



# ***The YouTube Apology***

***Analysing the image repair strategies and emotional labour of saying sorry online***

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## Abstract

The apology video has become a genre of its own on YouTube. Easily recognizable, the particular ways that YouTube creators address controversy on the platform have been subject to extensive parody and media coverage as they rack up drama-fueled views. Despite this satirization, the apology video is a strategic tool for creators to repair tarnished reputations, regain the trust of their audience, and secure their livelihood in the face of public conflict. Through semiotic visual analysis and quantitative content analysis of videos from six popular creators this thesis examines their strategies of apology and expressions of emotional labour as a form of self presentation. The analysis departs from theoretical perspectives on the strategies of apology, the nature of a public crisis, and on performativity. The main findings reveal that the most heavily used strategies of apology are those involving acknowledging an offense, presenting plans to solve or prevent recurrence, and asking for forgiveness. An important factor is discovered to be the visual and behavioral performance of sincerity through aesthetics of intimacy and authenticity. And lastly, findings also indicate that creators discuss emotional labour in relation to facing criticisms or hardship, in worry around maintaining an income, and in order to continuously project a marketable persona.

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Analysing the image repair strategies and emotional labour of saying sorry online

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## 1. Introduction

In 2015, the dramatic YouTube apology video became a meme on the internet. Often serious and over-the-top, these attempts to clear reputations and mend severed audience ties gave rise to a trope that persists to this day (Makalintal, 2019). Each time a scandal is stirred up around a creator, the apology video appears as a mandatory piece of content addressing the controversy.

Youtubers have gone from niche subculture personalities to mainstream celebrities since the platform was launched in 2005. At the same rate as the YouTuber's status as popular culture icon has increased, so has the interest in events surrounding them. Accusations of misconduct gain media coverage that reaches far beyond the boundaries of the YouTube communities in which they start, exposing new audiences to the culture of the platform (Dodgson, 2019; Kaur, 2019; Abad-Santos, 2019; Alexander, 2019). A creator trying to avoid damage to their brand during a reputational crisis may need to take into account not only their own audience, but also reporting media, the policies and algorithms of the platform, the interests of advertisers and sponsors, and management agencies (Hou, 2019:541, 550). This gives way for calculated performance driven by a desire to uphold a persona. Studies on the apologies of traditional public figures detail strategies used or how cultural and technological contexts affect the results, but the emotionally loaded digital labour of an online creator apologising to their audience remains unscrutinized (Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014; Hou, 2019). Some researchers mean that the effort creatives put into their work is not limited to the purely strategic, but that emotional labour is a meaningful part of their practice (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008). YouTube creators, who have built their brands on personal intimacy and manufactured authenticity, narrate their apologies to the audience that they refer to as their friends and navigate the line between denial and acknowledgement in the face of criticism. This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of image repair in relation to emotional labour and the relationships between actors in the YouTube ecosystem during a reputational crisis. As a profession that is replacing traditional celebrity roles as an aspiration for children and adults alike, it is an increasingly influential one in the current media landscape. Mapping its labour conditions and the unique cultural

meanings attached to it takes us one step closer to comprehending its significance as a growing occupation on social media. Using a qualitative semiotic method in combination with elements of quantitative content analysis, this thesis systematically analyses aspects of image repair and emotional labour in apology videos from six YouTube creators.

## 2. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the way that independent YouTubers express themselves in apology videos after facing public criticism, how they use image repair strategies, and how they discuss emotional labour in relation to their work. In order for the analysis to fulfil the research purpose, the following two research questions will serve as pillars of direction:

- How do strategies for image repair and apology used by independent YouTube creators in videos addressing a reputational crisis contribute to the reparation of audience-creator relationships?
- How do independent YouTube creators express and critique processes of emotional labour related to their video, and what does this mean for the unique conditions of their profession?

### 3. Contextualization

YouTube has grown from a modest video library into a vast entertainment machinery. More than 1 billion hours of video is watched daily on the platform, and the audience is made up of almost a third of all internet users (YouTube for Press, n.d.).

The complexities of the relationship between a YouTube personality and their audience are layered. In contrast to a star on a TV show, a YouTuber is speaking directly to the viewer, something that is making the forming of one-sided parasocial bonds a common occurrence (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019:4; Chung & Cho, 2017; Kurtin et. al., 2018:248). Some of the most upfront tactics of social media branding echo through every corner of YouTube, such as referring to your followers as friends and regularly reminding them how much you love them. Combine this with keeping an open dialog about inner thoughts, personal feelings, and life events, and the audience easily adopts the role of a close confidant. This building of intimacy is part of what turns followers into fans and fosters the feeling of trust that characterizes parasocial relationships (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019:4).

When the trust and the boundaries of either side of the relationship are broken, it is up to the creator to react to or amend the situation, publicly or privately. Handling it publicly can be a highly disruptive event. In common with the celebrity culture surrounding traditional media stars, is the gossip-fueled appetite for spectacle that generates so many YouTube views that a genre of YouTuber-specific drama reporting channels has grown over the past couple of years. This means that in the case of a public conflict it will be picked up and spread further by other channels. The phenomenon of a previously loving audience promptly turning their backs on a creator in the case of a scandal is what has coined the term Cancel Culture; based on the premise of declaring someone who appears guilty of an offense as irrelevant. It is said to originate from black users on Twitter, demanding responsibility from public figures during the #MeToo movement or in relation to individual cases of exposed sexual misconduct (Merriam Webster, nd). Several high-profile YouTubers were involved in public conflicts or controversies during 2019 that resulted in rapid subscriber count losses, advertisers pulling their ads from their channels, collaboration contracts with big brands being



dropped, and product lines being revoked (Kenbarga, 2019). For a smaller YouTuber the pressures of reputational damage can mean plummeting viewership numbers, decreased sales of merchandise or product lines, and sponsorship proposals disappearing from their inbox. The apology video is one attempt to ward off potential consequences and regain the trust of their audience.

Although values of democracy and participation are staples in the idea of YouTube as an accessible space for video sharing, it is owned and run by a capitalist industry. The general economic structure and the commercial culture of its users is tightly connected to how creators shape their content. While building of intimacy and trust is what turns followers into fans, it is also what advertisers see as a goldmine - and the interest of advertisers and sponsors has become increasingly important to those who seek to make a living from their videos on the platform. Since the original tagline "broadcast yourself" was coined, the platform has undergone a steady reconstruction towards a more commercialized logic, which seems to be affected by its reliance on an advertising market (Burgess, 2015:283-284; Jarrett:2008:141). The discrepancies of a platform built on user generated content at the same time as it is anchored in an advertising-driven economy, puts the YouTuber in the middle of a contradictory intersection.

In order to earn enough from their videos to keep creating them, they need to be advertiser-friendly, accept sponsorships, or receive financial support from their audience. Obtaining advertisers means that they have to adhere to strict content and copyright rules posed by the platform, unless they want to face demonetization or termination (YouTube:2019a, 2019b; Katzowitz, 2019; Askanius, 2012:61). This because YouTube is just as dependent as the creators are on advertisers' desire to associate themselves with YouTubers, their content, and their audience. Techniques built to optimize advertising such as automated recommendations and trending feeds end up favoring certain videos over others, forging an infrastructure that slips further away from an inclusive rhetoric of democracy. In this thesis, I view these precarious work conditions as an integral part of the broader context in which apology videos are embedded.

## 4. Literature Review

This section aims to provide the reader with better insight into research around social media apology, celebrity, and emotional labour. Although rooted in Media & Communication studies, we will discover that this thesis intersects with branches of Public Relations. By highlighting relevant articles and relating them to one another, I hope to position this thesis within the field, discover how it contributes to existing research, and discuss key topics.

### 4.1 Traditional Celebrities and Reputation on Social Media

In their study *Seeking sincerity, finding forgiveness: YouTube apologies as image repair*, Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018) compares possible correlations between how more traditional public figures express themselves in apology videos on YouTube and how users commenting on the videos perceived their sincerity. Videos were coded for verbal behaviours and nonverbal expressions of emotion, and compared to image repair strategies from both interpersonal and mass media theories. Their attempt to detect the effectiveness of these apologies took an interesting turn when results showed no significant relation between the use of strategies to obtain forgiveness and the expressed forgiveness of the commenting audience (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018:401). In the subsequent discussion, the authors proclaim that while the image repair theories used weren't able to clarify audience perception and forgiveness, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are ineffective. Turning their gazes toward the audience, they observe that many comments appeared to be expressions of confirmation bias. Selecting and interpreting information in alignment with their own beliefs, the commenters may have been using the YouTube video to express previously formed beliefs about the person apologizing. New questions arose in the light of this: Who are the viewers that take the time to comment? Are those with an already negative perception more inclined to comment, and if so, do their voiced opinions affect other viewers? Sandlin and Gracyalny also question whether the YouTube algorithm has a hand in their results, as investigations have found that it perpetuates a "filter bubble" that isolates users by

recommending content that echoes their political beliefs (a.a.:402). Their article shows the potential importance of the platform structure and online environment for perceptions and commenting behaviours around a YouTube apology.

Further reflections on the tactics of reputation management in social media can be found in *The presentation of celebrity personas in everyday twittering: managing online reputations throughout a communication crisis* by Colapinto and Benecchi (2014). They analyse the actions of Olympic athlete Evan Lysaack in the wake of a Twitter scandal regarding a derogatory tweet directed at the competing rival Johnny Weir. The tweet was a disruption in the self representation of Lysaack and caused strong reactions from his audience. Adopting a Goffmanian framework, the article views self presentation on social media as materially and symbolically performative (a.a.:220) and compares the actions of Lysaack and Weir. It also delves into how their different performances of self during the scandal were perceived by online audiences. With Lysaack and his management team trying to shift blame and deny his actions, audiences began a detective-like hunt for information that would disprove these claims. When they published the evidence they found online, Lysaack was pressured into apologizing, although never taking full responsibility of the post he made (Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014:229). The article shows how digital technology that allows both the subject and audience of a controversy to access and present information poses changes to central principles of crisis management (a.a.:231). Colapinto and Benecchi argues that the conscious choice of how to present oneself online is especially dependent on the feedback of other people in a social media setting, where people communicate with strangers in an intimate way (a.a.229). The specific image repair strategies used by Lysaack failed to account for the perspective of the audience and the technological context, which made it possible to counter his deflections. All the while the subject of the controversial tweet, Weir, remained silent and gained positive acclaim.

A case study in a similar vein to Colapinto and Benecchi's is *Jon and Kate Plus 8: A case study of social media and image repair tactics* by Mia Moody (2011). Building on Benoit (1997), the article recounts the public divorce of two TV celebrities and analyses the interplay between their social media image repair strategies and the responding media coverage of the unfolding process. Throughout the history of public scandals, quick and truthful admittance and expressions of remorse seem to have constituted a

successful apology if the audience has been convinced of a subject's guilt, but if the accused has been innocent, a quick defense has been more effective (Moody, 2011:406). Moody compares the strategies of Jon and Kate and places them in contrast to common divorce narratives in western culture. These framings tend to be heavily influenced by mythological figures such as "the struggling single mother", or "the cheating, self-centered husband" - something that was utilized by both parties in their performances on social media (a.a.:413). Kate responded swiftly to criticism by using image repair strategies to mold herself into what audiences and press would see as a socially acceptable persona. Jon lashed out and deflected blame, costing him his reputation; a result in line with what Colapinto & Benecchi observed in the case of Evan Lysaack's actions. Moody finds that Jon didn't receive public support until he apologized for his offenses and expressed that he had learned his lesson (ibid.). The study contends that traditional image repair strategies have an impact on audience perceptions when used in a social media setting. To appear credible however, social media responses to public controversy must take into account a wider cultural framing (Moody, 2011:413).

Sandlin & Gracyalny's findings are relevant to this thesis as they show that strategies to obtain forgiveness don't necessarily affect the perception of YouTube commenters, and brings viewer confirmation bias into the discussion. This can help us better understand potential strains and pressures in the relationship between an apologizing YouTuber and their audience. Colapinto & Benecchi's and Moody's case studies show that image repair strategies on social media such as denial and deflecting blame wield poor results in terms of forgiveness, while silence sometimes can be rewarded. Both articles highlight the importance of technological context while also showing that taking into account the cultural framing of one's position can generate public support. In addressing social media platforms other than YouTube they do not bring us closer to a general understanding of YouTube apologies, but together they show how many parts of the social media ecosystem play into the perception of a person, and exemplify the many considerations an online public figure might take into account when producing an apology. This is something I will bring into my reflections on the specific context of YouTube apologies and the emotional labour of creators.

## 4.2 Strategies of the Social Media Star

Celebrities in the age of the internet have a different way of strategically approaching their audience than their more traditional counterparts. The YouTuber's success is often built on social capital and close-knit interaction which makes their influence strong; their platforms become networked spaces for like minded people to convene, fostering a familiarity and trust (Abidin, 2018:33). Due to this a high percentage of young people relate more to their favorite YouTuber than traditional celebrities (Blumenstein & O'Neil-Hart, 2016). But how do YouTubers strategically maintain this level of relatability, and how do they manage their connectedness with their audience on the platform?

Mingyi Hou investigates the characteristics of social media celebrity in her article *Social media celebrity and the institutionalization of YouTube*. Looking into the world of beauty YouTubers using a digital ethnography approach, she bases the way she looks at the components of the YouTube ecosystem on a number of theoretical standpoints. She asserts that the social media star builds their self representation on performed authenticity (Hou, 2019:536) and that YouTube has turned from an amateur-driven space to a platform where increasing professionalization of content creators takes place (a.a.:538). To define what a social media star is, she points out that their success is "*native to social media platforms*" (a.a.:535) and that the entrepreneurial calculation involved in their work is platform specific, although they borrow techniques of representation from the world of traditional celebrity. Rather than a traditional celebrity however, they don't usually base their image on exclusiveness and glamour but on ordinariness and intimacy (Hou, 2019:548). To use Goffmanian terms this means that the distinction between the "backstage" and "frontstage" of a person's life and identity becomes blurred, as viewers are granted access to a scripted version of a YouTuber's private "backstage" through for example grooming routines or makeover videos. This plays into the fact that a social media stars' direct market is the audience and not, as in the case with traditional celebrities, entertainment companies or big media networks who can grant them publicity. This fact used to make the company or network the intermediary between the celebrity and the audiences' reception of them.

Hou finds through her fieldwork that for the social media star, audience reception and feedback is vital and given much consideration, as it can be explored through data analytics as well as comments, direct messages, and other types of digital response or dialogue (a.a.:549). To further explain the image these social media stars portray, Hou draws historical parallels to customs of aristocracy and bloodline inheritance. She muses that traditional celebrities could be seen as the “ordinary” counterpart to this in often having reached their success through their own hard work and talent. Taking another step into the future we can see the YouTube vlogger who doesn’t put in their hard work in an effort to be extraordinary, but rather in the name of being themselves, expressing their unique perspective as a regular person (a.a.:550).

Looking beyond all aspects of self expression, Hou discovers the commercialized world of the many industries merging at the core of the YouTube business model. The platform interface encourages entrepreneurial ambitions (2019:538), it is built on an advertising market with requirements creators try to meet (a.a.:541), and MCN management companies perpetuate the capitalization of creators’ identity and authenticity while administering the income they need to continue pursuing their profession (a.a.550). The article puts much weight on the individualism and performed authenticity that social media stardom is characterized by, while putting the full technological and economic context of it into perspective.

Similarly, Crystal Abidin explores how family vloggers work to create authenticity through the aesthetic of amateurism in her article *#familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labor*. Using the concept of calibrated amateurism as her building block, she frames the ways in which this type of enactment is valuable to family vloggers as they portray narratives of domesticity. Just like Hou distinguishes between the social media star and the traditional celebrity based on ordinariness, Abidin shows how the content of a family influencer is distinct from that of a reality TV family due to its premise of everyday, mundane charm (Abidin, 2017:4). A family vlog may be most well known for its higher production value “anchor content” such as music covers, comedy sketches, or DIY-tutorials, but will contextualize their lives through secondary “filler content” that gives viewers a look into their everyday life. Historically, vloggers have started out as passion-driven amateurs who over time become more sophisticated and professionalized. The constant return to filler

content is their attempt to retain their relatability and connect with their audience by turning the private into public performance (a.a.:6-7). Abidin observes that the audience craves this intimacy, always asking for more details from the undisclosed and private. I will use this insight into the practices of a YouTube vlogger to contextualize the apology videos analysed in this thesis.

Hou and Abidin bring media practices of the social media creator into this thesis, highlighting topics of relevance such as entrepreneurial calculation and manufactured authenticity which will be useful to understand the professional context of YouTuber's apologies.

### 4.3 Emotional Digital Labour

The road to building a career on social media is often described as a nearly democratic process (Unique, 2017). Any platform user who produces content about something they enjoy could wake up one day and magically feel their phone start buzzing, having been struck by the platform algorithm or been organically discovered by a hoard of like minded followers. It is not unusual to see this portrayed to be a universally desirable and enticing prospect - because who wouldn't want to work with what they love?

Duffy and Wissinger (2017) explore the realities and idealizations of social media labour in their article *Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and "Just Being Me"*. They observe that digital workers reproduce narratives of creative freedom, thankfulness and joy when they talk about their work publicly, to the degree that it doesn't resemble work anymore. It appears more as a hobby one would divulge in without expectations on financial reward. The authors discover that this is part of an inherent performance of positivity that social media workers within certain genres use to project the likeable persona they think is necessary to appeal to their audience (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017:4657, 4663). The emotional labour of simulating, or indeed actually feeling, a certain emotion at all times becomes a weight on their shoulders as even when they experience something else, they must stay in character to be marketable (a.a.:4658). The image of optimistic perfection within the profession is in fact far from reality as the digital economy is notoriously characterized by precarious work conditions:

“Often, creative laborers are located in industries and organizations marked by staggeringly high barriers to entry, periodic instability, and structural forms of inequality and discrimination.” (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017:4653)

When digital creatives downplay these conditions, they are normalizing long workdays and instability as there is no longer any separation between work and free time (a.a.:4663). There is not one moment of the day that is not fit for work when one's life is one's only product and packaging it into digital content is supposedly easy and joyful. According to the authors, this media rhetoric is designed to idealize the possibilities of creative work in order to keep the cogwheels of a digital creative economy spinning (a.a.:4663). As long as people believe that a career as a social media celebrity is effortlessly obtained and maintained, their aspirations will turn them into devoted consumers of digital technology themselves.

A different take on the emotional labour of YouTubers in particular is found in *Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, self-exposure and the productivity of negative affect* by Berryman and Kavka (2018). They argue that the view of positive affect as the sole currency of the digital creative economy is too one-sided, as it assumes that this is the only form of emotional labour involved in content production and the only thing that will catch users' attention (Berryman & Kavka, 2018:86). To explore how YouTubers engage with negative affect, they analyze the phenomenon of crying- and anxiety vlogs - videos in which a creator will either spontaneously express themselves around their grievances in a state of emotional distress, or in which they discuss in a pedagogical way their struggles with anxiety or mental health issues (a.a.:87). Their findings show how these creators connect with their audience and create a sense of community through their displays of negative emotion. Prefacing their anxiety videos with disclaimers and apologies that it will not be like their usual upbeat content, they differentiate these vlogs as out of the ordinary displays of their purest and innermost selves. Producing negative emotion becomes a positive product as they gain the value of authenticity, confiding in their audience their unfiltered emotions and creating unity around them (a.a.:90). When a creator sits down and addresses imagined spectators they are also guaranteed an affective and listening audience as they “imagine it into being”, which may function as a part of a healing processes of self reflection, making the vlog an ideal



setting for them to share negative affect (a.a.:96). It serves as an outlet without the risk of burdening or boring one's listeners, as all are watching on their own accord.

Strengthening of connective interpersonal bonds between creator and audience comes with positives for the platform, as it increases users' attachment to it and assures their return. Viewers are invited into a space of digital intimacy when they watch the finished product, able to identify and sympathize with the creator (a.a.92). As YouTube prevents content including sensitive subjects from earning revenue due to it deterring advertisers, YouTubers themselves will often only gain the currency of authenticity and connectedness, which may ensure further social media exposure in the future (a.a.:93). As such the labor of negative affect is an investment in their community, albeit a paradoxal one:

"After all, the very content of crying/anxiety vlogs is about exposing one's vulnerability in an effort to remedy it through further exposure. In order to claim an affective community based on shared anxiety or tears, YouTubers must emotionally expose themselves, even though the exposure itself – whether in the case of social anxiety or a perceived failure to achieve social expectations – is presumably what has caused them to become vulnerable in the first place."(Berryman & Kavka, 2018:96).

The authors argue that the strains of digital labour are part of the cause of creators' anxiety in the first place, as the emotional labour of fabricating positivity is a soul-crushing practice. They maintain that the therapeutic function of sharing "real" negative emotion to lessen this pressure is a temporary solution, but that it can aid in establishing an authentic persona and increase intimacy with their audience (a.a.:96).

Berryman and Kavka together with Duffy and Wissinger uncover two distinct ways in which emotional labour is conducted on social media. Their findings exemplify the ways in which emotional labour may produce value on platforms such as YouTube as well as how creators are encouraged to view and talk about their work publicly as saturated with positive or negative emotion. To understand and conceptualize the ways in which YouTubers speak about emotional labour in their apology videos, these findings will serve as important context.

#### 4.4. This Thesis Within the Field

As we have discovered, the apology strategies and emotional labour of celebrities online have been studied from several different starting points. Existing celebrity apology research generally focuses on traditional celebrities or on the conditions of their social media strategy (Sandlin and Gracyalny, 2018:402; Hou, 2019:548). Most examples of emotional labour research hone in on how digital creators produce idealized images of their profession through positive emotional labour, or how they process their own negative emotions and connects with their audience through for example anxiety vlogs (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017:4657, 4663; Berryman & Kavka, 2018:86). Studies on social media creatives have uncovered the demands of emotional labour they face, but haven't taken a step closer into the goings on during a crisis situation for specifically YouTube creators. This thesis contributes to this field by focusing on the apology practices of celebrities native to social media, and the crisis situations that are unique to them. This thesis also studies, from a Media and Communications perspective, the way that YouTube creators express the emotional labour of producing apology videos, which will contribute to our knowledge of the conditions of their work in our changing digital environment.

## 5. Theoretical Framework

This chapter will outline the main theories and models that will aid in approaching the empirical material. To gain a theoretical understanding of the study of apology, theories of Lazare (2005), Benoit (2014), Govier & Verwoerd (2001), Coombs and Holladay (2012), and Tamar et. al. (2013) on the strategies of apology, the nature of a public crisis, and the impact of context on forgiveness will be accounted for. In addition to this it will draw on Goffman's (1959) theory of performativity. These theories will shape the perspective of my analysis and be the framework that connects each part of the thesis together, as well as positions it within the research field.

### 5.1 The Study of Apology

The field of apology studies is built on the accounting of how and why organizations, individuals, and institutions attempt to save their reputations in the case of a crisis. While early scholarly studies were conducted on the discourse of interpersonal apology, other forms of apology later garnered interest (Hearit, 2006:80). Although interpersonal and celebrity public apologies are still studied within this space today, the current discourse is heavily affected by the crisis management of commercial corporations (a.a.:vii). This is perhaps most visible in the study of celebrity crisis management, as public figures are caught between the interpersonal and the organizational; while they represent themselves as they address the public, they will often have a team of PR advisors, writers, and attorneys behind them to strategize their approach (a.a.:120). In this chapter section we will take a closer look at three different scholarly approaches that this thesis takes into account, namely the nature of a public crisis, the structure of apology strategies, and how context affects forgiveness.

Govier and Verwoerd (2001) study the apology as an important step toward reconciliation in their article *The promise and pitfalls of apology*. They define the public moral apology as an expression of remorse from an individual or organization for wrongdoing, declared in the public eye with the assumption that it is important to the masses as well as the victims (Govier & Verwoerd, 2001:67). It involves both the admission of wrongdoing and the request for forgiveness. When an act of wrongdoing is

performed, the perpetrator is essentially regarding the victim as though they have little or no moral worth. What the authors see as the mystery of apology is that although words cannot undo a harmful act, a sincere apology can dissolve the claim that the victim doesn't deserve moral consideration. In "taking back" this claim, the perpetrator acknowledges that they were wrong in regarding the victim this way, that their actions inflicted harm, and that feelings of animosity are justified (a.a.). Throughout their exploration of this victim-perpetrator relationship, Govier & Verwoerd find that this acknowledgement of the victims' worth and feelings is why an apology is so effective in creating a shift toward forgiveness and reconciliation. A lack of earnest acknowledgement can heighten the damage caused by wrongful acts, making moral disregard a second injury (a.a.:71). The authors also discover that moral amends are best received in combination with practical amends, namely the willingness to undertake practical ways of reparation to damage done to the victim (a.a.:739.) This summary of the psychology behind a heartfelt apology and forgiveness may shine light on both the strategies and the emotional labour behind a YouTube apology.

Another take on the public apology from the perspective of crisis communication is brought forth by Coombs & Holladay in *The paracrisis: The challenges created by publicly managing crisis prevention*. They define the term paracrisis as "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012:409), a warning sign that could turn into a catastrophe if left unattended. When figuring out how to handle a reputational crisis, Coombs & Holladay suggest choosing between three strategies of response: refute, reform, or refuse (a.a.:412). Refuting would mean defending the organization and its practices and escalating the conflict with upset stakeholders. Reforming is the choice closest to Govier & Verwoerd's acknowledgement theory, and would mean changing the criticized behavior and therefore implicitly or explicitly acknowledging wrongdoing, continuing on the road to repairing broken trust between organization and stakeholders. Refusing would involve complete silence; not responding to the criticism and instead communicating about what is positive about the organization (a.a.413). Their article is an example of the possible calculations behind a public apology during a reputational crisis, and although their focus is organizational, it remains relevant to this thesis as the YouTuber is also an entrepreneur with a brand to uphold.

The effects of apology are studied by Tamar et. al. (2013) in *Do you really expect me to apologize? The impact of status and gender on the effectiveness of an apology in the workplace*. By surveying Israeli students they aimed to detect how effective an apology was depending on the offenders' status and gender. Their findings indicate that the less expected an apology is the more effective it is, as it is perceived as more sincere - a discovery that they tie together with results regarding gender and status. The results showed that an apology from a man was more effective than one from a woman, and more effective from a manager than a subordinate. They suggest that this may be because women are still today perceived as having lower social status than men due to a patriarchal societal structure, and "*therefore a woman's apology is a social obligation while a man's apology is perceived to be beyond the expected*" (Tamar et. al., 2013:1455). In general it seemed that the lower the status the one apologizing had the less effective the apology was, and vice versa. However, an apology from a female manager had higher effect than that of a male subordinate, implying that achieved status can overrule ascribed status and potentially alleviate stereotyped beliefs (a.a.:1454). The authors point out that studies on how men and women forgive have shown varied results in the past, demonstrating that while men (especially white men) have a strong belief in their ability to change, women (especially black women) are more likely to feel that their acceptance of an apology won't change a problematic situation (a.a.:1448). As minority groups often hold less social power, an offense against them is perceived as more severe and may be harder to forgive.

Govier & Verwoerd's and Coombs & Holladay's contemplation and discovery of what makes an apology a successful tool for reconciliation go hand in hand. The importance of acknowledgement of one's wrongdoing and recognition of another's suffering come out as key components of an apology that is perceived as sincere. Tamar et. al. pinpoints how relations of gender and status affect the likelihood of forgiveness, and while their study doesn't take into consideration the previous relationship dynamic between two parties which is an important factor in this thesis, it provides relevant insight into what social status might mean for how we view apologies.

## 5.2 Performance of Apology

When looking further into the strategies of apology used by YouTubers, having a coherent understanding of what constitutes and defines an apology will be of great use. The psychiatrist Aaron Lazare (2005), a leading authority on the psychology of shame (Hatch, 2006:524), has conducted research on the way people respond to public or interpersonal offense. Consulting Lazare on the topic we find that he discusses the apology by raising questions about concepts such as humility, shame, and remorse. He defines an apology as a negotiation between two parties, in which an offender acknowledges responsibility for their offense and expresses regret toward the offended (a.a.:21). A public apology can be to or from any number of people, factions, or organizations, but is always in the presence of a wider audience. He stresses that to understand this two-way communication process of conflict and reconciliation, and for an offender to convey a successful apology, we need to understand the underlying needs of both parties involved. Looking first to the victim's side, this could for example be the restoration of dignity, the assurance that no further harm will be inflicted on them, or a promise of reparations from the offender (Lazare, 2005:27). We also find that when a public offense is committed toward a group it can be seen as the breaking of a "social contract". This means that the boundary between what the group deems as acceptable or unacceptable behavior has been crossed, and that depending on how serious this transgression is, the offender may turn into a social outcast who will not be accepted in the group until they offer an adequate apology (a.a.:38). As an example, if a food YouTuber who has built their channel around propagating a vegan lifestyle is revealed to recently have consumed animal products, the community they have belonged to might feel betrayed and decide to reject them in this way.

In turn, an apologizing offender generally seeks to repair the relationship and avoid further damage or consequences, or seeks to apologize as a response to their own feelings of shame, guilt, and compassion toward those they have wronged (a.a.). Lazare claims that the most important part of an apology is the acknowledgement of an offense, and that although this may seem self-evident, it is not always easy to do as it involves detailed communication around offending behavior, negative impact and responsibility

(a.a.:50). A successful apology according to Lazare “*explicitly and publicly reaffirms the contract violated (“What I did was wrong”), expresses remorse (“I feel terrible for what I did”), and promises forbearance (“It will not happen again.”)*” (a.a.:38). Communicating with humility is of utmost importance to convey remorse, as an apology may otherwise turn into an insult. That ethical considerations and dialogue are as crucial as planning, skill, and timing for an apology are sentiments Lazare expresses (Hatch, 2006:254).

Moving on to image repair theory by Benoit (2014), we find an approach rooted in the tradition of public relations and crisis communication. In contrast to Lazares’ view of apology as a healing and restoring practice, Benoit sees image repair as a collection of interpersonal or organizational strategies to counter damage done by threats to image or reputation (a.a.:2, 3). He has been criticized for measuring an apology after what it does for the accused rather than the victim (Hatch, 2006), which is why I have found him balanced well by Lazare, who places the healing of the victim as highest priority and sees self-defence tactics as failures to do this. Benoit asserts that reputation is a valuable commodity, as we desire a positive self-image and as other people are more likely to be accommodating towards us when we have a pleasant reputation. In this way it is a staple in the way we socialize with other people. Benoit’s typology of image repair will be the main analytical tool used in this thesis as a base for the understanding and coding of strategies in YouTuber apology videos. This table demonstrates the five categories and tactics of image repair:

Main strategy	Tactic	Example
<i>Denial</i>		
	Simple denial (Didn’t do act, act did not occur)	I didn’t eat animal products.
	Shift blame (Another did act)	It wasn’t me, someone else put animal products in the food.
<i>Evade responsibility</i>		
	Provocation (Act was response to someone else’s offense)	I ate it, but it is you who are constantly pressuring me to be perfect.

	Defeasibility (Lack of information or ability)	I didn't know the food contained animal products.
	Accident (Act was a mishap)	The menu said that the dish didn't contain animal products, it was a mistake.
	Good intentions (Act was meant well)	I didn't want to offend the cook by saying no to the meal.
<i>Reducing offensiveness</i>		
	Bolstering (Stressing good traits)	I've been vegan for 10 years.
	Minimization (Act not serious)	It was just a one time thing.
	Differentiation (Act less serious than other ones)	At least I didn't eat red meat, only fish.
	Transcendence (There are more important things to consider)	Eating animal products is bad for the environment, but I needed to put my health first.
	Attacking accuser (Reduce credibility of accuser)	You are just haters looking to tear me down.
	Compensation (Reimburse victim)	Because I upset you, I will offer my online diet & wellness courses for free.
<i>Corrective action</i>	Plan to solve or prevent reoccurrence	I will start cooking my own food and always ask about the contents of food if I eat out.
<i>Mortification</i>	Remorseful apology	I'm terribly sorry for what I did. I regret doing it and I apologize.

Figure 1. Benoit's model of image repair Strategy (Benoit, 2014:28).



The one using these strategies has two possible aims: to change their audience's beliefs or to create new ones about the accusations being brought forth (a.a.:11, 29). Although an image repair effort can be successful enough to dispel any hard feelings, the term itself indicates that complete restoration is not always possible, and that in using these tactics the result can vary. Benoit points out that audiences already have preconceived beliefs about the accused, as well as their own values and concerns that need to be identified by the one who wishes to create a defense against accusations (Benoit, 2014:126). There may be several audiences involved that need to be persuaded in different ways, as well as multiple criticisms that need different approaches. Benoit recommends prioritizing what is most important for the image one wants to uphold (a.a.).

This upholding of an image is what Goffman (1959) refers to when he describes the self as a performance on a stage. In his theory of performativity he does not concern himself with authenticity of the self, since he claims that we play a role at all times whether we are conscious of it or not (a.a.39). What behaviors these controlled performances consist of are results of the social norms within our cultures, and are what ensures or disrupts symmetry in interpersonal communication (a.a.:8). In short, we will adjust our demeanor to serve the situation and the company we are in, to project a preferred image to our surrounding. In contrast to Benoit who ties his discussion on self presentation to "truth" and "honesty", Goffman sees this as our natural way of functioning and maintains that there is nothing inherently deceitful in it. A prime example can be found in a culture shock situation, in which a person presents herself in a manner favorable to her culture while visiting another one, and unknowingly appears in a negative light to her hosts who have different perceptions of appropriate behavior, causing adverse responses. Or to tie it closer to the theme of this thesis, when a YouTube creator posts an apology video approaching a subject in a certain manner that she expects her subscribers to approve of. In this way we use self presentation to create idealised renditions of ourselves, downplaying aspects that are incompatible with our ideals and enhancing others (Goffman, 1959:37, 48). Goffman's perspective on performativity will be useful for this thesis as a basis for the analytical interpretation of YouTube creators' self presentation in their videos. It will also be an

aid in discerning possible broader cultural ideals connected to the image repair strategies they adopt.

### 5.3 Emotional Labour in Social Media Work

The creative industries have historically been dogged by precarious standards for media workers, often meaning temporary contracts, expected overtime, and small margins between free time and work (Gill & Pratt, 2008:14). Individualized forms of digital labour are unregulated in comparison to the average desk job, often lacking both worker protections and directive legislation. As these occupations continue to evolve in spite of such conditions, we must acknowledge the value they have for creatives as well as for society at large (Cohen, 2015:4-5). This drive to pursue a creative passion despite troublesome work conditions is what ultimately has coined the term *emotional labour*. To discern how YouTubers express themselves about the emotional labour involved in the production of apology videos, we must establish what this concept entails. In their critique of autonomist takes on immaterial and affective labour, Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2008:114) scrutinize the everyday strains that face producers of symbolic, expressive cultural goods. They find that the pull of occupations within cultural work are connected to the prestige and glamour that can be attached to this artistic sector, and the power and influence that follows when one is capable to communicate with a listening audience of many people (a.a.:102). But as the authors describe everyday endeavors within these occupations, words such as “high demands”, “considerable responsibilities”, and “much at stake” are frequent throughout. The reality seems to be a constant balancing of demands from teams, audiences, and legislators, mixed with one's own aspirations and needs (a.a.:114). Seeing the way creative workers balance these conditions gives us insight into the socio-psychological dynamics they are part of, which Hesmondhalgh & Baker connects to how they control and administer their own emotions:

“In particular, it involves a form of emotional labour, defined in Arlie Hochschild's seminal discussion as requiring the worker ‘to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008:108).

Hesmondhalgh and Baker illuminate the labour involved in upholding the ideal outward countenance in a stressful environment. Upholding relevant interpersonal relations in this way is a strategy to navigate the possible highs and lows of what can be gained or lost in a creative production. Choosing to invest your emotions into or practice emotional distancing from your audience or stakeholders becomes an issue of protecting yourself, your reputation, and your production (a.a.:110). For a YouTuber, the emotional investment in one's work is vital for self-esteem but is also crucial as a commercial strategy, as the parasocial relationship and closeness to their audience is a major contributor to their success (Karlsson, 2019). Hesmondhalgh and Baker's theory will in this thesis help shed light on the emotional labour of creative work and how creators converse about this in their videos.

## 6. Method and Material

The structural layout of the analysis is detailed in this chapter, along with descriptions of its practical implementation and how to navigate the advantages and disadvantages of the method. The ethical considerations of conducting research this way are explored, and the empirical sample is discussed.

### 6.1 Semiotic Analysis

Since this thesis is concerned with analysis of video content, the qualitative semiotic method based on theories by Ferdinand de Saussure is well suited for the purpose. Stemming from a linguistic tradition it looks for meaning through the conceptual systems of our world and places language in the middle, as the one system that all definitions are derived from (Fiske, 2010:162, 163). As such it is also closely related to structuralism, that sees perceptions of meaning and social worlds as constructed and rejects the idea that people are able to obtain objective truth, unfiltered by culture. Saussure was not concerned with how meaning interacted with the individual reader and her reality, and aimed all of his attention to the text. As a structuralist he adopted the standpoint that while cultures and their meaning are unique, the ways in which they create these meanings are universal (a.a.: 133, 163), and it was this overarching system that interested him and his theory. It was his pupil, Roland Barthes, who with his theory of mythology later tied semiotics to the individual and her reality (a.a.:133).

Structuralism draws from the paradigm of hermeneutics, which assumes that language brings understanding and that humans see the world through it (Byrnes, 2001:3-5). It emphasises the importance of tradition and history as contributors to our current prejudices, which has become a major building block of the semiotic approach. Another common sentiment within this conceptualization is intersubjectivity, the assumption that people share a common world, which is also not far off from the Saussurian view of a ubiquitous system of meaning making. Meaning is seen as dependent on interpretation and no structure of a text is seen as existing outside of our reading (Romano, 2017:393). Objectivity and rationality in meaning is as such an impossibility:

“For hermeneutics, on the contrary, meaning is irreducible; we are always already living in it, and, if we want to explain it, we can only refer it to a behavior which is already meaningful: for example, the use of a sentence in a relevant context.” (a.a.:395).

Some scholars say that this perspective came about as a reaction against philosophical ideals that aimed to bestow researchers with access to nonpartisan truths free from historical conditioning (a.a.). Instead it sees philosophical certainty as unattainable, giving interpretation the front seat. This thesis operates within hermeneutics as a theoretical perspective and adopts the view of interpretation as a primary tool in meaning making.

Semiotic analysis has helped me to pick apart visual communication piece by piece in order to discern its many layers of ascribed meaning. As a research method it encourages one to look at a subject with fresh eyes, in order to see patterns of prejudice to expose hidden imbalances of power. Both semiotics and hermeneutics deem it a virtually impossible task to maintain objectivity by discarding our past experiences and states that interpretation is our best option (Fiske, 2010:162; Byrne, 2001). Instead of trying to look at visual representations from the “outside”, we have looked from the “inside” and embraced that each person's interpretation is different.

Saussure developed the concept of *signification* to make sense of language's sign system. Although we have touched upon the subject in the Theory chapter, it deserves to be illustrated more thoroughly. A *sign* according to his model is the combination of a *signifier* and a *signified*, something we can exemplify with the word “koala”:

- signifier: a mental representation of a sound pattern, and
- signified: the mental concept of a fluffy, grey animal gazing down from an eucalyptus tree (Chandler, 2017:14).

Saussure described the signifier as an “acoustic image”, a purely non-physical imprint in our mind. Later interpretations of his model have used it as the material part of the sign - the smell, taste, sound, touch, or sight of something - but for Saussure it did not refer to a material reality (a.a.:15). Ascribing meaning to words, after all, is something that

happens in our mind. Even the signified is for him only an idea and has nothing to do with the physical koala we might encounter on a trek through the forest, chewing on a mouthful of leaves. This approach has been criticized for seeing structural form as deterministic and undermining of individual agency and reality (Chandler, 2017:270; Barthes, 1982:96). In this thesis however, it allows for an active reading of visual elements and lends us the perspective that meaning must be continuously reinterpreted, as it is a fleeting thing not firmly anchored in physical reality. This has been helpful as this thesis has sought to understand constructed narratives of image repair as well as underlying structures of meaning within YouTuber apology videos.

## 6.2 Quantitative Content Analysis

In addition to the qualitative semiotic method, the thesis has used elements of quantitative content analysis in order to map and compare the image repair strategies used in videos. It is a research method that involves systematically assigning content into categories based on set criterias, and the analysis of the relationships between those categories (Riff, 2013:3, 20). Anchored in a positivist tradition in which the validity of a study depends on its replicability, the reductionist transformation of phenomena into data and a focus on denotative “objective” meaning are some of its central staples (a.a.:19). It is in many ways the polar opposite of the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation that this thesis is conducted from. However, in this thesis it provides a way to detect and demonstrate patterns and relationships within the qualitative framework and sample, as seen through the subjective lens of the researcher. The reason for including a quantitative perspective is to give an additional dimension to this thesis, making it possible to unveil new comparative angles to the patterns discussed. How the method has been practically applied can be found in the Realization chapter.

## 6.3 Realization

As a model of semiotic analysis, two terms are used as guides. These are two ways to describe meanings, *connotation* being the many associations that a visual element brings with it, and *denotation* being the literal description of what we see on the screen

(Chandler, 2017:147, 151; Barnes, 1945:256). Let us look at these terms through an example: say that we're watching a video of a koala in her natural habitat. The denotation would include the descriptive, literal sense of "a grey, fluffy animal with round ears and sharp claws climbing a branch". But the connotation to this visual brings with it implicated meanings or shared emotional associations. These might be things such as "harmonious", "Australian", or "vulnerable"; associations that we would only have if we knew the context surrounding the animal, such as its peaceful nature, its status as an Australian national icon, and it being an endangered species facing extinction. When considering YouTube apology videos, this means knowing about the creator's background and history on the platform, about the internet-specific genre they are aiming to fit into or create, about how their usual videos look and how they act in them, and so forth. These are factors that contribute to the various social and cultural implications of a video as we interpret it. Someone with different or no background knowledge about the creator will derive other meanings from it. This fact has been an important aspect to recognize as I moved into the analysis.

As demonstrated by Fiske (2010:100,101) and suggested by Hansen & Machin (2013:175), I structured the coding of videos around a set of denotational and connotational questions. These questions were asked to each video in order to coherently map their attributes. Initially, denotational questions considered the surface level things one could immediately tell from watching the video:

- What environment is the creator in?
- What objects are visible?
- From what angles is the video filmed?
- What is the creator wearing?
- How does the creator move?
- What tone of voice does the creator use when speaking?
- What colors are visible?
- Is the video edited, and if so, how?

The connotational questions went a little further and opened up for a deeper analysis of what the videos convey:

- How are the chosen image repair strategies expressed?

- How can the elements of the video be understood from the perspective of self presentation?
- Does the creator figuratively or literally express themselves about emotional labour, and if so, how?
- How does the elements of the video relate to genre-specific characteristics?
- How does surrounding elements, such as video caption & title, comment replies, and other related statements affect the meaning of the video?

I aimed to curate questions in order to capture speech, movement, visual self presentation and text as meaningful attributes in the analysis. As previously mentioned in the Theory chapter, I also used Benoit's (2014) image repair model as a template for detecting the strategies used and the amount they were used. It consists of the following five categories, as cited by Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018):

- "denial; includes denial and shifting blame.
- evasion of responsibility; provocation, good intentions, defeasibility, accident.
- reducing the offensiveness of the act: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accusers, compensation.
- corrective action; plan to correct the offense.
- mortification; admitting guilt and seeking forgiveness." (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018:394-395).

When it came to operationalizing Benoit's image repair model, one issue in particular led to reflection on my own impact as a researcher. While assigning spoken quotes into image repair categories, it became apparent that the words of a creator could be interpreted as belonging to different categories depending on how one approached it. In an instance of shifting blame, for example, it was seldom so easy to discern as a creator exclaiming "that other person did it!". The many subtle implications imbedded in how the creator spoke could at times place this statement in the category of attacking accuser, or provocation, as well; something that depended completely on my understanding of the context of their apology. This meant that a conscious choice had to be made several times when a statement appeared to be full of contradictory meaning, and that certain statements had to be allocated into more categories than one when the meanings were not contradictory but complementary. A semiotic analysis will always mean that the researcher assigns meaning to language or visual elements, and this was to a degree an expected part of the coding process. However, it proved to be more



challenging to categorize speech than anticipated, which is an aspect of the analysis that a reader of this thesis may want to keep in mind.

For the quantitative content analysis, this image repair model served as basis for categorization to measure differences in the creators' argumentation. Each video was watched and the speech of the creator was transcribed, with arguments systematically assigned into strategy categories. This data was compiled into tables comparing the use and frequency of use of image repair strategies in all videos combined as well as in each video individually. This comparative part of the analysis provided the opportunity to understand more about the unique contexts of each creator.

## 6.4 Strengths and Weaknesses

The biggest weakness of the semiotic method is arguably its subjectivity. Relying on individual interpretation can be seen as insufficient evidence to prove a theory or hypothesis in a valid way (Fiske, 2010:181). The system of asking a text connotational questions may in this sense seem overly curated, to such a degree that any evidence produced must be disconnected from material reality. If all we rely on is our subjective decoding, what is there to say we have proven anything at all? It is in the hermeneutic idea of intersubjectivity, that people can share a common world, that we find the answer to this (Byrnes, 2001:3-5).

Scholars of the more constructionist tradition will argue that the weakness of subjectivity is in actuality the method's greatest strength, as it is in the intersubjectivity of meaning we find the reliability of qualitative research (Chandler, 2017:79, 80). From the perspective that people perceive the world by constructing meaning, through linguistic systems or otherwise, it is impossible for a human being to "take off" their socially constructed views in favor of an objective truth (a.a.:78). From this social semiotics viewpoint truth is pluralistic, springing forth from the beliefs of groups of people, and can be as contested as any other aspects of power between groups (a.a.:79, 80). A semiotic analysis is then a way to uncover *one* truth. Meaning contrived from subjective interpretation is reliable in its intersubjectivity. Defamiliarizing ourselves with a video by asking it questions that probe into why we assign it a certain meaning can give us insight into our own preconceived notions, and as such, about the social

world we are part of. If we were truly unbiased and looked away from the context of our social world, we wouldn't be able to read the cultural codes around apology videos that are relevant, and this objectivity would be our disadvantage (Bergström & Boréus, 2012:32). If we remain aware of the effect that our preconceptions have on our interpretation, and count our own context as readers in the equation, we have done enough to achieve a reliable result (a.a.). The beauty of the semiotic method and its hermeneutic basis is found in this disparity between unique perspectives. When objective truth is exiled from the theoretical framing, the only thing that exists is different and equally valid interpretations of a preferred reading.

Turning our attention toward quantitative content analysis which is the second method of this thesis, we find a research tradition that usually has another way of approaching validity and reliability. In general, reliability within this methodology depends on the concept of shared meaning in order to define and assign phenomena into categories (Riff, 2013:95). Validity is in turn usually placed in the replicability of the study within this discipline, and that is where its main weakness lies as coders with different lifeworlds may assign meaning in different ways regardless of pre-established concept definitions (a.a.). However, as the content analysis in this thesis has been conducted within a qualitative framework, the subjectivity of the researcher has been taken into account. With a firmly hermeneutic epistemology as a basis, the two methods complement each other as the quantitative content analysis supports the deeper semiotic analysis of meaning.

## 6.5 Sample

I have adopted a *purposive nonprobability sampling* method "in which elements are selected from the target population on the basis of their fit with the purposes of the study and specific inclusion and exclusion criteria." (Jhonnie, 2012:7). This in order for the collected data to remain relevant to the research questions, maximizing its variability within the scope of the thesis and ensuring a well rounded analysis (Layder, 2013:72). My criteria of inclusion for the videos have been:

- Must be made by an independent YouTube creator,

- be available on the creators' YouTube channel in its full original version,
- be made originally for the YouTube platform and audience,
- be conducted in English,
- and the creator must belong to one of the three genres of Beauty, Lifestyle, or Vlogging.

An "independent" YouTube creator is in this thesis referring to a YouTuber who is personally in charge of running their channel, shaping their personal brand, and creating their content, as opposed to a person hired by a company to sit in front of the camera on their behalf. This to avoid selecting videos issued by or connected to corporations rather than YouTube creators, as it would have risked diluting their personal sentiments and opinions with corporate intent apart from their own.

I have used the term "genre" to distinguish thematic categories, and "format" to pinpoint specific styles of video (Giles, 2018:115). The Beauty, Lifestyle and Vlogging genres are common on YouTube and feature some of the most popular creators on the platform as well as arrays of smaller ones. Each thematic may contain several forms of video. To summarize how I approached them in this thesis: the beauty creator focuses mainly on sit-down makeup reviews and tutorials, the vlogger takes the viewer with them through personal daily life events (a.a.:116), the lifestyle creator is organised around a specific way of life in terms of religion, sexuality, disability, or a hobby-centric way of life which may mean mixing any combination of beauty, fashion, sports, food, art, or music content. Together these genres provide the opportunity to perform a purposive sampling, with wide enough communities that apology videos have been made by creators with differing subscriber counts, backgrounds and genders. To find videos, I used search terms such as "apology", "I'm sorry", and "my truth" in various search engines, on YouTube, and on news and entertainment sites. I also searched commentary and drama YouTube channels discussing controversies, as well as relied on the YouTube video recommendation algorithm to find content within this niche.

I compiled the following list of videos for analysis:

<b>Creator name</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Date of upload</b>	<b>Video length</b>	<b>Subscriber count (as of May 2020)</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
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Gabriel Zamora	Beauty	2019-08-22	48.56 minutes	826.000	North American
Nikita Dragun	Beauty	2019-07-24	35.41 minutes	2.68 million	North American, Vietnamese, Mexican
Jenna Marbles	Vlogging	2019-11-20	47.12 minutes	20.7 million	North American
Brad Sousa	Vlogging	2019-05-01	5.40 minutes	103.000	North American
Cozykitsune	Lifestyle	2017-08-10	20.07 minutes	888.000	North American
Jenn Im	Lifestyle	2018-11-30	8.50 minutes	2.62 million	North American, Korean

*Figure 2: List of YouTube apology videos included in the analysis.*

Gabriel Zamora and Nikita Dragun are beauty YouTubers whose content revolves around makeup, beauty products and skincare (Zamora, 2020; Dragun, 2020).

JennaMarbles is a creator who has been vlogging on the platform for over a decade and has built her audience on humorous vlogs and DIY (JennaMarbles, 2020). Brad Sousa became known as a vlogger after being featured in a viral video on another YouTube channel (YesTheory, 2018). CozyKitsune is a lifestyle vlogger inspired by Japanese and east asian culture and fashion, and Jenn Im is a lifestyle creator and fashion designer (CozyKitsune, 2020; Im, 2020). Each creator received critique on social media for their behavior that spurred their video apology. The context and backstory of each creator and the events that led up to their apology are detailed in the analysis.

One thing that soon became clear while compiling possible videos to include in this list, was a lack of racial and national diversity. The majority of creators found during sampling were white North Americans, something that surprised me as I knew that with 2 billion monthly users, only 15% of user traffic comes from the USA (Cooper, 2019). The reasons for this imbalance among these videos could be many. The sampling criteria could be excluding people of other nationalities and colors by honing in on English speaking YouTube - the platform is available in 80 languages, and only 33% of

videos from popular channels are in English (a.a.). It could be that within the genres chosen, people of color have less incentive to produce apology videos - due to receiving less attention and/or critique, due to social norms specific to the genre or culture, or otherwise. To find out if the tradition of apology videos is culturally specific, one would have to conduct extensive research into national and cultural niches and their apology cultures on YouTube, something that this thesis cannot accommodate, but can recommend as a topic for future research.

One reason for the perceived lack of diversity among YouTube apologies that is most likely to be involved, is algorithm dependency and the filter bubble effect. YouTube shepherds content that matches the information it has about a user's online behavior and identity, meaning that a circle is created in which few unexpected videos will be shown to a viewer (Pariser, 2011). This falls in line with the fact that 70% of YouTube views are determined by its recommendation algorithm (Cooper, 2019). This is where the important aspect of self reflection as a researcher comes in once again. As there is no true objectivity in interpretive research following the tradition of hermeneutics, it is clear that one must account for values and ideas that impacts one's own assumptions (Rose, 2000:28).

For example, the fact that all YouTubers included in the study are in their early twenties to early thirties could have to do with my own belonging to this age group and my identification with it. As a caucasian woman with a YouTube subscription list that consists of mainly American and UK creators, this is likely to have affected my YouTube search results, and may very well have affected the way I assigned meaning during the analysis. To ensure the validity of research results it is important to identify these aspects of subjective perspective (a.a.; Bergström & Boréus, 2012:32).

To avoid further homogeneity in this sample, I attempted to incorporate a range of genders and people on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, demographic aspects that are self identified by the creators included (Webber, 2018:228).

## 6.6 Ethics

An observation made during the sampling process was that among YouTubers, there seems to be a common practice of deleting apology videos that are not received well.

Several of the videos initially compiled for this thesis were deleted before the analysis process even begun. This seemed to occur when an apology was badly received by the audience, and a second, revised apology would sometimes appear soon after (Lee, 2019; Charles, 2019; Jaystation, 2019). Often when an apology is deleted, another user who managed to download it before it disappeared will reupload it on the platform. This reuploaded version may have been altered with added commentary, been re-cut in a satirical way, or be in its original state. Before I proceeded with the analysis of this thesis, I made sure that each video still remained on the original channel, and purposely excluded ones that did not. This to in some way remain within the ethical boundaries of consent (Somekh & Lewin, 2004), as deleting a video may equal the wish not to keep it public and available for analysis.

According to the principle of informed consent one should inform about the purpose of a study and obtain consent before including a person's material in research, as to not invade privacy or be the cause of possible negative outcomes (a.a.). If the analysis focused on small creators or private individuals, asking their permission and receiving informed consent would be of importance, and if there was no possibility of obtaining it their identities would have been kept anonymous (Denscombe, 2014:312). In this case, this is not viable as the material is produced by public, well established personalities who are as used to and prepared for scrutiny as traditional celebrities. However when it comes to screenshots of videos or platform interface, usernames of commenters or other unrelated individuals would have been blurred out if included.

During the course of conducting this thesis, I quickly became aware of the potential ethical complications that I was not already mindful of when the research process begun. With these attempts to avoid compromising the integrity and privacy of creators subject to analysis, I hope to stay within the bounds of ethically conducted research.

## 7. Results and Analysis

This chapter will present the analysis and subsequent findings of the study. The chapter is divided into two main sections reflecting theory and research questions, and will be summarized in a general comparative conclusion.

### 7.1 Apology and Image Repair

When we think of an apology occurring in our day to day life, the words “I’m sorry” easily come to mind. Remarkable in their simplicity, these two words can heal severed relationships, ease the pain of those who have suffered an offense, and soothe the guilt of an offender. However, the arguments, evasions, and explanations that might follow those two words are many and sometimes necessary for the process of apology. As we shall see, independent YouTubers use an array of strategies to get their intent across in their apology process.

Since “I’m sorry” is both a convenient and essential part of an apology, it is not a surprise that among the six creators analysed, the most frequently used image repair strategy in their videos combined was Mortification. This consists of remorseful acknowledgement of an offense and the request for forgiveness (Benoit, 2014:28, Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018:394-395). This tactic was realized through statements as:

“I am very sorry for using that offensive word [...] I am sorry for using it [...] I feel really ashamed about that and I’m sorry for it.” (CozyKitsune, 2019).

“I did snapchat a couple of girls from back home, and I did receive nudes [...] Every single day I just wish I could take back what I did [...] I hope you guys know that I’m truly sorry and, uh... I love you Tana forever [...] I’m saying sorry not only to the love of my life, Tana, but to you guys. I feel like I owe everyone an apology.” (Brad Sousa, 2017).

The use of “I’m sorry” in combination with acknowledgement of the offense, here being the use of a derogatory word or cheating on a girlfriend, becomes a plea for forgiveness as it is relentlessly repeated in these quotes.

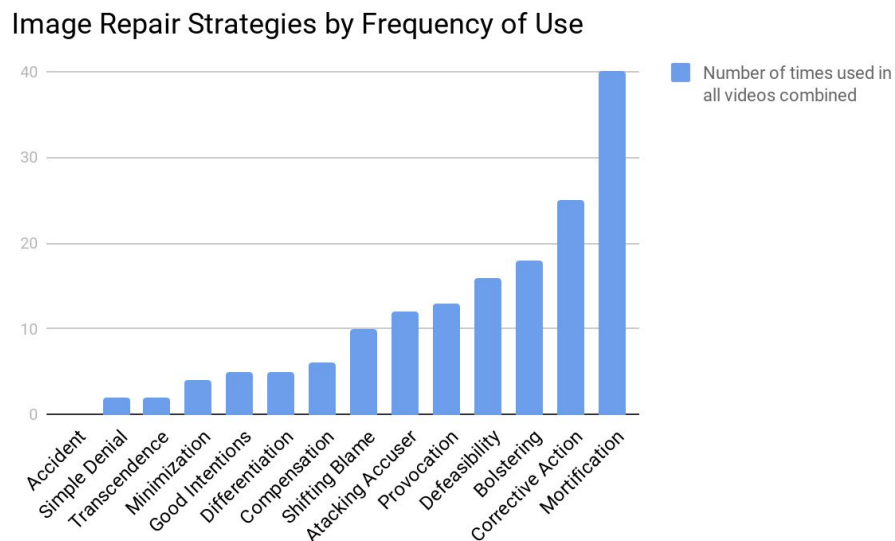


Figure 3: Image repair strategies by frequency of use.

Mortification is followed by Corrective Action, a plan to solve the issue or prevent reoccurrence. The Corrective Action tactic was realized through statements such as:

“What you put out is what you will receive. So I’m now focusing on putting positivity out, because I’ve learned from it.” (Zamora, 2019).

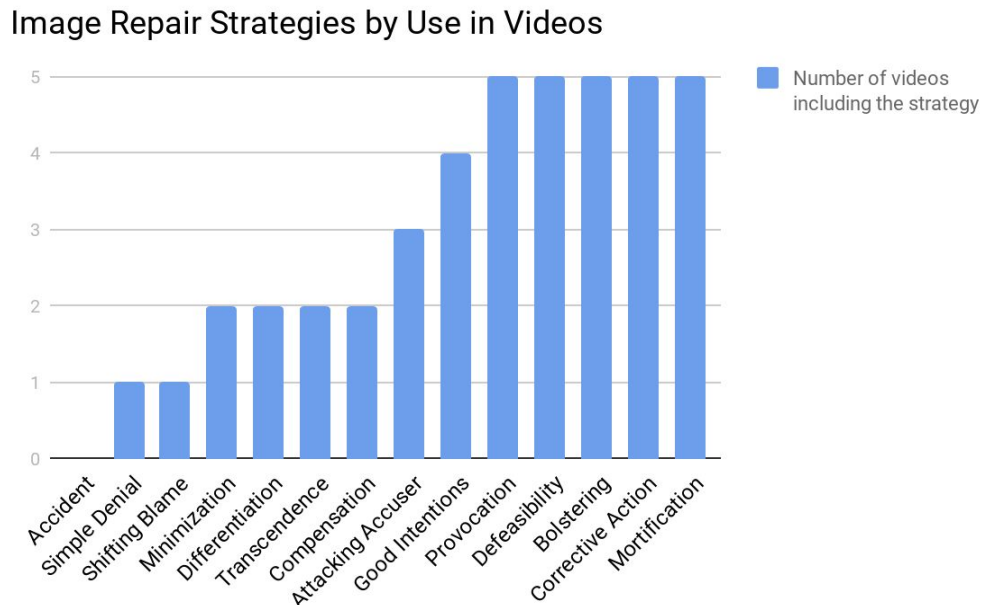
“How can I make this a teachable moment, a fixable moment, where I can show people my mistake so people don’t do it again [...] I think at the end of this, I am going to include the video so you can see what I did, and hopefully that will be enough reason for someone to not make that mistake again.” (JennaMarbles, 2019).

Corrective Action seems in these statements to be used to support or prove the truthfulness of remorse and give a stronger incentive for forgiveness. The risk that a viewer interprets the apology as “empty words” is lessened as the creator shares plans to offer material proof of their truthful intentions in apologizing.

Bolstering, the third most frequently used strategy, is an attempt to reduce the offensiveness of the act by trying to convince the viewer of the creator’s good traits, overshadowing the accusations (Benoit, 2014:28).

When we look at how many creators uses the strategies at least once in their video, we see that the result mimics the frequency table by several points:





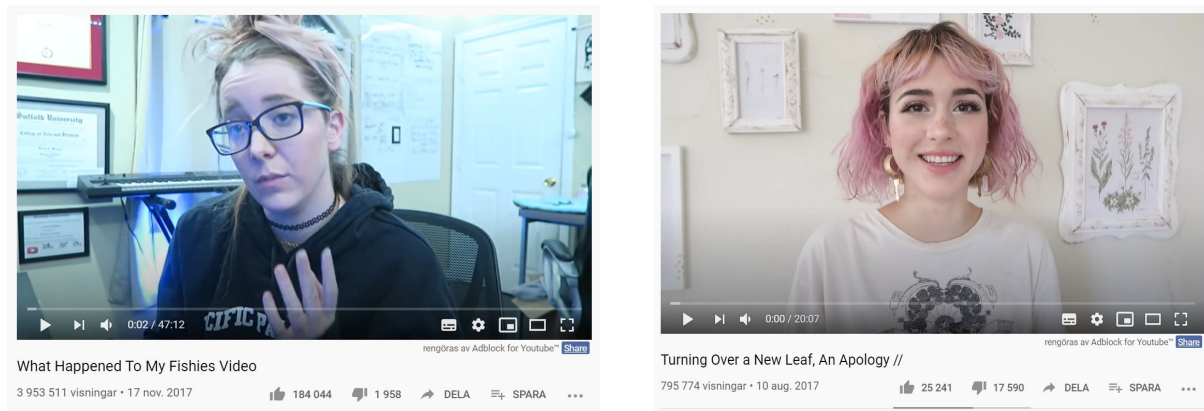
*Figure 4: image repair strategies by Number of Videos Including Them.*

The strategies Simple Denial and Shifting Blame were used by only one video. Strategies to reduce the offensiveness of an act itself such as Transcendence, Differentiation, and Minimization were less used than ones to evade responsibility such as Provocation and Defeasibility. This brings to mind the observations made by Colapinto and Benecchi (2014:231), who meant that as digital technology allows both the subject and audience of a controversy to access and present information, strategies of denial are difficult to succeed with regardless of the truthfulness in the accusations posed against them. This is relevant for YouTubers as proof is relatively easy to find or fabricate when an offense has taken place largely on social media, as is the case in all of the controversies studied here. If all is playing out in the public eye and an audience decides that a code of conduct has been broken, it may be difficult to convince them otherwise (Lazare, 2005:38; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018:401). That the Accident strategy was never used may also relate to this, and could be connected to an inherent aspect of the YouTube platform culture. The independent YouTuber is something of a modern archetype on the internet, representing the young, digital entrepreneur who through their own efforts builds a blooming career online. They are seen as the ones in full control of their social media, more or less masterfully communicating with an audience on their own, and these social channels are for the viewer direct access into the YouTuber's life (Hou, 2019:549, 550;

Duffy & Wissinger, 2017:4657, 4663). The Accident strategy doesn't match this image, and is difficult to use in defence of a social media post or a series of behaviours that are coming directly from the YouTuber's own account.

While what the creators say make their image repair strategies most visible, how they convey their aims and reasons for apologizing is possible to understand through observing their complete self presentation. All creators in this study address their viewers and express a wish to mend their relationship with them at some point during their video. This may not be surprising as each video was made as a response to a reaction on social media among the creator's viewers about a perceived offense. However, this is the only reason they all have in common for apologizing, as their words, body language, and actions can be interpreted as exhibiting varying levels of guilt, shame, or compassion towards the ones that feel wronged (Lazare, 2005:38).

### 7.1.1 Sincerity and Insincerity



*Figure 5: The apology videos of JennaMarbles (left) and CozyKitsune (right).*

To exemplify the way the creators express remorse and guilt in different ways we can compare the self presentation of JennaMarbles and CozyKitsune. JennaMarbles is a vlogger known among her fans to be an animal lover, having frequently featured her pets in her content over many years. After posting a vlog following her acquisition of pet fish for the first time, critique arose from her followers who were concerned that her way of setting up their tank would be harmful for the fish (JennaMarbles, 2017). The title of her video is "What Happened To My Fishies Video", a sentence that shows it is a

video dedicated to an offense that has happened in the past, in itself acknowledging its occurrence. Jenna's video contains every component of a successful apology according to Lazare (2005:38, 50) and Govier & Verwoerd (2001:67), meaning acknowledgement of the offense and showing in detail that one has understood why it was wrong, expressing remorse, and promising forbearance:

"For me the most ethical thing to do was to get them out of the bad environment I had put them in [...] I'm going to make it right, and I'm gonna put them in a right place [...] I am incredibly sorry, I did not mean to disappoint anybody, or make anyone mad, or do wrong by any animals. Again, I really apologize." (JennaMarbles, 2019).

Her determination to make things right is communicated through Corrective Action as she explains how she solved the issue by returning the fish to the pet store. Her expression of guilt to have disappointed her viewers also demonstrates the awareness she has of her position as a role model. To this adds the fact that she initially deleted the video that caused the criticism, and instead enclosed it at the end of her apology video in order for it to serve as an educational example of what not to do. This shows awareness of her responsibility as a public figure to forego with a good example, and her dedication to turning her offense into a learning opportunity for both herself and her viewers about proper animal care. That she points out not only her audience as victims in the situation but shows sympathy for the fish indicates her good intentions and sincerity. Signs detectable in her apology are connected to pet ownership; one can discern the ignorant pet acquirer who doesn't care enough about the wellbeing of the animals to do proper research, or the caring but amateur pet enthusiast who makes a mistake and is mortified.

CozyKitsune is in turn a lifestyle creator who received several waves of public critique regarding her depiction of Buddhism, her use of copyrighted material, use of derogatory slurs towards a minority, and denial of accusations. Her video title is "Turning Over a New Leaf, An Apology //", which is a sentence showing her intent to apologize, and that focuses on the future and leaving offenses behind. When we look at her speech during the apology she includes Lazare's components just as JennaMarbles does:

“From now on you will not see it on my channel [...] I was prideful. I would like to apologize to all of my followers for deceiving you guys and for letting you guys think I drew these things. Mainly I’m sorry for the artist. I know how detrimental it is to not give credit.” (CozyKitsune, 2019).

Here she is acknowledging of her offense, detailing both her personal flaw and her actions and showing that she understands the harm in her previous behavior. She also vows to never repeat the offense, signalling responsibility. If we compare the image repair strategies of the two creators, the main ones they use are largely the same:

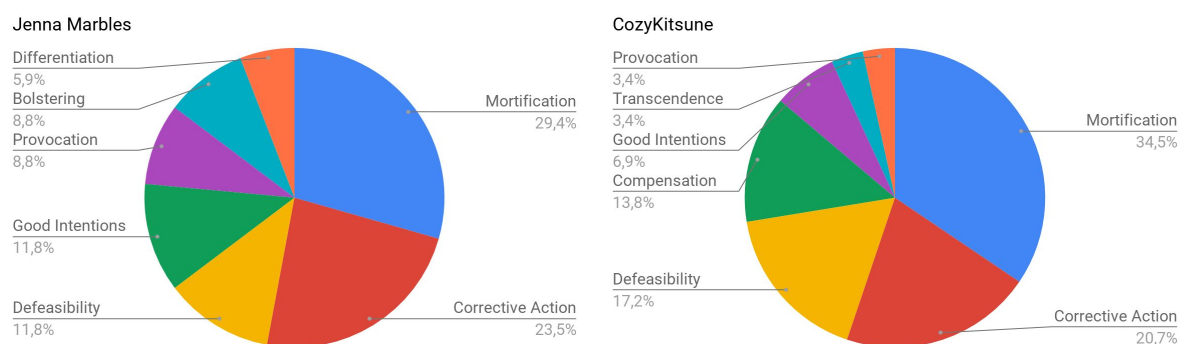


Figure 6: The image repair Strategies of JennaMarbles and CozyKitsune.

But CozyKitsune’s video also gives a completely different impression than Jenna’s. This difference does not primarily lie in what the creators say, but what they do and how they present themselves through the video. JennaMarbles sits in what looks like a workspace by a desk, wearing a hoodie, glasses, no makeup, and her hair in a messy bun - a slightly unusual attire for her, that can be connoted with informality and familiarity. Her apology is not edited except for when her camera momentarily dies, an absence of structure that signals spontaneity and transparency. Her manner is collected and austere. In the eyes of Goffman (1959:26) even this presentation of a “natural” self is a performance, and she is performing a sincere apology by stripping away any of the usual artifice it takes to make herself or her video look pleasing. The video is also not monetized, which means that she actively chose to not receive any revenue from it to show sincerity by removing commercial intent (Skinner, 2019). CozyKitsune is also in a home environment but has stationed herself by a decorated wall, wearing a white printed shirt, makeup, gold earrings and styled hair, as she does in most of her videos.

She begins the apology by giggling and smiling, and edits in little “ice breaker” moments unrelated to the overall message that in a regular lifestyle video would be used to let the creator’s personality shine through in a quirky or lighthearted way, like saying “phew, I’m sweating in here” while wafting her armpits, and then quickly cutting back to the original topic. These are all examples of her upholding her usual heavily stylized format; the complete opposite of Jenna’s presentation of intimate casualness that breaks her normal content routine. CozyKitsune also monetizes her video, and shows that she is aware of the implications this has when she asks her viewers to understand that she does it out of need for her rent and livelihood. By doing this she is breaking a platform culture taboo. One month later she undermines her arguments by choosing to upload a video about a Japan trip right after her apology video, which doesn’t match her narrative as international travel is commonly associated with wealth. In combination with her confident tonality and cheerful behavior through the video this makes her appear less sincere than JennaMarbles, proving one of Lazare’s central points; that conveying an apology with humility is of utmost importance to not turn it into an insult (Lazare, 2005:38).

JennaMarbles’ apology video exudes intimacy as she casts aside all regular artifice for the sake of her apology, signalling everydayness instead of unattainability as traditional celebrities often do. She also speaks very much directly to and about her viewers, reinforcing the close relationship she has with them by discussing their input (JennaMarbles, 2017). This reduces the distance between her as a creator and her audience, in line with the fact that vlogging is a genre characterized by the performance of closeness (Abidin, 2017:4). The creator is inviting the viewer into a representation of their private sphere, often holding the camera in one hand as they go about an adventure or daily chore.

The second vlogger of the sample has a different way of showing closeness to his audience. Brad Sousa came under heat after his relationship with prominent YouTuber Tana Mongeau ended as cheating allegations arose (Sousa, 2019). After acknowledging his offense in his apology video, Sousa uses Mortification and Bolstering to demonstrate his remorse, showering Mongeau in praise over and over as though he is desperate to prove his honesty. True to his genre he is holding the camera or camera phone in his hand while moving around, not an unusual form for Sousa to use in his regular vlogs.

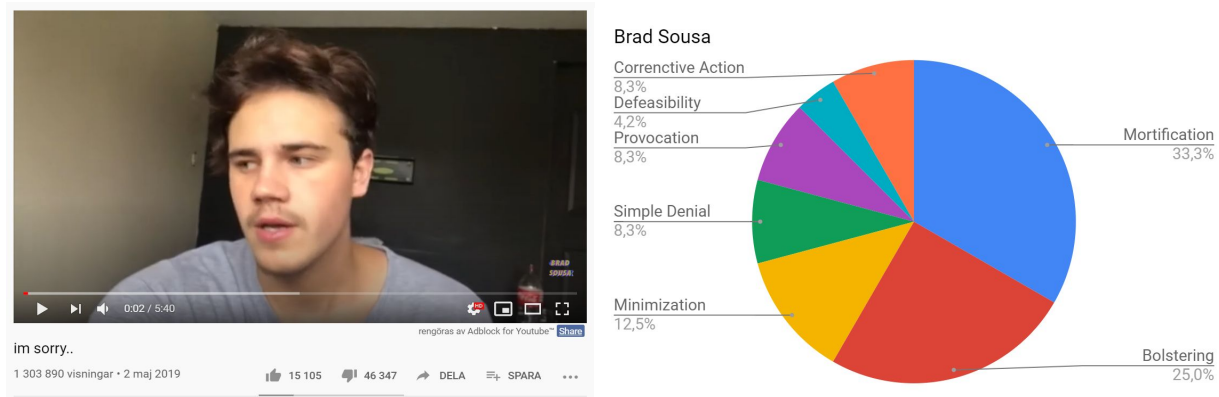


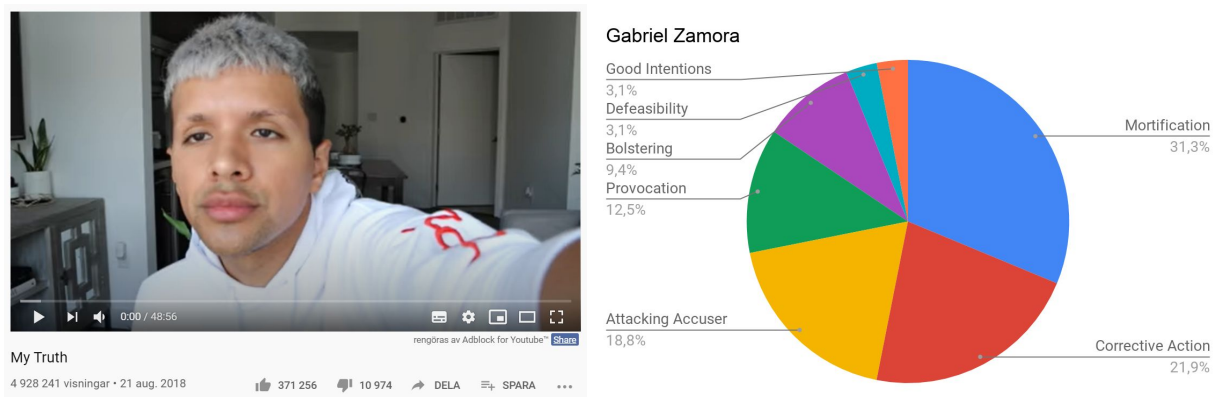
Figure 7: Brad Sousa's Apology Video and image repair Strategies.

He paces back and forth while speaking, touches his face constantly and hardly looks directly into the camera to meet the viewer's gaze; signalling nervousness. In combination with video edits that demonstrate time passing between takes, him visibly chewing gum while proclaiming his undying love for Mongeau, and minimization of his offense as a drunk mistake, he appears to be scrambling to avoid judgement from angry fans of his previous girlfriend rather than heal the broken trust between him and the victim of the offense (Govier & Verwoerd, 2001:71). His strategies and mannerisms may in the viewers eyes be portraying one of two things. Either one sees a social climber caught in the act, righteously being pressured into apologizing. Or on the other hand, one could see his apology as an honest effort to show remorse and not turn into an outcast within the YouTube sphere, persecuted by Mongeau's fans (Lazare, 2005:38). The elements of the video that establishes its genre, softens his otherwise nervous and minimizing demeanor and makes the video comparable to JennaMarbles' is how he addresses his viewers. In urging them to see his video as an example of what not to do, he shows sincerity through Corrective Action and opens up for dialogue with the viewer.

### 7.1.2. The Defensive Apology

Another genre which arguably distinguishes itself from vlogging by playing on the more traditional unattainability of celebrity is the beauty genre. Beauty and the extravagance of glamour go hand in hand, but apologizing for an offense is a less glamorous task than the usual makeup tutorials that YouTuber Gabriel Zamora uploads to the platform.

Zamora posted a hateful tweet about another YouTuber on the behalf of himself and his unknowing YouTuber friends, an action that amassed critique from the public on social media (Zamora, 2019). Zamora is calm throughout his apology video but becomes emotional when he speaks about how his friends reacted as public critique begun to arise. He describes how they took to PR strategies that would paint him as the sole perpetrator to save themselves, and although he takes full responsibility for his action, he states that behind closed doors they were saying the same things as he did in that tweet (Zamora, 2019). He states that he feels as though they are throwing him under the bus to come out of the paracrisis with spotless reputations themselves.



*Figure 8: Gabriel Zamora's Apology Video and image repair Strategies.*

If this narrative sounds vaguely familiar, it may be because it is reproducing meanings that have existed within popular culture for a long time. The notion of the “popular crowd” is inescapable in teenage high school movies as well as in literary fiction discussing class discrepancies. Whether it is the terrorizing popular clique of students in a classroom, the judgemental editors of a style magazine, or the fashionable aristocratic family that owns the whole village in a historical novel, it signifies proponents of status and conflict. Being “shady” online and engaging in gossip, surrounding oneself with a toxic friend group and using others for personal gain, are all familiar connotations associated with how Zamora portrays his situation. He uses the strategy Provocation in order to subtly blame his tweet on his friends’ earlier behavior, and Attacking Accuser to criticize his friends’ PR tactics as hypocritical:

“I allowed myself to create an image of someone in my head in a negative light based on what I was being fed [...] Yeah I may have started this, but let’s not act like you don’t feel

like this. If not worse, because I've heard you say worse." (Zamora, 2019).

In this way he puts the blame on his friends for feeding him the negative information that caused him to write the tweet, turning himself into a victim of their hatefulness. Accusing his friends of being equally or even more hateful both toward the person who was subject of the tweet and toward himself after the scandal erupted, strengthens his position of victimhood. Zamora's main strategies are not Provocation or Attacking Accuser however, as he also doesn't reject his responsibility and states that his own actions were unfair. Using Mortification and Corrective Action as his main strategies, he starts the video and continues for the main portion of it by apologizing to the YouTuber he addressed in his tweets and to his viewers. In repeatedly acknowledging his offense and stating how he has learned from it, he performs sincerity:

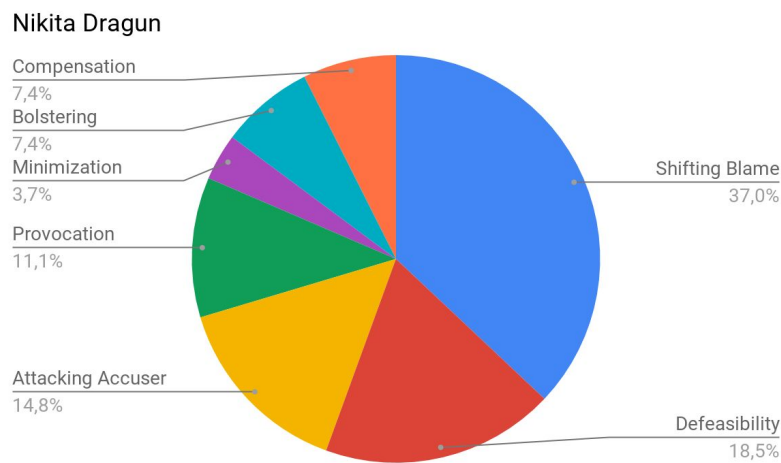
"I know now that it wasn't fair, and that no one should be doing that. You shouldn't make someone seem some type of way, to try to get people on your side [...] If you come back to check on me, I hope that my actions have proven that I've grown from this, and I've learned from this." (Zamora, 2019).

In showing that he is not avoiding and instead owning up to his offense by elaborating on its unfairness, he conveys a level of maturity; the realistic facing and handling of one's problems usually connoted to adulthood. The denotative aspects of his video reinforce this as he is in a home setting, with what appears to be natural lighting from a window, not wearing any makeup and dressed in a white hoodie. In this sense his self presentation is similar to that of JennaMarbles in its use of simplicity as a performance of authenticity.

Another strategy entirely is seen in Nikita Dragun's apology. She faced a paracrisis when it came to her viewer's knowledge that a person she had made out to be her boyfriend on social media was a hired model, receiving payment to act the part (Dragun, 2019). A disagreement ended this arrangement between the two, as the model accused Dragun for keeping him within the bounds of an uncomfortable situation while trying to coerce him into a real romantic relationship, and Dragun accusing him of leading her on romantically (Dragun, 2019; Spill, 2019). Dragun focuses in her video on addressing the issue of who was treating whom badly within the arrangement, and while she acknowledges that their relationship began as a business partnership, she brushes over



this and quickly moves on from it without addressing the critique she received for it. Looking to her image repair strategies we find that she stands in stark contrast to all other videos analysed:



*Figure 9: The image repair Strategies of Nikita Dragun.*

Using Shifting Blame and Attacking Accuser toward the hired model, she attempts to explain her position of victimhood by portraying him as the sole wrongdoer. That she chooses to play into this role may be related to the way that power balance is usually portrayed in romantic relationships between men and women, with a woman more easily being projected as the victim of a man's behavior (Tamar et. al., 2013:1455). Although one could turn the tables and view her as a wealthy socialite deceiving a man with promises of money and fame, and therefore having the upper hand that her status may invoke, a deceptive man with ulterior motives in a heterosexual romantic relationship is a strong connotation that her version of the story is dependent on. As a comparison, the power balance in the case of JennaMarbles is completely different as it is weighed between a human and her pet fish, and in the case of Zamora it is between him and his equally influential YouTuber friends. Denial and victimhood are much less plausible strategies when there are no strong connotations of being an underdog in the conflict. Dragun speaks extensively about her own struggles, fears and vulnerabilities when it comes to dating men as a trans woman, furthering her narrative of victimization, and using it as a strategy of Defeasibility:

"I've realized it's not easy, being the person I am, and having someone accept me, as a woman. I have my guard up for like ever, right? But when I let my guard down and let someone in, that's when they can do the absolute most damage." (Dragun, 2019).

This way of describing her struggle for acceptance portrays her not only as a victim of the model, but also in general when it comes to relationships with men. Her guard is up, she is protecting herself from people with regressive views on transgender women, and when she finally decides to trust someone she seems to be subject to attack. Her title "i got my heart broken" reflects this stance clearly, and is in lowercase letters as opposed to her usual capitalized or uppercase titles, signifying simplicity or candor. In the video she is sitting in what looks like a bedroom as opposed to her usual studio environment and blank backgrounds. This is as far as the change of self presentation for the apology video goes. She is wearing a white sweater, jewellery, makeup and a blonde wig, perfectly matching her white and pink background. Her set is well lit, presumably with studio lighting. The video is edited like any of her usual videos.



*Figure 10: Nikita Dragun's Apology Video.*

Dragun is adopting a strategy of response in line with Coombs and Holladay's (2012:412) refusal strategy, defending herself and her practices and escalating the conflict with upset stakeholders, who in this case are her viewers but also the hired model. Her brushing over the critique around hiring a boyfriend and instead focusing on who was treating who badly keeps the alleged offense as far away from social media as

possible, making the facade with the hired model secondary and the private matters between the two of them primary. As information on how they treated each other for the most part did not play out publicly online, denial is a better choice for her than it would have been for JennaMarbles or Zamora, whose offenses were posted by themselves on YouTube or Twitter which are completely public acts. In this way Dragun attempts to transform the issue from a double sided one involving her viewers into a private matter regarding only her and the model, and turn the video from an apology into a storytime heart-to-heart with her viewers about a traumatic experience she's gone through. She is focusing on her own emotions and struggles as well as private real-life events and as such deterring attempts to debunk her statements, pulling a veil over any broken codes of conduct in the eyes of her online community. It is a defensive strategy optimized for the technological context of social media as well as her own position (Lazare, 2005:38; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018:401).

Similarly to Zamora, Dragun plays into the connotation of the "popular crowd" by telling a romantic story that is lined with fame, money, and betrayal. Fights are started and trust is broken over Instagram photos being or not being posted, expensive reconciliation gifts are given, and cultural taboos around trans sexuality are being fought. It is the complete plot of a reality series about the goings-on within a powerful elite. What sets Dragun apart from Zamora is that she is well aware of and open about her self presentation involving artificial performance. During the video, she refers to herself and her work as a fantasy:

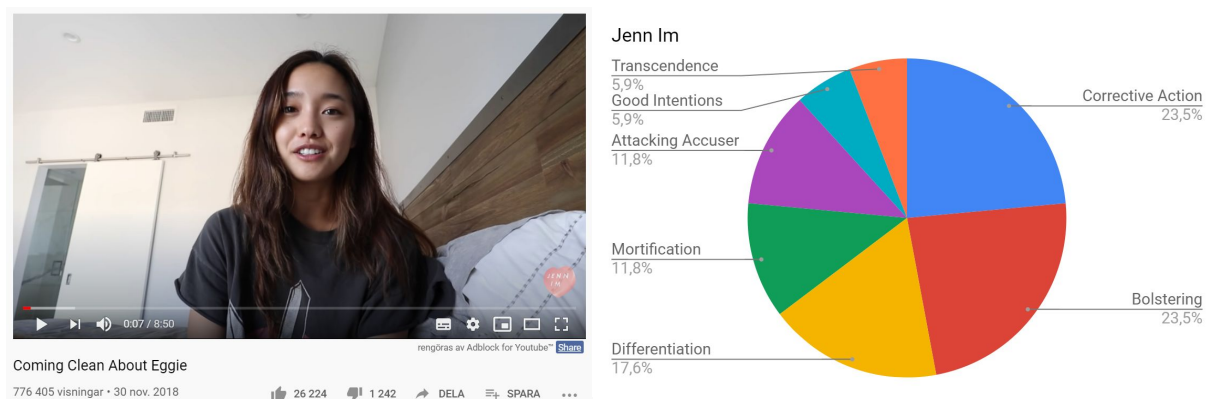
"...he was like, just like you have a fantasy I have a fantasy of being obtainable [...] and here I am, this crazy wild fantasy, you know so extra, on top of everything else that I embody and stuff [...] That's when I was doing my cowboy hat fantasy, with the dragon on the front, the all denim look. And that's when I felt like just powering through, and just trying to focus on work, and trying to focus on all the fantasy and everything I had prepared." (Dragun, 2019).

By describing it this way, she reveals one aspect of how she thinks about her work. She sees herself and the content she creates as a performance of fantasy, the reproduction of idealised versions of herself (Rivière, 2008:18). While Zamora doesn't knowingly ascribe himself with meanings connected to the "popular crowd", Dragun is well aware of that she is producing and selling entertainment based on performance, and that she is

judged according to her ability to do so (a.a.:20). This further explains why she portrays a polished appearance and doesn't stray far from her usual stylized video form, not choosing the "aesthetic of amateurism" in favor of what she sees as an ideal self (Dragun, 2019; Goffman, 1959:37, 48).

### 7.1.3. The Aesthetics of Saying Sorry

True to its name, the lifestyle genre propagates the aspects of a certain lifestyle directly. While a beauty YouTuber may have a certain lifestyle, their makeup skills are the center of their content and their ways of life (their relationships with others, what they do for fun, how they travel, how they decorate their home, what they consume, eat, listen to, believe in, et cetera) is in the background. The lifestyle YouTuber puts these things at the forefront, labels it directly or indirectly, and lets it define their content. This can often be an educational approach to showcasing their life for others who wish to emulate the same lifestyle (Giles, 2018:116).



*Figure 11: Jenn Im's Apology Video and image repair Strategies.*

Jenn Im, whose budding fashion brand Eggie sparked controversy for being produced in China and being sold at a high price point (Im, 2018), does not attach herself to her usual stylized form in her apology. She has placed her camera in an intimate bedroom setting and adopts a self presentation that diverges from her usual one by a lack of cuts and edits, by wearing sweats and no or minimal makeup, and by sitting only in her bedroom without moving around for its duration. Using Bolstering and Differentiation

she assures her viewers that the brand is not produced in sweatshops, and that the high price point is due to her will to pay every person involved well:

“Yes there are sweatshop factories, but there are a lot that aren’t [...] I would not be able to sleep at night knowing I was exploiting a bunch of people [...] The prices are the way they are so that everyone involved through the whole process are being paid and being able to support themselves and their families.” (Im, 2018).

By pointing out the negative aspects of sweatshops she differentiates her brand’s practices from the sweatshop image. Expressing an opinion against inhumane working conditions and wages can be seen as Bolstering in this context as she is highlighting her own moral stance against what she was critiqued for, placing herself on the “same team” as her viewers. This is emphasised by her choice of words; speaking about workers supporting not only themselves but also their families connotes wholesome family values, which stand in stark contrast to the image of an exploitative brand founder that she is trying to avoid.

Two further critiques received was that her clothing was not produced with environmental sustainability in mind and that it was not size inclusive. The former she addressed by explaining that she did not wish to make it inaccessible to many of her viewers, as greater sustainability would rack up the prices. This is a use of the Good Intentions strategy and asserts Transcendence as inclusivity was a higher priority for her than diverse sizing. As we can see in the table above, she favors other strategies than Mortification as she continues to explain and motivate her actions throughout her video, not acknowledging many of her alleged offenses but also not using Simple Denial. One could connote her choice of explanation in favor of apology or denial to the often educational tonality of the lifestyle genre, or simply see it as a tactic used to argue against accusations with humility. The one critique she uses Mortification for is the issue of lacking size inclusivity:

“The third one was about body inclusivity in our styles. And for that I want to apologize, because I think I may have been quite selfish with the designs myself.” (Im, 2018).

Here she acknowledges her offense, showing the viewer that she is receptive and doesn’t value a design aesthetic over her viewers’ opinions. She doesn’t elaborate on her previous thought process when it comes to sizing, but her acknowledgment of this

offense may be rooted in the values embedded in her personal brand. Im has spoken several times about body image struggles on her channel (Im, 2020) and has an audience who relates to this type of topic. Denying this offense would have meant discrediting herself as an authentic partaker in discussions around body image, which meant that acknowledging this offense was a strategy vital for her to regain her audience's trust.

She continues to use Corrective Action to assure the viewer of the steps she will take in order to become more sustainable and size inclusive. As the leader of an early stage entrepreneurship in the fashion industry, Im could be seen as the remorseful first-time entrepreneur, making a communication error in lacking transparency around her brand production and learning to grow and adapt along the way. Or on the other hand, as the founder of a shady fashion brand who sweeps immoral practices under the rug while amping up prices for unsustainable clothing. Much of her perceived sincerity ultimately lies in her determined use of Corrective Action in combination with her simplistic audiovisual self presentation - not only *what* she says, but *how* she says it.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, CozyKitsune is a lifestyle YouTuber whose videos have a form that is stylized and edited extensively. At times this stylization occurs to the point of almost reminiscing animation, which propels ascribed meanings into a certain direction. In her apology video she keeps her choice of appearance, behavior and editing of the video consistent with her usual online self presentation and ironically, she discusses accusations of trying to appear overly perfect in a delicate situation (CozyKitsune, 2018). She apologizes for trying to uphold this image even when addressing a controversy, referring to a previous apology video that she posted and deleted. Similarly to Nikita Dragun who is aware of her role as an establisher of "fantasy", CozyKitsune seems to view genre specific attributes that signify artifice as a natural part of her identity, and is unwilling to let go of them in front of her viewers even in a context of apology which calls for the performance of sincerity. As we consider her controversial use of religious symbols and philosophy and her unknowing use of slurs derogatory to ethnic minorities to describe fashion and makeup styles, a connotation becomes visible. We discern the (usually white) hipster who cares only about the superficial attributes of a certain lifestyle, adopting, showcasing and claiming to teach others about it via their social media, without educating themselves on where

this style originates from and what meanings it has to those who practice it. In the eyes of someone who grew up within a culture being used in this way, it can symbolize the ignorance of cultural colonisation, oppression and privilege. The notion of being able to choose your lifestyle based on its aesthetic has clear connotations to power imbalance in this way.

## 7.2 Emotional Labour

YouTube apology videos are often joked about for following recognizable structures and including overused tactics (Burns, 2019; Douglass, 2018; Kjellberg, 2018). Several of these are tied to expressions of emotional labour, such as the typical deep sigh at the beginning (a.a.). They are generally the creator's way of showing that making the video and addressing the topic is hard for them, a part of the performance of remorse or victimhood. Some will take this performance to an extreme by uploading an unstructured video of them crying or being in an otherwise heavily emotional state while apologizing (Berryman & Kavka, 2018:87), a use of the strategy Mortification that is generally met with scepticism if it lacks support from strategies to materially demonstrate remorse, such as Corrective Action (Skinner, 2019).

A video that thoroughly addresses the emotional labour involved in a YouTube apology is the one by Gabriel Zamora. He speaks about his feelings around being the cause of public outrage that affects others, and how it impacted his work as a beauty influencer:

"I was trying to just become numb, because it was a lot." (Zamora, 2018).

This is how he describes what he felt after seeing the consequences of a hateful tweet he directed at another beauty influencer, causing public outrage (Zamora, 2019). He doesn't elaborate on exactly what the consequences he saw were, but that he was avoiding social media out of exhaustion after his post "blew up". This indicates that the rampant critique on social media was a cause for his stress. Possible other consequences in such a situation could be losing both business and good reputation, not mentioning enduring personal feelings of guilt and remorse (Hou, 2019:541, 550; Lazare, 2005:38). The subsequent public falling out with some of his friends added to

this as he regretted getting them involved and was disappointed in how they handled the situation (Zamora, 2019). His body language and tone shifts gradually when he touches upon this subject, going from the melancholy of a remorseful apology into the loud and quick demeanor of someone angry for being treated unfairly.

About the conditions of his work, he elaborates on the pressures that he claims brought him into a negative mindset in the first place. Constantly producing and managing content in the “right” way was a demand he felt that was reinforced by his friends, many of whom have a similar vocation as him. As Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2008:114, 110) points out, this high demand around production and performance is a condition that creative workers face that causes emotional strain. Zamora expresses frustration over letting this mindset take over his work and not having time to do what he truly wanted within it. In short, he felt forced to uphold a certain performance which was not in line with his own wishes. Upholding or managing interpersonal relationships in a work environment is also a form of emotional labour (a.a.), which is why having to address his friends and colleagues in his apology increased his distress.

Nikita Dragun's strategies of Denial and Shifting blame are also lined with expressions of emotional labour. In the beginning of her video she emphasises how she debated for months whether or how to create it (Dragun, 2019), agonizing over how to address the issue and save face. The labour of upholding an ideal self presentation in front of her audience was in itself a workload, but the worry of how she would be perceived if she strayed from this ideal version even for a moment is something she talks about with great concern (a.a.). She is not alone in this. Jenn Im takes a similar stance in her apology as she immediately lets her viewers know how uncomfortable she is in addressing this topic, by stressing that she chose to record it in a setting she feels safe in (Im, 2018). She also discusses in a confessional tone how she took a while to record it due to being scared of confrontation (a.a.). She describes how much critique she has been getting and how it has affected her:

“I’m a sensitive soul, getting stronger by the day, but it just takes a while for me to process things [...] It’s difficult to have so many opinions about you being written about you all the time. There are so many pros with my job, but, just the noise of criticisms can be a huge con as well.” (Im, 2018).



Both Im and Dragun speak as if they owe it to their viewers to open up about their respective negative feelings, and treat the apology as an act of justice toward their fans. Emotional transparency is presented as a part of their job, as the ultimate act of upholding an authentic relationship between creator and viewer. It is not only the apology they owe their viewers, they also owe them an insight into the grimy details of their life and inner feelings. Nikita spells it out in her video:

“I just feel like I’ve been lying, and I haven’t been honest with you guys but also with myself [...] It would be such a disservice not to share the ugly stuff.” (Dragun, 2019).

Talking about their vulnerabilities in this way helps them emotionally connect with their viewers, through identification or affirmations, while simultaneously tackling the accusations against them (Berryman & Kavka, 2018:90). Dragun uses the word “lying”, which emphasises the meaning that by upholding a positive performance and not disclosing her hardships, she did something inherently wrong. Jenn Im reinforces her relationship with her viewers by pinning a comment she made under her video, that is filled with pathos:

“Why am I so nervous posting this video?! Ahh, well here it is. I wanted to address some concerns and questions you had about my clothing line and what actions the team and I are doing so that Eggie comes back even stronger. I do hope you guys can be gentle in the comments section and please know that I’m trying my best. Thank you and love you all so much.” (Im, 2019).

This can be seen as an attempt to both appease the anger of her critics, and strengthen her connection with all viewers through affectionate colloquial language - signing off with gratitude and a declaration of love. But she also begs her audience to “be gentle” towards her in the comments section. Im’s way of discussing online hate as a regularly occurring issue she struggles with makes it apparent how it is a part of her profession, and it reveals an aspect of the more harsh conditions of her job. Being used to constantly receiving critique in the YouTube comments and on their other social media under regular conditions, the knowledge that a scandal or controversy will be the cause of an even greater amount can contribute to feelings of anxiety. Managing their own emotions in order to stay motivated and confident in the face of online hate is a part of

their emotional labour as YouTubers. JennaMarbles also speaks on this as she describes the guilt she felt when critique started pouring in after posting her video about pet fish:

“I didn’t sleep Wednesday to Thursday, because it was completely destroying - I was like sobbing.” (JennaMarbles, 2017).

In this way she opens up about the labour of managing her own emotions as the feeling shame for her actions made her lose sleep. She does not mention the the pressure of being critiqued as the perpetrator of her emotional state, but the guilt she felt upon receiving it, making apparent the impact of negative online comments and discussion on her.

Someone who doesn’t use this tactic in his video is Brad Sousa. Although he signals closeness to his audience by way of addressing them as friends and by walking around with his camera in hand per vlogging tradition, he doesn’t reinforce this closeness by speaking of his emotional state. As a straight male in western culture it is stereotypical not to speak about feelings of vulnerability, struggle or hurt - and he doesn’t address any emotional labour related to himself or his profession at all (Sousa, 2019). We know of his nervousness only through his body language and behavior, which could indicate that the suppression of negative emotion observed in digital creatives by Duffy & Wissinger is at play (2017:4658). Upholding a marketable front then seems more important to him than the authenticity of emotional transparency. Here it becomes clear that choosing to practice emotional distance from his audience is a labour in itself as he is working to protect himself and his reputation from critics (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008:110).

This may very well apply to CozyKitsune as well, as while she expresses her emotional struggle several times throughout her video, she doesn’t show it through her tonality, setting, body language, or editing. This adds a vein of unbotheredness, that easily translates into questions of whether what she expresses is actually what she experiences.

## 7.4 Conclusion

To quote Ribére (2008:19); celebrity figures are surrounded by the air of being superior to regular people. Idealized performances are what YouTubers use to sell themselves and their lives as products in their videos, and whether they are aware of it or not, the upholding or adjusting of these performances in their apology videos is important for how they are perceived. In general it seems that they have two different ways of approaching self presentation in the context of apology. The route chosen by Brad Sousa, Nikita Dragun, and CozyKitsune is to largely keep the visual form of self presentation that they regularly use in their videos, whether that is by pacing around with a vlogging camera to maintain closeness, sitting under studio lights wearing a sparkling getup to maintain glamour, or editing in jovial “ice breaker” cuts between sentences to appear quirky and fun. The opposite route is used by Jenn Im, JennaMarbles and Gabriel Zamora, who discard their regular form to show a simpler and more intimate self, essentially performing sincerity through differentiation (Goffman, 1959:26).

By speaking about their emotions, advising their viewers as though they are close friends, or showering them with affirmations (“I love you guys so much”), the YouTubers are attempting to uphold the ideal of self-made intimacy that they have historically been associated with (Hou, 2019:550). The difference is that the visual self presentation of the former creators doesn’t align with this ideal as they present their usual polished self, while both image repair strategies and self presentation of the latter creators goes hand in hand with it, giving the impression of remorse and accountability. Govier and Verwoerd’s (2001:739) view that moral amends are best received when accompanied by practical amends is reflected in the way that the latter creators use image repair strategies of Mortification and Corrective action, but without combining them with coherent visual and behavioral self representation, their sincerity is not always fully conveyed. The question becomes whether to uphold the image connected to their genre and persona, or to heal their relationship with their audience. There seems to be a line dividing these two aims.

The act of showing emotional transparency seems to be expected of YouTubers, making their profession somewhat unique within the creative sector. As a standard of emotional transparency it has implications for how digital creators are perceived, for what expectations they face within their profession, and even of how they view intimacy and privacy within their work which is often all about sharing their lives. Jenn Im and Nikita Dragun uses this standard of vulnerability to make themselves appear everyday-like again. They reproach themselves for allowing an emotional distance to grow between them and their viewers and amend it by opening up about hardships. The apology video becomes a return to an original purpose as they sit in front of the camera with downcast eyes or fidgety hands, as though speaking through the wall of a virtual confessional booth. In a sense it is reminiscent of a religious confessional as they cleanse themselves of the “sin” that is privacy by acknowledging their wrongs and asking their audience for healing through transparency. Considering this process in combination with the often overwhelming critique they receive it is no wonder that producing an apology video involves intense emotional labour. This standard contradicts the findings of Duffy & Wissinger (2017:4657, 4663) who presents the performance of positivity to be the standard among social media creatives, as although the YouTubers describe the performance of positivity as something they “get stuck” in, the actual return to normalcy seems to include the sharing of intimate negative affect.

Looking at this through Goffman's eyes, creators seem to owe their viewers the performance of an authentic self as a part of their job, giving their audience access to a backstage of their lives (Hou, 2019:536; Goffman, 1959:37). Although this backstage in Goffman's view is not actually any more of a true representation of them than their regular content, the creators approach it as though it is a much less controlled version which gives the impression of closeness. This might be one way to explain why the apology video has become a staple in YouTube culture, as a way for the creator to “come down to earth” and once again seem relatable to their audience after straying from that path or breaking a code of conduct that has alienated them. This is in line with the findings of Berryman & Kavka (2018:90) who found that the purpose of YouTube videos discussing negative emotions was to establish a stronger bond with their audience. Although the purpose of obtaining forgiveness make apology videos unique, they are

also used as an opportunity to gain the value of authenticity through displays of negative emotion.

This takes us back to the notion of parasociality. In many ways the stakes are different during a YouTube paracrisis than in a conflict within most interpersonal friendships, even though they speak to their viewers as friends. On the viewers' side their parasocial friendship is at stake, but on the creators' side their work and livelihood is also at stake: public reputation, business opportunities, and revenue could be affected. The public apology from a company or organization doesn't contain elements of intimacy and affirmations while a YouTubers' does. The YouTuber is caught perfectly in between the corporate and the interpersonal, having to balance image repair from an organizational standpoint as well as with interpersonal tactics for the healing of a bruised relationship, effectively combining the apology theories of Public Relations and Psychology scholars like Benoit, Coombs and Holladay, and Lazare.

As a rite of passage in the YouTube world, a creator who hasn't issued an apology of some form is unusual. For the creator it seems as though even in an apology video the pressure to embody the myth of a perfect ideal clashes with the wish to be relatable and emotionally available to their audience, who are as thirsty for details about their favorite YouTuber's private life and thoughts as they might be for a close friend. If the audience feel betrayed due to a code of conduct being breached, sharing or oversharing of emotional experience seems to be an attempt from the YouTuber to humanize themselves in their audience's eyes and regain the lost value of their product: themselves.

## 8. Summary and Discussion

This chapter will summarize the findings of the thesis. Thereafter it will move on to a discussion about the broader relevance of its results, reflections on aspects of the study that were not elaborated on in the analysis, thoughts on possible further topics of research, and on how my role as a researcher may have affected the results.

### 8.1 Summary

Through a mapping of the spoken arguments of independent YouTubers, this thesis has shown that Mortification and Corrective action are the most common and frequently used strategies in the apology videos studied. This indicates that the overall most useful, morally sound or convenient strategies for YouTube creators in order to heal severed audience ties and repair their image consisted of acknowledging an offense, presenting plans to solve or prevent recurrence, and asking for forgiveness. The least common strategies were denial and shifting blame, as the technological context makes proof easy to find or fabricate, and the historical context of YouTubers paints them as independent and proactive, an image that contradicts shifting blame. Findings also indicate that without the visual and behavioral performance of sincerity through aesthetics of intimacy and authenticity they may not be perceived as truly sincere. By analysing their body language, vocal tonality, setup, framing, and choices of editing, the thesis was able to determine that the more a creator simplifies their format and adopts the aesthetic of an amateur in their video, regardless of their genre, the better they convey the seriousness of remorse in their apology. By stripping away the artifice of decorating themselves or their environment they show that they care about the issue at hand more than their own image.

The analysis also demonstrated that YouTubers combine discussions of emotional labour with their image repair strategies in apology videos. Their emotional labour is connected to pressures from the prospects of losing business as an entrepreneur in the face of a reputational crisis, as well as to the stresses of managing their audience and colleague relationships sufficiently. It is also connected to the management of their own feelings in the face of critique. Vulnerability and emotional transparency around this

topic was by some viewed as an obligatory duty they owed to their viewers, and used as a tool to add pathos to their apology as well as to strengthen the parasocial relationship their audience has with them.

## 8.2 Discussion

This thesis has given insight into the emotional labour and image repair strategies of digital creatives during apology processes on YouTube. Contrasting earlier studies on celebrity social media apologies that found traditional celebrities to not take into account the technological context of their image repair attempts (Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014:231), it has found that YouTubers are well aware of it as they navigate their relationship with their viewers in their apology videos. This may well be due to YouTubers' main target group being their audience - traditional celebrities' main audience is usually the media companies or sponsors that determine their levels of exposure (Hou, a.a.:548, 549). For the YouTuber, the brands, management companies and traditional media intersecting with their profession are secondary targets, and although the relationship with these actors appears to be a cause of concern during a paracrisis, it is mainly the audience the YouTuber aims to convince with their apologies. This is apparent in how they address essentially anonymous viewers as close friends, express their guilt in keeping secrets from them, or in simply not being open enough about their private lives to them. They are also extremely cognizant of and susceptible to audience feedback in contrast to traditional celebrity (Hou, 2014:549), something that this study has been able to observe through YouTubers' apology practices of posting and deleting multiple apologies depending on audience reception, of holding detailed discussions about viewer criticism and how they handle it, or of maintaining a marketable persona during crisis for fear of audience rejection.

When it comes to the suppression of negative emotion among YouTubers, we have discovered that in apology videos it seems split in half - to some degree confirming both the contradictory findings of Duffy and Wissinger (2017:4658) and Berryman and Kavka (2018:90). We see that at least in an apology context, positive emotional labour is not the only standard of performance that they are pressured to uphold, and therefore not the only type of emotional labour with benefits within their profession. Although

displays of negative emotion are at times viewed as an exception by creators, it is also described as an obligation in the name of authenticity. Generating value through intimacy and trust with their audience, it makes sympathetic viewers return to their videos and forges a stronger parasocial relationship between them. Even though YouTube actively works to disincentivize negative affect as it deters advertisers (Berryman & Kavka, 2018:93), for YouTubers it can turn a risky apology video into an opportunity to build brand loyalty. The apology video also differs from other video formats that display negative affect such as the anxiety- or crying vlog, since it is a strategic response to audience critique and not a self incentivized production. Negative emotional labour becomes a strategy not only to connect and create intimacy, but to repair their image and obtain forgiveness.

Social media content is in a Goffmanian sense just another layer of performance, in which creators magnify and re-fabricate the roles otherwise played out in their regular lives (Goffman, 1959:8). The difference between most creators' usual content and their apology videos is that as they press the record button on the camera, transfer the footage to an editing software and later upload it to YouTube, they are aware that the finished product will be judged based on how well they communicate characteristics such as truthfulness or repentance. The usual aims of producing content such as acquiring growth and revenue or boosting feelings of self worth by creating something one is proud of, are set aside in front of the looming shadow of a paracrisis threatening to tarnish their reputation. Explanation, justification, atonement and redemption take their place as primary aims, together with attempts to connect better with subscribers. This is why the apology video is crafted to be a return to a sincere state from one of superficiality, or to a remorseful state from one of carelessness or silence. The emotional transparency that these creators feel pressured to upkeep says something about how we view parasocial relationships on YouTube. Seeing the high labour expectations put on digital workers and how they perceive these pressures can help us understand this relational aspect of their profession. In the field of media studies this thesis is an insight into the unique conditions of apology within a part of the quickly growing workforce of the social media landscape. As a profession that is increasingly idealized by children and adults alike, that eagerly promotes the standards of the attention economy, the YouTuber is a beacon of digital creative independence.



Understanding how they negotiate their image during paracrisis takes us one step closer to mapping both the actual conditions of their labour, and the myriad of ascribed cultural meanings attached to their craft.

During the coding of the videos included in this thesis, it became clear how my perspective as a researcher affected the way I categorized and assigned meaning to statements and signs. After all, assigning verbal statements into image repair categories is based on my interpretation of words. I recognize that as a researcher I may have missed aspects in the analysis that another would have noted as my perspective is both colored by my culture and my preconceived notions about YouTube creators. Regardless of this, the theoretical framework chosen has allowed the deciphering of apology videos in order to uncover many interesting meanings.

A limitation to this study has been the amount of videos coded and analysed. Although appropriate to the time frame and scope of this thesis, a narrow empirical sample naturally makes drawing wider conclusions more difficult, leaving out demographics that would have provided greater variation in its findings. For example, only creators with over 100 000 subscribers were included, leaving out smaller ones. Findings may have been affected by this, reflecting the views of one niche within the YouTube economy and potentially missing out on another; if apology strategies differ between them, this thesis has not accounted for it and may be ignorant to the implications of audience size on apology videos. The same goes for any additional demographic lost through a narrow qualitative sample, such as additional genres or nationalities and the contexts they potentially bring to an apology video.

One direction that future research into this field could take would be to adopt a more intersectional comparative approach when analysing apology videos, diving deeper into the implications of contexts such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and status. Giving more room to the theory presented by Tamar et. al. (2013:1455) about the likelihood of forgiveness in relation to diverse demographics could be a way to challenge my own western cultural perspective and explore meaning and ideology beyond its boundaries. Combining this with analysis of YouTube comments, likes ratios, media coverage, and related commentary videos could in turn involve the audience in a way that this thesis has not done. Is a YouTube apology better or worse received depending on how much status a YouTuber has as a creator or from a socioeconomic

perspective? How do YouTube viewers react when an apology is monetized and a YouTube culture taboo is broken, and why? What is the nature of the critique that creators who are part of minorities face after apologizing, and what does that imply about the specific challenges facing them on the platform? There are countless directions that further inquiry could take, possibly providing new insight into how social media audiences judge and forgive the creators they watch every day. Another step could be to include creator interviews in order to get first hand accounts of the emotional and strategic processes involved in the apology, as well as insight into the intended readings of the videos. Another aspect yet to be analysed is how and why YouTubers use different social media platforms for different purposes during paracrisis - when do they find it adequate to just post an Instagram story with text to apologize or defend themselves, and when do they decide to create a video? This could tell us something about the transmedial nature of online celebrity as well as perceptions of different mediations of apology.

Lastly it could be beneficial to further study the relationship between YouTube creators' performed identity and their sense of self. Although there was no distinct difference between the two creators who expressed awareness of their roles as "performers" and the ones who did not in this thesis, interviewing creators on the subject of how they view their work in terms of performance could grant insight into the inner workings and reproductions of internet ideologies.

I could imagine few things more daunting than picking up my phone to discover that a mounting tsunami of strangers are suddenly taking moments of their day to critique my actions or speculate about my behaviour. It is something that most people will never experience. As I imagine the whirlpool of jumbled thoughts such a situation would generate in my own head, it is not hard to see why apology videos have become a source of memes due to their often irrational argumentation and format. In essence, the apology video is a way for YouTube creators to escape the bounds of shame or unfair accusations, save their livelihood, and regain the faith of their viewers. Whether one sees it as a reaction to rightful scrutinization of powerful influencers or a vindication against blind condemnation of dehumanized individuals, there is no question that the way they are produced speaks volumes about the challenges of YouTube stardom.

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