suggesting that he was going to work on his behavior in the future to prevent a similar situation from occurring again. This qualifies as an image repair strategy of corrective action.

From all the data's apologies, Smith's apology was the shortest and the most concise, but simultaneously it fit the definition of an effective apology the best and uses image repair strategies the least. Smith accepted the blame for his actions with few explanations while expressing remorse, recognizing several parties affected by his actions, and apologizing to them. Furthermore, Smith's apology could be described as the data's most straightforward one, as it contained barely any other content besides the clauses which were categorized as apology elements and/or image repair strategies. This made Smith's apology seem quite formal in comparison to for example Teigen's apology, in which she discussed her personal life and seemingly talked to her audience in a familiar manner, for example by thanking them and asking for their patience and support. The difference between the two apologies could be partially explained by their intended audiences: Teigen's apology seemed to be targeted to her own followers, whereas Smith's apology was aimed at a larger audience even beyond his own Instagram following, for example including the international viewership of the Oscars gala.

As pertaining to repercussions and reparations, Smith resigned from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences after the Oscars gala—furthermore, he was banned from participating in Oscars or other Academy events for the next ten years (BBC 2022). Many of Smith's upcoming film projects were shelved because of the incident, and Smith did personally express fear of being "fully cancelled" for his violent behavior (Grebenyuk 2022). According to Lee (2022), Smith took a hiatus from social media after posting his apology and returned months later, in the end of July 2022, with a video in which he further apologized to Rock and others involved. In the video, Smith claimed he had reached out to Rock to apologize personally but had not received a response (Lee 2022). On the other hand, Rock has stated that he has not been contacted by Smith since the Oscars incident (Ibrahim 2023).

4.1.4 Colleen Ballinger's apology: "hi"

Colleen Ballinger is an American comedian who became well-known on YouTube as and for her fictional, eccentric comedy character Miranda Sings. In the summer of 2023 Ballinger was accused of "problematic behavior" towards her fans which resulted in Ballinger's statement discussed in this section. However, the controversy initially

began in 2020, when a YouTuber named Adam McIntyre published a video in which he claimed Ballinger had formed an inappropriate relationship with him when he was still a minor (Yang 2023). Although the topic and McIntyre's claims were rebuffed at the time, they resurfaced in June of 2023, when another YouTuber confirmed McIntyre's accusations by claiming Ballinger had also acted inappropriately towards them and presenting proof of Ballinger's improper chat messages (Yang 2023).

Ballinger's alleged misconduct towards her underaged fans was not described as sexual in nature, but the relationships' power dynamics were said to have been unbalanced, as Ballinger was an adult in her thirties and the target of her underaged fans' admiration. However, Ballinger's former fans have also claimed Ballinger had asked her underaged fans sexually inappropriate questions in a private online chat (Yang 2023). Furthermore, Ballinger has been accused of putting several underaged fans in uncomfortable, embarrassing, and sexualized situations during skits on her live performance shows as Miranda Sings (Rios 2023).

On June 28th of 2023, Ballinger published a YouTube video on her ColleenVlogs channel titled *hi.* [sic] in which she played ukulele and sang a song as a response to the allegations of grooming and other inappropriate behavior (Bryce 2023; see Appendix 4). Ballinger's video seemed to be targeted towards a diverse audience, which ostensibly included not only her fans, who she wanted to explain her actions to, but also the people who were interested in the "platform drama" and the entertainment aspect of the situation, and the people speaking against her. This was demonstrated by Ballinger seemingly both appreciating and condemning her audience: Ballinger for instance both thanked her viewers for their support and accused them of spreading misinformation about her actions. Another focal point of Ballinger's video was cancel culture, which Ballinger commented on repeatedly, for example by singing about a "toxic gossip train" — a metaphor for cancel culture — in the song's chorus. In January 2024, the video has been viewed over 15 million times.

Although Ballinger's video has been called an "apology video" in media, it did not contain the elements of an effective interpersonal apology. Ballinger did not properly acknowledge her offense (i.e., inappropriate relationships and behavior with her underaged fans) in its entirety, as she only admitted to messaging to her fans in "a loser kind of way" and oversharing details of her life on direct messages, which she called "really weird" behavior. Ballinger also acknowledged she has made "dumb mistakes" and "jokes in poor taste", which most likely was a reference to her previously mentioned live show skits involving her fans and audience, as it was a heavily discussed and criticized topic at the time of the video's release. To all other accusations Ballinger referred to as "misinformation", "manipulation", "lies", and "dramatization", thus, denying and/or minimizing a large portion of them. Nearing the end of the video, however, Ballinger stated she felt "like shit" although she "never had any

bad intentions", which could be interpreted as her acknowledging and feeling the hurt her actions had caused.

Ballinger did not seem to express remorse and related attitudes in her statement, although she stated that she was "sad that there are some fans who feel betrayed" and that she did "feel like shit". Even though these statements expressed sadness, Ballinger did not acknowledge or specify the reason why her fans were feeling betrayed nor took responsibility of causing the said feelings of betrayal by acknowledging the offenses. Furthermore, Ballinger did not specify what caused her to "feel like shit", and although this expression could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of her offenses or remorse, there was a lack of specification. Ballinger could have meant that the entire situation and controversy had affected her negatively, as she also discussed the topic in her statement, for example by saying "it's not very fun to have millions of people all over the world call you the most vile [---] words that a person could be called in my opinion". Thus, it could not be explicitly stated that Ballinger expressed remorse or mortification for her actions.

Ballinger offered explanations for messaging her underaged fans in an inappropriate manner. According to Ballinger, her messages were not "creepy" as many people were "trying to suggest", and that she was only trying to be friends with everyone in her audience. Ballinger compared her attitude and behavior towards her fans to the behavior of a "weird aunt" in a family gathering, who tries to approach a younger relative by using youthful slang in her speech. With this reference Ballinger seemed to describe her own behavior as awkward but benign while using a humoristic and relatable comparison.

Ballinger utilized several different image repair strategies in her video. First, Ballinger used simple denial and denied many of the allegations made against her by calling them lies and rumors. Next, Ballinger used several tactics of the evade responsibility strategy: regarding the allegedly inappropriate communication with her fans, Ballinger somewhat utilized the tactic of defeasibility by explaining that she did not realize she should have established boundaries in her communication with her fans. Additionally, Ballinger used defeasibility in the sense of appealing to lack of control: Ballinger explained that her Miranda Sings character was never intended for children and that it was the parents' responsibility to decide what content their child consumed.

Ballinger also used the tactic of good intentions by stating she never had any bad intentions and that her intention was not to manipulate but to be friendly towards her fans. Furthermore, while referring to a situation where a fan was left feeling embarrassed after Ballinger's live show because of a "fart joke", Ballinger seemed to evade responsibility for the fan's humiliation by stating the situation was supposed to be entertaining and funny and thus, implying that her intentions were good. The fan in question had claimed that Ballinger included her in a fan segment during a Miranda

Sings live show and made her do different yoga poses on stage while a loud flatulence sound was played from the speakers to humiliate the fan and make it seem like the sound came from her (Smith 2023).

The strategy Ballinger used the most in her statement was reducing her acts' offensiveness. Ballinger was primarily vague while discussing the accusations made against her and did not, for example, mention the fans who came forward with their own videos discussing Ballinger's behavior. Ballinger referred to the accusations as rumors "made up for clout" (*clout* meaning influence or fame, as in the rumors were created in hopes of garnering fame) but admitted to making "a fart joke" five years ago, which again was a reference to the former fan's experience. When Ballinger referred to the situation—which the fan had found deeply embarrassing and harmful, according to Smith (2023)—as a "fart joke", it appeared as minimization of the fan's experience, as Ballinger seemingly disregarded the harm caused. Furthermore, Ballinger claimed in her video that she had been called a predator because of the said "fart joke", insinuating that the specific incident was the only reasoning for the accusation made against her—thus, minimizing her offenses.

The most utilized tactic of reducing offensiveness in Ballinger's video was attacking accusers. Ballinger repeatedly called the accusations made against her "lies" and "misinformation" to diminish the credibility of both the accusations and the accusers. Furthermore, Ballinger targeted both the video's audience and the people discussing her behavior online by stating that they value entertainment over truth, meaning that the audience was seemingly more interested in being entertained by the so-called platform drama and cancel culture than finding out what was accurate and true. This is reminiscent of Lewis and Christin's (2022: 1651) argument regarding the negotiation of truth on social media: the truth can transform into meaning the most convincing performance of authenticity instead of what is factual.

Ballinger claimed people were trying to destroy her life online, and that her criticizers must have been perfect if they could judge her and other people's mistakes. According to Ballinger, the audience had already made up their mind on what is true before the video's release and were thus not interested in what she had to say in her defense. Ballinger ended the video by discussing how making mistakes does not make someone a bad person and by stating "But what do I know, fuck me, right?", further pointing out that she was helpless against the audience and their attacks. As a result, Ballinger's video could be seen as an attack against its viewers, which in following made it seem unremorseful and unapologetic.

When Ballinger explained her past behavior of messaging her fans, she presented corrective actions she had already done: Ballinger claimed she had not over-shared with fans in years, had tried to learn from her mistakes, and had changed her behavior and taken accountability for her actions. Ballinger did not seem to express

mortification in her video, as she did not straightforwardly accept blame nor show remorse for the things she was accused of. Furthermore, Ballinger's ostensible attempts of evading responsibility and reducing the offensiveness of her acts fought against the concept of mortification.

Ballinger's video statement was missing many elements of an effective interpersonal apology and relied more on image repair strategies. It was the only one of the data's apologies which included the strategy of denial, and it featured the largest quantity and variety of different image repair strategies. As Ballinger used the image repair strategy of denial and did not actually apologize during her video but only stated "Well I'm sorry, I'm not gonna take that route of admitting to lies and rumors that you made up for clout", her video was not technically an "apology video".

After the publication of her ukulele video, Ballinger completely withdrew from social media for several months before returning to YouTube on late November 2023 (St. Martin 2023). According to St. Martin (2023), Ballinger stated upon her return that she was embarrassed of her previous video (meaning *hi.*) and apologized for it. McIntyre, Ballinger's former fan who spoke against her, has claimed he has not received a personal apology from Ballinger (St. Martin 2023).

4.1.5 A summary of the results

A theory-based content analysis was conducted by comparing the apologies to Lazare's (2005) elements of effective interpersonal apologies and to Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies, as Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 401) have described public apologies as a combination of interpersonal apology elements and image repair strategies. The analysis was conducted both to determine which elements and strategies were used, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the apologies according to Lazare's theory.

As a part of the analysis, I determined what the apologies' intended audiences were, and who the apologies were at least seemingly directed to. I saw this as a necessary step before being able to analyze whether the celebrities succeeded in acknowledging their offenses, as determined by Lazare (2005: 50). The target audiences of all the apologies were large and, in most cases, the apologizers' own, respective audiences and fans, i.e., the people who follow them on social media. However, Will Smith's statement also included public interpersonal apologies and it was seemingly intended for an audience beyond Smith's own, as he extended an apology to "everyone watching around the world", referring to the Oscars gala. Ballinger addressed both her fans and her perceived adversaries in her statement, meaning people who were speaking against her or following the controversy surrounding her for "platform drama", as defined by Lewis and Christin (2022: 1638). Teigen mentioned in her apology that she had privately reached out to interpersonally apologize to the people she

had originally hurt with her offensive tweets, but the other celebrities did not mention giving interpersonal apologies to the people they had offended.

Table 4. Lazare's (2005) apology elements in the data

	Acknowledging the offense	Remorse, shame, humility	Explanations	Reparations
Logan Paul			X	
Chrissy Teigen	X	X	X	
Will Smith	X	X	X	
Colleen Ballinger			X	

X = present in the data

As shown in Table 4, none of the apologies included the element of reparations presented by Lazare (2005). According to Lazare (2005: 77), to demonstrate that the offending party is taking the situation seriously and wishes to fix it, they should offer reparations to their victim. As none of the data's apologies were intended purely as interpersonal apologies and were directed to large audiences—possibly consisting of millions of people—concrete reparations would have been difficult to offer, but symbolic reparations were not offered either by any of the celebrities. However, during the aftermath of his apology Logan Paul did pledge to donate a million dollars to a charity related to mental health, and most of the celebrities did engage in the image repair strategy of corrective actions, which closely resembles the element of reparations. In practice, three of the four celebrities promised to not repeat their actions in the future.

Based on Lazare's (2005) elements of effective interpersonal apologies, Teigen's and Smith's statements could be labeled as the data sample's most effective interpersonal apologies, because they included all the elements except reparations. Moreover, they included the element of acknowledging the offense, which Lazare (2005: 50) asserts as the most essential element of an effective apology. Thus, the lack of reparations does not necessarily mean that the apologies were unsuccessful. The data's two other apologies—Paul's and Ballinger's—did not include the element of acknowledging the offense, nor the element of remorse, and were thus insufficient apologies according to Lazare's (2005) theory.

Table 5. Image repair strategies and tactics in the data

	Denial	Evasion of responsibility	Reducing offensiveness	Corrective action	Mortification
Logan Paul		Defeasibility, Good intentions	Bolstering		
Chrissy Teigen			Bolstering, Differentiation	X	X
Will Smith		Provocation, Defeasibility		X	X
Colleen Ballinger	Simple denial	Defeasibility, Good intentions	Minimization, Attack accuser	X	

X = present in the data

As presented in Table 5, the apologies included a wide variety of Benoit's image repair strategies, as different apologies seemingly utilized different strategies. Furthermore, there was no strategy which was present in all four apologies, but the strategies of evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action were present in three apologies, making them the most used strategies. More specifically, the tactic of defeasibility was used in all three apologies which included evasion of responsibility: defeasibility refers to the way an accused party can try to claim they had no control over their offensive behavior or that they did not possess all the needed information. Furthermore, two of the apologies included the tactic of good intentions, meaning that the accused parties claimed their actions were done in good faith. When it comes to the three apologies using the strategy of reducing offensiveness, two utilized the tactic of bolstering, i.e. the accused tried to portray themselves in a more positive light.

4.2   Thematic analysis of the apologies

The four main themes which were identified from the apologies with the use of thematic analysis were parasocial communication, cancel culture, human errors and empathy, and self-improvement and change, and these themes will be further discussed in the following sections.

4.2.1   Parasocial communication

The apology statements included elements which could be categorized as parasocial communication: as discussed in section 2.1.1, parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships which can form, for example, between celebrities and their fans through

mass media or social media platforms, even though the celebrities' communication is intended for a large audience and is not happening on personal level. In the apologies, especially Teigen and Ballinger addressed their audiences as "you". This could help them in creating a connection with their audiences, making it seem like they were interacting with their fans individually and personally.

On the other hand, Paul's and Smith's apologies were less engaging in the sense that Paul and Smith did not address their statements' recipients but only spoke from their own personal points of view. Nevertheless, Paul addressed his fans using the hashtag #Logang4Life, in which "Logang" is portmanteau of *Logan* and *gang*, thus referring to Paul's "gang" of followers. *Logang* is seemingly Paul's fandom name, meaning an individual name given to the followers and fans of a specific content creator (Tarvin 2021). Naming fandoms is an especially prevalent practice on YouTube, and one of its purposes is to create a sense of belonging and a community between the fans and the associated celebrity (Tarvin 2021).

In addition to addressing their audience as "you", Teigen and Ballinger could be generally described as the most engaging with their audiences. Both Teigen and Ballinger thanked their statements' respective audiences—such as "thank you for listening"—and expressed their gratitude and appreciation towards their fans. Especially Teigen discussed the relationship she had built with her audience by stating "I truly love that social media has connected me to so many of you. We've shared so much, I've learned so much, I've grown so much, and I love what you have meant to me". Furthermore, while offering explanations for her actions, Ballinger stated she talked to her fans as she talked to her friends.

Teigen and Ballinger also extended wishes and requests for their audience: Ballinger hoped people would be willing to listen to what she had to say, and Teigen wished she could make her audience proud of her in the future. In addition, Teigen asked her audience for a chance to change and improve as a person and specifically stated she was not asking for her audience's forgiveness, but for their "patience and tolerance". Overall, Teigen's statement was seemingly the most personal out of the four apologies, as she discussed her feelings and thoughts about the situation in depth, and expressed her feelings towards her audience, for instance stating that she had "so much love to give if you are open and willing to accept it".

Furthermore, in her statement Teigen's described how she cringed remembering her "asshole past" and commented on how reaching out to the people she had insulted was like her "own version of that show *My Name is Earl!*". *My Name is Earl* is an American comedy series from the 2000s, in which the main character aspires to become a better person and fix his past mistakes in search of good karma (My Name is Earl 2024). This personal and somewhat humorous approach helped to create a sense of humility to Teigen's statement, which is an important element of an effective apology and could

simultaneously make her appear more relatable. However, using humor in an apology could also be considered callous, as discussed later in section 4.3.1.

4.2.2 Cancel culture

Although call-out culture, cancel culture, or canceling were not directly mentioned in any of the apology statements, the concept itself was discussed repeatedly. As the terms cancel culture and canceling are contemporary, most likely ephemeral, and somewhat politically charged, the concepts of public shaming and (consequent) ostracizing might not be always referred to with those specific terms. Thus, Ballinger for example repeatedly discussed cancel culture in her statement by using the metaphor of "toxic gossip train".

As was with the theme of parasocial communication, Teigen's and Ballinger's statements discussed cancel culture the most. This can be explained at least partially with the apologies' length: Paul's and Smith's statements were short and concise, whereas Teigen's and Ballinger's were lengthier and touched on several different themes and topics. However, despite Paul's apology's shortness, Paul stated in it that his Aokigahara video had caused as "a monsoon of negativity". This could have been a reference to the overwhelmingly negative feedback Paul received, but as the online discussion revolving around the topic also included open requests and demands of Paul's cancelation, the "monsoon of negativity" could be Paul's way of referring to phenomenon of cancel culture.

Teigen and Ballinger seemed to approach the topic of cancel culture from two opposing points of view. As described in section 2.2, one of the viewpoints to the phenomenon is seeing it as a movement which aims to suppress and restrict free speech and, in the most extreme instances, ruin people's livelihoods, and in this more negative context the phenomenon is often referred to as *cancel culture*. On the other hand, the same activity can be seen as "calling out" bad behavior and a way of serving social justice by utilizing social media's equalizing nature, and in this context, the concept can be referred to as *call-out culture*. Thus, in this section the former point of view is referred to as cancel culture and the latter as call-out culture to simplify the different perspectives of the phenomenon.

Teigen explained in her blog post that she had been "sitting in a hole of deserved global punishment, the ultimate 'sit here and think about what you've done'". Thus, Teigen seemingly regarded the phenomenon from the point of view of call-out culture, as she confirmed her "global punishment" was "deserved" and described its goal as making her think about her own actions. This could be determined as a prerequisite for taking accountability, as accountability is defined as willingness to accept responsibility for one's actions (Merriam-Webster 2024a). In her apology, as previously stated, Teigen seemingly took accountability for her actions by acknowledging her

offense, expressing mortification, and promising to change her behavior in the future—thus, Teigen at least theoretically demonstrated the ostensible objectives and goals of call-out culture, i.e., making an offender "see reason" and change.

As a part of her apology, Teigen explained her own past behavior on X and how she used to "snark at some celebrities" by posting "crude, clever, harmless quip". Later Teigen referred to her own actions as "trolling" and stated she understood what motivated it: "the instant gratification that you get from lashing out and clapping back, throwing rocks at someone you think is invincible because they're famous". Merriam-Webster (2024f) defines *trolling*—in the context of social media and other online platforms—either as antagonizing others by posting disruptive content, or as harassing and criticizing public content especially by provocatively disparaging it. The latter definition and Teigen's own description of "clapping back" at celebrities seemingly come very close to what canceling can be defined as. Furthermore, Teigen compared her own past tweets to the negative feedback she received by stating she understood the irony of her situation, as she had now learned what it felt like to be on "the receiving end of incredible vitriol".

Thus, the difference between trolling and calling out seems to lie in what the target of these activities has done. If the target has done something offensive and the backlash is thus perceived as warranted, the activities can be described as "calling out" or canceling, but in Teigen's case, the targets of her tweets had not apparently done anything to warrant the attacks, and her tweeting activity was thus, according to Teigen, "trolling". As discussed by Bouvier and Machin (2021: 320-321), the targets of cancelations are perceived as not sharing the common moral values and can be therefore othered from a social group, simultaneously becoming easy targets for ridicule and public shaming. Therefore, the online activities which could be otherwise defined as "trolling" become more socially acceptable.

Lewis and Christin (2022: 1651) claim cancel culture and cancelations function as cyclical, communal rituals where social morals are negotiated, and where the catharsis of the process itself can offer enough satisfaction for the participants even when concrete consequences or punishments for the offenders do not follow. Thus, as Teigen stated she understood the irony of her situation as the target of "incredible vitriol" and expressed she had learned from the experience, her case seemed like a prime example for Lewis and Christin's theory.

Oppositely, Ballinger's stance towards the canceling phenomenon seemingly reflected cancel culture, i.e., the more negative point of view. Ballinger used the metaphor of "toxic gossip train" to discuss cancel culture and its effects in the choruses of her statement song. Ballinger's metaphor included train-related thematic such as "chugging down the tracks of misinformation", "one-way ticket to manipulation

station", and "steamroll over someone's reputation" which had very negative connotations, as did the designated name of the metaphor, "*toxic* gossip train".

In addition to the negative vocabulary, the narrative Ballinger told with the metaphor reflected the concept of cancel culture. According to Ballinger, the "toxic gossip train" aims to destroy people's reputations for entertainment and without fact-checking. Ballinger (2023) also referred to cancel culture more straightforwardly in other parts of her statement, such as explaining the actions behind cancelation processes:

> Hey everybody I found someone new to harass,
> She did some things that I do not like in her past,
> So everybody gather round cause we're about to attack,
> But not based on facts, oh no
> Your loaded lethal weapon is your fingers on the keys,
> You don't need any armor when you can hide behind a screen,
> So shoot me down quick with a click and bam,
> Your reputation's deceased

Ballinger presented cancel culture as a practice of harassing people online because of their past actions, and with the goal of destroying their reputations and ruining their lives with "mob mentality". Again, Ballinger stated "but not based on facts, oh no" to reiterate how the harassment and accusations are apparently rarely or never factual, but that the cancelation process "steamrolls", i.e. moves forward, regardless. Ballinger also expressed she was feeling helpless in her situation as she considered her attempts to explain herself futile— "doesn't really matter what my intention was because it seems everyone's already decided on that". Ballinger stated she personally considered holding people accountable for their mistakes "really important" but did not consider taking accountability to be the goal of the situation she was in. Thus, whereas Teigen seemed to somewhat accept the cancelation or "call-out" she was facing, Ballinger appeared to be more defensive in comparison.

4.2.3 Human errors and empathy

A famous idiom "to err is human; to forgive, divine", originating from Pope's (1988: 50) poem *An Essay of Criticism*, is frequently used to signify that making mistakes is normal and, moreover, that forgiving is the right and virtuous thing to do. Three of the data's four apologies addressed this sentiment in some manner and likened the committed offenses to human errors. Paul stated he believed he makes good decisions, but he was "still a human being" and he "can be wrong". Teigen claimed she aspired to be a person "who will still fuck up in front of the world but rarely, and never not growing only more good from it". Lastly, Ballinger (2023) ended her video with a "to err is human" statement:

> Sometimes people make mistakes simply because they made a mistake
> And that mistake doesn't make them a terrible human
> Just makes them human

This "human error" theme closely resembles Benoit's (2014) image repair theory's strategy of reducing offensiveness, whose goal is to negate the offensive act's consequences and show the offending act in a more positive light. However, the "human error" approach does not fit into any of the specific tactics determined by Benoit, as none of the offenders specifically appealed to "human error" to explain their behavior or reduce their acts' offensiveness, but instead referred to it as an additional factor, perhaps to evoke compassion and to remind the audience that committing one offense does not need to define the offender completely. As Teigen expressed: "we are all more than our worst moments".

Similarly, the apologies discussed the importance of empathy, love, and kindness. Teigen and Smith both shared their views on what the world requires: according to Teigen, the world needs "more kindness and love" and Smith stated that "there is no place for violence in a world of love and kindness". Furthermore, Paul and Teigen expressed their love towards their audience and Teigen discussed her own empathetic quality, how "life has made me more empathetic".

Bouvier and Machin (2021: 308, 324) report that discussions on social media are often polarized, and judgements can also become quite black-and-white. As targets of cancelations are often othered based on their perceived moral views and ideologies, they can also become targets of harsher judgements and ridicule than someone who would be perceived as sharing the same views. Therefore, emphasizing qualities such as compassion and the humaneness of making mistakes can be seen as a necessary defense by an offender, and it can also function as a reminder to the audience that the offender is not so different from them. Reminding the audience of the offender's humaneness and other qualities they share with their audience, such as wishes for a kinder, loving world, could be an attempt to bring the offender closer to their audience, so the offenders would not be judged as harshly, othered, or placed outside of the ideological square (van Dijk 1998: 267): that they would still be considered as one of "us".

4.2.4   Self-improvement and change

All the celebrities made references to learning or growing from the offenses and their aftermaths, and the apology statements handled topics related to changing and developing as a person. When it comes to the shorter statements, Paul asserted he will not mishandle the power given to him again, thus, indicating he had learned from the experience. Smith on the other hand stated he is "a work in progress", simultaneously

acknowledging his own shortcomings and the need for development and promising to work on himself and to improve in the future.

Teigen's statement handled the topic of self-development more in depth. As Teigen had written her offensive tweets a decade before the apology, Teigen had a unique position compared to the other celebrities who were apologizing for more recent offenses. In her post Teigen claimed she "grew up" and had changed and become more empathetic since her acts of misconduct, stating "At the time, I just didn't get it. Believe me, I get it now". In addition to describing the changes she had allegedly made over the years, Teigen promised to "keep working to be the best version of myself for EVERYONE", signifying that self-development and personal growth was a continuous process. Furthermore, Teigen stated that she had been on "a path of self-improvement" for the past decade and planned to continue doing so.

While discussing her personal growth and development, Teigen claimed she is "no longer the person who wrote those horrible things", referring to her offensive tweets. With this statement Teigen seemingly attempted to create distance between her current self and her past self, as they were two different individuals. While Teigen admitted to writing the tweets, distancing herself from her own past actions by claiming she was not the same person who wrote the tweets resembles the image repair tactic of shifting blame—however, shifting blame, as defined by Benoit (2014: 22), is a tactic of the strategy of denial, which presupposes not admitting to one's offenses. Thus, distancing oneself from their own offenses by appealing to personal growth and change cannot be categorized according to Benoit's image repair strategies.

Although Ballinger's alleged offenses were not as old as Teigen's, Ballinger also seemingly attempted to create distance between herself and her past actions. In her statement, Ballinger admitted to oversharing with her fans, but then claimed she had not done so in years and had since "changed her behavior" and taken "accountability". Later, Ballinger elaborated on what accountability meant to her by wishing people "could learn from their mistakes and grow and change their behavior and be a better person". As Ballinger expressed that she had already taken accountability and changed since her offense, she portrayed her earlier wrongdoings as practically resolved: Ballinger had supposedly acknowledged her offense and even done the necessary reparations years before releasing her statement. Thus, Ballinger's way of distancing herself from her past actions can be seen as a minimization tactic, as portraying the offense as already solved and dealt with seemingly aimed to minimize its negative effects.

In addition to discussing the ways they currently were or already had been working to better themselves, both Teigen and Ballinger asked their audience for a chance to grow and improve as a person. Furthermore, both seemingly extended their requests to apply to others as well, asking their audience to give similar space and

kindness to others: for instance, Ballinger stated people do not need to respond to mistakes with hate, but can instead "kindly let them know and help them to grow". Teigen promised reciprocity for her audience by assuring she would allow them to "own past mistakes and be given the opportunity to seek self improvement and change".

4.3   Thematic analysis of the reactions

I began the thematic analysis of the response tweets by dividing them into positive and negative responses based on their initial stance or reaction towards the apology. This division was done based on my own personal interpretation. Most of the tweets could be categorized as either positive or negative, as they took a clear stance by, for example, appraising, mocking, dismissing, or critiquing the apologies. However, some of the tweets were vaguer and did not offer any contextual clues about their writers' stances towards the apologies, and in such instances, I labelled the responses as ambiguous or neutral.

Table 6. Tally of the positive and negative reactions to data's apologies

	Positive	Negative	Ambiguous/neutral
Logan Paul	0	18	2
Chrissy Teigen	7	11	2
Will Smith	6	11	3
Colleen Ballinger	0	20	0
Total (out of 80)	13 (16%)	60 (75%)	7 (9%)

As demonstrated by Table 6, out of the total of 80 responses, most were negative: two of the apologies did not receive positive responses (in the data) at all, and even the more positively received apologies still had more negative than positive responses. Teigen's apology had the most positive response, closely followed by Smith, whereas Paul and Ballinger's apologies received overwhelmingly negative reactions, Ballinger's reception being the most negative one. The apologies were found inadequate in several different ways and for different reasons, but the major themes which were identified from the responses were insufficiency, insincerity, apologies as a genre and as a source of entertainment and humor, cancel culture, and support.

4.3.1   "The WORST apology video ever": insufficiency

With varying reasoning, all four apologies were evaluated as insufficient by at least one responder. Some X users expressed their dissatisfaction by straightforwardly

disparaging or mocking the apologies, for example by stating that they were "bad", "pathetic", or "the worst fucking apology in YouTube history". A simple stylistic way the responders used to convey they found the apologies inadequate was with the use of scare quotes. Scare quotes, also called shudder quotes and sneer quotes, refer to the use of quotation marks in an unconventional way: quotation marks are most often used to signal quoted content in a text, but they can also be used to convey a writer's disagreement with the way a word is used by others in a certain context (Pinker 2014: 42-43). Thus, the way the responders referred to the apologies as *"apologies"* with quotation marks, such as in Figure 1, is an example of the use of scare quotes. Their aim was seemingly to signify that the commenters did not agree that the statements qualified as genuine apologies.
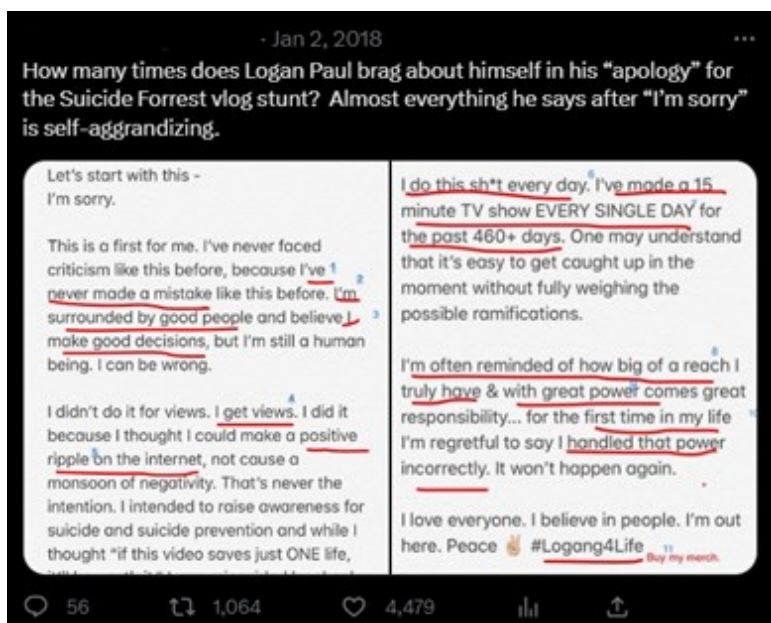

Figure 1. X user's underlines showing what they considered boastful in Paul's apology.

The dissatisfaction with the apologies was also expressed by correcting them: the respondents for example underlined parts of the apologies to showcase what they were especially unhappy with (as demonstrated by Figure 1), edited the apology text and claimed they "fixed" it, and utilized the artificial intelligence system ChatGPT to produce "a better apology". Additionally, the responders seemingly aimed to correct the celebrities' chosen wording, especially regarding the misconduct or violations the celebrities had committed. The offenses were specifically brought up in all four apologies' responses, typically in a negative context to seemingly diminish the apologies' effects. For example, Teigen's way of referring to her past tweets as "snark" was revised by a responder as "pure evil", and what behavior Teigen herself referred to as "mean" was changed to "cruel" by a responder. Thus, the responders ostensibly

aimed to correct and present a narrative regarding the situation which they considered to be truthful and just, possibly from a supposedly objective point-of-view.

Similarly, the apologies' insufficiency was seemingly argued with the celebrities' past actions, as some of the responders referred to the celebrities' offenses to emphasize why they found the apologies unacceptable. For instance, Paul's explanation for his offense — intention of raising awareness for suicide prevention — was essentially rejected by the responders, as it was viewed as an inadequate explanation in comparison to the severity of the offense, i.e., filming a dead person. Additionally, in Smith's case, his behavior at the Oscars gala was highlighted as "an assault" by some of the respondents to reject the apology, such as in Tweet (1). Smith himself referred to his actions by stating that he "reacted emotionally" and that violence is poisonous and destructive.

> (1) Sorry but Will Smith ASSAULTED Chris Rock. Period. And an apology doesn't change that. It's just not "oh he said he's sorry so he should be forgiven". It was ASSAULT by EVERY definition.

Another reasoning for the apologies' perceived inadequacy seemed to be related to the apologizers' attitudes, which were not in line with Lazare's (2005) elements of effective interpersonal apologies. According to Lazare (2005: 67), expressing attitudes such as humility and sincerity are important parts of an apology. Based on the apologies' theory-based content analysis, Smith and Teigen expressed such attitudes in their apologies, whereas Paul and Ballinger did not, and based on the results of the thematic analysis of the tweets, the responders paid attention to these differences, especially to the lack of remorse. While Teigen's and Smith's apologies received at least some positive feedback and were even complimented, Paul and Ballinger received heavy backlash for the attitudes they were observed to have portrayed.

The central problem the X users had with Paul's apology was seemingly its heavy arrogance, as demonstrated earlier by Figure 1. Over half of the responses found Paul's apology post self-aggrandizing and that Paul was bragging and "making it all about himself". Specifically, Paul's phrase "I didn't do it for views. I get views" or some variation of it was referred to point out how the statement revolved around Paul, as was the way Paul stated that the instance was the first time he had regretted his actions. The reaction to Paul's apology could also be described as the most aggressive out of the data's apologies because X users used curse words and insults in their comments regarding Paul and his apology, and similar commentary was not present elsewhere in the data. In the tweets Paul was called "pure trash" (Tweet 2) and "cunt", and one commenter wrote to Paul "you ain't shit". One X user requested people to unfollow Paul and stated, "fuck that boy, he deserves everything he gets", expressing strong disdain. In Tweet (2), the angry response was seemingly caused by Paul's flippant attitude after finding the suicide victim.

> (2) Glad the video was deleted. Logan Paul's apology is pathetic! Saying "I didn't do it for the views. I get views." Also how can he raise awareness about suicide.. by posting a video of him & friends laughing at a dead body of someone who committed suicide? Logan Paul is PURE TRASH

In addition to words, feelings can be expressed in text with the use of typographical tone of voice (McCulloch 2019: 115). In Paul's case, X users seemed to express their feelings with the use capital letters, which is, according to McCulloch (2019: 115), one of the most common methods of portraying strong emotions with a typographical choice. However, capitalizing can also express emphasis, especially when only one word is written in capital letters (McCulloch 2019: 115). Thus, it cannot be explicitly stated that the commenters expressed anger with their capitalization, but when it is combined with the commenters' topics and wording choices, the resulting text are at least seemingly angry, such as in Tweets (2) and (3).

> (3) You could write a PhD dissertation on everything wrong with Logan Paul's "apology" for FILMING DEAD SUICIDE VICTIMS and then GETTING WELL DESERVED BLOWBACK.
>
> ☑ Makes it all about him
>
> ☑ Isn't it great he learned a lesson?
>
> ☑ No real mention of any issues beyond himself.

Ballinger was evaluated as not having expressed or shown any remorse or shame for her actions. As demonstrated by Tweet (4) below, its author described Ballinger's video as "not funny at all" and that instead of apologizing, Ballinger had treated the situation as a joke and used the entire duration of her statement to essentially mock the people she had hurt. Another X user called Ballinger's statement "dismissive", and yet another user described it as not an apology but "a parody": many commenters drew attention to how Ballinger appeared flippant and indifferent by responding to the serious allegations made against her by performing a song. Thus, Ballinger's apology was perceived not only as disingenuous, but also as insulting towards the people Ballinger had offended, which was perhaps one of the contributing factors in why Ballinger's apology was ranked as "the worst apology" by many responders.

> (4) No because Colleen Ballinger will go down as having the worst fucking apology in YouTube history… and it wasn't an apology at all. She essentially spent 10 minutes mocking all of the people she hurt. Typical behavior for an abuser/groomer. It's not funny at all.

Based on the thematic analysis of the responses, an effective apology requires an appropriate level of graveness when it comes to the representation. As both Paul and Ballinger received negative feedback for their seemingly flippant apologies, it could

be argued that the responders expected the celebrities to take their situations seriously and react in a solemn manner. Lazare's (2005) elements of an effective interpersonal apology do not specifically mention this aspect, however it is possibly included in the element of expressing remorse and other related attitudes, as portraying such attitudes while not being serious would be somewhat contradictory.

Both the format and the length of the apologies were also brought up as reasons for the apologies' perceived inadequacy. When it comes to Ballinger, her stylistic choice of responding to a series of serious allegations with a song and (referring to the image repair tactic) attacking her accusers in her statement seemed to negatively affect the apology's perceived adequacy. In Paul's case, the X users criticized the style of the apology statement in contrast to the offense Paul was apologizing for.

> (5) I love how Jenna Marbles makes a 47 minute video on apologizing for buying the wrong fish tank for her fish. Yet Logan Paul makes text apology on twitter for showing a man who committed suicide on his YouTube video… really

The author of Tweet (5) compares Paul's apology to another apology made by Jenna Marbles, a YouTube personality who, according to the tweet, had published a lengthy video apologizing for an apparently minor offense. The author of the tweet seemingly found Paul's "text apology on twitter" insufficient and cursory in comparison to Marbles'. Furthermore, other responders pointed out different aspects of Paul's apology, such as the use of the "Spider-Man quote" and ending the statement with the hashtag #Logang4Life", which made them feel incredulous about Paul's apology's sincerity and adequacy.

Another reason for why the apologies were observed as insufficient was their targeting. As the apologies were public, all their intended targets were at least tentatively the celebrities' own audiences and followers on social media; a summary of each apology's target audiences can be found in section 4.1.5. However, some of the responses questioned either the need of a public apology in general, or the celebrities' choice of apologizing publicly instead of offering a personal apology to the actual offended parties. For instance, one of the tweets commenting on Smith's apology stated that Smith "needed to personally apologize to Chris and not to us on IG. My face doesn't need ice!", whereas another response to Teigen's apology wondered why Teigen was apologizing "via 3rd party", most likely referring to Teigen's public apology blog post. Furthermore, according to the responses, Teigen's public apology was considered meaningless if she had blocked Courtney Stodden, one of the people Teigen had targeted with her tweets, on social media as Stodden had claimed (Lampen 2021). Thus, based on the data, public apologies can be also seen as insufficient or insincere if there is no concrete evidence that the offended parties have received interpersonal apologies, despite who the public apology is intended for.

4.3.2 "Don't fall for that false apology!": insincerity

Although not all the apologies were evaluated to be insufficient, all of them were deemed somehow insincere, falsely given, or fabricated by at least one responder. The more positively received apologies, given by Teigen and Smith, obtained more doubts regarding their authenticity in comparison to Paul's and Ballinger's apologies: as especially Ballinger's apology was evaluated practically unanimously as insufficient and dismissive, its sincerity was thus seemingly not considered as much.

The reasonings for the apologies' perceived artificiality were relatively homogenous. First, Paul, Teigen, and Smith were all assessed to have apologized because of external pressure or "for show". Some X users claimed that both Paul and Teigen only apologized because of the negative feedback they had received and because they were "called out" on their behavior, and especially Paul's apology was seen as a sort of knee-jerk response to the backlash his YouTube video had received. Teigen's apology was perceived to have been published as a response to Teigen losing brand deals and career opportunities because of her actions. Furthermore, one of the X users stated that Smith's apology was the result of condemnation he faced, and because the Academy had launched an official investigation regarding the situation at the Oscars.

Second, at least Teigen's and Smith's apologies were deemed insincere because of their timing, meaning the time that had passed between the initial offensive behavior and the apology. Interestingly, the time between Teigen's offensive tweets and her apology was ten years, while the time between Smith's violent outburst and his apology was approximately 24 hours: still, Smith's apology was evaluated as being "too little too late", most likely because Smith did not take a moment to apologize during the Academy Award acceptance speech he gave shortly after the incident with Rock. Thus, it was surprising to see that Teigen did not receive more negative feedback for publicly apologizing for her social media insults a decade later.

Finally, Teigen's and Smith's apologies, which had also received positive feedback for their genuineness, were perceived to have been written by someone else on their behalf—thus, they were presumed to be falsely given. In both Teigen's and Smith's case the X users surmised that the celebrities' public relations teams or managers were behind creating the published statements, but this theme was especially salient in Smith's apology, as demonstrated by Tweet (6), which was a response to another tweet complementing Smith's apology. In several reactions to Smith's apology, the reasoning for the suspicion towards its legitimacy seemed to be how "perfectly" the apology was written.

(6) Your sentence: Will Smith's apology to Chris Rock could not have been more perfectly written.

My sentence: Will Smith's apology to Chris Rock could not have been more perfectly written… by his publicist.

Smith's apology's perceived "perfectness" could refer to the way Smith successfully included all the elements of an effective interpersonal apology in his short statement while simultaneously using only few image repair tactics. In a positive light, Smith's apology was seen as a prime example of an apology, whereas in negative context it was seen as *too* perfect. When compared to other apologies of the data, this so-called negatively perceived perfectness could refer to the apology's lack of personal touch: Smith did not include almost anything in his statement besides the elements of an effective apology, whereas Paul, Teigen and Ballinger all offered a varying amount of personal information and even discussed topics unrelated to the apology. However, the authorship of Teigen's statement was questioned as well, despite her presenting personal viewpoints in her apology. As Teigen's and Smith's apologies were both theoretically effective and estimated to be exemplary apologies by some of the X users, the reasoning behind the suspicions towards their authenticity could be, in fact, the apologies' good qualities—well-presented apologies would be more likely to have been produced by communications professionals in comparison to unsuccessful apologies.

The findings of this section support Lewis and Christin's (2022: 1649-1650) theory of public apologies being seen as inauthentic and fake in principle, because they are performative in nature and exist on commercialized, monetized platforms. Based on the findings, the audience can most likely always find a reason to question an apology's authenticity, despite how well-written and personal it is. In our time, as celebrities' social media presences are ever growing and ever commercializing, it probably becomes increasingly easier to accuse a public relations or social media team of drafting even the smaller statements on the celebrities' behalf, thus, nullifying the apologies' positive effects.

4.3.3 "The four horsemen of bad YouTuber apology videos": apologies as a genre and as a source of humor

Lomborg (2013: 3) defines a genre in the context of social media as conventions and expectations which are negotiated by the participants to understand different methods and forms of online communication. As Lomborg (2013: 3) expresses, genres indicate a so-called "horizon of expectations" which realizes in the form of textual conventions, media formats, tone etc. The X users in the current study's data were able to identify similarities and draw comparisons between different YouTube apologies, and it suggests that they were also familiar with the other apologies mentioned in the

tweets, and their topics and style. The ability to draw these comparisons demonstrated that social media users had seemingly found and determined enough specific combining features in "YouTube apologies" to discuss them as a genre, perhaps as a subgenre of apologies, or as a subgenre of YouTube videos.

The response data included several references and comparisons to other, previously made public apologies, but only Paul's and Ballinger's apologies received these comparisons. The reason for this is unclear, but possible answers include the fact that both apologies received heavy criticism (both individually and compared to the other apologies), and that both Paul and Ballinger are YouTube personalities, as the comparisons were done between existing "YouTube apologies", i.e. apologies made on YouTube in video format. However, it must be noted that Paul's apology discussed here was a text-based apology published on X, although he released another apology on YouTube later the same day.

Most of the humor present in the data also revolved around the topics of comparing the apologies to others, grouping them together, and mocking them.

> (7) choose ur fighter Colleen ballinger ukulele apology vs Sienna mae interpretive dance apology

For instance, in Tweet (7), an X user used a meme format "choose your fighter" to compare Ballinger's apology to an apology video made by YouTuber Sienna Mae. "Choose your fighter" refers to the starting point of video games, in which the player needs to choose a character they want to use as their avatar. Thus, Tweet (7) utilized the meme to compare Ballinger and Mae's poorly received apologies and asked other participants on X to choose which one is better out of the two. In Figure 2 below, Ballinger's apology was listed among "the four horsemen of bad YouTuber apology videos", again making a comparison between several negatively received statements. "The four horsemen" is a reference to the Bible and the Book of Revelation, in which the four horsemen of the apocalypse are the harbingers of the end of the world.
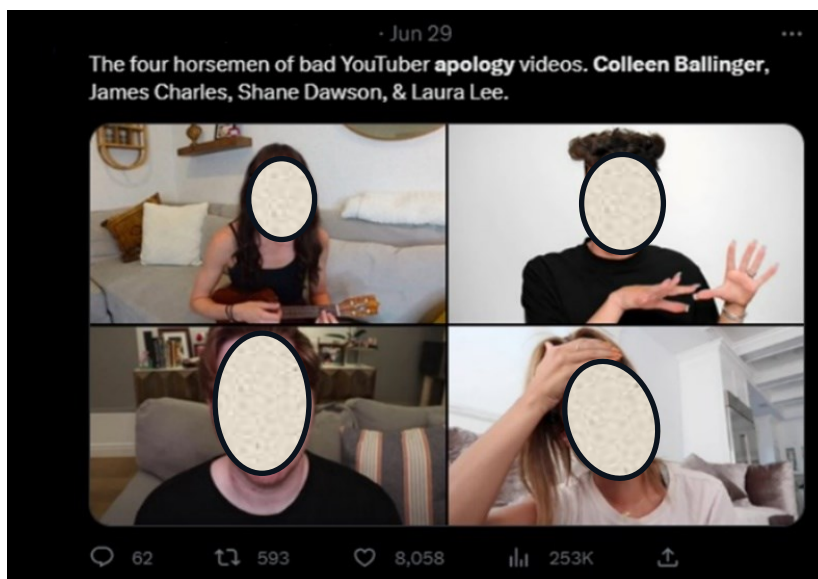
Figure 2. A collection of "bad YouTuber apology videos"

Especially Ballinger's apology was compared to other poorly received YouTube apologies, and as established in section 4.3.1, many X users evaluated Ballinger's statement to be "the worst apology" on YouTube. On many occasions X users made the comparisons seem like the YouTubers were competing on who has the most ill-received apology, such as in Tweet (8). Furthermore, based on the data, many social media users seemingly agreed with the established baseline, i.e., which ones were the worst YouTube apologies, as specific apologies were repeatedly mentioned in several different tweets.

> (8) "Laura Lee has the worst apology on youtube"
>
> Colleen Ballinger: Hold my ukulele.

Paul's apology was not included in the ranking of the "worst apologies" or compared to Ballinger's apology, but as stated, these comparisons were done between apologies published on YouTube. However, Paul's apology was still compared to an apology which had apparently had a better reception, and Ballinger's apology was compared to the same apology as well, as shown in Tweet (9):

> (9) Colleen Ballinger: 10min "apology" & taking "accountability" & making a joke out of her prolonged inappropriate relationships with fans.
>
> Jenna Marbles: 47min video apologizing about a fish tank for her fishes.

According to Tweets (5) and (9), Marbles had published a long video apologizing for an offense which was apparently perceived as minor, as both Tweets especially mention the duration of Marbles' video and the topic of her apology. The comparison to

Marbles' apology suggests that Paul's and Ballinger's statements were viewed as lacking because Marbles had apologized so thoroughly and lengthily compared to them, and while doing so, Marbles had seemingly set some sort of standard for an appropriate and effective YouTube apology. Marbles' apology video has since been deleted or made unavailable on YouTube.

Although publishing an apology on YouTube automatically makes it a "YouTube apology", it could be argued that the specific subgenre the responders are referring to and evaluating in the data has more defined features and a specific "horizon of expectations". For instance, the example videos mentioned in the data were all published by a famous YouTuber, and only one of the videos was discussed in a positive context. Thus, the genre of "YouTube apologies" has arguably a negative connotation, as it is often connected to poor reception and mockery.

The X users present in the data seemed to be relatively knowledgeable about the genre of "YouTube apologies", as many of their tweets included comparisons and rankings. Additionally, some responders even included meta-type of commentary of the genre in their tweets.
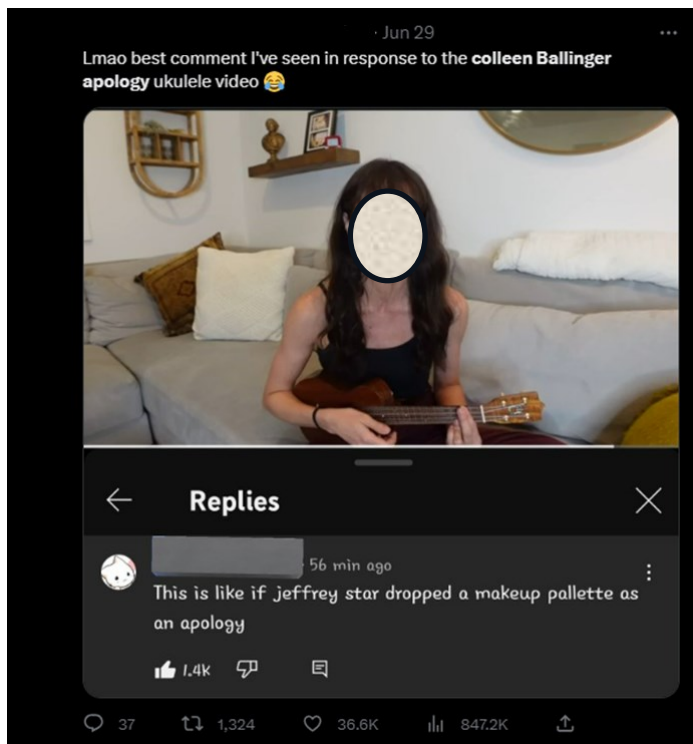

Figure 3. A comparison between Colleen Ballinger and Jeffree Star's apologies.

In Figure 3, an X user has taken a screenshot of a comment on Ballinger's YouTube video and attached the said image to their tweet, stating that the YouTube comment was the best they had seen in relation to Ballinger's video. The comment in question reads, "This is like if jeffrey star dropped a makeup pallette as an apology". Jeffree

Star is a YouTuber and social media celebrity, who is also the founder and owner of the makeup and cosmetics brand Jeffree Star Cosmetics. Over the years Star has been involved in many controversies, for example in the previously mentioned James-Westbrook feud (Lewis & Christin 2022). Thus, the YouTube comment about Star releasing a makeup palette as an apology was a reference to both Star's career involving makeup, and to the public apologies Star has given for his participation in "platform drama". The comment on Figure 3 thus asserted that Ballinger's choice to release her statement in the form of a song was as ridiculous as if Star would apologize in the form of a makeup palette, and making and understanding the reference requires knowledge of the genre of celebrity apologies.

Another example of metacommentary in the data was an X user reacting to Ballinger's apology with a GIF of Shane Dawson, a YouTuber discussed in section 2.2.2, who was also involved in the Charles-Westbrook "platform drama" (Lewis & Christin 2022). The GIF was a subtitled video clip from Dawson's livestream, where he reacted incredulously to a video related to the Charles-Westbrook situation before being canceled for the role he played in it. The use of this specific GIF could of course be a coincidence, but the choice heavily suggests that the online community reacting to the apologies was also knowledgeable of the "platform drama" which had preceded the apologies.

Based on the analysis, especially "YouTube apologies" were compared to each other and evaluated not only individually, but also in the context of the genre. This is perhaps done because "YouTube apologies" form a clear and distinct subgenre by existing on a singular platform in comparison to all celebrity apologies, which could be published on many different social media platforms. Nevertheless, as discussed in the theoretical background section, entertainment-focused online news sites have been publishing yearly lists of for example the best and worst "celebrity apologies" for several years, so they are also judged. Thus, future apologies can be expected to be compared to previous apologies in a similar manner, and especially poorly received apologies can be expected to be subjected to ridicule, mockery and meme-making. Furthermore, apologizing on YouTube might subject the apology to even harsher judgement, as based on the analysis, the genre of "YouTube apologies" ha a negative reputation.

4.3.4 "Unfollow him": cancel culture

Cancel culture was discussed both explicitly and implicitly in the response data: terms such as canceling, which directly refer to cancel culture, were mentioned as were topics such as unfollowing a celebrity on social media, public shaming, and consequences of one's own actions, which can all be thematically and implicitly linked to cancel culture. Implicit cancel culture discourse was present in all four apologies' responses.

When it comes to explicit mentions, canceling was mentioned in the responses to Teigen's and Smith's apologies. In Teigen's case, the term was used against Teigen, for example by responding "girl, you're still cancelled" to signal that the apology was not accepted. Furthermore, another Tweet (10) stated that because Teigen had tried to cancel others before, she should accept it is now happening to her, reflecting a "what goes around, comes around" mentality. As discussed in section 4.2.2, Teigen had referred to her own actions as "trolling".

> (10) She wasn't forgiving or "tolerant" to other celebrities/people when they made mistakes and apologized. Why should she be the exception? She rallied to get so many canceled & now should accept that it's happened to her.

On the other hand, in Smith's responses it was argued that Smith should not be canceled because of his actions, so the term was used in Smith's defense. The term "calling out" was mentioned in the responses of Paul's and Teigen's apologies, and in both instances in a context where it was stated that the celebrities in question were only apologizing because they were "called out" on their offensive behavior.

As demonstrated both by the data and theoretical sources, topics such as accountability and consequences are often linked to the concept of cancel culture. Thus, the repercussions the respondents wished the celebrities would face for their actions can be viewed as the desired outcomes of cancel culture, especially as the tweets actively requesting a celebrity's cancelation also noted penalties and punishments they saw fitting for the celebrity's offense. The only concrete consequences the responders mentioned were related to Smith: one tweet argued that Smith should have been removed from the Oscars gala as an immediate consequence of the slap, and another tweet wished Smith was banned from comedy clubs for life. Additionally, an X user responding to Paul's apology stated that Paul "deserves everything he gets", and several tweets reacting to Teigen's apology seemingly shared this sentiment, as according to them, Teigen "should accept" what was happening to her and her career, also demonstrated by Tweet (10). Thus, the consequences of the celebrities' actions — whichever they would be — were seen as just.

Overall, four of the response tweets could ostensibly be categorized as canceling: one was directed to Paul, one to Teigen, and two to Smith. The canceling comments were either more direct, such as "you're still cancelled" to Teigen, or indirect, such as requests for mass unfollowing or claims of withdrawing support. In connection to Paul's and Smith's apologies, these indirect cancelations were expressed with comments such as "unsubscribe from him and unfollow him" and "#boycottWillSmith". Outside these four tweets, the responders were seemingly against the concept of cancel culture, at least in the sense of the free-speech restricting, public shaming, and ostracizing phenomenon.

(11) Re: Logan Paul, something I always think about is when people make... ethical mistakes, as in, not-illegal, should we really be trying I ruin their lives and end their careers or accept the apology, personally make a choice to stop watching, and move on.

For instance, the author of Tweet (11) presumably opposed cancel culture by questioning if people should be trying to end the careers and ruin the lives of people who make "ethical mistakes". Similar sentiments were present in several responses to Teigen's apology, in which canceling was seemingly referred to as living in "worldwide contempt" and ruining people for their "mistakes or past bad behavior" on a societal level. Interestingly, although Ballinger heavily discussed cancel culture in her apology, not one responder mentioned the topic in their tweets. Although the comments included mockery, it was directed towards Ballinger's apology, not at her person—thus, it is debatable if cancel culture was present in the responses at all.

To summarize, the majority of the respondents did not seemingly aim to actively cancel the celebrities: even though most of the responses were negative, not accepting an apology or critiquing one is not equivalent to a cancelation by definition. Oppositely, the discourse related to cancel culture mostly portrayed canceling in a negative light and the responders spoke against it.

4.3.5   "I have faith in you": support and parasocial relationships

Out of the four celebrities, only Teigen and Smith received positive feedback and support for their apologies. This is in line with the findings of the theory-based content analysis, according to which Teigen's and Smith's apologies were effective as interpersonal apologies. Moreover, Teigen and Smith relied on fewer image repair strategies with the aim to diminish their actions, such as the strategies of denial, evasion of responsibility, or reducing offensiveness, and used the image repair strategy of mortification, whereas Paul and Ballinger did not. The positive responses expressed support for the celebrities and complimented the quality and execution of the apologies, but also discussed the themes of empathy, forgiveness, and self-improvement.

In contrast to the negative responses, the positive responses scarcely specified reasons for why the apologies were found good or acceptable. The apologies were described as "as genuine an apology as one can give", "a proper apology", and "perfectly written", but specific reasonings for the feedback were not given. Only one responder commenting on Teigen's apology stated the apology was "one of the best apologies" they had seen, explaining that "There was no 'but', no excuses. Flat out owned it", referring to the way Teigen had acknowledged her offense.

Instead of reasoning the acceptance of the apologies, the positive responses to both Teigen and Smith's apologies seemingly emphasized the humaneness of making mistakes, or the "to err is human" statement also addressed in section 4.2.3. For example, one of the responders to Teigen's apology stated "Heaven forbid that any of us

have never said mean or terrible things in our lives. Stones in glass houses folks?". The last clause is a reference to another English idiom, "people who live in glass houses should not throw stones", meaning people who have faults or negative qualities should not criticize others for the same faults (Merriam-Webster 2024e).

Teigen's responses seemingly highlighted the fact that everyone has said things they have regretted, whereas in Smith's case, where the committed offense was physical, not verbal, the commentary did not include similar comparisons. Smith's wrongdoing was, for instance, referred to as Smith having a "bad moment" and that the situation had "deeper context" and it had been "blown way out of proportion". Thus, although both manners seemingly aimed to portray the offenses as human errors, the defenses for it varied.

In addition to forgiveness, the positive responses discussed the theme of self-growth: a similar theme was also presented in the findings of the apologies' thematic analysis (see section 4.2.4). Especially Teigen, who asked her audience for a chance to change and grow as a person, received responses in which the theme of self-improvement was salient. The respondents for example encouraged Teigen to "keep growing, learning, and sharing with us" and suggested that Teigen's apology was a new beginning for her, as demonstrated by Tweet (12):

> (12) Chrissy, we all say and do things we wish we could take back. They're usually said and done when we are immature and egocentric. What you're experiencing now is the dawn of your wisdom. That wisdom will grow as you do. I have faith in you. Much love ❤️

As Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 401-402) point out, a pre-existing perception of a celebrity can influence the perception of their apology's sincerity: a more positive perception of a celebrity and their reputation can lead to a more positive view of their apology, which in following, can lead to forgiveness. In the present study it is unknown what the respondents' previous relationships with the celebrities were, and if those relationships influenced the rejection or forgiveness of the apologies. Based on the positive responses, it could be argued that at least some respondents had a pre-existing, perhaps parasocial, relationship with the celebrities in question.

One observation made from the data was the way X users addressed Teigen: the responders who had positive comments concerning Teigen often addressed her as Chrissy (such as in Tweet (12)), whereas negative responses referred to her as Teigen. In English language, the way people are addressed depends on both the relationship the participants of the conversation share, and the formality level of the situation (Cambridge Dictionary 2023a). Thus, the use of first name suggests that the current situation is informal and/or that the participants are familiar with each other—that they are "on first name basis" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023b). It is unknown if the X users who addressed Teigen as Chrissy were acquainted with her personally: however,

if the responders did not know Teigen personally, or furthermore, if Teigen did not know the responders, the use of first name might be the result of a parasocial relationship.

In Smith's case, some X users ostensibly aimed to minimize his actions. This was a unique response theme, as none of the other apologies' responses included similar defending tweets. Although none of the tweets seemed to directly accept or excuse Smith's behavior, one X user stated "there was no 'bad guy' in the situation, just a bad moment. There was no greater, unpardonable error of judgement, both knew where they went wrong", which suggests that in the X user's opinion, the fault was equally in both Smith and Rock. Additionally, according to one other responder, the whole situation at the Oscars was "blown out of proportion" and people were "dragging it" despite Smith apologizing and Rock having decided to not press charges against Smith. Thus, the X user was seemingly suggesting that people should stop discussing the incident, because an apology was given, and leave the situation to be handled by the ones involved.

5   CONCLUSION

The aim of my study was to research public apologies given by celebrities who faced controversies and were "called out" for their offensive behavior, and the public's responses to the apologies on the social media platform X. My research questions were as follows:

1. What kind of image repair tactics and elements of effective interpersonal apologies do public figures utilize?
2. What themes can be identified from the apologies and their responses?
3. How are the apologies' acceptance or rejection reasoned?

The data of the study consisted of four apologies and twenty response tweets respectively, eighty in total. The methods of the study included theory-based qualitative content analysis, which was utilized to theoretically evaluate the apologies' effectiveness, and thematic analysis, which was used to analyze both the apologies and the responses. The theory-based qualitative content analysis was conducted based on Lazare's (2005) elements of an effective interpersonal apology and Benoit's (2014) image repair theory.

   When it comes to Lazare's (2005) elements of effective interpersonal apology, the answer to my first research question is that all the celebrities used the element of explanation and none of them utilized the element of reparations, but otherwise the use of the elements varied. Two of the apologies, the ones given by Teigen and Smith, contained three of the four elements of Lazare's (2005) theory. The use of Benoit's (2014) image repair strategies in the apologies varied as well, and none of the strategies were used in every apology across the data. Evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action were the most utilized strategies, as they were applied in three of the four apologies. The image repair tactic (the subcategories of the strategies) the celebrities used the most was defeasibility, as three of the four celebrities claimed they lacked control or knowledge regarding their offenses, thus

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attempting to evade responsibility for their actions (Benoit 2014: 23). To summarize, the apologies followed both Lazare's and Benoit's theoretical frameworks in varying levels, but the most effective interpersonal apologies—according to Lazare's (2005) definition—were given by Teigen and Smith. Furthermore, Teigen and Smith used the least amount of image repair tactics defined by Benoit (2014).

Moving onto the second research question, the answer is that the themes which were identified from the apology data were cancel culture, parasocial communication, the concept of human errors, and self-improvement. The themes from the response data partially corresponded with the apology data findings, as the themes of cancel culture and parasocial communication were again identified. The responses also included humor and discussion of celebrity apologies as a genre. Furthermore, the response data included themes of insufficiency, insincerity, and support, which will be further discussed in relation to research question three to answer how the apologies acceptance and rejection was reasoned.

As the thesis' premise was to research apologies related to cancel culture, I expected to see the theme reflected in the data: however, cancel culture was discussed surprisingly little. Both Teigen and Ballinger addressed the topic in their respective apologies, but the responses which actively demanded the cancelations of the celebrities or otherwise expressed their personal withdrawal of support were scarce. A portion of the responses included insults and mockery and thus, can be categorized as online shaming, but it is debatable if they could be considered as canceling, as negative comments do not necessarily equal cancelation, although mockery is a part of cancel culture (Bouvier & Machin 2021: 320–321). Based on the findings, cancel culture was not as prevalent in the data as anticipated.

The theme of parasocial communication and relationships was also present in both the apologies and the responses. This was expected, as parasocial relationships can form between celebrities and their followers and fans on social media (Reinikainen 2019: 105). Three of the four apologies in the data involved expressions which could be interpreted as parasocial communication towards the celebrities' audience, and especially Teigen and Ballinger addressed their audience more as their friends than their fans. In the response data, the theme of parasocial relationships could be identified especially from the tweets which had positive responses to the apologies: for example, the X users who responded positively to Teigen's apology seemingly addressed her in a more familiar manner in comparison to those who had responded negatively.

Several of the apologies addressed the theme of human error, and how making mistakes is natural part of human life. It could be argued that emphasizing mistake making as humane could have the goal of reminding the audience that the celebrity is still like them and should not be othered or placed outside of the "ideological square",

where all their negative qualities and attributes are emphasized, and positive qualities and attributes are minimized van Dijk (1998: 267).

The positive apology responses also reflected a "people who live in glass houses should not throw stones" mentality and often mentioned the importance of empathy and forgiveness. Both the apologies and the positive responses highlighted the concept of self-improvement, and how making mistakes is a chance to learn valuable lessons and grow as a person. Furthermore, the celebrities whose offenses had been committed years before they published their apologies, seemingly drew distance between their current and past selves by declaring they had changed and were not the same person who had committed the offenses.

As the themes of human error and self-improvement were noticeable in the data and were not introduced in the theoretical background or the theories included in the content analysis, it could be argued that these themes are either characteristics of contemporary public (celebrity) apologies, or characteristics of cancel culture apologies. These themes could be further researched to see if they are as salient as they appeared in the data, and if their utilization has any relation to the apologies' acceptance.

When it comes to the negative responses, the apologies' perceived poor quality led to mockery and humor, which corresponded with the results of Bouvier and Machin's (2021) study of cancel culture and tweets. According to Bouvier and Machin (2021: 320–321), celebrity apologies are treated as a source of entertainment and humor, and negative commentary and ridicule are thus to be expected, as the canceled people are placed outside of an "ideological square", defined by van Dijk (1998: 267). In the data, humor and insults were mostly constructed by comparing the data's apologies to other poorly received apologies, and these comparisons were done especially between apologies made on YouTube. This finding suggests that the participants of these tweets were also familiar with the compared apologies, which in following suggests that celebrity apologies, or at least "YouTube apologies", is a distinct subgenre with its own features, characteristics, and notable examples.

It is unknown how universally known and recognized the genre conventions of "YouTube apologies" are: the people engaging in conversation about them seemed familiar with several other apologies related to cancel culture, as they were able to rank the apologies and consider what was "the worst apology", but as Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018: 402) state, the people who participate in cancel culture on social media are a minority. However, celebrity apologies are a recurring entertainment news topic, so people who regularly follow entertainment news could be argued to be at least somewhat familiar with celebrity apologies.

The comparisons and rankings done between different apologies in the data were performed in a negative context, seemingly with the goal of finding the worst (YouTube) apology. The humor, ridicule and negativity associated with the subgenre

of "YouTube apologies" in the data could suggest that the subgenre has a negative connotation, meaning that apologies published on YouTube could be expected to be poor from the onset, regardless of their technical effectiveness.

The answer to the third research question regarding the reasoning behind the apologies' acceptance or rejection was found with the thematic analysis of the responses. To begin, I first had to determine what constituted as an acceptance and as a rejection and did this by evaluating the contents of the response data tweets on a semantic level. Based on this evaluation, approximately 75% of the responses had a negative stance towards to the apologies: this is congruent with Ruane and Cerulo's (2014: 144) study, according to which the apologies of celebrities are not automatically accepted because of the celebrities' elevated status. Instead, as theorized by Bouvier and Machin (2021: 317-318), celebrities' apologies are more often rejected than accepted, because they can be perceived to be acting against societal moral values.

Starting with the reasoning for the apologies' acceptance, the responders rarely offered explanations for why they found the apologies acceptable. However, the need for acceptance, forgiveness, and personal growth were emphasized in many of the positive responses, as was discussed in relation to the second research question. Furthermore, the significance of Lazare's (2005) theory's elements of acknowledging the offense and remorse, and Benoit's (2014) image repair strategy of mortification seemingly correlated with the most positive reactions to the apologies, as these elements were not present in Paul's and Ballinger's apologies, which were negatively perceived and faced criticism for lacking these elements.

The negative apology responses mostly highlighted the apologies' insufficiency or insincerity. The insufficiency of the apologies was mainly argued with factors which corresponded to Lazare's (2005) elements of effective interpersonal apologies, especially with the need to express remorse, humility, and other related attitudes in an apology. On the other hand, the apologies' perceived insincerity was argued with multiple different reasons, and based on the analysis, seemingly no matter how theoretically effectively constructed an apology was, it could still be viewed as insincere.

The apologies which received the most positive feedback were also the apologies whose authorship and thus, authenticity, were questioned: the responders suspected the apologies in question were written by the celebrities' public relations teams, publicists, or managers instead of the celebrities themselves. If an apology would be given by someone else than the person responsible for the offending act, it would diminish the meaning of the apology completely: for example, Lazare (2005: 50) points out that acknowledging the offense is an important part of an apology, and it requires the offending party recognizing themselves as the wrongdoer.

The suspicions of the use of ghost writers were not always reasoned, but in Smith's case, one reasoning for the suspicions was seemingly Smith's apology

statement's "perfectness", i.e., its technical effectiveness and lack of personal touch. Thus, it could be argued that the effectiveness of the apology and its attributes, which could be otherwise perceived as positive and desirable, were used as a reasoning for the apology's rejection and for perceiving it as inauthentic. The authenticity of public apologies has also been discussed by Lewis and Christin (2022: 1649-1650), who suggest that the innate performative nature of monetized social media platforms makes authenticity difficult to achieve, despite it being a highly valued quality in content creation: as every action can be perceived as inauthentic, authenticity becomes ephemeral and unattainable. Thus, public apologies' authenticity is especially questioned, most likely because genuineness is expected from an effective apology.

The challenge with public apologies is that they are, as Ruane and Cerulo (2014: 125) assert, "first and foremost, media events": it is no secret celebrities do have publicists and public relations teams managing their business, and as Ballinger stated in her apology, her "team" had advised her against making her statement, but she chose to not follow their advice and went on to publish her video, which was then titled as "the worst apology on YouTube". As it is known that media professionals can and do work for the celebrities to improve their public image, it can become easy to conclude that celebrities' media and press releases are always created by said professionals, and this deduction applies to apologies as well. However, the findings of the study suggest that this assumption only applies to the apologies which are theoretically well-written, as neither of the apologies which were deemed poorly executed were suspected of being written by someone other than the celebrity in question.

To summarize, based on both the findings of the current study and earlier research, releasing a public apology which would be evaluated authentic seems like a daunting, nearly impossible task, as reasons for an apology's perceived inauthenticity and rejection can practically always be negotiated—even based on the apology's positive qualities. According to Lewis and Christin (2022: 1651), leaving negative comments to a celebrity's apology can feel satisfactory and cathartic especially if the celebrity has been called out or canceled for offensive behavior.

The analysis of the negative responses revealed what was deemed the most detrimental both for the apologies' adequacy and authenticity, and the most criticized aspects were arrogancy, a flippant attitude towards the committed offense, and the targeting of the apology. To specify, many responders found the public apologies, which were targeted for the celebrities' general audiences, to be inauthentic, unacceptable, or even unnecessary because of a lingering obscurity about whether the victims of the initial offenses had received interpersonal apologies. As a result, this finding suggests that the responders considered the celebrities uncapable of authentically apologizing for the hurt they had caused for their audiences, if they had not first interpersonally apologized for their wrongdoings.

Additionally, as stated previously, the authorship of theoretically effective apologies was questioned. This happened especially in Smith's case, whose apology was the most concise without much additional content besides the elements of an effective interpersonal apology. Thus, it could be concluded that an effective public apology should be appropriately earnest and refrain from boasting, but still include a personal point of view to demonstrate that the offender has truly acknowledged the offense and its effects, and that they have been personally remorseful and humbled. This further elaboration could help with the perception of authenticity both when it comes to the apology and its authorship.

When it comes to the limitations of the current study, the first matter which needs to be noted is the subjective nature of a qualitative study: the interpretation of the data is dependent on the researcher's interpretation. Thus, the way the apologies and their responses have been interpreted does not necessarily reflect the views of their original authors; especially the response data included tweets which were complicated to analyze and whose meaning was unclear. Second, the data sample is small, and the observations and results gathered from it are generalizations. More relatable results could be obtained with more extensive data, both with the apologies and their responses. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the response data does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the public: the data included tweets which had a minimum of 50 likes, so they would include at least somewhat popular opinions, but liking a tweet does not equate to an opinion. Thus, the opinions expressed in the response tweets should be considered more as opinions of individuals rather than of the public.

Public apologies continue to offer fascinating research topics for future studies. One possible topic relates to the apologies' authorship: as stated, the more positively evaluated apologies' authorship was questioned, whereas the more negatively assessed apologies got revisions and correction suggestions from the respondents, and furthermore, one of the X users asked ChatGPT to write a better apology for a celebrity. The increasingly easier access to fast-developing artificial intelligence programs could be a valuable tool for conducting technically effective apologies, and a quick glance shows that AI-mediated apologies have already become research topics (e.g., Glikson & Asscher 2023). The fleetingness of authenticity, heightened perceptions of performativity on social media, and the rise of AI can make effective apologizing even more difficult in the future, and these topics could be further studied.

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APPENDICES

1. LOGAN PAUL'S APOLOGY

Dear Internet,

Where do I begin…

Let's start with this –
I'm sorry.

This is a first for me. I've never faced criticism like this before, because I've never made a mistake like this before. I'm surrounded by good people and believe I make good decisions, but I'm still a human being. I can be wrong.

I didn't do it for views. I get views. I did it because I thought I could make a positive ripple on the internet, not cause a monsoon of negativity. That's never the intention. I intended to raise awareness for suicide and suicide prevention and while I thought "if this video saves just ONE life, it'll be worth it," I was misguided by shock and awe, as portrayed in the video. I still am.

I do this sh*t every day. I've made a 15 minute TV show EVERY SINGLE DAY for the past 460+ days. One may understand that it's easy to get caught up in the moment without weighing the possible ramifications.

I'm often reminded of how big of a reach I truly have & with great power comes great responsibility… for the first time in my life I'm regretful to say I handled that power incorrectly. It won't happen again.

I love everyone. I believe in people. I'm out here. Peace ✌️ #Logang4Life

Source:
Paul, L. [@LoganPaul]. (2018). *Dear Internet,* [Image attached] [Tweet]. X (Twitter). https://twitter.com/LoganPaul/status/948026294066864128 (10 July 2023).

2. CHRISSY TEIGEN'S APOLOGY

Hi all. It has been a VERY humbling few weeks.

I know I've been quiet, and lord knows you don't want to hear about me, but I want you to know I've been sitting in a hole of deserved global punishment, the ultimate "sit here and think about what you've done". Not a day, not a single moment has passed where I haven't felt the crushing weight of regret for the things I've said in the past.

As you know, a bunch of my old awful (awful, awful) tweets resurfaced. I'm truly ashamed of them. As I look at them and understand the hurt they caused, I have to stop and wonder: How could I have done that?

I've apologized publicly to one person, but there are others — and more than just a few — who I need to say I'm sorry to. I'm in the process of privately reaching out to the people I insulted. It's like my own version of that show My Name is Earl! I understand that they may not want to speak to me. I don't think *I'd* like to speak to me. (The real truth in all of this is how much I actually cannot take confrontation.) But if they do, I am here and I will listen to what they have to say, while apologizing through sobs.

There is simply no excuse for my past horrible tweets. My targets didn't deserve them. No one does. Many of them needed empathy, kindness, understanding and support, not my meanness masquerading as a kind of casual, edgy humor.

I was a troll, full stop. And I am so sorry.

I want to go a little further here, thinking of those I've hurt and friends I've disappointed.

When I first started using social media, I had so much fun with it. I made jokes, random observations. Think of all the engineers, working day and night to develop this amazing new platform and technology, connecting people all over the world to learn, create, and find kindred spirits. And I used it to snark at some celebrities.

In reality, I was insecure, immature and in a world where I thought I needed to impress strangers to be accepted. If there was a pop culture pile-on, I took to Twitter to

try to gain attention and show off what I at the time believed was a crude, clever, harmless quip. I thought it made me cool and relatable if I poked fun at celebrities.

Now, confronted with some of the things that I said, I cringe to my core. I'll honestly get sharp, stabbing pains in my body, randomly remembering my asshole past, and I deserve it. Words have consequences and there are real people behind the Twitter handles I went after. I wasn't just attacking some random avatar, but hurting young women — some who were still girls — who had feelings. How could I not stop and think of that? Why did I think there was some invisible psycho-celebrity formula that prevents anyone with more followers from experiencing pain? How did I not realize my words were cruel? What gave me the right to say these things?

I wasn't mean in my everyday life. More than once, someone would come up to me and say, "You're so much nicer in person." Why was that not a huge red flag? But I took it in and tossed it aside. I did book signings where girls would call me a bad ass bitch, and I'd stretch my arm toward them as they walked away, looking at my friends and saying, "I promise, I'm not!"

At the time, I just didn't get it. Believe me, I get it now.

I'm telling you this for context, not seeking or deserving any sympathy. There's no justification for my behavior. I'm not a victim here. The subjects of your sympathy — and mine — should be those I put down.

The truth is, I'm no longer the person who wrote those horrible things. I grew up, got therapy, got married, had kids, got more therapy, experienced loss and pain, got more therapy and experienced more life. AND GOT MORE THERAPY.

Life has made me more empathetic. I'm more understanding of what motivates trolling — the instant gratification that you get from lashing out and clapping back, throwing rocks at someone you think is invincible because they're famous. Also, I know now how it feels to be on the receiving end of incredible vitriol. Believe me, the irony of this is not lost on me.

John tells me almost every day how much our daughter Luna reminds him of me. Every day, I try to make sure she's all the best parts of me, all the things I aspire to be all the time, but fail at sometimes. And we preach kindness to her and Miles every chance we get. Will they eventually realize there is some hypocrisy there? I certainly do. But I hope they recognize my evolution. My goal is to be so good that my kids will

think this was all a fairy tale. Not the fake good. The good that has the best intentions, the good who wakes up wanting to make her friends, family, her team and fans as happy as possible. The good who will still fuck up in front of the world but rarely, and never not growing only more good from it.

I'm going to keep working to be the best version of myself for EVERYONE. Everyone deserves better — even my detractors. And better is what you can expect from me. The world needs more kindness and love and I want to contribute to it. I've been on a path of self-improvement for the past decade and that path is going to continue.

I truly love that social media has connected me to so many of you. We've shared so much, I've learned so much, I've grown so much, and I love what you have meant to me.

I have so much love to give if you are open and willing to accept it. And if not, that's okay too. That's something I work on being more okay with every day. I know I let you down, but I hope I can make you proud. It's been a heavy few weeks, so I'm going to take some more time to focus on things that are most important — being with my family and taking care of myself.

We are all more than our worst moments.

I won't ask for your forgiveness, only your patience and tolerance. I ask that you allow me, as I promise to allow you, to own past mistakes and be given the opportunity to seek self improvement and change.

Phew. A lot, I know. Thanks for listening.

Source:
Teigen, C. (2021). *Hi again*. Medium. https://chrissyteigen.medium.com/hi-again-3bb3faffa76d (10 July 2023).

3. WILL SMITH'S APOLOGY

Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive. My behavior at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable. Jokes at my expense are a part of the job, but a joke about Jada's medical condition was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally.

I would like to publicly apologize to you, Chris. I was out of line and I was wrong. I am embarrassed and my actions were not indicative of the man I want to be. There is no place for violence in a world of love and kindness.

I would also like to apologize to the Academy, the producers of the show, all the attendees and everyone watching around the world. I would like to apologize to the Williams Family and my King Richard family. I deeply regret that my behavior has stained what has been an otherwise gorgeous journey for all of us.

I am a work in progress.

Sincerely,

Will

Source:
Smith, W. [@willsmith]. (2022). *Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive. My behavior at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and* [Image attached]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CbqmaY1p7Pz/?hl=en (10 July 2023).

4. COLLEEN BALLINGER'S APOLOGY

Hey, it's been a while since you saw my face
I haven't been doing so great so I took a little break
A lot of people are saying some things about me that aren't quite true
Doesn't matter if it's true though, just as long as it's entertaining to you, right?
You guys having fun?

All aboard the toxic gossip train
Chugging down the tracks of misinformation
The toxic gossip train
You got a one-way ticket to manipulation station
Toxic gossip train
Tie me to the tracks and harass me for my past
These rumors look like facts if you don't mind the gaps
I won't survive in the crash, but hey, at least you're having fun

Hi everyone I've been wanting to come online and talk to you about a few things (um) even though my team has strongly advised me to not say what I wanna say I recently realized they never said that I couldn't sing what I want to say, so (.) here I am and um today I only wanna talk about the facts so (.) I hope that you'll be willing to listen (.) Here we go (.)
Many years ago I used to message my fans but not in a creepy way like a lot of you are trying to suggest, it was more of a loser kind of way I was just trying to be besties with everybody it's kind of like uh when you go to like a family gathering you know when there's a weird aunt there who keeps coming up to you and is going "hey girl what's the tea?" and you're like "ugh" uh, that was me but in group chats with my fans it was weird

I've been sharing my life online for over fifteen years
I've poured my heart out to you and because of that I feel like I'm talking to my friends, but at the beginning of my career
I didn't really understand that maybe there should be some boundaries there
There were times in the DMs when I would overshare
Details of my life, which was... really weird of me
I haven't done that for years, you see
Cause I changed my behavior, and I took accountability
But that's not very interesting is it
So let's go on the

Toxic gossip train
Locomotives fueled with hateful accusations
Toxic gossip train
Steamroll over someone's reputation
Toxic gossip train
Hop on board but close your eyes otherwise you'll realize
That the train is made of lies and that person you despise
Maybe didn't deserve to die, but hey
At least you're having fun

In all seriousness I do think it's really important to hold people accountable for their
mistakes um... you know, we should hope that everyone can learn from their mistakes
and grow and change their behavior and be a better person. This is something that
I've always tried to do when I make mistakes, it's something that I will continue to try
to d- what? Oh, you don't care? Oh, okay

I thought you wanted me to take accountability
But that's not the point of your mob mentality, is it? No
Your goal is to ruin the life of the person you despise
While you dramatize your lies and monetize their demise... yeah

I feel like I can already hear the comments on this video "She's gaslighting! Manipu-
lating! Ugh, she's a narcissist and a rat! I would never make a mistake like that!"
Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize that all of you are perfect, so please criticize me
Bring out the daggers made from your perfect past
and stab me repeatedly in my bony little back
I'm sure you're disappointed in my shitty little song
I know you wanted me to say that I was one hundred percent in the wrong
Well I'm sorry, I'm not gonna take that route
Of admitting to lies and rumors that you made up for clout

"Hey everybody I found someone new to harass
She did some things that I do not like in her past
So everybody gather round cause we're about to attack"
But not based on facts, oh no
You're loaded lethal weapon is your fingers on the keys
You don't need any armor when you can hide behind a screen
So, shoot me down quick, with a click, and bam
Your reputations deceased

Uh, I also wanted to take a minute to talk about that girl, Miranda Sings you know the one yeah, her yeah, she's PG-13 it says that on my website, and it's always been that way

And that's why you won't find my videos on the YouTube Kids app anyway. Um I didn't realize it was my responsibility
to decide what was appropriate for every kid to see
I've always relied on parents to decide if they're comfortable
with their families watching my YouTube or coming to my live shows
now

Have I made some jokes in poor taste? Yes
Have I made lots of dumb mistakes? Yes
Am I sad that there's fans who feel betrayed? Yes
Was it my intention to manipulate? No

Doesn't really matter what my intention was because it seems everyone's already decided on that (.) let me tell you it's not very fun (.) to have millions of people all over the world call you the most vile horrendous disgusting life-ruining words that a person could be called in my opinion um it doesn't matter that these things aren't true (.) but everyone just believes that you are the type of person who manipulates and abuses children (.)

So I just wanted to say that um
The only thing I've ever groomed is my two Persian cats
I'm not a groomer, I'm just a loser
Who didn't understand I shouldn't respond to fans and
I'm not a predator even though a lot of you think so because five years ago I made a fart joke (.)
So (.) even though this video won't change anyone's mind about me
I still felt it was important to come on here and defend myself a little and take accountability (.)
And I also wanted to say that (to) anyone out there who has ever supported me in any capacity
I really really appreciate you (.) thank you
For what it's worth (.) I never had any bad intentions (.) but I do feel like shit (.)

The toxic gossip train

You're chugging down the tracks of misinformation
Toxic gossip train
You got a one-way ticket to manipulation station
Toxic gossip train
You tie me to the tracks and harass me for my past
The rumors look like facts, when you don't mind the gaps
I won't survive in the crash, but hey
I hope you had some fun(.)

[goes on to quit the video but stops]
Actually you know
I feel like maybe I should let you guys know something um it seems like (.) maybe
you're confused about something I don't know, let me try to help um

Sometimes people make a mistake and it doesn't make them a horrible person whoa
Sometimes people can make a mistake and they're still a good person (.) crazy I know
Sometimes people can make a mistake and you don't have to take that mistake, oh no
And twist it up and grind it and add some lies to it and pulverize it and stab it with
knives and ruin a life and (.) oh no
Sometimes people can make a mistake, it doesn't mean you gotta send them hate, oh
no
Sometimes people can make a mistake and you can kindly let them know, and help
them to grow
Sometimes people make mistakes, simply because they made a mistake
And that mistake doesn't make them a terrible human
Just makes them a human (.)
But what do I know (.)
Fuck me, right?

Source:
Ballinger, C. [ColleenVlogs]. (2023). *hi.* [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceKMnyMYIMo (10 July 2023).