

Direct and Indirect Expressive Speech Acts in Celebrity Apology Posts on Instagram: A Pragmatic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the pragmatic analysis of expressive utterances in celebrities' apology posts on Instagram. It examines the types and functions of direct and indirect expressive speech acts and those in apologies. It applied qualitative descriptive research with data from celebrity Instagram posts that grew significant community attention within five years (2021-2025). The data analysis involved categorizing each apology utterance as either direct or indirect and subsequently identifying its pragmatic function within the specific context of the celebrity's post. The findings show that celebrities tend to use a combination of direct and indirect apology expressions. Direct apologies, such as "I apologize" and "I'm sorry," indicate clear responsibility, while indirect expressions, such as "I feel greatly ashamed of myself" and "I deeply regret my behavior," create sympathy and reduce negative impact. These findings hint at the nature of online communication on social media sites and the importance of apologetic strategies for keeping these relationships harmonious with the general public and enhancing a positive image for celebrities.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, celebrities use social media platforms to communicate with their audience (Brooks et al., 2021). There are many social media platforms offered to interact between celebrities and their audiences; one of the most heavily used platforms is Instagram (Ahmadi et al., 2022). Instagram becomes a place for celebrities to share their personal lives with the audience and also a place to repair their public image by delivering apologies for the controversies that have been caused (Wan Ismail et al., 2022). This apology becomes an action they make to convince and influence the audience to restore their damaged reputation and restore public trust in them. The ease of public access to social media makes the language and style of celebrity apologies important to pay attention to because it determines how sincere and effective their apologies are (Jegede, 2024).

The main framework used to understand apologies is speech act theory. This theory classifies apologies as expressive speech acts, which are verbal acts that indicate psychological states such as responsibility, guilt, and regret (Searle, 1999). Speech act theory further categories apologies into direct and indirect forms (Tanduk, 2023). Direct expressive speech acts use explicit apology phrases such as 'I'm sorry' or 'I apologize', whereas indirect expressive speech acts use

implicit apology phrases such as 'That was a dumb thing to do' (Uoti, 2022). Audiences judge a person's sincerity and responsibility by how the person uses direct or indirect apologies.

Although there are many studies on speech acts and politeness in communication, studies that specifically examine direct and indirect expressive speech acts in the context of celebrity apologies on Instagram are limited. Previous research has focused on analyzing apologies in the context of characteristics in series (Alwirido & Candra, 2023; Maulana & Hardjanto, 2020; Sabilla & Jusmaya, 2020), corporate (Beaudin, 2018), foreign language speakers (Farenkia, 2022; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Khabar, 2024; Shakki et al., 2021), Javanese speakers (Maruti, 2022), and individual speeches (Abudin & Sundari, 2021). However, apologies on social media that bring together visuals, text, and audience interaction have not been analysed in depth. In addition, although some studies have discussed direct and indirect apologizing in the context of the film 'Venom Let There Be Carnage' (Utomo & Mubarak, 2023), the film 'Heidi' (Rahayu et al., 2024), the film Onward (Anak Agung Ratu Paratistha & Widiastuti, 2021), WeChat (Lu, 2022), in real-life situations (Prima et al., 2023), the pragmatic distinction between direct and indirect in the context of Instagram apologies is still an under-researched area.

This study seeks to address an existing research gap by classifying the various types of expressive speech acts employed in celebrity apology posts shared on Instagram. Through this classification, the research not only focuses on identifying the forms of expressive speech acts but also aims to contribute more deeply to the understanding of the role that pragmatic speech acts play in reshaping public perception and fostering a positive social image for celebrities. Furthermore, this study will explore in greater detail the different strategies that celebrities use when delivering apologies, both directly and indirectly, while taking into account the social and communicative contexts that emerge on social media platforms. Specifically, this research will examine how celebrities utilize language as a communicative tool to maintain engagement with their audiences and to avoid potential controversies amid the ever-changing and relativistic trends of social media. Ultimately, this study intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic strategies employed by celebrities to preserve their reputation and public credibility within the dynamic digital sphere.

The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of how celebrities pragmatically employ various apology strategies on Instagram, such as using direct apologies to convey a sense of sincerity or adopting indirect forms of apology, for instance, by posting photos without makeup as a symbolic expression of remorse. While previous studies have examined apology strategies in general, only a limited number have specifically investigated how direct and indirect expressive acts function within the unique context of social media interactions—particularly in relation to audience responses to these apologies. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by providing a deeper understanding of how pragmatic choices in online apologies shape public interpretation and emotional engagement. The findings from this research are expected to serve as a new theoretical foundation for comprehending the complex dynamics of speech acts within the multidimensional and ever-evolving digital communication landscape.

This study will examine the patterns of apologies used by celebrities in their Instagram posts to understand how celebrities express apologies in maintaining their public image in the digital era. This research has two main objectives: (a) to classify the types of expressive speech acts used in celebrity apologies on Instagram. (b) to describe the pragmatic functions of direct and indirect

expressive speech acts in shaping public perception and maintaining social image, and it is presented in the research questions below:

1. What are the types of direct and indirect expressive speech acts employed by celebrities in their apology posts on Instagram?
2. How do the public respond to direct and indirect expressive speech acts employed by celebrities in their apology posts on Instagram?
3. What are the pragmatic functions of both direct and indirect expressive speech acts employed by celebrities in their Instagram apology posts?

This research aims to offer valuable insights into the most appropriate and effective strategies for expressing apologies in online contexts, emphasizing the importance of linguistic and pragmatic considerations in maintaining authenticity and credibility in digital communication. Beyond that, it is intended to serve as a comprehensive reference and practical guide for future studies that wish to further explore the management and implementation of apology strategies within the ever-evolving landscape of digital media. By doing so, this study contributes not only to the theoretical development of pragmatic studies but also to the practical understanding of how individuals—particularly public figures—can navigate and manage apologies effectively in the fast-paced and constantly transforming digital world.

METHODS

The approach applied in this study is a descriptive qualitative approach. This is because the data obtained is in the form of text or sentences (Sholikhatin & Indah, 2019). This study was carried out in a pragmatic context to find out how celebrities express apologies both directly and indirectly on the social media platform Instagram. The data sources used in this study include apology uploads from A total of nine apology posts from internationally recognized celebrities across various fields, such as music, acting, and K-pop, posted on Instagram over the last five-year period (2021-2025), ensuring significance to recent trends in online communication. The data collected consisted of apology posts from celebrities that contained direct and indirect expressions and significant reactions from the public. Data collection was carried out through documentation methods, keyword searches, post-analysis, and archiving screenshots.

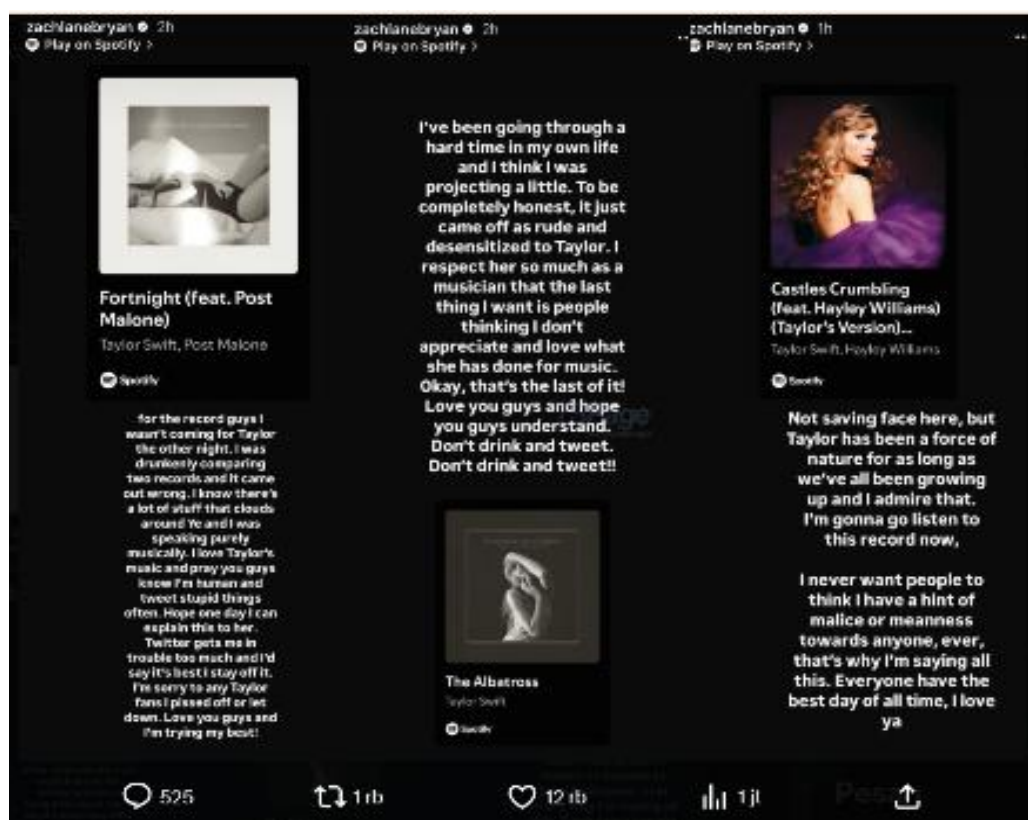
The study employed a triangulation method to ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data. This approach involved comparing and cross-analyzing celebrity apology posts, audience responses, and related news reports to establish consistency in the use of both direct and indirect expressive speech acts. To analyze the data systematically, the study adopted the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which encompasses three key stages: data reduction, where only relevant apology posts were selected; data display, where direct and indirect apologies were categorized and organized into tables; and conclusion drawing, which involved interpreting the patterns of apology strategies and their influence on audience perceptions. Through this methodological framework, the research provides a structured and comprehensive analysis of how celebrities publicly convey apologies within digital platforms—particularly Instagram. Consequently, this study offers valuable contributions to the fields of pragmatics, digital discourse analysis, and crisis communication in the context of social media.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In an analysis of celebrity apology posts shared on personal Instagram accounts, data collected over the past five years revealed recurring patterns in the ways celebrities express their apologies. The primary focus of this study is to provide a detailed examination of the various types of expressive speech acts employed by celebrities in their apology statements, to assess public reactions and audience engagement in response to these posts, and to explore the underlying pragmatic functions that guide their linguistic and communicative choices. Through this comprehensive approach, the research seeks to uncover how celebrities strategically construct their apologies to manage public perception, rebuild their social image, and navigate the complex dynamics of communication within the digital media landscape.

1. Types of expressive speech acts used by celebrities

Some of the collected data reveal that, in expressing their apologies, celebrities tend to employ more than one type of expressive strategy. They often combine both direct and indirect expressions within the same apology post to effectively communicate remorse and maintain a positive connection with their audience. In their direct expressions of apology, celebrities frequently use phrases such as "I'm sorry," "I would like to apologize," or "I sincerely apologize." These phrases serve as strong indicators of accountability, reflecting the speaker's acknowledgment of wrongdoing and willingness to take responsibility for their actions. This use of explicit apology language not only emphasizes sincerity but also aims to rebuild trust and empathy among followers. An example illustrating this expression can be seen in the following instance:



Picture 1. Zach Bryan stated, "I'm sorry to any Taylor fans I pissed off or let down."



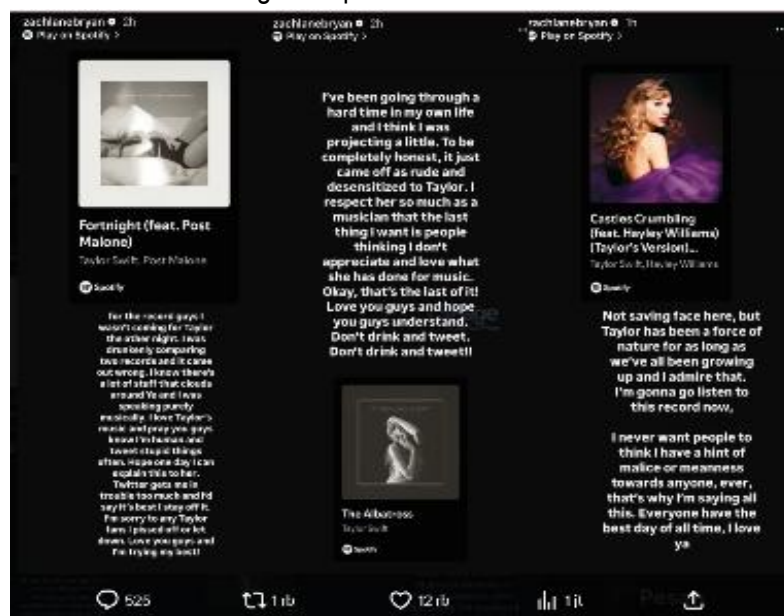
Picture 2. Will Smith explicitly said, "I would like to publicly apologize to you."



Picture 3. Chris. Renjun (NCT) : "I would like to apologize to anyone who suffered damage due to my negligent behavior yesterday."

The use of indirect expressions was also found in celebrities' apology posts that they uploaded on their personal Instagram accounts. They put implicit phrases such as "I feel greatly ashamed of myself", "I'm reflecting a lot", or "I deeply regret that my behavior".

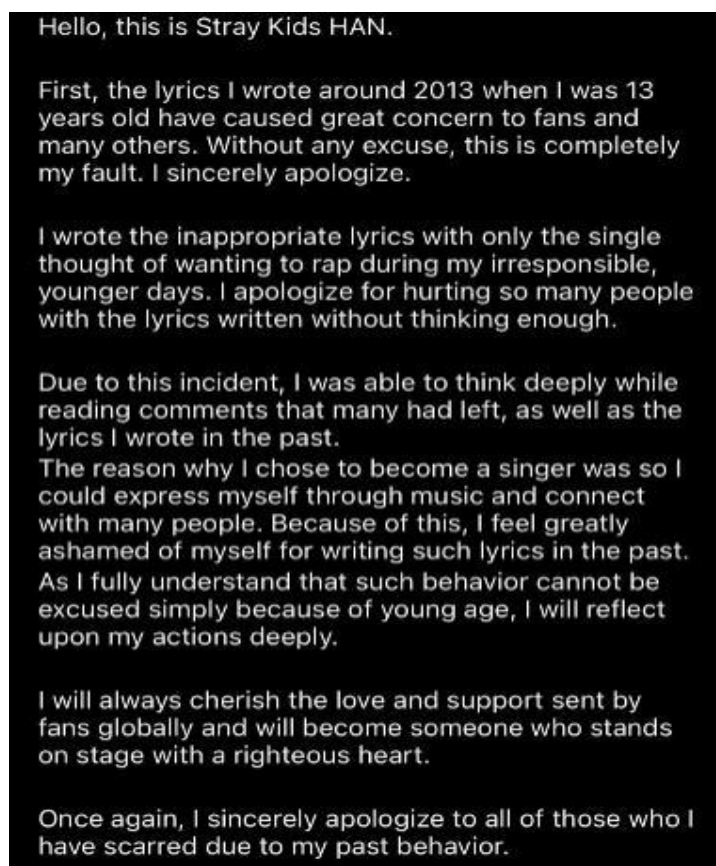
The purpose of using such sentences is to evoke sympathy and emotional understanding from the audience while simultaneously acknowledging one's mistakes in a subtle and indirect manner, without explicitly stating them. This strategy allows celebrities to express remorse and responsibility in a way that maintains their dignity and public image, while still addressing the expectations of their followers. Such linguistic choices serve to balance sincerity with self-presentation, demonstrating awareness of the social dynamics of apology in the digital sphere. This can be illustrated in the following example:



Picture 4. Zach Bryan followed his direct apology with an indirect one, saying, "I wasn't coming for Taylor the other night" and "I was drunk comparing two records and it came out wrong."



Picture 5. Will Smith used indirect expressions like "My behavior at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable," and "I am embarrassed and my actions were not indicative of the man I want to be."



Picture 6. Han (Stray Kids) also reflected this with, "I feel deeply ashamed of myself for writing such lyrics."

Celebrities often combine both direct and indirect forms of apology in a single statement, strategically blending the two to achieve a more nuanced and effective expression of remorse. This approach allows them to convey regret explicitly through direct apology phrases, while simultaneously appealing to the audience's empathy and understanding through indirect or implicit expressions. By employing this dual strategy, celebrities are able to soften the impact of their mistakes, defuse potential public tension, and gradually rebuild their credibility and social image. Such a communicative technique reflects a calculated effort to balance honesty and emotional appeal within the framework of digital public relations.

2. Public response to apology posts

After analyzing in terms of public response to celebrity apology posts, a pattern emerges between one post and another. The public response is strongly influenced by the type of mistake the celebrity has made. If the celebrity makes a mistake that is still tolerable to the public and the impact is not too great, then the public response is positive and tends to accept their apology, and can save the public image that has been damaged. The way the celebrity expresses the apology also affects the public response. If the celebrity writes an apology sincerely, admitting mistakes and willing to improve themselves, then the public will accept their apology. For example, the public responds to Renjun (NCT) about his neglectful behavior. Most of the audience responds positively, especially in the context of controversy against sasaengs. This suggests that the nature of his mistake and the sincerity of his apology resonated positively with his audience.

Conversely, suppose the celebrity makes mistakes that are intolerable to the public. In that case, the public response will be negative and not accept their apology, and even worse, they fail to save their damaged image. Apologies that do not look sincere and do not use direct sentences in the apology also greatly affect the public's response to them. After analyzing celebrity apology posts on Instagram based on public response, it can be concluded that public response is strongly influenced by the mistakes that celebrities have made and the expression of apology delivered.

3. Pragmatic functions of celebrity apology

The expression of apology posted on Instagram not only functions as a form of regret, but behind it, there are other pragmatic functions used to improve the celebrity's relationship with the audience and maintain their public image. First, acknowledgment of mistakes and self-awareness. This function is seen in the expression of apology and becomes the celebrity's self-awareness that the actions taken were wrong and that there is an impact of the actions taken. For example, Han (Stray Kids) stated, "Due to this incident, I was able to think deeply while reflecting on myself," demonstrating both acknowledgment and self-reflection. Jessi expressed "I feel moral responsibility," showcasing her self-awareness regarding her actions.

Celebrities who openly acknowledge their mistakes and make statements such as, "I realize that my actions can hurt a lot of people," demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility and accountability for their behavior, which in turn helps strengthen the emotional bond and trust between them and their audience. Moreover, such apologies function not merely as a form of damage control but also as a vehicle for self-improvement and personal growth. Through these expressions, celebrities convey their sincerity in confronting their shortcomings, their willingness to reflect on past actions, and their determination to learn from these experiences in order to become better individuals. In some cases, this commitment to change is further emphasized by tangible actions, such as participating in community service or social initiatives, thereby reinforcing their promise to make meaningful improvements and contribute positively to society.

On the other hand, the act of expressing an apology also functions as a crucial tool for restoring balance and repairing the disruption caused by a celebrity's actions. It serves to ease tension, calm public emotions, and return the situation to a more stable and positive state. This role becomes particularly significant in the context of social media, where information spreads rapidly, and public reactions can be immediate and highly emotional. In such a fast-paced and reactive environment, a well-crafted apology helps manage the crisis by clarifying misunderstandings and demonstrating accountability. For instance, Zach Bryan's apology was intended to provide clarification and prevent further tension, directly exemplifying this pragmatic purpose. Similarly, Jessi's apology aimed to mitigate public backlash and restore a sense of calm, highlighting how celebrities strategically use apologies as a form of crisis communication in digital spaces.

In addition, managing public image emerges as one of the key pragmatic functions within the act of apologizing. The sincerity and timeliness of an apology play a crucial role in shaping public reaction and protecting a celebrity's reputation from negative perceptions. A carefully constructed apology, delivered with genuine intent, can serve as an effective means of rebuilding trust and reaffirming a celebrity's position in the public eye. When celebrities respond

promptly after an issue arises—crafting statements that convey honesty, responsibility, and a commitment to resolution—their apologies tend to have a stronger impact in diffusing public anger, repairing their self-image, and regaining audience support. This demonstrates that beyond expressing remorse, a well-formulated apology serves as a strategic communication tool for reputation management in the fast-paced digital environment.

The study found that when celebrities apologize on Instagram, they use a mix of direct statements (like "I'm sorry") to clearly take responsibility and indirect expressions (like "I feel ashamed") to gain sympathy and soften the impact. This dual approach helps them manage challenging situations and improve their public image. The public's reaction to these apologies varies greatly, depending on how serious the celebrity's mistake was and how sincere the apology seems. Minor errors with genuine apologies are often accepted, while major missteps or insincere apologies can cause further damage to their reputation. Ultimately, these apologies serve various pragmatic functions: acknowledging mistakes and showing self-awareness, committing to self-improvement, easing tensions from chaotic situations, and strategically managing their public image to regain trust and support.

The findings presented above highlight three key aspects related to celebrity apologies on Instagram. First, they identify the various types of expressive speech acts employed by celebrities in crafting their apology posts. Second, they examine the nature of public reactions that emerge in response to these apologies, including both supportive and critical responses from audiences. Third, they explore the underlying pragmatic purposes that motivate such expressions—ranging from the desire to convey sincerity and accountability to the strategic goal of managing reputation and restoring public trust. Together, these aspects provide a comprehensive understanding of how celebrities navigate the complex process of apologizing within the dynamic and highly interactive environment of social media.

1. Types of Expressive Speech Acts Used by Celebrities

Celebrities do not only use one type to express an apology. However, they usually use both direct and indirect types to express apologies that are accountable and have an emotional nature. Explicit acknowledgement of fault and responsibility can be found in direct expressions such as "I'm sorry", "I sincerely regret", and "I would like to apologize". These statements indicate regret and responsibility. To show responsibility and sincerity to their audience, public figures usually choose to apologize directly in public (Abudin & Sundari, 2021). Moreover, indirect apology expression, such as expressing regret without directly admitting fault, can involve indirect statements, such as "I feel very ashamed" or "I've been thinking it carefully". These statements aim to evoke strong emotions in the audience while maintaining the image. According to (Anak Agung Ratu Paratistha & Widiastuti, 2021; Darmawan, 2024), indirect expressions usually reduce the impact of negative messages, making them easier to accept by the general public. Furthermore, the combined strategy is the most common strategy used by celebrities to write their apologies. The combined strategy is a mix of the direct apology and indirect apology types. This combined strategy helps balance the need for clear responsibility with the desired emotional appeal. (Alwirido & Candra, 2023; Ramlah & Sartini, 2023) emphasize that combining both types of strategies is often more effective in gaining forgiveness from the public and managing negative self-image.

2. Public Response to Celebrity Apology Posts

The public has two responses to a celebrity's apology: a positive response and a negative response. If a celebrity makes a mistake that is considered trivial or acceptable, and if the apology is considered sincere, timely, and honest, then the public reaction is usually forgiving. (Ahmadi et al., 2022; Lamsijärvi, 2024) revealed that celebrities who use language with a high level of emotional intelligence and responsibility will receive positive reactions from the public through interactions such as likes and comments significantly. On the other hand, if the mistake is serious, such as a moral or legal offense, or if the apology seems insincere, vague, or too implicit, a negative response from the public may arise. (Wan Ismail et al., 2022) emphasize that a poorly delivered apology can make public anger worse and fail to repair the celebrity's image. This opinion is reinforced by (Beaudin, 2018), who says that the perceived authenticity and moment of the apology play an important role in its success.

3. Pragmatic Functions of Celebrity Apologies

The expression of a celebrity apology goes beyond the mere act of expressing regret; it encompasses multiple pragmatic functions that contribute to shaping meaning, managing social relationships, and reinforcing moral accountability in the public sphere. From a pragmatic perspective, when a celebrity apologizes, they are not only admitting fault but also demonstrating an awareness of the social and ethical consequences of their actions. This acknowledgment reflects an understanding of the broader impact their behavior may have on others—particularly their followers—and signals a willingness to take responsibility for repairing any harm caused. Such acts of acknowledgment serve as vital mechanisms for rebuilding trust and restoring balance within the relationship between the celebrity and their audience.

According to Ismagilova et al. (2020), this function holds particular importance in cultural contexts that value collectivism over individualism—cultures where social harmony and community well-being are prioritized. In such settings, celebrities are often perceived as role models who carry moral and social responsibility beyond their personal image. Consequently, their apologies are not only evaluated as private acts of remorse but also as public demonstrations of ethical accountability and social leadership.

From an analytical standpoint, celebrity apologies can indeed be viewed as performative social acts that operate simultaneously on interpersonal and cultural levels. On the interpersonal level, they serve as communicative tools for mending relationships between celebrities and their audiences—reaffirming trust, demonstrating accountability, and signaling emotional sincerity. On the cultural level, these apologies function as ritualized social performances that reflect broader moral and societal values, such as humility, respect, and collective responsibility. In this way, a celebrity's apology does not only concern the individual speaker but also resonates within the shared ethical framework of the community observing the act.

The act of publicly admitting wrongdoing, therefore, becomes more than a defensive maneuver—it is a deliberate attempt to reestablish the moral order that may have been disrupted by the celebrity's actions. By acknowledging fault in front of millions, celebrities transform their personal failings into moral lessons that can reaffirm societal norms and expectations. This process aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, wherein individuals strategically present themselves in ways that align with social expectations to restore face and credibility. In the digital age, this performance of morality is further amplified

by the visibility and interactivity of social media platforms, where audiences actively evaluate the authenticity and emotional tone of such apologies.

Moreover, this performative act carries a pragmatic duality—it operates as both a linguistic expression of remorse and a strategic discourse of moral restoration. Linguistically, it uses speech acts such as admitting, expressing regret, and promising change to convey sincerity and self-awareness. Strategically, it functions as an instrument of image repair, helping the celebrity to rebuild their reputation and reconnect with followers. The blending of these two layers underscores the complex nature of digital apologies, where authenticity and strategy coexist within the same communicative act.

Celebrities often issue apologies as a sign of personal growth and willingness to make changes. This aspect is both manifest and strategic, as it gives them a chance to turn the scandal into an opportunity for growth. (Maruti, 2022; Prima et al., 2023) emphasize that expressions of intent to improve can positively impact public views and help restore reputation. Likewise, apologies can help to repair tensions and restore public trust, especially on social media, where problems can spread quickly. Apologies that pay attention to their delivery strategy and the language chosen can quickly repair a previously damaged self-image (Chen et al., 2022). It is in line with (Beißwenger & Pappert, 2019) who revealed that online politeness strategies, such as the use of emojis and language that shows empathy, play an important role in reducing negative impacts. Maintaining reputation and managing public image are the main objectives on the pragmatic side. As (Brooks et al., 2021) revealed that social media influencers and celebrities rely heavily on the audience's perspective to maintain their position. Therefore, apologies are delivered carefully because it is not only to show regret but also to carefully manage the image and maintain the audience's trust in them.

In the digital era, the manner in which individuals express apologies has evolved beyond simple expressions of remorse to become a powerful and strategic communication tool. Research conducted by Yang (2023) revealed that the inclusion of emotional visual cues—such as emojis or the use of “playing cute” (*sajiao*) expressions—in apology posts significantly enhances the perception of sincerity and increases the likelihood of forgiveness from audiences. Similarly, Uoti (2022) demonstrated that apologies shared on social media platforms, particularly during critical moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, function not merely as interpersonal acts of communication but as symbolic tools used to influence and control the broader public narrative. These studies collectively underscore the transformative role of digital apologies, illustrating how linguistic choices and visual elements intertwine to shape public sentiment and manage reputation within the fast-paced and emotionally charged environment of social media.

CONCLUSION

In the realm of social media, celebrity apology posts have been transformed into deliberate communication strategies that go beyond simply expressing regret. In many cases, celebrities combine direct and indirect expressive linguistic acts to align accountability and emotional appeal. Direct expressions such as “I’m sorry” or “I sincerely apologize” serve as an acknowledgement of the wrongdoing. Indirect expressions such as “I’ve been reflecting a lot” implicitly express an admission of guilt. This mix suggests that apologies in the digital age should be emotionally resolved and strategically controlled since it helps celebrities to keep public sympathy and manage their image at the same time.

The gravity and sincerity of this apology have a big impact on how the public reacts to it. The audience will probably continue to support the celebrity and donate more if the offense was relatively minor and the apology is sincere. Viewers frequently react negatively to more serious offenses, particularly when the apology comes across as evasive or dishonest, which further diminishes the celebrity's appeal. Celebrities are held to higher standards for ethical responsibility because of this dynamic, which emphasizes the significance of language, emotional tone, and timing in eliciting audience responses. From a pragmatic perspective, celebrities apologize for a variety of reasons. In a digital age where information travels more quickly, apologizing is a way to enhance relationships and build public perception.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on pragmatic communication in digital spaces, particularly in the context of public apologies by celebrities. By identifying how direct and indirect speech acts are used strategically, the findings offer insights into the intersection of language, image management, and audience engagement. The results are valuable for linguists, media scholars, and public relations professionals, offering a framework for understanding how language shapes public sentiment and brand identity in the digital age.

Despite its insights, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, consisting of only nine apology posts from global celebrities, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the analysis focuses exclusively on Instagram, excluding other platforms such as X, TikTok, or YouTube, which may host different styles and formats of public apologies. Third, the interpretation of sincerity and intent is subjective and based on textual analysis, which may vary depending on cultural or contextual interpretations.

Future studies could expand the dataset by including a larger and more diverse range of celebrities across different cultures and platforms. Comparative analyses between regional (local) and international celebrities may reveal variations in apology strategies influenced by cultural norms. Additionally, incorporating multimodal analysis—such as examining visual elements, emojis, or video delivery—could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how apologies are constructed and received online. Researchers might also consider conducting surveys or sentiment analyses to measure actual audience reactions and assess how different types of apologies influence public perception over time.

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