

I am Sorry and Sincere: A Case Study of Influencer Apology

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Abstract

Influencers have become prominent figures whose actions are closely watched by the public in the digital age. When scandals arise, they tend to make apologies on social media platforms, sparking discussions on their sincerity and credibility. Taking a pragmatic point of view, this study takes YouTuber Jenna Marbles' apology as an example to explore the pragmatic strategies applied to increase sincerity of apology and rebuild trust. The study transcribed the apology video and applied Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's framework of apology in its annotation and analysis. The findings reveal that the apology features a mixed use of explicit and implicit devices and that there are five strategies serving to enhance sincerity and rebuild trust: taking on responsibility, account of cause, offer of repair, promise of forbearance and apology intensification. The study seeks to enrich the pragmatics of apology literature and provide insights into the complex dynamics of public figures navigating crises in the digital era.

Keywords: speech act, influencer apology, sincerity

1. Introduction

In pragmatics, an apology is defined as a perlocutionary speech act performed with the intention of producing an effect on the listener and apology is made on the presupposition that the offender recognizes there was a transgression from the norm or an acceptable behavior (Yule, 1996). A speaker apologizes after committing wrongdoings to achieve perlocutionary objectives such as seeking forgiveness and restoring harmony. Organizations make apologies to the public to restore its image and reputation (Lee & Atkinson, 2019). Therefore, apology is considered necessary and successful in risk aversion and trust building. The phenomenon of "Influencer Apology" has recently gone viral on YouTube, characterized by a strikingly formulaic approach to apology. Influencer apology, following a pattern that has become almost cliché, have sparked public discussion on the sincerity and credibility of their apologies. This observation has drawn attention to the need for a deeper understanding of influencer apology.

1.1 Apology and Influencer Apology

Apologies are ubiquitous in all languages. The ubiquity of apologies is attributed to their close relation with human action and social norms. Apologies are post-event acts, presupposing the fact that certain event has already taken place. Apologizing is to recognize the speaker's involvement, or partial involvement in the cause of the event (Blum-Kulka et al., 1984). As Goffman (1971) suggested, the speech act of apologizing can be defined by the following obligatory conditions: it is required by the apology that an offender take responsibility for the offence and express emotion such as 'guilty', which thus gives the offeree some redress and restore a relationship. That being said, an offender apologizing acknowledges the hearer's face needs at the cost of his/her own face.

From the time of Austin's (1962) speech act theory, apologies have received sustained attention from pragmatics (Owen, 1983; Murphy, 2015) and socio-psychology (Meier, 1998; Lazare, 2016). Pragmatists have studied apologies from various perspectives, including the felicity conditions for the speech act of apology (Owen, 1983; Murphy, 2015) and apology strategies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Empirical research on apology have been explored from perspectives of cross-cultural communication (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), private conversations such as maternal (Lee et al., 2022) and teenagers' apology (Aijmer, 2019), formal public contexts such as political contexts (Murphy, 2015; Harris et al., 2006), corporate apology (Page, 2014), celebrity's apology (Benoit, 1997). Socio-psychological research of apology has been carried from various angles, such as image repair (Benoit, 1995; Compton, 2016; Choi & Mitchel, 2022), public relations (Kampf, 2008), crisis

response (Coombs et al., 2008), etc.

Since the emerge of social media, research on influencers and the influencer economy have witnessed a considerable increase. Previous research on influencer apology primarily took the perspective of public relations. Sandlin and Gracyalny examined verbal behaviors, emotions displayed in videos, and comments from the viewers. Similarly, building upon the popular image repair strategy, Choi and Mitchell (2022) analyzed message construction, strategies, and media effects from Youtubers' apology videos.

1.2 Sincerity of Apology

Determining the sincerity of apologies is difficult because the offender is the only person who knows the actual degree of sincerity (Deutschmann, 2003). Despite the elusive judgement of sincerity, the display of sincerity can be evaluated from felicity conditions and context. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) proposed two basic forms of apology (CCSARP). One is explicit illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), which makes use of performative verbs such as (be) sorry, apologize, regret, excuse, pardon, etc. The other form is an utterance which relates to the cause for the offence, the speaker's responsibility for the offence or the speaker's willingness to offer repairs or promise forbearance. An apology that has a well-rounded inclusion of the above apologetic forms-acknowledgement of offence, assumption of responsibility, attempt to correct the wrong and promise forbearance-is considered sincere (Hatcher, 2010). Kampf (2009) mentioned that "minimizing responsibility" in an apology reduces sincerity.

Sincerity is one of the focal points of previous research on apology. It is found that positive comments about the public figure's reputation contribute to perceptions of apology sincerity, which further lead to perceived forgiveness of viewers (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). Although the findings also revealed that interpersonal strategies are unrelated to perceptions of sincerity, yet it does not exclude the case that influencers are motivated by higher sincerity to use verbal strategies. For example, YouTubers overemphasize the word "sorry" in order to direct the viewers but this "exaggerated" repetition of "I'm sorry" seem to counter sincerity (Choi & Mitchell, 2022).

Despite the growing interest in public apologies, scholarly attention has predominantly focused on institutions and celebrities. Few have considered the context of influencer apology on social media. In addition, literature on influencer apology have mainly taken the perspective of public relations rather than pragmatics. Therefore, this study intends to fill this gap by probing into the pragmatic strategies used in influencer apology and how they achieve the perlocutionary goals of enhancing sincerity and restoring trust. The present study poses the following two questions: 1) What pragmatic strategies do the influencer use in the apology? 2) How do these strategies enhance sincerity and rebuild trust? The study seeks to not only contribute to the pragmatics of apology literature but also provide insights into the complex dynamics of public figures navigating crises in the digital era.

2. Materials and Methods

The paper chooses one representative apology video on YouTube as its sample. The video was made by famous YouTuber Jenna Marbles. She met with protests against her content because of allegations of racism and stereotype. The video lasts around 12 minutes. The reason for this choice of sample can be explained from three dimensions. First is that Jenna is one of the best-known content creators on YouTube who have started her internet career very early and got 19.7 million subscribers on YouTube up to the date. In other words, she is a representative member of the influencer community. Second is that her apology video is so representative that it was always included in previous research on influencer apology. Third is that her apology video was previously evaluated to be "most genuine apology" of 2020 (Haylock, 2020). The comments below Jenna's apology video are overwhelmingly favorable, which signals a high perceived sincerity and the viewers' positive attitude towards Jenna's credibility.

The research borrowed Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework to identify and analyze apology devices. According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), there are two apology types: IFID and without IFID. IFID stands for illocutionary force indicating device that leads to the most direct realization of an apology. IFID features a routinized, formulaic expression of regret such as performative verb like *(be) sorry, apologize, regret, excuse*, etc. Without IFID refers to the way one performs an apology using an utterance which contains reference to preconditions for the apology act. This device is composed of four potential strategies: cause of offence, responsibility, offer of repair and promise of forbearance.

To perform the data analysis, first, the apology video was manually transcribed to text with reference to the automatically generated subtitles. Second, apologetic expressions were identified, annotated and then categorized according to the analytical framework. Third, a frequency statistical analysis of apology types was

then conducted to determine which strategies the influencer tended to use. The strategies are analyzed within the context. The data were annotated and analyzed by two researchers, and a third researcher was consulted for judgement.

Table 1. The analytical framework

| devices | | Example |
|---------|---------|--|
| Apology | IFID | (be)sorry, apologize(for), excuse, forgive, pardon |
| | Without | explanation or account of cause |
| | IFID | the speaker's responsibility for the offence |
| | | the speaker's offer of repair |
| | | the speaker's promise of forbearance |

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 IFID vs Without IFID

Table 2. The frequencies of *IFID* and *without IFID* in Jenna's apology

| Types | | | Number | Ratio% |
|--------------|-----------------|--|--------|--------|
| IFID | | | 12 | 23 |
| Without IFID | four strategies | explanation or account of cause | 8 | 15.4 |
| | | the speaker's responsibility for the offence | 24 | 46.2 |
| | | the speaker's offer of repair | 1 | 1.9 |
| | | the speaker's promise of forbearance | 7 | 13.5 |

Apologetic expressions of IFID that are identified in the data are *(be) sorry and apologize*, in which *(be) sorry* is the most common form. It is also to be noticed that these forms have variations. For example, the phrase *I'm sorry* can be complete, or it can be followed with a clause to state the offence such as *I'm sorry that I ever offended you...*

Of all the apologetic expressions, 40 (77%) are utterances without IFID. It is shown that without IFID (77%) outnumbered significantly IFID (23%) in the data. This result indicates that whereas IFID features formulaic and routinized apologetic expressions, the speaker is more inclined to apologize in an indirect way. It is clear in the type of without IFID, expressions related to the speaker's responsibility for the offence are the commonest device (46.2%). For example, Jenna said this near the end of the video: *I want to hold myself accountable*. Despite the absence of word like "sorry" and "apologize", this expression is based on the precondition that the speaker has committed offence and also admitted the fact. It signals guilty on the speaker's part and thus can convey apology. Similarly, saying "it was not my intention" to do what one has done or "it's not what I ever set out to do" does not necessarily convey an apology but only implies it in context. The implicature is communicated only when the speaker admits the offence and recognizes the need to restore the relationship with the hearer.

The preference for implicit apologies over explicit ones can be partly attributed to the speaker's face needs. By apologizing, the speaker recognizes his/her involvement, or at least partial involvement, in certain offensive act. Therefore, apologies naturally involve loss of face on the part of the speaker and enhancement of face on the part of the hearer. Compared with outright admission of fault, indirect apologies such as offering explanations for the cause or repair are more accessible for the speaker because the threat to the speaker's face is lessened in this way. Everybody has face want and tend to protect their public self-image from being tarnished. This is especially true for celebrities and influencers whose public image has a lot to do with their economic interest. Even if they commit wrongdoings and face public criticism, maintenance of a positive public image is nonetheless essential.

3.2 Taking on Responsibility

According to Table 1, the most frequently used strategy is taking on responsibility (46.2%). It means that the speaker chooses to take on responsibility for the offence which created the need to apologize. According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's operational definition, apologetic expressions convey various degrees of "taking on responsibility". Table 3 shows the subcategories under this strategy in Jenna's apology.

Table 3. The subcategories of ‘taking on responsibility’ strategy in Jenna’s apology

| Subcategories | Examples |
|-------------------------------|---|
| explicit statement | I want to hold myself accountable. |
| expression of self-deficiency | ...I’m not completely unproblematic I’ve definitely done things in the past that weren’t great |
| self-blame | I just fucked up. I’m ashamed of things that I’ve done and said in the past. |
| denial of fault | / |

According to previous research, *hold (sb) accountable* is one of kind. It is formal; it is explicit; it is inexcusable. Saying “I want to hold myself accountable” near the end of the video, Jenna made a trustworthy conclusion. It is worth mentioning that this video is followed by Jenna’s decision to stop operating the channel. Different from other public figures, influencers stick with one social media platform and count on a relatively homogeneous group of subscribers (Choi & Mitchell, 2022). Hence, stopping content creation on the platform is tantamount to destroying one’s career. Given this background and the fact that Jenna have quit YouTube after stop updating videos for already 3 years, the taking-on-responsibility is earnestly carried out. In fact, claiming to assume the responsibility and announcing a break from the internet is not rare in influencer apologies. The audience tend to believe the sincerity of explicit claim of responsibility, at least at the point of watching the video. If the claim is accentuated by expressions related to self-punishment, the apology displays higher sincerity.

Expressions related to self-deficiency can perform apology, implying the speaker’s responsibility of the offence. Example 1 is what Jenna claimed in the very beginning of her apology. Despite the support from some of her fans who attribute the protests to people’s overreaction and over-sensitivity, Jenna did not take it for granted and negate her intactness. Saying that she is not always unproblematic produces the implicature that what she did this time is problematic. She was confessing to the offence and revealing her responsibility. It’s not explicit apology but implies an apology. It can be found in the video that Jenna blamed herself in the last couple minutes where she got teary and choked voice. Self-blame was made on the precondition that one is responsible for what is done. By blaming herself, Jenna admits her responsibility and performs the apology.

- (1) I also get a lot of tweets from people that are saying like, we love you, you are unproblematic queen, which always makes me uncomfortable...I’ve definitely done things in the past that weren’t great and that I’m not completely unproblematic...

Expressing self-deficiency and self-blame can foster empathy. In example 2, Jenna acknowledged that she was not separated from the audience but a part of the same human experience: to err is human. She expressed her self-deficiency in a way that can arouse the audience’s sense of connection and shared experience so that she could be better understood. In example 3, Jenna claimed responsibility for creating content about gender stereotypes while recognizing people’s struggle with gender identity nowadays. The recognition of people’s personal experience signals her empathy with her audience, thus appeasing them as a result.

- (2) The only thing I would like to say is that I’m just a person trying to navigate the world the same way that you are. So I don’t always know what’s right, what’s wrong, what the truth is, and I’m just trying my best.
- (3) ...I don’t think that making jokes about your gender is funny. And I know that there’s a lot of people that struggle with their identity...

3.3 Account of Cause Offer of Repair and Promise of Forbearance

The three strategies are situation-dependent and therefore closely linked to the type of offence (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Account of cause strategy means that the apologizer offers an explanation of or an excuse for the violation. For example, the apologizer may ascribe the offence to external factors which he is unaware of or cannot control. In the case of Jenna Marble, she provided repeated explanations for privatizing all old videos after the crisis.

- (4) And I think now it’s hard for that content to exist at all because I think people watch it and don’t bother to look at when it was posted or don’t care about what path I took to get to where I am.#It offends them now and if that’s the case, where people got something and be offended now, I don’t want it to exist.

In example 4, Jenna explained that she was afraid that people would watch the videos now and keep getting offended by her regardless of the fact that her past does not define her or her future. When facing the charge of destroying the evidence, the influencer claims that what she has done was after careful thought and not

completely unbearable. Therefore, offering account of cause helps the influencer regain trust from the audience.

Offering repair can be intended as an apology in situations where the damage or inconvenience caused can be compensated for. In the present case where the damage is primarily emotional, the repair also comes in an affective way. As was required by the audience, Jenna made this apology video in which she addressed all her offence in detail. In addition, she stressed that she was ‘happy’ to do so (see example 5). The obedient attitude she took has greatly placated the audience, thus increasing her sincerity and arousing public trust.

- (5) There’s a couple of things that people want me to address and apologize for and I’m happy to do that...I hope this, uh, felt like something that you needed to hear from me.

Promise of forbearance means that the apologizer promises not to make the same mistake again or make future progress. This approach can mitigate the negative image projected and accentuate the apologizers’ positive traits. At the end of the video, Jenna promised that she would no more hurt anyone because she had decided to stop the channel (see example 6). The promise enhances the reception of the conveyed message and thus help restore the audience’s trust (Mazzarella et al., 2018).

- (6) I want to make sure that the things that I put into the world are not hurting anyone. Yeah, I’m just gonna stop...And I don’t want to put anything out in the world that’s gonna hurt anybody. So I need to be done with this channel for now or forever.

3.4 Apology Intensification

Apologetic forms such as sorry can be intensified. The speaker’s decision to intensify an apology is affected by several factors, among which the degree of seriousness of the offence is the most significant one (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Apology intensification can be brought about by various devices. Table 4 illustrates the devices of intensification in the data.

Table 4. Apology Intensification in Jenna’s apology

| Apology Intensification | Examples |
|---------------------------------|--|
| intensification within IFID | I’m unbelievably/incredibly sorry |
| explicit concern for the hearer | ...and it seems like maybe some of you aren’t having a good time |
| use of multiple strategies | It’s not cool, it’s not cute. It’s not okay |

It is identified in the video that intensified apologies only exist in parts when the speaker addresses issues of primary concern. In the video, Jenna made apologies for a couple of issues and they have different degree of severity. The speaker started with apologizing her privatizing her old content from the viewers, which happened after the protest and did not get much attention from people outside her fan community. In this part, *I’m sorry* was identified for only once. In contrast, in the following parts where the speaker addressed the major concerns that bring forth the accusation of racism, intensified apologies abound.

The most common form used within IFID is adverbial intensifiers such as *I’m unbelievably sorry* and *I’m incredibly sorry*. Apologies containing explicit expression of remorse intensified through adverbials are proved to be more effective when compared to a simple one. Apology intensification can also be realized without IFID by expressing concern for the hearer. For example, when purging herself from creating content for sponsors, Jenna stressed that she creates content just to ‘have a good time’ and soon she added “it seems like maybe some of you aren’t having a good time”. Jenna expressed explicit concern for the audience who were influenced. It is emotional, reciprocally empathetic, and perceived as more remorseful than a simple apology and leads to higher purchase intent (Effrosyni, 2023).

The manners of apology intensification are inclusive of one another, so there are expressions that use several strategies simultaneously. As is shown in the data, the speaker judged her wrongdoing as “it’s not cool, it’s not cute, it’s not okay”. The oral parallelism is emphatic of the speaker’s compunction and sounds more convincing. Such sequences of three negative sentences are frequent in the video. The speaker referred to her act of making fun of gender as “it doesn’t make sense, it can be hurtful, it can be harmful”, and kept saying “I don’t wanna hurt anyone, I don’t wanna offend anyone”. By repeating the same linguistic structures, the speaker conveys emphatic messages to the viewers of her reflective efforts and good intention.

4. Conclusion

This study examines influencer Jenna Marble’s apology to explore the strategies used to enhance the sincerity of apology and build trust. The study identified a mixed use of explicit and implicit apologies and five types of

strategies used in influencer apology to enhance sincerity and restore trust: taking on responsibility, account of cause, offer of repair, promise of forbearance and apology intensification. Through these strategies, the influencer signals her commitment to responsibility, remedial actions, self-correction and empathy. It is also found that the use of mixed strategies serves mainly three functions. First, expressions of apologies convey the speaker's remorse to the audience. Second, apology strategies enhance the sincerity and credibility of the speaker and help the speaker repair self-image and rebuild public trust. Third, using linguistic devices of apology reflects the speaker's metapragmatic awareness of restoring self-image and repairing a relationship.

Compared with simple apologies, the five strategies involve a more subtle and empathetic engagement with the audience. For one thing, the four strategies focus more on the impact of the speaker's actions on the audience, which reflects the apologizer's understanding of the audience's expectations and empathy for their distress. For another, the five strategies leave some room for interpretation of the offence considering that the apologizer and the audience's perceptions do not always align with each other. Showing respect and care for the audience's feelings while also preserving the room for ongoing dialogue can contribute to a long-term relationship.

In today's continually streaming internet, the construction of a trustworthy image for influencers is critically important. Influencers employ various linguistic strategies to navigate through crises of trust, attempting to mitigate damage and restore their credibility among their audience. However, as evidenced by numerous public figures whose insincere apologies have been met with public outrage, it is clear that a more nuanced approach to apology is necessary. For the audience, it is also crucial to sharpen their critical literacy regarding online messages.

One notable shortcoming of this study is the limited scope of research subjects, which may constrain the generalizability of our findings. Future research can apply corpus study to expand the sample size. Moreover, the current study primarily focuses on the verbal aspects of apologies. However, in the realm of digital communication, non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, body language and other paralinguistic cues are also significant in conveying remorse and sincerity. Therefore, a multi-modal approach in future studies is advocated.

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