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Laugh until it's No Longer a Scandal: The Use of Humorous Apologia to Reframe Crisis Narratives on Saturday Night Live

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LAUGH UNTIL IT'S NO LONGER A SCANDAL: THE USE OF HUMOROUS APOLOGIA
TO REFRAME CRISIS NARRATIVES ON SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE

by

Vanessa Hills

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
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Vanessa S. Hills, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2021

This thesis examines the role of humor-based apologia as a crisis communication strategy for celebrities. Using a rhetorical method, it explicates the role that humor plays in shaping crisis narratives in response to kategoria within the context of *Saturday Night Live*. Four case study analyses determine whether the generic parameters of apologia include the use of a humor-based apologia or whether humorous apologiae should be classified as a unique subgenre. These findings further the body of research on apologia and highlight the need for additional research on the effectiveness of humor as a crisis communication strategy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On most Saturday nights at 11:30 p.m. EST, the jazzy intro to *Saturday Night Live* plays on millions of television screens across the United States, signifying the onset of roughly 90 minutes of sketch comedy and prepared skits. In the days that follow, the funniest and most culturally relevant clips from that episode make their way onto YouTube, Facebook, and even news programs in search of a few minutes of levity. Unsurprisingly, research shows that television like *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) both influences and is influenced by the pop culture zeitgeist (Becker, Marx, & Sienkiewicz, 2013; Wild, 2015). Miller and Shales (2015) detail this effect when they argue that:

With the arrival of *SNL*, the TV generation, at least for ninety minutes a week, could see television not just as a window on the past or a display case for the fading fantasy figures of their fathers and mothers, but as a mirror – a warped fun-house mirror, perhaps, but a mirror just the same, one reflecting their own sensibilities, values, and philosophies. (p. 11)

While *SNL* may reflect society's norms and values back out to viewers, it also plays a role in influencing culture and popular opinion (Wild, 2015). What viewers think of as funny, appropriate, smart, moral, or appropriate can stem, in part, from what they see on their television screens. The celebrity guest hosts who appear on *SNL* already recognize this; they use it as a way to promote their upcoming films, television shows, comedy specials, and new musical releases.

With an audience of over nine million for some episodes in 2019, *SNL* undoubtedly serves as a platform for celebrities seeking to promote themselves (Perez, 2019). However, promotion is not the only reason why a celebrity may want to appear on *SNL*.

In the wake of a media scandal, celebrities sometimes find it necessary to do “damage control” by responding to allegations of wrongdoing. By choosing *SNL* as a platform for a celebrity’s apology, the context features the use of humor to serve as part of a strategy to shape the narrative of their crisis (Achter, 2000). This thesis will examine a number of celebrity appearances on *Saturday Night Live*, each of which served as a form of apology, or “speech of defense” for the celebrity in question (Tavuchis, 1991). Celebrity guests like Rob Lowe, Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber, and Lindsay Lohan each appeared on one or more episodes of *SNL* in the wake of a media scandal. Each mentioned the wrongdoing(s) of which they were accused in humorous sketches, skits, and/or songs.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the use of humorous apologies on *Saturday Night Live* in order to understand its role in shaping the narrative of a crisis. It will seek to analyze whether the use of humor-based apology on *SNL* can lessen the perceived severity of a celebrity’s crisis and whether that method of communication fits into the rhetorical genre of apology or constitutes its own unique subgenre within apology. This chapter begins with an examination of *Saturday Night Live* as an object of analysis as well as explicates why the public is interested in hearing about media scandals in the first place. In addition, this chapter summarizes what constitutes a crisis, some of the most common crisis outcomes and responses, and reviews the research literature on the topics of humor and framing theory.

Saturday Night Live and Media Scandals

Saturday Night Live is a sketch comedy show from NBC that airs, unsurprisingly, on Saturday evenings. It follows a formulaic structure that varies little from week to week: The cold open, the intro theme, the host's monologue, sketches, a musical performance, the Weekend Update segment, more sketches, and a final musical performance (Becker, Marx & Sienkiewicz, 2013). Despite this fairly regimented format, *SNL* does not appear to lose much of its audience. Although the show is more than 40 years old, *SNL* saw same-day viewership numbers of 9.9 million for a highly anticipated December 21, 2019, episode featuring Eddie Murphy and Lizzo, exemplifying its appeal to a large audience (Perez, 2019). While those numbers do not come close to the viewership of the 1970s and 1980s when viewers had fewer media choices, it still plays a significant role in pop culture. *SNL* routinely makes it onto the Nielsen Ratings Weekly Top Ten List for Social TV interactions, a measure that highlights which shows are the most engaging and talked about on social media (Nielsen Social, 2020).

SNL has transcended its role as a "television show" to become a cultural framer, having "consistently and intentionally debated the politics, pop culture, and social norms of American life in five decades" (Becker, Marx & Sienkiewicz, 2013, p. 4). Similarly, Miller and Shales (2015) write of *Saturday Night Live* that: "Since its premier in 1975, it has served as a trendsetter in American humor and had a remarkable effect on American mores, manners, music, politics, and even fashion" (p. 7).

Saturday Night Live is known for sketch comedy, or short vignettes that comedically explore a concept or person, as well as their skits. While its sketch comedy certainly is influenced by culture, it also influences culture (Wild, 2015). When Tina Fey portrayed Sarah Palin in *SNL* leading up to the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election, she *defined* the candidate.

Afterwards, Fey's portrayal of Palin became "the lens through which most journalists saw her" (Wild, 2015, p. 503). Fey no longer was a comedic actress playing the character of Sarah Palin: For many television viewers, Fey *was* Palin. Her brief impression standing on the stage next to Amy Poehler, playing the character of then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, shaped the way that many Americans thought of Palin. Recognizing the power that *SNL* had over the shaping of culture and politics, Palin eventually appeared on *SNL* herself. Says Palin,

Even today, I'll walk by the TV that's maybe on in our living room and I'll glance up and once in a while I still see that same old Tina Fey, the portrayal of me, and I do a double take. I think, "What am I doing on TV today? Oh! It's Tina Fey." It's weird! What really kills me is that people believe that I said the things that Tina Fey said in her funny comedy sketch. That tells you that yeah, there is that impact on part of the electorate that *SNL* has. Another thing that's significant here is that *SNL* is able to kind of ratchet down what the debate is to a level that is culturally relevant, and that's important and quite significant. (Miller & Shales, 2015, p.594)

Virtually every one of the 889 episodes of *Saturday Night Live* that have aired since 1975 featured a celebrity guest host. From Christopher Walken and Peyton Manning to Paul Simon and Candice Bergen, celebrity hosts bring new energy to each episode, and each host has his or her own unique reasons for appearing on the show. "As far as jobs go, it doesn't pay all that well, it requires a full week's unrelenting commitment, and the hours are late and punishing," said Miller and Shales (2015, p. 622). Nonetheless, celebrities of the highest caliber consider the hosting job an honor, both because of the show's influence and its enormous platform.

While there are personal, political, and promotional reasons why a celebrity might decide to appear on *Saturday Night Live*, the show's writers typically do not create sketches around

celebrity media scandals as a favor to their hosts. Instead, they do so because audiences at home are interested in watching crises play out and in experiencing media scandals from their couches. A media scandal is not just a one-time event with a beginning and end, but “something that is shown, reported, staged, and kept alive day after day” (Ekström & Johansson, 2008, p. 72). Part of what keeps a media scandal alive are media outlets themselves. The notion that scandals “sell newspapers” is a fairly universal one, and there is ample research to suggest that it continues to be true (Darnton, 1997; Darnton, 2010; Stephens, 2007). Replace newspapers with late-night sketch comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live*, and the same concept applies. If audiences enjoy the drama of mediated scandals, then media outlets will continue to offer them up in exchange for profit. The commodification of scandal is well researched and plays a role when media outlets select their content (Ekström & Johansson, 2008). Worth exploring, however, is why scandals sell newspapers, get viewers to tune in to television shows, and generate clicks on online platforms. Why are humans drawn to scandals, and why do they present a captive audience when celebrities discuss their scandals with or without the addition of humor?

Scandals on a small scale, such as between friends, neighbors, families, or community members, typically remain localized (Thompson, 2008). In contrast to mediated scandals that have public connection, a localized scandal is transmitted from one person to the next and is “linked to the kinds of gossip and rumor which are spread by word of mouth” (Thompson, p. 62). Gossip and rumor are present in modern health organizations (O’Connor, Kotze & Storm, 2018), in 20th Century Indonesia (Herriman, 2010), among Latino migrants in Israel (Paz, 2009), and, perhaps unsurprisingly, on the internet (Solove, 2007). Indeed, it is challenging to find a period of human history in which gossip and rumor was not a valued commodity. Gossip can mean any idle chat about a topic but it commonly involves the discussion of a third party who is not in

attendance (Bergmann, 1993). Gossiping as a communicative act offers a number of benefits, some of which include understanding our social environment, enforcing the morality of a society, determining who belongs to an in-group, and offering important information to those who participate (Westen, 1996).

Even without media outlets that tell audiences an act is scandalous, people find ways to spread news of scandal. Gossip and rumors, again, are far from a new concept. In 18th Century Paris, one might read the best-selling biography of Louis XV's mistress, Mme. Du Barry, the print version of courtly gossip, listen for rumors at the Café de Foy, or listen to seditious songs in crowds, all of which served as entertaining and popular ways to hear the news of the day (Darnton, 1997). The major differences between a rumor or piece of gossip in a local café or Parisian court and larger modern scandals found online and on television is that the latter are mediated and visible to a much larger audience, although they may offer the same types of benefits as smaller-scale gossip and rumor.

One way to think of a mediated scandal is as a “cultural phenomenon which audiences use to debate and negotiate transgressional acts, social norms, and values in a symbolic and ritualized way” (Hammarlin, 2019, p. 4). Through media coverage of a scandal, viewers determine how their peers, their society, and their culture “thinks” about the perceived wrongdoing. If a celebrity author behaves inappropriately but jokes about it on live television, and the television audience laughs along with the joke, then a viewer easily could begin to believe that perhaps the actor's behavior was not too inappropriate in the first place. An offense first has to be perceived as wrong, and then it has to continue to be perceived as wrong in order for it to remain a scandal. If perceptions shift, perhaps in part due to a humorous sketch in

defense of the behavior on *Saturday Night Live*, then what began as an offense might simply transition into a punchline.

Anyone who pays attention to the news might observe that today's headlines may not even be mentioned in tomorrow's news cycle. Or, as Elvis Costello wrote in 1981, "Yesterday's news is tomorrow's fish and chip paper," referring to the traditional English practice of wrapping up fried fish in old newspapers (Ashling, 2008). Scandals referenced on television one week might be forgotten the next, and not just because a new scandal has arrived to take its place. Instead, scandals move in and out of public view because the general public has determined, through a collective negotiation, that the act does offend or transgress social norms. A scandal is not a scandal, after all, unless it offends the dominant morality of society (Achter, 2000). Perhaps celebrities (or more likely, their management and public relations teams) faced with a crisis know that attempting to avoid gossip and media coverage is like swimming upstream against the current of the Streisand Effect (Harvey, 2014). The more offenses are hidden, the more the general public perceives them to be worth bringing to light. In contrast, bringing a potentially moderate crisis into the limelight means that the general public can negotiate the meaning of any wrongdoing and move on.

Crisis and Crisis Response

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) argue that a crisis is:

A specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten high priority goals including security of life and property or the general individual or community well-being. (p. 233)

Crises can take place in any number of environments, and can be organizational, environmental, political, or personal in nature (Benoit, 1997). When a personal crisis collides with celebrity culture, it often results in a media scandal (Achter, 2000).

All crisis types can lead to varied outcomes. There is a risk of an undesirable outcome if a crisis truly is a crisis (Billings, 1980). In the case of a celebrity faced with a media scandal, the outcome of a crisis could range from financial loss because of canceled films or sponsorship deals all the way to legal proceedings or investigations in the case of potentially criminal behavior. To minimize these unfavorable outcomes, including a threat to reputation, a number of crisis communication responses exist for those accused of wrongdoing (Benoit, 1997).

Crisis response types have been classified and reclassified many times in extant scholarship (Benoit, 2015; Coombs, 2007; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Individuals and organizations alike can respond to crisis with strategies that include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 2015). These responses are one half of a call and response speech set (Ryan, 1982). The allegation, or accusation of wrongdoing, is called a *kategoria* (Ryan, 1982). A response to this *kategoria* is the *apologia*, or “a broad term that means to respond to organizational criticism by offering a vigorous and compelling defense” (Hearit, 2006, p. 4).

Framing Theory

Kategoria and *apologia* work together to craft a narrative, but they are not the only determining factors in what constitutes a crisis that the public will pay attention to or care about (Ryan, 1982). Framing theory posits that media outlets and representatives can frame issues in such a way that the public will view them through a particular lens (Gitlin, 1980). Even in

acknowledging that the “public” is less an objective reality than a concept representing a theoretical monolithic response to rhetoric, it is possible to analyze phenomenon of framing (McGee, 1975). For example, the same news story about “undocumented” workers would be framed and comprehended differently if it was instead about “illegal” workers (Merolla, Ramakrishna & Haynes, 2013). When frames shift, it is known as downshifting or upshifting (Baran & Davis, 2014). Frames can shift upward to make an issue appear more serious, but they also can shift downward to make an issue seem less important.

Frames shift in part due to agenda-setting, or the process through which the media communicates to their respective audiences what topics to think about (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). While agenda-setting does not necessarily tell viewers how to think about a topic, it does encourage viewers to focus on specific issues and view them as important. As such, the rhetoric used by media *frames* public issues. Rhetoric, the art of discourse, “occurs in response to an exigence or some kind of urgency, problem, or something not as it should be” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 358). Humor can function as a form of rhetoric and, therefore, is worthy of analysis, which is what the next section of this paper addresses.

Humor

One form of discourse is humor, which is defined as “anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh” (Martin, 2018, p. 3). Defining humor is complicated because it is such a broad term, but research does attempt to show what, exactly, makes something funny. There are three basic criteria that must be met in order for something to seem funny to its audience (Veatch, 1998). To start, humor requires a violation to occur; it departs from what is considered “normal” in a society. Then, that perceived violation has to be

viewed as safe. If the violation is unsafe, then a situation could be perceived as terrifying rather than hilarious. Last, an audience must hold both of those contradictory ideas in their heads at the same time (McGraw & Garner, 2010). When all three criteria are met, laughter is likely to follow. The Benign Violation Theory as proposed by McGraw and Warren (2010) uses this foundation above to explain why even immoral behaviors are funny in the right context. Sarcasm, a form of humor associated with contempt, and satire, often associated with ridicule, are two methods that can be used to make immoral behavior the punchline of a joke. Benign Violation Theory helps explain why these forms of humor are frequently used to poke fun at the immoral, illegal, or otherwise frowned-upon behavior of politicians, celebrities, and everyday individuals.

Humor is not a new tool in the apologist's repertoire. As far back as the Ancient Greeks and Romans, humor has been used in rhetoric as a direct response to *kategoria* (Constantini, 2019; Grant, 1924). Humor is one of many varied strategies in crisis communication as part of an *apologia*. Some modern research simply mentions humorous *apologia* as an additional factor in a greater rhetorical strategy (Compton, 2015). Studies that examine the crisis responses of Hugh Grant, Newt Gingrich, and David Letterman all included humor as an element in the discussion, though none attributed the success of an *apologia* to the use of humor (Benoit, 1997; Compton & Miller, 2011; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997). By studying the greater role that humor plays in *apologetic* discourse, it may be possible to see how celebrities can use humor to their advantage when responding rhetorically to a media scandal.

Summary and Organization

This chapter has introduced some of the primary concepts of this thesis, including *Saturday Night Live*, crisis, crisis response, framing theory, humor, and the use of humor in apology. In so doing, it raises the broad question: Can the use of a humorous apology on *Saturday Night Live* diverge from traditional conceptions of the genre and, by so doing, serve as a vehicle to reframe a crisis narrative? Chapter II will explore the existing research on these topics, focusing on crisis response strategies and the role of humor in historic and contemporary apology research, and culminate with the precise research questions that will drive the completion of this thesis. Chapter III, then, will outline the methodology used in analysis, examining the benefits and assumptions of rhetorical criticism and close textual analysis. Subsequently, Chapter IV will analyze specific *Saturday Night Live* episodes, specify how humor was used in celebrity defense on the show, and determine both the motives for use and its effectiveness for celebrities on *SNL*. Finally, Chapter V will summarize the analysis and draw conclusions about the use of humor in celebrity apology on *Saturday Night Live*.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crises occur in many environments and at varying times; they are present in individual's personal lives, in politics, in the entertainment world, in government, and in organizations. Each of these ecosystems offers differing challenges as well as unique ways to deal with, navigate, and respond to crises, though they all use similar strategies. While not traditionally perceived as such, humor is one of many potential strategies within crisis management. The focus of this chapter, then, is: 1) to define and review key aspects in the study of crisis, crisis communication, framing theory, and humor; and 2) to explicate the impact sketch comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* have on the current cultural narrative.

Crisis and Response

There are three factors that define a crisis. First, a crisis must be unpredictable. If an event can be planned for or predicted to occur at a specific time, then it is no longer a crisis. Crises are low probability events that are reasonably expected not to occur (Weick, 1988, p. 305). Second, for an event to become a crisis, it must lead to undesired outcomes. These outcomes include financial loss, a damaged reputation, or any number of negative prospects; and they must be reasonably large or severe in order to be seen as a crisis (Billings, 1980, p. 308). Third, a crisis creates a sense of urgency (Williams & Treadway 1992; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998). Crises are ticking time bombs that cannot be ignored; they require a timely response.

Types of Crisis

While all crises have in common their unpredictability, surprise, and undesirability, they often differ in a number of significant ways. An individual crisis may vary when compared to an organizational crisis, and even individual crises can vary depending on whether they are political or entertainment crises, among other variations. Despite these differences:

Reputation is important in all three realms; discourse can be a remedy for threats to image; and although which strategies are used most often, or which are most appropriate may vary, the same options are open to all rhetors. (Benoit, 1997, p. 255)

Every crisis response team has available most of the same communication and management options, though some strategies are more common among certain types of crisis.

Corporate or organizational crises, by definition, involve more than a single individual. Even in corporate crises in which a single player within an organization is at fault, a response may be required by the organization as a whole, and the implications of the crisis can impact a variety of stakeholders in significant ways (Benoit, 1997). Corporations also face legal concerns that limit their options for an apologia, lest an apology translate to liability in court (Myers, 2016).

Political crises occupy a unique space somewhere between corporate crises and celebrity crises. On one hand, crises often involve the behaviors of a single political figure, such as Bill Clinton (Benoit, 1997; García, 2011) or Newt Gingrich (Kennedy & Benoit, 1997). On the other, even individual political crises can negatively impact the image or reputation of entire political parties, coalitions, or branches of government. In addition, political figures wield significant authority, so they may be held to different standards than those established for corporate executives or entertainers. Political crises often have an added partisan element and a level of

competition and attack that is sustained and even encouraged by opposing political figures, something less common among other types of crises (Achter, 2000; Benoit, 1997).

Entertainment crises and the responses that stem from them are shaped by the cultural narrative (Achter, 2000). By virtue of the power of celebrity, individual behaviors become media scandals, or “private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community” that are “public and narrativized by the media” (Achter, 2000, p. 319). While apologies are difficult no matter what a person’s career, they may be easier for entertainers than for politicians or executives because individual actions typically impact fewer people than organizational actions (Benoit, 1997). Nevertheless, those embroiled in entertainment crises still seek to resolve the crisis with as little damage as possible to reputation. The very nature of an entertainment crisis plays a role in how the crisis is managed and resolved as the crisis narrative evolves through the media (Sellnow, 2019).

Crisis Outcomes

A defining condition of a crisis is the threat of an undesirable outcome (Billings, 1980). These outcomes include both a social legitimation crisis and opportunities for change, growth, or repair (Hearit, 1995; Seeger, 1998). An organization may experience a social legitimation crisis if it “faces a public charge that its actions have violated normative standards of behavior” (Hearit, 1995, p. 3). While individual entertainers, politicians, and corporations are held to differing standards of behaviors, a cultural narrative shapes normative standards through society, and few are immune from scrutiny. For a celebrity in film, television, or music, a version of a legitimation crisis stems from being accused of copying another artist or verbally abusing a castmate, two actions that are frowned upon in artistic circles. There are social sanctions on

violations of normal behaviors, even for celebrities. Shifts in attitudes across culture dictate what is considered inappropriate behavior, what violates cultural norms, and what constitutes a social legitimacy crisis (Achter, 2000). Naturally, both individuals and organizations aim to overcome crises, move past any undesirable outcomes, and repair their reputations.

The results of a crisis left unchecked may be undesirable and can include financial loss, the end of corporations or careers, and legal consequences, among others; but action can mitigate those undesirable outcomes. In the face of a social legitimation crisis, loss of profit, or damage to reputation, there are opportunities for growth and revitalization (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998). The response to a crisis can hasten negative outcomes or provide a route to positive organizational change and re-legitimation, showcasing the importance of the appropriate crisis response.

Crisis Response

A narrative pattern to crises exists in the form of a call and response (Achter, 2000; Ryan, 1982). First is the *kategoria*, or the accusation, which brings to public light the actions or words deemed inappropriate for an individual and speaks out against either policy or character (Ryan, 1982). For a *kategoria* to “stick” and be persuasive, it must ensure that the accused is seen as responsible for an act and that act has to be seen as offensive to its audience (Benoit, 1997). In response to this accusation an *apologia* forms the second half of the speech set (Ryan, 1982). “An *apologia* is not an apology (though it may contain one); rather, it is a response to a social legitimation crisis in which an organization seeks to justify its behavior by presenting a compelling, counter account of its actions.” (Hearit, 1995, p. 3). Or, as Ware and Linkugel (1973) put it, “In life, an attack upon a person’s character, upon his worth as a human being, does

seem to demand a direct response” (p. 274). This direct response, or *apologia*, is the way through which individuals can respond to a *kategoria* levied against them and defend themselves rhetorically.

Apologetic discourse takes a number of different forms and has been a substantive area of *apologia* research (Hearit, 2006). *Apologia* takes these many forms in order to manage crises and restore the damage caused as a result of perceived or actual wrongdoing (Benoit, 1995). Some of the earliest examples of apologetic response strategies come from Ware and Linkugel (1973), who outlined the strategies of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Similarly, Coombs (2007) developed a classification system for seven crisis response strategies comprised of attacking the accuser, denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective action, and full apology. Benoit (2015) also has looked extensively at the strategies used to respond to allegations of wrongdoing, formulating a classification system of the following five image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Though these oft-cited categorization systems are useful for classifying a large number of potential strategies, Coombs (2007) observes: “A researcher cannot hope to craft the one, perfect list of crisis response strategies. What can be created is a list of useful crisis response strategies” (p.170). What follows are Benoit’s five image repair strategy categories in a list that is useful, though not exhaustive, in understanding the *topoi* or “common” responses to allegations of wrongdoing (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2004).

Denial

The strategy of denial involves contesting the facts of the leveled accusations. It involves straightforward denial, or refuting the charges outright (Benoit, 2015). Denial also acknowledges

an action but denies blame, shifting guilt onto a third party (Benoit, 2015; Burke, 1969). The goal of either form of denial is to reduce the culpability of the accused individual.

Evasion of Responsibility

Evasion of responsibility aims to reduce the liability or accountability of the accused through one of four methods: provocation, defeasibility, making an excuse based on defining a situation as an accident, or using the justification of good intentions (Benoit, 2015). Each of these four methods seeks to let an accused person off the hook, reducing responsibility.

Reducing Offensiveness

Reducing offensiveness occurs when an accused individual aims to limit negative response from his or her publics, and it can take on several forms (Benoit, 2015). The first, bolstering, seeks to increase goodwill for the accused so that negative actions seem less troublesome. The second, minimization, aims to limit the scope and intensity of the negative action so that it appears less problematic. Third is differentiation, or distinguishing between the accused's acts and more worrying acts that appear to be a bigger and more concerning issue, mitigating the perceived harm of the original accusation. Fourth is transcendence, a strategy that moves the act into a new context and reframes the cause and effect in order to diminish its offensiveness. The fifth strategy to reduce offensiveness is to attack the accuser, with the aim of reducing the credibility of the accuser and therefore diminishing the credibility of the charges themselves (Benoit). Finally, compensation can offset the negative feelings associated with wrongdoing; the payment serves to help repair the reputation (Benoit).

Corrective Action

Corrective action involves the acknowledgement of harm from the accuser, but it does not necessarily involve the accused taking on responsibility (Benoit, 2015). Fixing a problem through corrective action can involve restoring a situation to how it was before the action took place, or promising not to let that kind of action happen again (Benoit 2015; Goffman, 1971).

Mortification

Mortification is admitting wrongdoing (Benoit, 2015). This is known as an apology, defined as a speech act structured dyadically between the offender and the offended (Tavuchis, 1991) that contains an admission of guilt, a statement of regret, and a request for forgiveness (Hearit, 2006). Apology as a form of crisis management is understood in five stages according to Hearit (1995): 1) a sociocultural order is transgressed, 2) the transgressor is accused of wrongdoing in an accusation known as *kategoria* (Ryan, 1982), 3) social sanctions arise (Hearit, 2006), 4) the accused offers an apology, and 5) if the apology is accepted, the accused's reputation or image is repaired.

Many strategies are available to crisis managers who seek to resolve a crisis. Even after strategies have been chosen, crisis managers must choose a timeline, a spokesperson, and a delivery method, with online and social media crisis communication a growing option along with other large media platforms with sizeable audiences, such as *SNL* (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In sum, there is no single way to manage a crisis; instead crisis managers can choose from the multiple response options.

Framing Theory

The dominant cultural narrative shapes both what constitutes an entertainment crisis and what the appropriate response should be (Achter, 200). How a cultural narrative is set, and how it is perceived by the general public, has a lot to do with the frame through which those publics view a crisis and the subsequent response. A frame is the “specific set of expectations used to make sense of a social situation at a given point in time” (Goffman, 1974). These frames “help us interpret and reconstruct reality” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 407).

“Framing” was used as a term in a mass communication context in a study of CBS’s reporting on the student movements in the 1960s to make them seem less important and less significant to American viewers (Gitlin, 1980). It helps audiences understand how to interpret the information presented to them (Gitlin, 1980; Gorp, 2007). Frames can stem from cultural norms and societal mores, but certain frames also can be encouraged through the use of rhetoric or by agenda-setting. When individuals change frames by downshifting or upshifting (Baran & Davis, 2015), they reframe these situations to make them more or less serious, altering both how individuals think about them and subsequent behavior of the public audience.

Often, the topic of framing is accompanied by agenda-setting, or a kind of media gatekeeping (Littlejohn & Foss, 2015). Agenda-setting aims to tell audiences not how they should think, necessarily, but instead what they should think about and what topics deserve attention (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Some early 20th Century communication scholars argued that with so much information available to the public, it had to be distilled in some way so as not to overwhelm (Lippmann, 1921). Media outlets can set an agenda by presenting stories in vivid ways, dedicating extra time to a story, or emphasizing specific aspects of a story. Say Iyengar and Kinder (1987):

We found that people who were shown network broadcasts edited to draw attention to a particular problem assigned greater importance to that problem—greater importance than they themselves did before the experiment began, and greater importance than did people assigned to control conditions that emphasized different problems. (p. 112)

Similarly, a study conducted during the 1968 presidential election revealed that “the media appeared to have exerted a considerable impact on voter’s judgements of what they considered the major issues of the campaign” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 180).

Rhetorical choices also have an impact on the frames through which publics view media stories and scandals (Burke, 1969; 1973). Ancient Greek definitions of rhetoric can be summarized as “the art of discourse, of systematically and artfully thinking through the five canons of rhetoric: invention, organization, style, delivery, and memory” (Foss, 2012, p. 854). More recently, Weaver (1953) defined rhetoric as “truth plus its artful presentation” (p.16). The language or rhetoric chosen reveals the speaker’s way of seeing the world, and by merely being used takes a step toward organizing and understanding the world (Grassi, 1980).

Rhetoric creates the vocabulary that is used in interpersonal contexts as well in mass communication. It often provides justification for thoughts, actions, and behaviors and may “offer ways of reframing actions so that they are more tolerable or acceptable” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 358). The rhetoric consumed by the general public may influence its understanding of incidents or crises, some of which may include media scandals.

One type of discourse, humor, is a rhetorical device on its own, with discernible patterns of structure and endless complexity (Gabin, 1987). Telling a joke or relying on sarcasm and satire can frame a story as well as be persuasive (Gain, 1987; Smith, 1993). It also creates social cohesion and in-groups, since a joke is only funny to those who can connect the dots and

understand what makes a statement funny. Satire, in particular, is noted as having “strong rhetorical properties” because it can find humor by exposing certain aspects of human behavior for a punchline (Rybacki & Rybacki, p. 319).

Humor

Defining humor is challenging. Nonetheless, researchers in fields like psychology and sociology have been trying to do so for centuries. Definitions range from the straightforward and clinical; “Humor is a psychological state characterized by the positive emotion of amusement and the tendency to laugh” (McGraw & Warren, 2010), to the more cerebral explanation from Kuipers: “The word ‘humor’ is capable of suggesting something profound, prompting people to contemplate human nature, the importance of creativity, or the connection between suffering humor, and detachment” (2006, p.2). In this thesis, humor is defined as it is by Martin (2018):

A broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it. (p. 3)

Humor brings emotional and physiological benefits ranging from attracting attention and friendship to coping with pain (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Humor also can release tension and, anecdotally, bring joy and laughter (Freud, 1928).

Even after defining humor, it is challenging to understand what, exactly, elicits laughter in response to attempts at humor. Humor is a linguistic exchange that disrupts the way that a world is supposed to operate; it violates the natural order of things (Freud, 1928; McGraw & Warren, 2010). One theory of humor set forth by Veatch (1998) and built upon by McGraw and Warren

(2010) argues that in order for communication or behavior to be humorous, three criteria must be met. First, there needs to be a violation of some kind, or a breach of what is considered normal. Second, that perceived violation needs to be viewed as safe and benign rather than threatening. Finally, humor requires that two contradictory thoughts about a single situation be held simultaneously (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Humor is achieved if the audience who interprets the communication can see the violation and not be threatened by it at the same time. Puns, for example, are amusing to many because they violate expectations, but those wordplay infractions are unlikely to cause their audience harm.

The Benign Violation Theory, drawn from the three criteria of humor above, explains why even immoral behavior can be humorous (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Moral violations can elicit humor if they are benign, largely because these violations are seen as both wrong and not wrong at the same time, leading to mixed emotions. A violation may appear benign if there are conflicting interpretations of the norm being violated or if there is a low commitment to the violated norm, as might be the case for religious jokes among infrequent church attendees (McGraw & Warren, 2010; Veatch, 1998).

Violations are more likely to be perceived as humorous if an audience has some distance from the violation (McGraw, Warren, Williams & Leonard, 2012). Mishaps may be funny in the present and in close proximity, but tragedies are less likely to be seen as humorous in the moment. Spatial, social, temporal, and even hypothetical distance can increase the humor in even the most tragic of events (McGraw et al.). Or, as Mark Twain is widely believed to have quipped, "Humor is tragedy plus time." Twain himself recognized that given enough temporal distance, even a tragedy could be funny.

Sarcasm and Satire

Widely attributed to Oscar Wilde is the remark “sarcasm is the lowest form of wit but the highest form of intelligence” (Gino, 2015). There is far more nuance involved than Wilde’s blanket statement, but sarcasm is an effective tool to express humor and communicate a message indirectly (Boylan & Katz, 2013). Sarcasm is defined as communicating a message humorously by signifying the opposite through language (Gibbs, 1986, Pexman & Olineck, 2002).

Sarcasm fits under the general umbrella of humor but is also associated with contempt (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Pexman & Olineck, 2002). Rarely are sarcastic messages intended to be sincere, and they can thinly veil feelings of scorn, disapproval, or criticism (Gibbs, 2000). This variety of humor is widely considered to be hostile as opposed to either affiliative, self-enhancing, or self-deprecating humor (Martin, et al., 2003). It is widely used as a mechanism for humor, particularly on sketch comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live*. In one episode’s sketch, titled “Sarcasm 101,” *SNL* goes so far as to poke fun at the very use of sarcasm on the show with celebrity guest Matthew Perry as a character named Mr. Bennett teaching sarcasm to a class of teenage students.

Marissa (Student): Excuse me, is this Sarcasm 101? [Entering classroom.]

Mr. Bennett: No, it’s Lamaze class for men named Arthur.

Marissa: Oh, okay, sorry. [Turns to exit.]

Mr. Bennett: I’m kidding. It is Sarcasm 101. Be more gullible. Take any seat you want.

[Marissa begins to sit down at an empty desk.] Except that one. I’m kidding!

(*SNL*, episode 428)

Sarcasm is not the only form of humor utilized on *Saturday Night Live* and other sketch comedy shows, but it is a favorite among writers who use it heavily alongside other forms of humor like satire, self-deprecating humor, and slapstick.

Satire is a highly rhetorical art that often elicits laughter as well as critical thought. A work of satire is designed to attack vice or folly (Griffin, 1994). It is a critical form of humor that points out to the audience when a concept, action, or behavior is ridiculous. A celebrity, for example, might satirize media coverage of his or her marijuana use while implying that the criminalization of marijuana is an outdated element of the justice system. To achieve the objective of highlighting ridiculousness, satire often uses exaggeration. Some of *Saturday Night Live*'s best-known sketches include satirical impressions of politicians like Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump. In exaggerating the silly or ridiculous aspects of each politician's persona, phrasing, verbal tics, or mannerisms, *SNL* asks its audience to draw a critical conclusion as to each politician's policies and ability to govern.

Humor in Apologia

Humor has long been used as a tool in apologia, image repair, and crisis communication (Constantini, 2019; Holcomb, 2001; Sherwood, 2013). However, few researchers have focused exclusively on humor as a strategy in apologia. Often, humor is included as a footnote or a complicating factor, as in the case of 1940s radio personality Gracie Allen whose "image repair rhetoric also reflects how humor can complicate the equation of image attack and image repair" (Compton, 2015, p. 262). Humor is more than just a means of delivery or a complicating factor in image repair, however. Sherwood argues, "Humor is not simply a rhetorical device but also a

rhetorical enterprise” (2013, p. 45). Humor has the ability to persuade, and it can be used in a crisis response.

Historic Use of Humor in Apologia

There is a long history of using humor to persuade, influence, change minds, and restore image. Ancient Greeks examined the proper and improper use of laughter and humor in rhetoric (Grant, 1924). In the Roman Empire, Second Century rhetorician Apuleius defended himself against charges of magic and sorcery using wit and humor in what would come to be known as his *Apologia* (Constantini, 2019). Apuleius’ humor runs the gamut from self-deprecating humor about his own face, hair, and eloquence, to jokes minimizing the allegations against him and insulting his accusers (Constantini, 2019; Hunink, 1998). By bringing humor into his legal defense, he was able to distract from the severity of charges against him, discredit his accuser, and increase his own likeability to the audience. His ancient rhetorical achievements fit neatly into recognized strategies for modern image repair such as bolstering, attacking the accuser, and minimization (Benoit, 2015).

A governing principle of discourse, *kairos*, is defined as situational appropriateness or fitness for the occasion (Sherwood, 2013). This is critical to the use of humor in a crisis, because it guides when it is appropriate to use humor in what may be a tense or high-risk moment. Holcomb (2001) touches on the topic of early English rhetoric manuals and how they address the appropriate use of humor by stating that the manuals:

Recognize that the success of the speaker depends on his ability to observe decorum and adapt his jesting to the particular occasion as well as the larger social context, even if that means refraining from jesting altogether. (p. 28)

Humor is a valuable rhetorical tool, but even those early manuals predating the modern era recognized that it was only appropriate in certain contexts.

Contemporary Research on the Use of Humor in Apologia

Just as humor was used in apologiae among the ancient Greeks (Grant, 1924), the Romans (Constantini, 2019), and the English of the Middle Ages (Holcomb, 2001), it has been used and studied in contemporary contexts. Rarely, however, is humor the focus of academic study in apologia. Instead, some research focuses on jokes “gone wrong” and what methods were used to resolve the resulting crisis (Compton, 2015; Compton & Miller, 2011). Nevertheless, modern communication scholars have documented the use of humor in a number of crises and subsequent attempts at image repair.

Hugh Grant

In the world of entertainment, Benoit (1997) studied Hugh Grant’s image restoration discourse after his 1995 arrest with a sex worker. The arrest constituted a crisis for Grant’s career, and Benoit argues that image repair strategies including mortification and bolstering were ultimately successful in repairing the actor’s crisis. His moments of “boyish humor” may have bolstered his image (Benoit, 1997, p. 257) and the “flashes of dry wit during his appearances tended to make him appear to be a well-rounded and generally likeable person, probably helping his image” (p. 258). In Grant’s case, a dose of wit and self-deprecating humor appeared to be appropriate alongside genuine remorse for his actions. Appearing on *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*, Grant wryly quipped, “It’s not been my best week” (Benoit, 1997, p. 258).

David Letterman

Humor also was part of a crisis and the resulting apologia in the case of David Letterman, host of *The Late Show*, in a controversy that involved the 2008 Republican nominee for Vice President, Sarah Palin, and her family. Letterman joked on air about one of Palin's daughters getting "knocked up" by professional baseball player Alex Rodriguez during a New York Yankees game (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 415). The interpretation of the joke was not clear to the audience as the only Palin daughter attending said Yankees game was 14 at the time. Palin's public response implied that the joke was about the sexual exploitation of minors, and Letterman was forced to respond to this kategoria with his own defense. His first attempt at an apologia included an explanation, differentiation, a denial, and plenty of jokes, as he "wove humor into his image repair attempts" (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 417). His second attempt at an apologia featured denial, differentiation, defeasibility, and bolstering, and yet again included a joke; this time at the expense of himself and New York politician Rudy Giuliani, "eliciting audience laughter and possibly serving a bolstering effect" (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 418). Humor was used in both of Letterman's attempts, yet only the second one was effective in terms of crisis resolution.

Newt Gingrich

When Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich signed a multimillion-dollar book deal in 1994, he was attacked with allegations about corruption and valuing money more than his role in public office (Kennedy & Benoit, 1997). Gingrich's apologia in response to the attack included denial, corrective action, good intentions, bolstering, and the use of humor when attacking his accusers, particularly Democrats (Kennedy & Benoit, 1997). His use of humor was not evaluated

as a defense in and of itself and appears only briefly in Kennedy and Benoit's evaluation of his response.

In each of these examples of crisis communication, the accused's apologia includes humor, but that humor is not the only strategy. In addition, none of these research examples clarify when humor can or should be utilized in crisis communication. Perhaps that is because context matters so much when determining the appropriateness or effectiveness of humor. Compton and Miller (2011) write: "Humor offers a light-hearted approach that may not always fit with the severity of the offensiveness of the act or the sincerity of the image repair strategy" (p. 416). Determining when and where to use humor, and if humor is appropriate at all in crisis communication, has not been clarified in previous academic study. While it may not always be clear whether humor is appropriate in crisis communication, it is a regular feature in some of the sketches in NBC's *Saturday Night Live*.

Saturday Night Live

Saturday Night Live, a late-night television sketch comedy show, has been on the air since 1975. It is known globally for its social commentary, timely jokes, live sketches, and celebrity guests. As first discussed in Chapter I, while most of the celebrities who have appeared on *SNL* did not have a media scandal to navigate, those that do can use the popularity of the show to connect to millions in the United States and beyond. Therefore, each episode of the show is a unique opportunity to explore the use of humor and how it can benefit those celebrities who commit a week of their lives to rehearsing, recording, and performing the show live on Saturday night.

The four crises analyzed in this thesis involve illegal drug use, grand larceny, and sexual misconduct¹. In the summer of 1988, Rob Lowe engaged in sexual activity with teenage girls and filmed the activity. Lawsuits continued into 1989, and Rob Lowe appeared as the host of *SNL* in March of 1990 to address the offense. In December 2010, Miley Cyrus was caught on camera using a bong. In March 2011, she hosted *SNL* and sang a sarcastic ditty titled, “I’m Sorry I’m Not Perfect.” In 2011, Lindsay Lohan received a DUI, spent time in jail, was charged with grand larceny, and attended an inpatient substance abuse program. In March of 2012, Lohan hosted *SNL* and acknowledged the scandals of the year prior. Also, in 2012, Justin Bieber was arrested for driving over 100 MPH on the Ventura Freeway in California and later was accused of using marijuana. In February 2013, he subsequently hosted *SNL* and acknowledged illegal drug use. These four crises represent the varied situations when a humor-based apologia might be helpful to celebrities.

Research Questions

Many communication scholars have classified strategies for crisis response (Benoit, 2015; Coombs, 2007; Ware & Linkugel, 1973), and still more have analyzed specific crisis communication discourse to examine the effectiveness of those varied strategies (Benoit, 1997; Achter, 2000; Compton, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; García, 2011; Hearit, 1995; Williams & Treadway, 1992). Some have mentioned the use of humor in crisis communication rhetoric and contributed thoughts on whether that humor helped or hurt the image repair process (Benoit, 1997; Compton & Miller, 2011; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997). Research also has examined the role of *Saturday Night Live* as a cultural influencer (Becker, Marx & Sienkiewicz, 2013; Miller &

¹ In Chapter III, I will detail the method through which these four crises were selected as objects of analysis.

Shales, 2015; Wild, 2015). However, no researcher has studied the ways that humorous apologiae on *Saturday Night Live* have attempted to reframe the narrative of an entertainment crisis. This raises the following research questions, which will serve as the foundation for this thesis:

RQ1: Can the use of a humorous apologia on *Saturday Night Live* serve as a vehicle to reframe a crisis narrative? If so, how?

RQ2: What are the humor-based strategies and tactics that *SNL* celebrity guest hosts Rob Lowe, Miley Cyrus, Lindsay Lohan, and Justin Bieber used to reframe their respective crises? Are they common across multiple cases?

RQ3: Are humor-based apologiae a distinct subgenre of apologetic discourse, and, if so, what distinguishes from them simply being stylized variations within the greater genre of apologia?

Thesis Overview

To answer the research questions posed above, this thesis examines the use of humorous apologetic discourse by celebrities appearing on *Saturday Night Live* in the midst of or in the wake of media scandals. By analyzing discourse from four *SNL* episodes that feature guest hosts Rob Lowe, Miley Cyrus, Lindsay Lohan, and Justin Bieber, this thesis will explore the ways that humor is used in attempts to reframe, minimize, or otherwise lessen the severity of a celebrity's alleged wrongdoings in an effort to repair their damaged reputations.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the characteristics of a crisis, the need for a crisis response, and the many crisis response strategies available to crisis managers. It has examined the tenets of framing theory and its connection to both agenda-setting and rhetoric. It also has explored the study of humor and the use of humor in apologia. A thorough review of the literature on crisis communication, framing theory, and humor establishes the foundation for a closer review of the role of humor on *SNL* as a means of reshaping the cultural narrative of a media scandal.

In Chapter III, this thesis will outline the rhetorical methods that are used to analyze crisis communication as well as the specific methodology used for this paper. In Chapter IV, results will be reported that explain how those celebrity guests on *Saturday Night Live* used apologia to reframe the narrative of their crises. Chapter V will summarize the findings of the rhetorical analysis and draw conclusions as to whether humor is an effective form of apologia for celebrities and other apologists as well as how humor functions within the context of crisis communication.

CHAPTER III

RHETORICAL METHODOLOGY

Every day, people are bombarded with persuasive messages. In addition to more traditional persuasive messages from loved ones and advertisers, individuals are affected by messages delivered through social media, billboards on the drive to work, and political campaign advertisements on the radio. When a speaker intentionally wishes to persuade his or her audience through communication, be it verbal or nonverbal, it is a form of rhetoric. Rhetoric seeks to convince and to persuade; it can be used for pro-social or anti-social outcomes (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). A basic definition of rhetoric offered by Foss (1989) is “the use of symbols to influence thought and action” (p. 4); it also is defined as a window through which the communicator comes to be known (Weaver, 1948). Through both of these definitions, it is possible to see rhetoric both as a product with the intent and ability to persuade an audience as well as an opportunity to learn more about the rhetor.

For this thesis, rhetoric is defined as discourse that causes another to shift his or her opinion toward a similar point of view and may lead a listener to action. While that is a wide scope for a definition, it is nonetheless a practical one. Using this conception of rhetoric, this chapter examines rhetorical thinking and articulates the rhetorical method of generic criticism. In doing so, it also serves as an introduction to the method of analysis for each of four *Saturday Night Live* episodes that demonstrate the use of humorous apologia in the chapters that follow.

Before discussing the process of generic criticism, this chapter first begins with an explication of the concept of rhetoric and the corresponding tool of rhetorical criticism.

Rhetoric

The use and development of rhetoric dates back at least as far as the 4th Century BCE, when Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote *Rhetoric* (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). In this text, Aristotle proposed three primary appeals that can be used in rhetoric to persuade an audience: ethos, pathos, and logos (Foss, 2009). Ethos is an appeal to the audience's character or ethics and relies on a rhetor's credibility (Hart, Suzanne & LaVally, 2018). By convincing an audience of a rhetor's strong character or ethical credibility, that audience may be more likely to believe what is being said. For a celebrity accused of wrongdoing, that might mean highlighting participation in a charity event or recounting awards from their peers. Ethos lays a foundation from which the speaker increases his or her credibility and therefore is imbued with more significant persuasive influence.

Aristotle's second rhetorical appeal, pathos, appeals to an audience's emotions (Foss, 2009). As emotional creatures, human beings are prone to persuasion through emotional pleas. A celebrity on a morning talk show might use pathos to better persuade a television audience through a segment discussing the devastating personal effects a recent media scandal has had on loved ones, and how much the celebrity simply wants to move forward. That kind of plea might cause an audience to consider the potentially damaging effects of the public's role in perpetuating a juicy media scandal.

The third of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals is logos, or attempting to connect and persuade an audience through argument, often with the support of facts and figures (Foss). This is a logical

approach, and one that is free from emotion. An actor in a television commercial could use logos when citing statistics about food insecurity in America in a bid to increase donations to a regional food bank. Faced with compelling statistics, a TV viewer might be more likely to pick up the phone or visit a website and make a donation.

Three centuries after Aristotle, Roman scholar Cicero further refined the art of the rhetorical tradition by introducing the five canons of rhetoric (1949). To speak persuasively, one might use some or all of Cicero's (1949) five canons: invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory (1949).

The first, invention, can be considered conceptualization (Cicero, 1949). During invention, a rhetor assigns meaning to symbols and begins to create or discover their arguments and supporting evidence. Next, a rhetor uses arrangement, the process of organizing ideas (Cicero). Arrangement strengthens the relationships between arguments and provides needed context to illustrate a point or convince a listener. Next, Cicero remarked upon the importance of style. Style is critical to rhetorical tradition as it is responsible for the selection of specific words, phrases, metaphors and symbols, creatively assembled, that are used in discourse. Anyone with an appreciation for language knows that style is a necessary and prized piece of the rhetorical puzzle. The fourth of Cicero's canons is delivery. With delivery, a rhetor moves beyond simply speaking the words and focuses on performance. Is a speaker who stands completely still more convincing than one who walks across the stage throughout a speech? Does someone with a booming voice inspire more confidence than someone with a weak, raspy voice? From voice timbre and stance to gestures and body position, delivery impacts how an audience interprets and processes any kind of speech (Cicero). The type of speech act in question also impacts which methods of delivery are most appropriate and effective for an occasion. Apologizing to a family

member while shouting might appear disingenuous, while the same manner of speaking might be just right when riling up a crowded arena prior to a sporting event. Finally, Cicero considers memory one of the rhetorical canons. When a speech is memorized, its delivery to an audience is more natural and, as a result, effective. Compared with someone who reads off of notecards, a memorized speech has the potential to make a bigger impact.

Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical messaging is created, distributed, and absorbed by individuals on a regular basis (Foss, 2018). While not every example of rhetoric needs to be analyzed, *criticism* is valuable when it comes to its ability to facilitate understanding of the rhetorical processes. Criticism does not diminish the value of the rhetoric; instead, it helps auditors to fully understand the substantive, stylistic, and ideological nature of discourse through analysis (Hart, Daughton & LaVally, 2018). Rhetorical criticism is a “a qualitative research method designed for systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (Foss, 2018, p. 6). In other words, rhetorical criticism serves as a means through which understanding and analysis of discourse is furthered.

Rhetorical criticism is not to be confused with judgement. Critics of rhetoric do not simply attempt to find fault with the discourse being studied, although that may occur. As such, criticism can feel like an inherently negative word, but its purpose is not to diminish the value of a rhetorical artifact. Rather, rhetorical criticism is a way to better understand and appreciate the value and effects of a piece of discourse, assuming that it has a prosocial message to communicate. Rhetorical criticism of political speeches from a single political party may be able to highlight the key issues and delivery mechanisms favored by that party to understand its goals

(Foss). Similarly, rhetorical criticism of a company's external communication might reveal insight into its values and priorities (Hearit, 1995). Over time, the attributes that rhetors observe, either as commonalities or differences between discourse, helps deepen understanding of both the speakers and the communication process as a whole.

Rhetorical criticism also seeks to pinpoint messaging, identify symbols, and better understand the style, structure, and content of rhetoric (Foss, 2009). More broadly, this approach seeks to make the complicated clear, to promote understanding, and to enlighten audiences. These critical revelations can even make people better communicators in the future.

There are several methods of rhetorical criticism available to researchers. This paper will list some of the other common methods of rhetorical criticism before focusing on the method most helpful to the examination of humor-based apologiae.

Rhetorical Methods

The first method of rhetorical analysis developed within the field of communication is known as the neo-Aristotelian method, or the neo-classical method (Foss, 2018). This approach was used primarily to understand and analyze oratory spoken by a single rhetor. Developed by applying Aristotelian concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos to a political context, the neo-Aristotelian method is less commonly used today, although early scholars who relied on this approach made significant contributions to the communication field. Notably, early 20th Century scholar Wichelns (1925) outlined what critics should look for in a speech: personality, character of the rhetor, audience, major ideas presented, motives, expression, arrangement, preparation, delivery, and effect on audience, among others. Since this methodology came to be seen as inadequate for analyzing the full range of rhetorical artifacts, new methods began to emerge in

the middle of the 20th Century to allow for a deeper analysis of rhetoric. Some of these methods that were developed include fantasy-theme analysis, feminist criticism, ideological criticism, and narrative theory, to name a few (Foss, 2018). The generic method of rhetorical analysis, which also emerged as a response to the limits of neo-Aristotelian criticism, is an enduring form of criticism and the one that will be used in this paper to analyze the humorous apologia present in episodes of *Saturday Night Live*.

Generic Method of Rhetorical Criticism

The generic method of rhetorical analysis is a useful way to determine what structural and content features link rhetorical discourse within a specific genre. These commonalities, or similarities found among a form of discourse, often appear in patterns that help to define a genre of rhetoric (Hart, Daughton & LaVally, 2018). By using a generic method, critics can search and identify these commonalities, as well as key differences, in order to trace and monitor the larger social and communication patterns that resonate throughout the genre and even throughout society. This approach developed thanks to the scholarship of Black (1965), who argued that the neo-Aristotelian method was inadequate. In laying out the case for a generic approach, he asserted:

(1) there is a limited number of situations which a rhetor can find himself, (2) there is a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type, and (3) the recurrence of a given situational type through history will provide the critic with information on the rhetorical responses available in that situation.

(p. 133)

With these three tenets in mind, Black formulated a method of identifying specific events that take place in specific settings. He operated under the assumption that since a finite number of commonly occurring combinations of events and settings exist, rhetors could develop styles suited for certain combinations (Foss, 2018). Certain genres of rhetoric, therefore, follow generic guidelines for style as well as substance (Foss). Once researchers recognize a genre, they can understand what type of discourse is likely and they can readily identify other types of discourse that follow similar patterns.

One example of a rhetorical genre is a patriotic speech, or a speech given on the Fourth of July. Patriotic speeches have a distinct tone, revolve around a specific situation (i.e. the nation's birthday), and carry a clear message of following the values of the early American founders, all factors arrived at through a generic methodology (Hart, Daughton and LaVally, 2018). It is easy to tell when a Fourth of July speech is being delivered as it has a distinct rhetorical style. Apologetic crisis communication is another example of a rhetorical genre (Hearit, 1995), as are so-called gallows speeches (Aly, 1969). As it relates to this study, when a celebrity is caught in a media scandal, the probability is high that he or she will respond similarly to many celebrities who have faced similar situations.

Generic Analysis

The existence of rhetorical genres implies that specific forms of discourse have a similar substance, style, and situation (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). Rhetorical artifacts within each genre are linked by commonalities related to the context that precipitated the message, how the message is delivered, and the content of the message. Defining a rhetorical genre and then

applying a rhetorical artifact to that specific genre provides an opportunity to compare and contrast that artifact with others of a similar nature, allowing for a more in-depth analysis.

One popular example of a rhetorical genre is the eulogy. Most adults have attended at least one memorial service where a funeral oration was delivered. Even those who have never heard a eulogy in person likely have heard one delivered on television for a head of state or political figure. Perhaps one of the most memorable eulogies of the late 20th Century was delivered after the passing of Princess Diana.

I stand before you today the representative of a family in grief in a country in mourning before a world in shock. We are all united not only in our desire to pay respects to Diana but rather in our need to do so. We have all despaired at our loss over the past week and only the strength of the message you gave us through your years of giving has afforded us the strength to move forward. (Earl Spencer, 1997)

When Earl Spencer spoke those words at Princess Diana's funeral, there was no need to explain that he was delivering a eulogy. If a person tuned in late and heard just those two sentences, he or she would have no doubt about that which Spencer was speaking. Methodologically, the identification of the situation, substance, and style combined to reveal that the genre of the speech was undeniably a eulogy.

The situation for Princess Diana's eulogy, and indeed all eulogies, is the passing of a friend, loved one, or respected individual. Death is the precursor to all eulogies and the situational requirement for the genre (Foss, 2018). Eulogies also have a distinct style, or tone, in which they are delivered, and that tone is recognizable. It would be inappropriate for a eulogy to be delivered in the same way as a comedy showcase or an academic presentation. Even without contextual clues like mourners wearing black or photos of the deceased, the very style of the

rhetoric points to the genre of eulogy. Finally, a rhetorical artifact can be classified as a eulogy by noting the substance of the discourse, or the message itself as delivered by the speaker (Hart, Daughton & LaVally, 2018). The eulogies delivered at funerals frequently contain religious or spiritual language. In addition, they are characterized by a review the accomplishments and positive attributes of the deceased, a celebration of what time was spent with the deceased, and an offering of encouragement to the mourners to have hope for the future.

Eulogies and patriotic speeches are not the only easily identifiable rhetorical genres. Apologia is a clearly defined form of communication; discourse that falls within specific apologetic parameters fits into the genre. A rhetorical artifact is within the genre of apologia if it meets situational requirements; that is, if it is delivered when a rhetor is faced with circumstances that stem from charges of illegal, unethical, or inappropriate behavior (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Charges, or *kategoria*, can originate from individuals as well as from organizations or media corporations (Hearit, 1995). The substance of apologetic discourse can take on varied postures; four of them are identified by Ware and Linkugel (1973) as denial, bolstering, differentiating, and transcendence. Stylistically, discourse within the rhetorical genre of apologia often is either conciliatory or justificatory. It may be delivered defensively or with remorse (Hearit, 2006). The possibility of a humor-based apologia differs from the genre of traditional apologia and appears to follow its own rules situationally, substantively, and stylistically.

Humor-based Apologia as a Subgenre

This thesis will investigate whether humor-based apologia is also a rhetorical genre - specifically, a sub-genre of apologia. Like eulogies and crisis communication, it appears as if humor-based apologiae have distinct situations, substance, and style. The situation that calls for

humor-based apologia is within the sphere of an allegation of wrongdoing. As identified by Ryan (1982), apologia is part of a call and response speech set. Without an initial accusation, there is no need for a speech of defense, or an apologia. The types of situations that may lead to humor-based apologia, particularly among the celebrities prone to use of this rhetorical genre, include accusations of sexual infidelity, crude or politically incorrect humor, drug use, and other alleged unethical or illegal behaviors. All of these accusations could result in a crisis for the accused, necessitating a response (Coombs, 2008).

Relatedly, a genre of humor-based apologia would have a distinct style. Like Benoit's image repair typologies of bolstering and minimization (2015), it would appear as if humor-based apologiae are attempts to lessen the perception of wrongdoing through the introduction of levity. Joking about marijuana use could serve to decrease negative public opinion about drug use. Poking fun at allegations of infidelity may function to decrease the severity of the ethical attacks. As such, in order to minimize allegations of wrongdoing, it appears as if rhetors work within this form of discourse to not take an issue seriously. Instead, the style associated with humor-based apologia is irreverent and lighthearted. If a behavioral issue is mocked successfully, then the accused need not take the consequences quite so seriously.

The third major commonality of discourse that fits under the genre of humor-based apologia is substance. This substantive aspect of the genre is the message that is communicated by the accused in response to an allegation, or the "speech of defense" (Tavuchis, 1991). This speech of defense is potentially unique from more common forms of apologia because it is lighthearted and unapologetic. In the place of remorse, there appears to be an air of nonchalance and dismissiveness. Instead of regret, humor-based apologia may be comprised of minimizing remarks, jokes, and humor that distract from the severity of the charge. The message may include

acknowledgement of the alleged wrongdoing, but only in ways that lessen the intensity or negativity of the charge. Further exploration of these ideas will constitute the major thrust of Chapter IV.

The Conduct of Generic Analysis: Saturday Night Live Episodes

Identification of Rhetorical Artifact

This thesis used the generic method of analysis to analyze four *Saturday Night Live* episodes that contain examples of humor-based apologia. The critical analysis offered here specifically examined sketches and monologues delivered by celebrities on *SNL* who were accused of wrongdoing and used the platform of the comedy show to distribute apologia along with humor. The four episodes chosen for analysis feature Rob Lowe, Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, and Lindsay Lohan. In the wake of their own distinct media scandals, these four hosts appeared on *Saturday Night Live* and participated in sketches that referenced those scandals. Instead of offering remorse or apology, as might be expected in more traditional forms of apologia, the four celebrity hosts used humor-based apologia. The decision to focus on these four case studies was the product of a thorough and systematic process. To choose four celebrity hosts on *SNL* to use as case studies, I first secured a list of the show's 895 episodes and identified the celebrity hosts, when possible, for each episode. Initially, I identified two episodes, featuring Rob Lowe and Miley Cyrus, that I recognized as relevant. For both episodes, I was familiar with the content as well as the celebrity crisis referenced in the episode. Then, I supplemented those two cases by researching celebrity crises and cross-referencing those findings with my list of *SNL* hosts. Finally, I confirmed that the crises happened prior to the recording of the show. The result was a total of 6 celebrity hosts who appeared on *SNL* within one year of their respective

celebrity crises. Further review of the six potential episodes revealed four episodes that addressed the celebrity host's scandals through humor. Rob Lowe hosted *SNL* episode 15 of season 15 on March 17, 1990; Miley Cyrus hosted *SNL* episode 16 of season 36 on March 5, 2011; Lindsay Lohan hosted *SNL* episode 16 of season 37 on March 3, 2012; and Justin Bieber hosted *SNL* episode 13 of season 38 on February 9, 2013.

Performing the Close Textual Analysis

Transcripts and video recordings of these four *Saturday Night Live* episodes served as the foundation for a close textual analysis completed using the generic method of critique (Hart, Daughton & LaVally, 2018). As to the specific steps I have taken, analysis began with a thorough reading of all transcripts along with notetaking on patterns and commonalities that emerged through reading (Foss, 2018). This first step included specifically identifying the situation that caused each case study as well as noting my initial identification of the tone or style of each text (e.g. defensive, apologetic, or jovial).

Second, I conducted another reading and analysis of all transcripts; this time I analyzed each statement of every *SNL* host case study through the lens of the 16 Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018). Coding each statement into these 16 Universal Topics allowed for the recognition of emerging patterns as well as frequencies of use. These observations informed and led to critical arguments regarding the content of each case study transcript (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally).

Third, after classifying each statement according to the 16 Universal Topics, analysis took place at a more detailed level. I identified specific quotes or lines of text that appeared significant in terms of apologetic strategies in order to dissect them in greater detail. This was an

opportunity to carefully focus on the intent and impact of word order, word connotations and associations, and the implications of any imagery (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018).

Constituting the Genre

After the reductionist steps have occurred, next, I then reconstituted the genre by considering how each case study related to traditional conceptions of apologia (Hearit, 1995). In so doing, I identified where each case study differed and where it overlapped with the prevailing understanding of situation, style, and substance of apologetic rhetoric. Identifying these factors also provided an opportunity to analyze the goal of each case study and identify what the social actor is hoping to achieve with the production of the rhetorical artifact (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018). Relatedly, analysis examined the messaging of the communication as well; that is, which image repair or crisis communication strategies were used. Some of the many strategies that were identified during this close textual analysis included bolstering, minimization, apology, and corrective action (Benoit, 1995). At this point, I determined whether the fusion that occurred with the intersection of the substance (messaging), style and situation fit into the standard definition of an apology or whether it fit outside of those traditional boundaries.

Identifying the Effects

Finally, my analysis considered the impact of each rhetorical artifact, to the degree it is possible, to first identify whether the intended message was effective and, second, to ascertain what, if any, additional actions and strategies outside of *SNL* (such as social media, press conferences, or additional television appearances), may have contributed to that success. Content analysis was performed primarily through observation rather than through coding.

Although no such formal subgenre of humor-based apologia has been covered in research, the wider schema of traditional crisis response will be referenced when it overlaps with or differs from this potential subgenre. As such, this thesis will analyze the substance, style, and situation for each episode to determine the existence of a genre of humor-based apologia.

Summary

In the following chapter, this thesis will explicate the four examples of humor-based apologia as found in the *Saturday Night Live* episodes hosted by Rob Lowe, Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, and Lindsay Lohan. A close textual analysis of the transcripts and video recordings from all four *SNL* episodes has identified and isolated commonalities between each episode and identified if and how they differ from traditional apologia in substance, style, and situation. Through a case study analysis of all four episodes, this thesis will discuss whether humor-based apologia can be classified as its own distinct genre of rhetoric.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

Of the hundreds of celebrities who have hosted episodes of *Saturday Night Live* since 1975, four stand out as examples who used humor-based apologiae in response to a media crisis. In each case study, the celebrity host attempted to reframe the crisis narrative so as to lessen the lingering negative effects on his or her reputation. The four cases examined in this chapter are Rob Lowe in 1990, Miley Cyrus in 2011, Lindsay Lohan in 2012, and finally, Justin Bieber in 2013; each of whom appeared on *SNL* as a celebrity host following a personal media scandal of some kind. Using these four examples as case studies, I will begin to answer the three research questions introduced in Chapter 3 by performing a close textual analysis of their respective *SNL* appearances.

As such, this chapter will analyze the four celebrity hosts' *SNL* appearances through a generic method of rhetorical analysis and criticism. First, this chapter will examine the situational, substantive, and stylistic components of each appearance and provide a summary of each episode; this will include an analysis through the classification of each artifact according to the 16 Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018). Next, this chapter will consider the ways that each case study fits into traditional classifications of apologia (Hearit, 2006). Finally, I will seek to determine whether each appearance on *Saturday Night Live* can be considered "successful;" that is, whether the intended messaging sufficiently met audience expectations for addressing their wrongdoing as well as the potential influence of other mitigating circumstances.

Generic Criticism of SNL Host Case Studies

To conduct a generic analysis of these four *Saturday Night Live* celebrity host appearances, it is necessary to determine the situation, substance, and style for each case study and compare their similarities to the genre of apologetic communication. The situational requirement for apologetic communication is a charge of illegal, unethical, or inappropriate behavior (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). The substance of the genre of apologia is varied, but five commonly identified overarching message strategies include denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—though they do not account for all of the relevant strategies (Benoit, 2015). From a stylistic perspective, apologetic communication can be conciliatory or justificatory; apologists also can choose to deliver their apologia remorsefully or defensively (Hearit, 2006). A nuanced schema for apologetic style, proposed by Ware and Linkugel (1973) includes four postures of verbal self-defense identified as absolution, vindication, explanation, and justification. In each of the case studies that follow, I first identify the situation for each celebrity and then detail the episode in which said celebrity appears. Then, I explain the substance and style of each appearance before comparing it to traditional conceptions of the genre of apologia and finally analyze its success.

Rob Lowe

Rob Lowe: Situation

Rob Lowe's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* came less than a year after a scandal and court case related to sexual encounters, at least one that included an underage woman, filmed in the summer of 1988 (Mathews, 1989). When Lowe campaigned for presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in Atlanta, Georgia, for the Democratic National Convention at the age of 25,

he met two women at a nightclub, took both back to a hotel room, and filmed their sexual encounter. The women stole the videotape, and Lowe later learned that one of the women was in fact a 16-year-old girl. When the videotape became public, a formal investigation took place (UPI, 1989). The age of consent in the state of Georgia was just 14 in 1988, and Lowe was not charged, though he was held and interviewed through the Pre-Trial Intervention Program in Atlanta. On July 29, 1989, Lowe subsequently signed an agreement with Fulton County court officials, officially ending the investigation for any violations of Georgia laws prohibiting sexual exploitation of a minor (Mathews, 1989; UPI, 1989). Legally, Lowe's punishment was minor. He did not have to formally admit guilt; he was sentenced to 20 hours of community services; and he agreed to 'stay out of trouble' for the two years that followed (UPI).

While the legal ramifications were minor, there was considerable concern about the long-term impact the scandal would have on Lowe's career. In one *Los Angeles Times* article from the summer of 1989, the author wrote: "The question, as the tapes and inevitable jokes make the rounds, is what effect the issue will have on the actor's career?" (Mathews, 1989). Robert F. MacLeod, editorial director and publisher of *TEEN* magazine, removed Lowe from the August issue and stated: "It is inappropriate to publicize a public figure of Lowe's stature when serious charges are challenging his reputation" (Mathews). A full-page advertisement in *Women's Wear Daily* featured a photo of the actor and the tagline "How Lowe Can You Go?" (Mathews). All of these charges function as *kategoriae*, or accusations of wrongdoing (Ryan, 1982) and, when combined with mediated commentary that amplified the charges, they created the situation that led to Lowe's response on *Saturday Night Live*. It should be noted that if these same events took place in 2021, Lowe's response and punishment likely would be very different. The wrongdoing

would be perceived as far more predatory and criminal than it was viewed in the 1980s, and the use of humor in response likely would be seen as inappropriate and even offensive.

Rob Lowe: Episode Summary

Actor Rob Lowe appeared on *Saturday Night Live* on March 17, 1990, as the celebrity host for Episode 15 of Season 15. The episode Lowe hosted came just eight days after the theatrical release of his film *Bad Influence*, an occurrence that aligned with the promotional nature of *SNL*. Lowe took part in many of the sketches and segments of the episode, starting with the cold open. While *SNL* cast member Dana Carvey impersonated then-President George H. Bush giving an address to the nation, the camera cut to Lowe in the dressing room, worried about the audience reaction to his sexual misconduct, getting advice and support from other cast members and even *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels. The sketch ended as Lowe appeared on the stage to deliver the traditional opening monologue to the show's audience.

Lowe also appeared in a sketch titled Church Chat with a recurring character named the Church Lady, again played by Dana Carvey. In Church Chat, Lowe played himself in an interview with the Church Lady, who skirted around Lowe's past indiscretions before spanking him with a paddle. Later in the show, Lowe appeared in Helmet Head as a man stuck in a helmet after years of service in the military. Finally, Lowe parodied Arsenio Hall with an over-the-top fictional character named Arsenio Beckman.

Rob Lowe: Substance

The substance of Rob Lowe's appearance on *SNL* included a number of more traditional apologetic strategies as defined by Benoit (2015). Overall, the sketches were designed to reduce

the offensiveness of the charges and to minimize their severity. Through jokes delivered on stage about the charges, and tongue-in-cheek references to them, Lowe and the other cast members on *SNL* minimized the allegations; the implication that they were less serious than they appeared in the media. Furthermore, the appearance on *SNL* bolstered Lowe's image through the revelation that he was an actor with comedic timing who could laugh at the media storm that surrounded his own indiscretions. Through a demonstration of his self-deprecating humor, Lowe showed the audience that he had personality and wit, and perhaps did not take himself (or the charges) too seriously. Therefore, Lowe relied on strategies of bolstering and minimization in his *SNL* apologia. Lowe's discourse involved many of the 16 Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018); those that appeared most frequently included desirability/undesirability, correlation, existence, and substance.

Another key aspect of Lowe's implied message while on *SNL* was that the people who were concerned about his behavior were probably prudish, uptight, or otherwise uncool. This especially is noticeable in the Church Lady sketch, because Lowe played along with a caricature of a religious person who was bothered by Lowe's actions but one who also visibly enjoyed the act of talking about deviant behavior and then punishing the actor by spanking him with a paddle. Lowe revealed this faux accuser to be a hypocrite and a religious fanatic, and, in doing so, communicated to a wider audience that anyone who cares too much about his actions also falls in the same camp. This type of satirical humor itself is a strategy, a form of counterattack that mocks and shows contempt toward anyone who dwells on the charges brought against Lowe.

Lowe's sketches on *SNL* also demonstrated his acknowledgment of the charges levied against him. He does not argue against the fact that he had sex with a minor and filmed it.

Instead, he recognized the charges as a deliberate strategy. His punishment was time served on the stage of *SNL*; he served as a punching bag for jokes at his expense. This is an example of what Hearit (2003) has described as “proportional humiliation.” Humor is, of course, a big part of the strategy; self-deprecation and mockery are two common varieties. Many of the jokes are set up to be appreciated by those who are on the inside, who understand the subtext of the humor, and who have knowledge about the allegations against Lowe. Those who cannot or do not laugh at the jokes are either not in the know or are too uptight to appreciate the humor in the situation.

Rob Lowe: Style

In both the situation and substance of Rob Lowe’s appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, there were similarities between the actor’s approach and the strategies of someone who employs a more traditional approach to apologia. There was a much more noticeable departure from the norm, however, when the style of the appearance is considered. Lowe’s delivery certainly was not defensive. At no point in the show did he argue that the charges levied against him were incorrect or even inaccurate. Nor did Lowe try to defend himself or his actions, which ruled out the postures of absolution and vindication (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Neither was he apologetic. Instead Lowe appeared to accept responsibility calmly and in good humor, encouraging others to do the same. He offered no apology for his actions. Lowe did not seek to explain or justify his behavior.

Throughout the show, Lowe managed to find a calculated balance between sincerity and intensity. In the cold open, he seemed to be genuine. He wanted to ensure that the audience would be able to move past the sex tape, and others came to his aid to encourage him before he walked onto the stage for the monologue. Later in the show, however, Lowe appeared far less

sincere. In the Church Lady sketch, Lowe played one half of a double act: the straight man to the Church Lady's funny man. The Church Lady was ridiculous and over-the-top, a character who does not exist in reality. Lowe, on the other hand, played a version of himself: calm, collected, willing to accept the punishment for the crime, but equally ready to move on and discuss his upcoming film. This arrangement allowed Lowe to seem normal and down-to-Earth when compared to the more outrageous personalities featured in the *Saturday Night Live* sketches.

Miley Cyrus

Miley Cyrus: Situation

Miley Cyrus' career has been plagued by a number of scandals, but at the time of her *SNL* appearance in March 2011, when she was just 18, the latest scandal involved a video of the star smoking a bong before declaring to the camera that she was "having a little bit of a bad trip" (Schwartz, 2010). The video featured Cyrus giggling, mumbling incoherently, and then saying: "I want more of that s---" (Schwartz). In the wake of the publicity about the bong hit, Cyrus reported that the bong contained salvia rather than marijuana. Salvia, a hallucinogen, was a legal drug in California at the time of the incident. Recreational marijuana use, on the other hand, was illegal in California in 2011 and remained so until a ballot measure passed in 2016 (Detrick, 2010).

The release of the video caused public outcry, particularly among parents who referenced Miley Cyrus' role on the popular Disney Channel show *Hannah Montana* (Coppie, 2010). The television show, which aired until January 2011, was geared toward children and young teens; it starred Miley Cyrus as the fictional popstar Hannah Montana. Media attention on Cyrus' leaked video revolved around whether the young actor acted appropriately in her capacity as a Disney

star and a role model who was revered by many young girls. Critics complained about Cyrus' behavior:

Miley built her fame and fortune entirely on the backs of young girls, and it saddens us that she seems so eager to distance herself from that fan base so rapidly. The young people that see her as a role model could mimic the same behavior. (Copple)

Cyrus was apologetic in an interview with *Marie Claire* following the incident, saying:

I made a mistake . . . I'm disappointed in myself for disappointing my fans. So for me it was a bad decision, because of my fans and because of what I stand for. (Mapes, 2011)

There was no genuine fear that Miley would be arrested for the use of a bong in California.

However, public charges that she had acted inappropriately for her age or let down her young audience had the potential to jeopardize her career. The use of humor on *SNL*, therefore, was another example of an apologia in response to a kategoria (Ryan, 1982).

Miley Cyrus: Episode Summary

Singer, actress, and former child star Miley Cyrus appeared on *Saturday Night Live* on March 5, 2011, as the celebrity host for Episode 16 of Season 36. In the typically promotional nature of *SNL* celebrity hosts, the star's appearance came just one month before the start of her worldwide *Gypsy Heart Tour*. Cyrus appeared in many of the episode's sketches, including a segment called the Miley Cyrus Show in which cast members Vanessa Bayer and Jason Sudeikis impersonated Miley Cyrus and her father Billy Ray Cyrus. The real Miley Cyrus played fellow child star turned megastar Justin Bieber. A conversation between Bayer (in the role of Cyrus) and Cyrus (in the role of Bieber) explored the issue of drug use for both teens. Bayer, as Cyrus, said: "So you're growing up. Like me, doing salvia! Did you know I smoked salvia?" With an increasingly frustrated tone and a gaze directed at the camera, Cyrus as Bieber responded: "You

know, there's no reason why you wouldn't, because it's totally legal, yo." (Saturday Night Live; March 5, 2011). There is no question to anyone aware of Cyrus' career that the retort referenced the young star's own salvia-related scandal.

Miley Cyrus also starred in sketches as a moisturizing cream spokesperson and an acting coach, but the most direct response to coverage of her bong use in 2010 was the monologue, where Cyrus delivered a song titled, *I'm Sorry that I'm Not Perfect*. As preface, Cyrus mentioned some of her minor scandals: "And, you know, that might upset some people, and for that . . . I'm truly sorry." She then burst into song:

There's a photo of me/being kissed by a dude
And Annie Liebowitz tried to get me nude
For those of who think that's very crude
I'm sorry that I'm not perfect
I never stole a necklace/or got a DUI
Never cheated on my wife like that golfer guy
So what you can see a little boob from the side?
I'm sorry that I'm not perfect
And sure, I dance on a pole
And people called it sinning
But at least I didn't date a porn star
And tell everyone I'm winning
Didn't make a dirty tape/and pass it along
Didn't text a photo of your dong
Don't both of these things seem worse than a bong?

I'm sorry

So sorry

I'm really sorry that I'm not perfect (Saturday Night Live; March 5, 2011)

In this song, Cyrus minimized her actions by comparing them to the many other inappropriate or illegal celebrity actions in recent history. In comparison to those incidents, however, her wrongdoings appeared minor and not worthy of significant public attention.

Miley Cyrus: Substance

The substance of Miley Cyrus' messaging while appearing as a celebrity host on *Saturday Night Live* focused on minimization of the severity of her public scandals. Right from the cold open monologue, Cyrus fixated on the seemingly minor allegations she was charged with in the media. In the first song, Cyrus asked whether the use of a bong is really that bad, and the cast members that joined her onstage for the performance nodded and verbally agreed with her statement. This was part of a larger strategy to reduce the offensiveness of the charges through minimization. If Cyrus and the cast members of *Saturday Night Live* did not see the use of salvia as a problem, why should the audience?

Since Cyrus appeared to be in on the joke, and was not afraid to laugh at herself, bolstering was another traditional strategy that makes up the substance of her messaging. She did not attempt to deny the charges, nor did she dwell on them. Instead, she mentioned them as punchlines, acknowledging the charge that she was a bad role model for young girls. References about the use of a bong and later the use of salvia means Cyrus did not attempt to shy away from the topic; those details were kept in the dialogue to show that she was comfortable with their use and was not afraid to admit it. Her performance existed in the tension created by acknowledging

the allegations without apologizing for them. Cyrus's discourse focused on the Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018) of similarity/dissimilarity, existence, and substance.

Another key part of the messaging throughout Miley Cyrus' appearance on *SNL* is comparing her misdeeds to the misdeeds of other celebrities as demonstrated by a strategy of differentiation. In her opening monologue song, Cyrus referenced Tiger Woods's extramarital affair, Charlie Sheen's relationship with an adult film actress, Lindsay Lohan's theft of a necklace and DUI charge, and the many celebrities who have had sex tapes or shared inappropriate photos. By comparison, her own youthful indiscretions no longer seemed to be that serious. Rather than trying to deny the charges, she minimized them through comparison. This rhetorical move also introduced the theme of hypocrisy to the audience. After all, if the audience continued to be entertained by the many celebrities who committed far worse offenses than Cyrus, why should they not continue to support her? Choosing to forgive a thief or an adulterer should, to most people, be more difficult than forgiving a teenager who used a legal recreational drug. Questioning why it is hard to accept a young woman's imperfections used satire to hold up a critical mirror to Western society's ideals for women.

Part of the substance of Cyrus' message on *SNL* is her use of humor. Self-depreciation ran throughout the sketches; she was not afraid to make herself the punchline of the joke. In one entire sketch, a cast member played Miley Cyrus and mocked her vocabulary, enthusiasm, and father. Cyrus was unfazed throughout the sketch and stayed in character, proving that she was in on the joke and not afraid to be the object of the humor—and not just the subject. Humor, and in particular sarcasm, was a deliberate strategy used in Cyrus' apologia on *Saturday Night Live*.

Miley Cyrus: Style

Miley Cyrus' messaging style appeared, in the first seconds of the monologue, to be apologetic. However, her "I'm sorry . . ." quickly trails off and concludes with ". . . I'm not perfect" (Saturday Night Live; March 5, 2011). Not a true apology, she was mocking the societal expectation that asks women, and in particular young women, to achieve impossible beauty and behavioral standards. Any apology she verbalized, therefore, ultimately was insincere. She did not explain her motivations, nor did she justify her actions, which ruled out both the explanatory and justificatory postures of verbal self-defense (Ware & Linkugel, 1973).

Cyrus was not remorseful; instead she took a sort of glee in reminding the world that she engaged in adult behavior that might be frowned upon by some. She did not attempt to seek absolution through denial. One traditional posture used by Cyrus, at least to some degree, was that of vindication (Ware & Linkugel). The actress did not compare herself to her accusers, but she did ask her accusers to compare her actions to those of other celebrities who faced more severe charges of wrongdoing, a move that is consistent with vindication. She also used humor frequently and kept an upbeat appearance throughout the show; she demonstrated impressive delivery throughout. Whether playing the character of Justin Bieber or playing herself, she was confident and direct. Any mentions of her allegations were tongue-in-cheek, with a wink to the camera. She did not convey a sense of shame or embarrassment about any of the acts that precipitated her media scandals.

Lindsay Lohan

Lindsay Lohan: Situation

For Lindsay Lohan, 2010 and 2011 were rife with media scandals. In May 2010, news broke that Lohan had missed scheduled court appearances and court-ordered alcohol counseling sessions, which were conditions of her parole after charges of DUI, drug possession, and transporting a narcotic into a custody facility (Tauber & McNeil, 2010). Later that July, Lohan served 13 days in jail at Lynwood in Los Angeles. After her release, Lohan planned to complete a rehab program but ultimately failed to appear in court for mandatory drug testing. She was forced to wear an alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelet in September of 2010 and later checked into a rehab facility in Rancho Mirage, California (Duke, 2012).

Compounding Lohan's alcohol and drug abuse issues, the actress allegedly walked out of a high-end jewelry store in Venice, California, with a necklace valued at \$2,500 (Duke, 2012). As a result of this theft, Lohan was sentenced to over 400 hours of community services and 120 days in jail, which she served under house arrest due to overcrowding at the Los Angeles correctional system (Duke). In November 2011, after again violating conditions of her parole, Lohan served just a few hours of her 30-day sentence due to prison overcrowding.

The crimes outlined above are not exhaustive, but they summarize the most severe of Lohan's criminal actions and very real legal consequences. In Lohan's case, hers was not just a trial by public opinion; she also defended herself in a court of law. Unsurprisingly, this was accompanied by an ongoing media scandal. Young, wealthy, and famous, Lohan was the unofficial spokesperson for inappropriate celebrity behavior.

There also were creative and financial consequences due to Lohan's bad behavior. "Her career has suffered acutely . . . with few producers willing to subject their projects to her erratic

life” (Tauber & McNeil, 2010). Despite her acting abilities, Lohan was not frequently cast for roles for fear that she would cause problems or simply not show up to the set, something that she was accused of many times before and after her 2012 *SNL* appearance (Rodrick, 2013). It is likely that Lohan hoped to use her hosting appearance on *SNL* as a way to show that she could show up, perform, and succeed despite the DUI, grand larceny, and inpatient drug treatment of the months prior.

Lindsay Lohan: Episode Summary

Actress and singer Lindsay Lohan appeared on *Saturday Night Live* on March 3, 2012, as the celebrity host for Episode 16 of Season 37. In a departure from most celebrity host appearances, Lohan appeared on *SNL* to promote herself more than to promote a career. There was no film, album, or global tour about to begin. Instead, her appearance on the show was rooted in a desire to remain relevant as a comedic actress after a turbulent year of personal and public scandals. This appearance was the fourth time that Lohan hosted *SNL*, a likely indicator that appearances on the show thus far had been a positive for her public image.

Lohan appeared in a number of *SNL* sketches, some of which referenced her latest media scandals. In the opening monologue, an alarm blared when Lohan stepped too far forward on the stage, as if she had on a court-ordered ankle monitor. Cast member Jimmy Fallon rounded out the monologue by saying:

You can do this! This is the return of Lindsay Lohan. The new old Lindsay Lohan is back! Everybody makes mistakes, but that doesn't mean you can't shake them off. I mean, you can do this. And if for any reason you can't, Jon Hamm is on standby as backup host. (*Saturday Night Live*; March 3, 2012)

Various cast members appeared next to Lohan, ostensibly to offer her encouragement, but the subtext revealed each was there to ensure that she was not on drugs or smuggling contraband.

The other sketch that focused heavily on Lohan's past was a parody of the popular-at-the-time television show *Beyond Scared Straight*. In the *SNL* sketch, three male cast members who posed as teen delinquents were forced to endure a talk, à la *Beyond Scared Straight*, from two prisoners in a jail office overseen by a bumbling police chief. In the sketch, Lohan and cast member Keenan Thompson acted like hardened criminals. When it was revealed that the teen delinquents stole bicycles, Thompson explained: "It starts with bike-jacking . . . guess where it ends?" Lohan finished: "You're in Malibu in rehab." To this warning, one of the teens responded: "That actually doesn't sound so bad!" Later, in detailing her own criminal history, Lohan explained:

What, you don't think I got into trouble with a vehicle before? One time, I became friends with a Volkswagen Beetle that had a mind of its own! I believe his name was Herbert. I magically switched places with my mom and have to live in her body for a week. Then I discovered I have a twin sister and had to develop a scheme to get our parents to reunite. Is that what you want, huh? First you're hanging out with the mean girls and then you get accused of stealing a diamond necklace? Because this here is real. (Saturday Night Live; March 3, 2012)

This diatribe, of course, was a recap of Lohan's biggest film roles; it referenced plot points from movies including *Herbie: Fully Loaded*, *Freaky Friday*, *Parent Trap*, and *Mean Girls*. However, the final line, which referenced the stolen diamond necklace, is drawn from Lohan's own criminal act, for which she was sentenced to four months of jail time (Duke, 2012).

In another sketch from the episode, a parody of the *Real Housewives* franchise called *The Real Housewives of Disney*, Lohan played Rapunzel among a group of other Disney princesses. She also appeared as a guest in a radio show sketch and as part of a delinquent girl gang who repeatedly attack a character played by Fred Armisen.

Lindsay Lohan: Substance

The substance of Lohan's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* included several image repair strategies identified by Benoit (2015) but also present were new message strategies that deviated from those traditional core strategies. Lohan did attempt to reduce the offensiveness of her crimes simply by appearing on stage prepared to laugh at herself and her mistakes, relying on the strategy of bolstering. Without the need to defend her actions or show shame or remorse, Lohan presented to the audience the idea that those actions are not serious. This also worked in conjunction with her attempts to minimize the charges. She did this when she combined her recent crimes with events that happened in her movies, stringing them together until the whole collection of actions seemed silly rather than problematic. Adding the theft of a diamond necklace to meeting a Volkswagen Beetle that can talk (referencing Lohan's fictional role in *Herbie: Fully Loaded*) lessened the gravity of the crime and created a humorous twist to reframe her actions. Throughout her discourse, the Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018) of causality, capacity to change, spatial, and substance appeared most often.

Merely appearing on the show with a jovial attitude also bolstered Lohan's image. Like other celebrity hosts who use humorous apologiae on *SNL*, Lohan did not deny the *kategoriae* levied against her. She resigned herself to the charges, and in fact brought them up multiple times throughout the show. Neither did she admit guilt, however. She was the butt of the joke through the use of self-deprecating humor in several sketches, which is punishment for the crime, and through that punishment Lohan attempted to bolster her image as a person who is fun and lighthearted rather than one who is guilty. Lohan found a delicate balance through an acknowledgement of the wrongdoing while avoiding a genuine apology.

In addition to the use of self-deprecating humor, Lohan relied on a number of other types of humor in her apologia. Absurdity is one form, and it is prevalent in the *Scared Straight* sketch. When Lohan and Thompson played incarcerated individuals, they took on ridiculous caricatures. The language and behavior used was wildly inappropriate for a police station, as was the friendly relationship the pair have with the police officer in charge. The absurdity of the situation reminded audiences that Lohan was not a criminal, and the hypothetical situation created in the sketch in which Lohan is incarcerated did not make logical sense. Highlighting the absurdity of the situation told the audience that Lohan is a celebrity, not a criminal.

Finally, the use of satire was present in the *Scared Straight* sketch. The sketch points out that the scare tactics used in programs like *Scared Straight* are comically inappropriate and ineffective. When Lohan pointed out that the end result of criminal behavior is rehab in Malibu, the audience realized that the punishment was not so severe. As a result, the audience might have noted that if the punishment is merely a spa-like rehab on the beaches of Southern California, then by extension the crimes committed must not be that bad. The logical response was to assume that any crimes Lohan had been charged with could not be severe if the punishment was mild or even potentially enjoyable.

Lindsay Lohan: Style

Lindsay Lohan's sketches on *Saturday Night Live* were delivered without apology, defensiveness, or remorse. At no point in the episode did Lohan apologize for her behavior or ask for forgiveness. Throughout the episode, Lohan avoided all of the four primary postures of verbal self-defense (Ware & Linkugel). When she spoke about the scandals in her recent past,

she did so in a matter-of-fact way, with little emotion in her tone. She joked and laughed often, which kept the appearance light and free from seriousness.

While Lohan did not take a defensiveness stance when it came to her actions, her opening monologue did contain some defensiveness with regard to the lack of trust shown by the cast of *SNL* during the appearance. She seemed shocked when two cast members appeared on stage to check her eyes for signs of drug use and pat her body down in search of contraband. She seemed equally shocked to see Jon Hamm in the audience as her replacement in the event that Lohan messed up in some way and could not complete her *SNL* performance. In the middle of the monologue, Lohan said: “I thought you guys trusted me?” In that moment, she feigned shock that anyone would judge her based on her past actions, and her body language similarly implied that she was surprised, though she was in on the joke throughout.

Justin Bieber

Justin Bieber: Situation

In 2013, Justin Bieber was one of the most famous entertainers in the world (Billboard, 2015). A documentary that followed 10 days in the life of the superstar, *Never Say Never*, was released in 2011 and was the highest grossing music concert movie since the 1980s (Billboard, 2015). His album *Believe* debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 (Billboard, 2015). However, the singer also was in the midst of a series of media scandals. The most significant and relevant of these scandals, and the one addressed in the show, involved Bieber’s recreational drug use.

In January of 2013, photos emerged in the press that depicted Bieber holding a marijuana joint with friends at a party (Cills, 2014). Multiple images from varied perspectives showed the

young singer as he smoked the joint and passed it around the room, which was strewn with drug paraphernalia (TMZ, 2013). Two days after the images were made public, Bieber tweeted his response with the words: “i see all of u. i hear all of u. i never want to let any of you down. i love u. and..thank u. #beliebers” (@justinbieber, Twitter, 2013). This tweet does not meet the criteria of a traditional apology, but it did acknowledge that Bieber recognized his actions may have potentially disappointed his enormous fan base.

There were no criminal actions taken against Bieber as a result of his on-camera drug use. However, it did tie into a larger story about a photographer who died as he tried to take photos of Justin Bieber and his vehicles just days prior. The photographer claimed to have seen Bieber using a pipe of some kind while behind the wheel of his Ferrari and called the agency where he worked to let them know about the story (Cills, 2014). Less than an hour after that call, the photographer was hit by a vehicle as he crossed a street to take better pictures of Bieber’s Ferrari. Although the Ferrari in question was driven by a friend of Bieber’s, and Bieber was not on site at the time of the accident, his brand and identity were still tied to the incident (Cills). In response, Bieber’s PR rep released a statement to TMZ saying:

It's really sad that people are trying to push a story without the facts so soon after this tragic accident. Justin was not present or involved in this incident and the focus should remain on honoring the memory of the victim. (Cills)

To have photo evidence of Justin Bieber using drugs just days after the photographer’s death may have shifted the public perception that the singer was innocent in the accident. If the photographer’s “scoop” about Bieber’s drug use was true, then perhaps he had greater reason to get a clear shot and break the story in a hurry despite the risks. Although Bieber never was implicated in the photographer’s death, he was associated with it, as was his drug use. Celebrity

teen drug use and a connection to a paparazzi fatality is undeniably headline fodder, and Bieber received ample media attention as a result of the scandals (Cills).

Justin Bieber: Episode Summary

Singer Justin Bieber appeared on *Saturday Night Live* on February 9, 2013 as the celebrity host and musical guest for Episode 13 of Season 38. In addition to providing Bieber with a chance to deliver a humorous apology, appearing as the host also meant that the singer could promote his album *Believe Acoustic*, which was released just two weeks prior (Billboard, 2015). As both the musical guest and the host, Bieber was heavily featured throughout the show and played the starring role in a number of sketches. His duties as host began with a monologue in which he played up his status as a heartthrob but also made fun of himself by getting numerous Black history facts outrageously wrong. Justin Bieber also played a parody version of Danny Zuko from *Grease*, a Southern California runaway, and a popstar who was in need of a body double.

In addressing his media scandals, one sketch stood out as an unusual example of an apology. Bieber appeared on a recurrent sketch called the Miley Cyrus Show in which cast member Vanessa Bayer played a caricature of Cyrus. Bieber played the nerdy president of the Miley Cyrus Fan Club who fawned over the singer. In the sketch, Bieber poked fun at himself, mocking popstar Bieber's looks and talent. At one point, Bieber's character said of Bieber:

I heard he still has his baby teeth. I also heard he got busted for smoking weed, and he's really sorry about it, and that people make mistakes, and he's never going to do it again. (Saturday Night Live; February 9, 2013)

To this statement, the character of Miley Cyrus, played by Bayer, responded with a smile and a wink: “yeah, right!” (Saturday Night Live; February 9, 2013). This rejoinder, directly to the camera, implied that Bieber’s apology was anything but genuine.

Justin Bieber: Substance

Some of the traditional strategies to reduce offensiveness are used in Justin Bieber’s appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. Throughout the episode, Bieber made fun of himself and bolstered his image by showcasing his humor, his talent, and his ability to laugh at himself. He committed to sketches fully, even when they required him to say outlandish statements or skewer his own behaviors, dance moves, voice and personal style, as they did in a sketch in which body doubles showed their ability to look like Justin Bieber through a series of comically unattractive moves and poses. The use of self-deprecating humor is a clear part of Bieber’s apologetic strategy. In addition to bolstering, he also attempted to minimize the offensiveness of his wrongdoings in the Miley Cyrus Show, such as when the Cyrus character also acknowledged her drug use. If multiple young people were using drugs recreationally, then perhaps it is not as big of a deal as media would have the public believe. Bieber’s strategy involved acknowledgement of the wrongdoing in his recent history while also avoiding a true apology. In his discourse, Bieber used the Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018) of form, substance, and desirability/undesirability most often.

A new strategy in messaging also came by way of the Miley Cyrus Show sketch when Bieber apologized for Bieber’s actions while impersonating another character. This meta-apology allowed Bieber to apologize for his actions with the words “he’s really sorry” and “he’s never going to do it again,” but he did not have to accept any responsibility or admit guilt since it

was his character who offered up the apology (Saturday Night Live; February 9, 2013). Although the audience heard Justin Bieber utter an apology on live television, Bieber himself did not actually accept responsibility or admit guilt. The idea of offering an apology issued in character is a far cry from the mortification strategy as outlined by Benoit (2015), although it does add a creative twist. When Hearit (1995) outlined the five steps of apology as crisis management, he did not specify whether the accused could offer up an apology while in character and playing the role of someone else. By making a mockery of the whole apology process, Bieber subverted the need for an apology at all, which minimized the offense. In doing so, he reframed the narrative and asked the audience to see his wrongdoings as minor infractions that did not require a formal apology or corrective action.

Justin Bieber: Style

Justin Bieber delivered all of his sketches with a sense of confidence. Even when his timing or delivery was less impressive than that of the more experienced cast members who appeared on stage, Bieber committed to the sketches and seemed to be having fun. At moments, he acted shyly, often when his persona as a heartthrob was the object and not just the subject of the joke. Overall, he was confident and self-possessed throughout. There was no evidence of defensiveness or seeking approval, which eliminated the postures of explanation and justification. Likewise, Bieber did not deny wrongdoing, nor did he attack his accusers. This eliminated the remaining stylistic postures of verbal self-defense, absolution and vindication, as identified by Ware and Linkugel (1973).

At no point in the show does the audience see remorse from Bieber. His head is held high, figuratively speaking, throughout the episode. Even at the brief point when Bieber

apologized while in character as someone else, the audience did not get the sense that he was serious or that his apology was genuine.

Generic Analysis Summary

Each of the celebrity hosts used a variety of apologetic strategies on *Saturday Night Live* (Table 1). Common strategies included bolstering and minimization (Benoit, 2015), both of which served to reduce the overall offensiveness of the charges leveled against the hosts in the media. In addition, all hosts used humor as a strategy that worked well in conjunction with reducing offensiveness. Making light of the kategoriae encouraged the audience to view the celebrities' wrongdoings as significant and also, therefore, less problematic and easier to forgive. None of the four celebrity hosts denied their charges, but none offered a genuine apology—nor did they offer any corrective action. In addition, not one of the celebrity hosts utilized any of the primary stylistic postures as identified by Ware and Linkugel (1973). A brief exception is the case of Miley Cyrus, whose comparison of her own behavior to far worse celebrity behavior came close to the posture of vindication during the opening monologue. Overall, the celebrities resigned themselves to their charges and remained confident, lighthearted, and calm.

Table 1

Apologetic Strategies Employed by Celebrity SNL Hosts

Celebrity SNL Host	Strategies Used in <i>SNL</i> Apologia
Rob Lowe	Bolstering, minimization, counterattack, humor
Miley Cyrus	Bolstering, minimization, differentiation, humor
Lindsay Lohan	Bolstering, minimization, humor
Justin Bieber	Bolstering, minimization, humor

Reconstituting the Genre

After analyzing the *Saturday Night Live* hosting appearances of Lowe, Lohan, Cyrus, and Bieber, this thesis now compares how each example of humorous apologia conforms to the norms of the genre. By comparing each celebrity’s apologia to the tenets of traditional apologia in terms of situation, substance, and style, I seek to identify whether these four case studies fit within the parameters of traditional apologia or whether they constitute their own sub-genre. In addition, I also examine whether each celebrity *SNL* appearance ultimately was successful in shifting the narrative for the celebrity host and whether the show itself was a likely factor in the equation.

Rob Lowe: Comparison to Apologetic Genre

The situation that preceded Rob Lowe’s appearance on *SNL* is very much in keeping with the situations that lead to traditional examples of apologia. Lowe was faced with legal charges that involved illegally filming a minor in a sexual act. That is more than just a scandal; it is a serious crime with potentially life-ruining effects for the actor as well as his victims. There

clearly and definitively was a need for a response of some kind, and the situation called for an apologia.

Similarly, the substance of Lowe's appearance on *SNL* fits, at least partially, within the traditional parameters of apologetic messaging. Bolstering and reducing offensiveness, for example, are common strategies as identified by Benoit (2015) that Lowe used in both his opening monologue and in the Church Lady sketch. However, Lowe also relied on a less traditional strategy of acknowledging the charges without accepting responsibility. Lowe's message is not that he did not commit the crimes of which he is accused, but that he pleads no contest and is ready to move on and uses the self-deprecating humor of the show to demonstrate his penance.

The style used in Lowe's *SNL* appearance, however, is far from the bounds of traditional apologia. While traditional apologiae rely on one of four postures of verbal self-defense, Lowe used none of those tactics in his appearance on the comedy show. He was visibly concerned with the public's perception of him in the wake of the scandal, and talked about that openly in his monologue, but he did not admit wrongdoing. Lowe also accepted being the butt of the jokes (quite literally when he is spanked repeatedly on stage in the Church Lady skit), and acted in a jovial, comedic manner throughout the episode. Notably, this style made the audience comfortable. It did not cause the audience to cringe or feel secondhand embarrassment, because Lowe did not appear to be embarrassed. Similarly, it intimated to the audience that it did not need to think about his crimes in a serious way, because he made light of them. The use of this style to frame the narrative in this way encouraged the audience to continue to see Lowe as a fun, cool, and likeable person.

Rob Lowe: Level of Success and Contributing Factors

Lowe's appearance on *SNL* was a success. Approximately 30 years later, Lowe still points to that episode as the turning point in his career, and a noteworthy moment that allowed him to show off his comedic talents. On an episode from the podcast *Armchair Expert*, Lowe had the following exchange with host Dax Shepard:

Lowe: And for me, the lesson I learned is that if you take a chance like that...by the way, my lawyers didn't want me to do it, my agents didn't want me to do. Nobody wanted to do it, but I wanted to do it. And it started a relationship with Lorne, and Mike Myers, and Farley, and Spade, that brought Tommy Boy, Wayne's World, Austin Powers...none of that happens if I don't do that show.

Shepard: Yeah, and interestingly, like you don't do that, I don't know that Mike Schur thinks . . . oh let's bring Rob Lowe in to do comedy on Parks and Rec. You can trace it all back.

Lowe: All to that monologue. Literally all to that monologue. (*Armchair Expert*; April 27, 2020)

This exchange revealed that to Lowe and others, his appearance on *SNL* had a notable and positive impact on his career and his public image.

Lowe's appearance on *SNL* was far from the only element of his apologia. In addition to using humor on the show, Lowe also apologized publicly in a more traditional manner. He did this often while promoting his film *Bad Influence*, particularly as the title and premise of the film tied into the actor's own scandal (Mathews, 1989). It is difficult to determine whether the apologies or the humorous apologia was responsible for the success and longevity of Lowe's career, but he attributed a great deal to the *SNL* episode (*Armchair Expert*, 2020).

After the 1990 appearance on *SNL*, Lowe went on to have an impressive career by any standard. What is most striking is that despite his association with sex tapes and sexual activity with minors, Lowe appeared in a number of family-friendly, wholesome shows. He was not

relegated to the realm of R-rated films or gritty series with poor production values airing on late-night television. Lowe appeared as the star of the political drama *The West Wing* from 1999 to 2003 as well as the comedy *Parks and Recreation* from 2010 to 2014. In 2020, Lowe's net worth was estimated between \$60 and \$100 million (Thomas, 2020). By all accounts, he has enjoyed a successful career; the scandal of 1989 and 1990 is just a brief flash in his rearview mirror.

Miley Cyrus: Comparison to Apologetic Genre

The situation that led to the need for Cyrus' public response aligns with the situations associated with traditional apologia. Cyrus was seen using a bong and acting in a way consistent with drug use, and the actress later told the public that the substance in the bong was salvia, a legal recreational drug in the State of California. A well-known personality caught using drugs is not an uncommon occurrence in the kategoria/apologia call and response set (Ryan, 1982). Compounding this was the fact that Miley Cyrus was a popular Disney star and therefore a role model for a young audience; this made her drug use more shocking and inappropriate to the general public.

Miley Cyrus delivered a number of messages on her *SNL* appearance, and many of them aligned with strategies commonly employed in apologiae. The substance of her appearance included bolstering, as Cyrus tried to improve her perception by showcasing her personality and willingness to participate, and the minimization of charges, as she compared her scandal to the far more serious wrongdoings of other celebrities. Cyrus did introduce a number of less common messages, however, in addition to these traditional strategies. For example, Cyrus introduced the idea of hypocrisy. If an audience can forgive men and women for theft and adultery, should it not have an easier time forgiving Cyrus for legal drug use? Pointing this out subtly to the crowd

through song, as Cyrus did in her opening monologue, reminded the audience that it should not really care about the allegations. In addition, Cyrus resigned herself to the charges she faced publicly. Yes, she did what she was accused of; however, she would not apologize for it or admit that her actions were wrong.

The major differentiator between Cyrus' appearance on *SNL* and traditional characteristics of the apologetic genre is style. Her use of humorous apologia did not include justification, absolution, or explanation; a momentary hint of vindication was noticeable but did not define her posture. Her tongue-in-cheek delivery was far from serious, and that lighthearted tone implied that the audience should not take the charges seriously. If the accused (in this case, Cyrus) could brush off the allegations, then she was not worried about the consequences. This reframing of the narrative was a subtle technique to downplay the severity of the wrongdoing. Although she drew attention to the allegations through her television appearance, Cyrus reminded the public that her actions did not warrant the kind of attention they were receiving.

Miley Cyrus: Level of Success and Contributing Factors

While correlation does not equal causation, after her appearance on *SNL* Miley Cyrus has continued to have a successful career. That is not to say that the actress and singer has not encountered additional scandals in the years since, but she continued to have influence across the entertainment industry through tours, albums, sponsorship deals, and high-profile relationships (Billboard, 2017). However, it is important to recognize that this appearance on *SNL* was not her only attempt at damage repair done in response to her leaked bong video. In an interview with *Marie Claire* that preceded her *SNL* appearance, she expressed remorse over her actions and

explicitly apologized to her fans, particularly those young fans for whom she was a role model (Mapes, 2011).

Cyrus' appearance on *SNL* did play a role in a narrative shift away from the idea that a young, wholesome pop star was a drug user. Instead, the message evolved to say that Cyrus was a young adult, and as such was likely to do the things that other young adults were doing – including experimenting with drugs and sexual activity. This is a common trope among former child stars; in its enactment Cyrus rebranded herself as a more mature performer around the time of this *SNL* appearance, though it was not the only factor that reshaped the narrative. She demonstrated that the *SNL* hosting gig was effective because she reappeared on the show several times afterwards. After her debut in 2011, Cyrus served as host and musical guest in 2013 and 2015. If she felt that her appearance did not effectively address the issue and promote her work, she likely would not have agreed to keep coming on the show.

Lindsay Lohan: Comparison to Apologetic Genre

When Lindsay Lohan appeared as the celebrity host on *Saturday Night Live* in 2012, she did so following a number of public incidents. In the months prior to her appearance, Lohan entered inpatient substance abuse treatment, was arrested for grand larceny, and received a DUI (Duke, 2012). In addition to ongoing legal issues that stemmed from her behavior, Lohan was faced with a cold shoulder from the entertainment industry; few directors, producers, and casting agents were willing to take a chance on the young actress while she was perceived to be unstable (Rodrick, 2013). Lohan's situation fit into the traditional definition of the apologetic genre; she was faced with allegations that threatened to jeopardize her future in more ways than one.

Where Lohan's humorous apologia begins to differ from the traditional characteristics of the genre is when it comes to substance. Some of the messages found in Lohan's sketches are traditional strategies, which includes bolstering and minimization. However, she also broke from tradition through the use of satire and her resignation in the face of *kategoria*. Lohan acknowledged the charges levied by the public but offered no explanation or defense. While she mentioned them throughout the episode, she did not appear to feel the need to apologize for them; instead, she moved right past them in conversation, recognizing their existence but refusing to let the charges steal the spotlight. In addition, Lohan used satire to make fun of the criminal justice system. This is a departure from traditional apologia, and it relied on humor to make the point that, at least for celebrities, criminal activity can lead to a stint in a cushy rehab facility on the beach. Throwing doubt onto the whole treatment and recovery system may have served as a way to lessen the severity of her own crimes.

The style of Lohan's humorous apologia on *SNL* falls outside of the traditional bounds of the apologetic genre. She was neither remorseful for nor defensive of her actions. There is no evidence of the four traditional stylistic postures of verbal self-defense. At points in her opening monologue, Lohan appeared grateful, which was unique in that, for a moment, she did not explicitly rely on humor. Even that, however, was just a set-up for a punchline, and the audience was left unsure about whether Lohan was ever really serious and grateful for the chance to appear on the show at all. Lohan appeared upbeat, in good humor, and delivered her lines with a smile.

Lindsay Lohan: Level of Success and Contributing Factors

After 2012, Lindsay Lohan went on to achieve a number of significant career milestones, including starring in films, appearing on popular television shows, and opening a resort on the Greek island Mykonos, which featured heavily in the MTV series *Lindsay Lohan's Beach Club*. However, most of these achievements received poor reviews or ultimately failed, as did the Mykonos beach club (Wang, 2019). While it would be unfair to blame her appearance on SNL for the overall downward trajectory of Lohan's image in the entertainment industry, what is true is that Lohan's role as host did not receive rave reviews. Critics noted that Lohan was given small roles, and she never carried an entire sketch (Fagan, 2012). Many of the reviews also focused on either her uninspired acting abilities, her less-than-perfect comedic timing, or simply her appearance, with some journalists focused on the size of her lips or her allegedly bloated face (Fagan, 2012). These reviews prevented the narrative from shifting toward Lohan as a funny, lighthearted actress, and instead kept focus on the fact that she was going through a difficult time and likely continuing to struggle with substance abuse.

Indeed, in the *Scared Straight* sketch, as one example, Lohan frequently mumbled or misspoke her lines and had to repeat them to get the word order right. This gave off the impression that she had not rehearsed the sketch or was unable to focus and remember her lines; both of which are problematic for a paid actor. It also had an impact on how funny her lines were to the audience. This introduces the question of how much of the success of a humorous apology is dependent upon how funny said apology is, and whether a failed attempt at humorous apology is worse than no apology at all. Lohan's past, and potentially her documented substance abuse, impacted her ability to perform at the highest level. Audiences may be more willing to forgive certain behaviors as long as they do not impact performance. When ability to

perform well is impacted, and it lets down the cast, crew, or “team” of performers, the public is less likely to sanction those inappropriate behaviors (Kruse, 1981).

Of the four case studies analyzed in this paper, Lohan is the only *Saturday Night Live* host whose actions may be attributed to a substance abuse disorder rather than simply misbehavior. While avoiding any public medical diagnosis is prudent, Lohan repeatedly relied on drugs and alcohol and attended rehab facilities, which the other celebrities did not. While many now generally recognize that addiction is a disease rather than a choice, it appears audiences nonetheless may be less quick to forgive the misbehavior of someone who is unwell when compared to celebrities who act out for reasons other than substance abuse issues.

Justin Bieber: Comparison to Apologetic Genre

Justin Bieber’s appearance on *Saturday Night Live* shared similarities with a number of traditional characteristics of apologiae. The situation that preceded his *SNL* appearance, for example, was a public scandal that involved drugs and even a connection to a photographer’s death. The circumstances leading up to his humorous apologia on *SNL* were very much in keeping with the reasons any other public figure might issue their own apologia to the public.

The substance of Bieber’s apologia on *SNL* diverges from typical apologiae. There are similarities to the genre in the singer’s use of bolstering his image and even his efforts to downplay the wrongdoing in order to minimize the offensiveness of the act. However, his brief use of mortification ultimately was subverted because Bieber did not truly apologize as himself, but merely intoned that he has heard that Bieber was sorry while acting in character as someone else entirely. When he mocked the apology and softened its severity, Bieber similarly asked the audience to downplay the severity of the wrongdoing.

The style of Bieber's appearance also differed from traditional apologiae. His delivery did not include vindication, explanation, justification, or absolution. Instead, the style was confident and calm; the approach of a man who did not believe he had any reason to be either defensive or remorseful over his actions.

Justin Bieber: Level of Success and Contributing Factors

Reviews of Bieber's hosting and performing duties on *Saturday Night Live* were varied and largely dependent on whether the reviewer was a "Belieber" prior to the episode airing (Voss, 2013; Reid, 2013). Some critics reviewed the show with biting commentary such as Hays (2013) who asserted: "Apparently Bieber only knows two acting styles: himself, and [a] dumber version of himself with a bad accent." A few noted the PR attempt shoehorned into the sketch where Bieber faux-apologized while in character: "Justin did get to make a backhanded public statement about getting caught with weed," said Joe Reid of *Vulture* (2013) while another journalist got right to the heart of the matter:

Of course, this slightly awkward apology didn't clarify one thing: Is he sorry he smoked weed, or is he sorry that we live in a world where it's ridiculously easy for photos of him possibly smoking weed to get leaked on the internet? (Grossman, 2013)

Justin Bieber's career certainly did not come to an end as a result of his illicit drug use, although it is difficult to know what role his *SNL* appearance played in its trajectory, if any. Bieber continued to find himself in headlines for problematic reasons, and within a year of his appearance on *SNL* he was arrested for driving under the influence and resisting arrest without violence (Cills, 2014). While the delivery of his humorous apologia on *SNL* may well have bought him some good will from the public, subsequent arrests and substance abuse likely had a

greater impact on Bieber's image. In 2021, Justin Bieber is still incredibly successful, is now married, and has planned an already sold-out tour.

Summary

In each of the four examples of celebrity hosts who deliver humorous apologiae on *Saturday Night Live*, the apologetic responses fit into at least some of the parameters of the genre. Notably, each had the traditional situation preceding the appearance, and each used at least some of the traditional substantive messaging associated with apologia. However, Lowe, Cyrus, Lohan, and Bieber also introduced new strategies not yet included within the parameters of the apologetic genre. The use of humor is not addressed by Benoit (2015) as a strategy, yet it is a critical component of the apologiae for each of the four celebrity host appearances addressed in this paper. While the 16 Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018) were used to code each of the case studies, there was no significant pattern that emerged across the substance of the four examples of celebrity apologiae on *SNL*. Each of the celebrity hosts acknowledged the kategoria directed at them, but each also mentioned a number of additional topics, and the context of each sketch varied substantially. Furthermore, each apologist largely avoided the common stylistic postures of apologia as identified by Ware and Linkugel (1973); they opted instead to enact an alternative posture that does not fit neatly into the categories of absolution, vindication, explanation, or justification. Each celebrity experienced varying levels of success as a result of their use of humorous apologia on *SNL*.

In the final chapter, I will answer my initial research questions and determine whether the humorous apologiae on *Saturday Night Live* fit into the traditional genre of apologia or belong in

a distinct subgenre. I also will summarize the effectiveness of using humor in verbal self-defense and outline the strategies that proved most effective among the four case studies analyzed.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Apologia is a well-established genre of verbal self-defense that serves as a response to allegations of wrongdoing, also known as *kategoriae* (Benoit, 2015; Hearit, 1995; Ryan, 1982). For celebrities, allegations of wrongdoing can have significant consequences and create a context that calls for image repair. Humor traditionally has not been associated with the well-articulated schema that have been identified to serve as the substance of apologia; it is not included as one of Ware and Linkugel's factors (1973), nor is it included in Coombs (2007) or Benoit's (2015) strategies for image repair.

Celebrities caught in a wrong face a unique context for addressing allegations of wrongdoing, one that is distinct from that of political figures, organizations or institutions. For Rob Lowe, Miley Cyrus, Lindsay Lohan, and Justin Bieber, *Saturday Night Live* was a key vehicle through which they could respond to the *kategoriae* leveled against them. Rather than using a formal, traditional context, each of the four celebrities used *SNL* as a platform for the delivery of humorous apologia. To understand the generic parameters of this approach, this thesis has attempted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Can the use of a humorous apologia on *Saturday Night Live* serve as a vehicle to reframe a crisis narrative? If so, how?

RQ2: What are the humor-based strategies and tactics that *SNL* celebrity guest hosts Rob Lowe, Miley Cyrus, Lindsay Lohan, and Justin Bieber used to reframe their respective crises? Are they common across multiple cases?

RQ3: Are humor-based apologiae a distinct subgenre of apologetic discourse, and, if so, what distinguishes from them simply being stylized variations within the greater genre of apologia?

Using my analysis of *Saturday Night Live* appearances by Rob Lowe, Miley Cyrus, Lindsay Lohan, and Justin Bieber, I now use the rest of this chapter to answer each of these research questions.

Shaping Crisis Narratives Through Humorous Apologia

The first research question posed for this thesis asks whether the use of a humorous apologia on *Saturday Night Live* has the potential to shift the crisis narrative for the celebrity apologist. Before explicating the role of humorous apologia on *SNL* in shaping the public perception of celebrities and their actions, this thesis must specify that an apologia is but one factor among many in shaping a crisis response narrative. As has been shown, an appearance on *Saturday Night Live* can result in media coverage that recasts the celebrity host in a different light. However, the deployment of a humorous apologia on an episode of *SNL* is far from the only factor in a crisis narrative. In each of the four cases examined in this thesis, celebrities responded to allegations in more than one way. A combination of tweets, magazine interviews, and other television appearances all played a role, in conjunction with hosting *Saturday Night Live*, in the reframing of crisis narratives for Lowe, Cyrus, Lohan, and Bieber.

Reshaping Lowe's Crisis Narrative Through *SNL*

Lowe's appearance on *SNL* significantly impacted his crisis narrative. The appearance turned him from a heartthrob who acted inappropriately into an adult with respectable comedic timing. The use of a humorous apologia on *SNL* shaped Lowe's career as well as the public's perception of him. In a 2020 interview, Lowe went so far as to say that much of his comedy career, and the many acting opportunities he was given over the past 30 years, are owed: "All to that monologue. Literally all to that monologue." (Armchair Expert, 2020).

Reshaping Cyrus' Crisis Narrative Through *SNL*

Prior to Cyrus' *SNL* appearance, she was seen as a wild child who acted inappropriately, given her status as a Disney role model. The humor-based apologia she delivered helped to reshape her crisis narrative so that she was seen as an informed adult woman calling attention to the hypocrisy of societal standards. The wrongdoing she was accused of, including inappropriate dancing and recreational drug use, became less problematic after the *SNL* episode aired.

Reshaping Lohan's Crisis Narrative Through *SNL*

Lohan's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* reveals less evidence of a narrative shift than the other celebrities analyzed and assessed in this thesis. Before the *SNL* episode aired, it was public knowledge that Lohan likely was dealing with substance abuse issues. Her appearance on the show only reinforced that. The effectiveness of her humorous apologia was dampened because critics labeled her performance as subpar and not always funny. This observation reinforces the conclusion that the strategy of humorous apologia is effective only if it is well-performed and is perceived as funny by the audience. Failure to perform or make the audience laugh risks reinforcing the original crisis narrative stemming from *kategoriae*.

Reshaping Bieber's Crisis Narrative Through *SNL*

Bieber's use of humorous apologetics on *SNL* helped to shift his crisis narrative. In his case, simply appearing on the show became the headline. There were mixed reviews about the success of his appearance, and many critics noted and raised questions about the authenticity of his meta-apology while in character as someone else (Grossman, 2013; Reid, 2013). Bieber's acknowledgment of drug use may have helped the public see him as an adult, but so did responding to the public crisis with good-natured humor. For his older fans, the *SNL* appearance may have provided them with the opportunity to appreciate Bieber as an adult artist rather than just as a teen heartthrob.

Humor-based Apologetic Responses Used on *SNL*

The second research question of this thesis relates to the specific humor-based strategies used in each celebrity's *SNL* apologetics and whether those strategies were common across all four examples. As outlined by Benoit (2015), there are five strategies of image repair, each with some variants. The five are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The strategy of reducing offensiveness, which has been shown to be most relevant to this thesis, includes sub-strategies of bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, and counterattack (Benoit). Each of the four celebrities who appeared on *Saturday Night Live* primarily used the strategies that fit under the umbrella of reducing offensiveness. If humor is to be used in an apologetics, it appears that a strategy of reducing offensiveness is an effective partner, at least in the context of celebrity apologetics on *SNL*. Lowe, Cyrus, Lohan, and Bieber primarily used bolstering and minimization in their *SNL* apologetics, but

each also used a variety of humor-based minimization strategies, which are not specifically identified by Benoit, but should be added to his typology.

Each of the four celebrity hosts used bolstering in their *SNL* appearances, and each involved an element of humor. By being good sports and willingly serving as the punchline to jokes, the celebrities demonstrated their good-natured personalities. By seeing them in a new light in which they are mocked rather than admired, the audience concludes that the celebrities' actions should be viewed as within the realm of "conventional" behavior. Opting to be made fun of on *SNL* bolsters the image of celebrities dealing with a crisis and helps to shift the narrative in the favor of each celebrity.

Common among each of the four *SNL* hosts is the use of minimization, a strategy intended to minimize the severity of the charges levied against each celebrity host. Minimization broadly occurs simply by delivering a humor-based apologia. The implication is that a serious charge would require a serious apology or a strong defense. By offering neither and proffering humor instead, the celebrities effectively minimized their wrongdoing by making light of the charges. Celebrity hosts who acknowledge their wrongs on *SNL* without apologizing or justifying themselves send a message that the charges do not "require" a serious defense (Bitzer, 1968). Such a charge, therefore, must be insignificant. Celebrities like Cyrus further minimized charges by specifically comparing them to more severe charges. Through this humorous comparison delivered via song, for example, Cyrus' own problematic behaviors were minimized.

In addition to Benoit's strategies of bolstering and minimization, I identified the strategy of humor in each celebrity's apologia. Variants of humor found across the four celebrity *SNL* apologiae include humorous techniques such as absurdity, satire, self-deprecating humor, and sarcasm. Humor is laced through each of the strategies employed by the celebrity hosts of *SNL*,

often in congruence with messages of bolstering or minimization. However, humor also can stand on its own as a distinct strategy in each celebrity's apology. Lohan used absurdity and satire in one sketch to mock the farcicality of the charges levied against her and bring attention to problems within the criminal justice system. Cyrus used sarcasm when referencing her drug use. Bieber mocked his own image for laughs to show that he had nothing to hide. Lowe played the straight-faced stooge to comic actors who were so ridiculous that it became hard to take seriously any meaningful allegations against him. In each case, humor helped strengthen the apology of the celebrity host, encouraging the audience to move on and forgive any wrongdoing.

Classifying Humor-based Apologia

The third and final research question for this thesis examines whether the humor-based apologiae seen on *SNL* constitute a distinct subgenre of apology and, if so, what characteristics define that subgenre. Rhetorical artifacts fit within the genre of apology when they meet distinct parameters of substance, substance, and style (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). The use of humor-based apology on *SNL* lies beyond the traditional conceptions of apology. While the situation that precedes the delivery of a humor-based apology on *SNL* is similar to that of traditional apologetic contexts, there are significant differences when it comes to both strategy and style. In response, humor-based apologiae should be classified as a unique subgenre within the larger umbrella of apology.

Situation is the only area in which humor-based apology fits neatly into the traditional conceptions of apology. Across the board, celebrities use apologiae in order to defend against a kategoria of real or perceived wrongdoing. The celebrity hosts on *SNL* used apologiae in response to common allegations seen in other types of apology, including drug use and socially

inappropriate behavior. Each celebrity faced genuine risks capable of negatively impacting their career and public image.

Substantively, in direct contrast with situation, humor-based apologiae do not exclusively use the traditional messaging strategies associated with apologia. Benoit (2015) identified five major strategies for apologia that include denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, although that is not an exhaustive list of recognized apologetic strategies. Humor-based apologiae do rely on some previously identified strategies, reducing offensiveness in particular. However, celebrities also used humor as a standalone approach to lessen their severity of the charges and appear unimpacted by any allegations, thereby encouraging the audience to come to the same conclusion. The use of humor as a distinct strategy means that humor-based apologia fits outside the traditional parameters of apologia. Furthermore, the strategy of *nolo contendere*, or pleading no contest in the wake of a mediated crisis, which is the core rhetorical trope of this form of discourse, requires that humorous apologia constitutes a distinct subgenre of apologia.

Notably, coding the four examples of humorous apologia on SNL with the 16 Universal Topics (Hart, Daughton, & LaVally, 2018) did not reveal any significant patterns. In each case study, the celebrity apologist delivered dozens of statements. Categorizing these statements showed little consistency across the genre, suggesting that the delivery of humor-based apologia is dependent more upon the posture than specific word choice.

Stylistically, the genre of humor-based apologia does not fit within the four accepted verbal postures of self-defense as identified by Ware and Linkugel (1973). Celebrity hosts on *SNL* do not rely on stylistic methods of absolution, justification, vindication, or explanation. Instead, celebrities resign themselves to the process of appearing on *SNL* and making jokes at

their own expense. In exchange, they receive public permission to move on and continue working, living, and performing as well-liked celebrities. This exchange gets at the core idea of this newly identified posture of *nolo contendere*. The strategy of *nolo contendere*, or no contest, was used by each of the four *SNL* celebrity hosts.

Nolo contendere comes from the Latin phrase meaning “I do not wish to contend.” In legal matters, it is a plea from a defendant who offers an indeterminate response to charges of wrongdoing. The accused accepts conviction but does not admit guilt. As part of the English common law tradition, a defendant was permitted to ask the court for leniency or mercy without expressly admitting guilt; relatedly, even if the defendant later changed his or her plea to not guilty, it would not amount to perjury. Eventually, this plea became known as *nolo contendere* or no contest, a plea available to defendants in most states in the United States according to the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure (Bibas, 2003).

Similarly, celebrity hosts on *SNL* respond to crises by recognizing the wrongdoing or situation that led to each crisis. Likely due to the platform, this acceptance often comes in the form of a humorous skit or song. However, acknowledging the wrongdoing does not equate to recognizing or accepting guilt. A guilty defendant in court might plead *nolo contendere* rather than entering a plea of guilty even though the punishment is the same. By pleading *nolo contendere*, defendants accept the judge’s verdict and punishment but abstain from an admission of guilt. That is precisely what celebrities aim to do when they respond to a crisis through an *SNL* appearance. The posture of *nolo contendere* is not a justification or an admission, nor it is accompanied by an apology. It offers a way for celebrities to acknowledge the wrongdoing and accept their punishment, which begins with the humiliation of poking fun at oneself on the national stage; that is, being the object of the humor and not just the subject. As a bonus, opening

themselves up to that ridicule allows a celebrity to be in on the joke, and in the process receive recognition, if not approval, for not contesting the charges. It is related to but not synonymous with what Hearit (2006) has described as a “non-apology apology.”

Nolo contendere is analogous to a similar tactic in corporate apologia. Organizations strive to achieve balance between offering apologetic discourse that demonstrates remorse and protecting against legal liability. While admitting wrongdoing can make an organization less abominable from a public relations perspective, “Every word used to persuade the public is a word which may be used to persuade a judge” (Cooper, 1992, p.349). This central tension leads to situations in which an organization might not admit guilt after a crisis but still may take steps to rectify a situation. Even if an organization must choose words carefully to sufficiently protect itself against legal liability, there still remains the cultural expectation that the CEO or President appear in a public context soon after a crisis and recognize the gravity of the situation. Similarly, audiences expect a celebrity on *SNL* and acknowledge his or her crisis, but do not require an apology so long as conventions are adhered to.

Rob Lowe used the posture of *nolo contendere* on *Saturday Night Live* when he appeared on the Church Lady skit and played along with Dana Carvey’s Church Lady character. While Lowe never apologized or admitted guilt, he allowed himself to be spanked on camera. There was no genuine physical punishment, but Lowe, in effect, pled no contest to the allegations of wrongdoing by appearing on the show and allowing himself to be ridiculed.

Miley Cyrus, similarly, used the posture of *nolo contendere* on *SNL* by singing a song that revolved around her recent history of adult behavior. Through the song she acknowledged her behavior without admitting guilt. By participating in the show, Cyrus tacitly communicates

to the audience that she accepts playing the joker on national television in exchange for moving beyond the scandal.

Lindsay Lohan also used the posture of *nolo contendere* in her appearance on *SNL*. Simply appearing on the show and outlining her past actions showed recognition of the alleged misconduct. Appearing on the *Scared Straight* sketch, in particular, showed that Lohan understood and acknowledged the charges. By avoiding penitence or apology, Lohan pled no contest to the audience. Trading ridicule and mockery on *SNL* was the corresponding punishment from the public.

Finally, in his *Saturday Night Live* appearance, Justin Bieber also used the posture of *nolo contendere*. Bieber's image was and still is one comprised of a projected innate coolness; his appearance on the show as a socially-inept nerd and mentioning his past drug use is both recognition of the crime and a punishment in and of itself. His plea of *nolo contendere* meant that he played along with the narrative of this form of apologiae and allowed the public to see him as less than cool.

What celebrities hope for when using the posture of *nolo contendere* is another legal term: *nolle prosequi*, or "unwilling to pursue" (Cornell Law School, 2021). Celebrities do not expect their audiences to forget about the allegations of wrongdoing or of past criminal behavior. However, they are desirous of *nolle prosequi*; that the public will not pursue these wrongdoings any further and that the public consciousness of the event will recede. Appearing on *SNL* and offering up a humorous apologia constitutes a scripted narrative offered with the hope that, if it is well-performed, then generic expectations will be met. In so doing, the audience disdain with the behavior functionally will be placated and permit the celebrity to continue to seek success in the world of entertainment without their indiscretion controlling the narrative.

Further Conclusions

Analysis of celebrity apologiae on *SNL* has revealed that the success of discourse in this subgenre is contingent on the apologia being perceived as funny by the audience. In addition, the use of humorous apologia is best reserved for celebrities, as opposed to politicians or organizations, where it would be unlikely to be received well.

In three of the four cases, the celebrity hosts largely were successful in meeting audience expectations in the delivery of their humorous apologiae. Lindsay Lohan, however, was the outlier. Her apologia on *SNL* was less effective than the other three, and it also did less to downshift her crisis narrative. The biggest difference between Lohan's humor-based apologia and the apologiae of the other three is the level of humor embedded in her performance. Since Lohan did not deliver her lines well, misspoke frequently, and delivered what was deemed a subpar performance, it was less funny to the audience (Fagan, 2012). This reveals that in order for a humor-based apologia to be an effective strategy against a *kategoria*, it must be well-delivered to be perceived as funny by the intended audience.

The four celebrities who delivered a humor-based apologia on *Saturday Night Live* were in the entertainment industry. While the option of humor-based apologia is available to anyone charged with wrongdoing, this strategy is best suited for celebrities who largely are considered entertainers or members of popular culture. While some audiences might enjoy a humorous apologia from their senator or a high-profile business executive, the risks are far greater risks to apologists in these cases. Furthermore, celebrities mostly are accused of crimes related to a violation of social conventions such as inappropriate behavior or immorality. While audiences do not necessarily sanction these behaviors from entertainers, nor are they usually surprised, either. In contrast, key publics tend to expect more from business leaders and politicians and hold them

to higher standards. When non-celebrities are charged with wrongdoing, audiences may expect a more traditional apologia in response.

Conclusion

Through a rhetorical analysis using the generic method of criticism, this thesis examined the apologetic responses used by four celebrities appearing on *Saturday Night Live* between 1989 and 2013. While Rob Lowe, Miley Cyrus, Lindsay Lohan, and Justin Bieber did use some traditional apologetic strategies identified by Benoit (2015) and Coombs (2007), they also used newly identified strategies that previous researchers have overlooked. The use of humor is a standalone strategy, and the role it plays in shifting a crisis narrative as well as in bolstering apologists helps celebrities account for and minimize their wrongs.

In key ways, the subgenre of humor-based apologia is unique from other forms of apologia. While the situations that lead to the delivery of humor-based apologia might be identical to those that precede more traditional conceptions of apologia, humorous apologia should be recognized as a distinct subgenre governed by its own specific parameters. Apologetic responses fit within the subgenre of humor-based apologia when the apologist acknowledges his or her wrongdoing but offers no apology, justification, or defense, and uses a humorous approach that involves self-deprecating humor, sarcasm, satire, or absurdity. The posture associated with humor-based apologia is identified as *nolo contendere*, or no contest. Through this plea, an apologist recognizes the *kategoria* with which he or she is charged but offers no apology. The identification of *nolo contendere* is most applicable to celebrity apologia, but it also may have limited applications in corporate apologia, as it closely relates to the common tension of

acknowledging corporate wrongdoing but avoiding responsibility in an effort to avoid legal liability.

As a distinct subgenre of apologia, humor-based apologia has proven to be an effective method by which celebrities can meet audience expectations with regard to an accounting of their guilt. When used by celebrities on a platform like *SNL*, humor-based apologia can shift a crisis narrative in the favor of the apologist. For this stance to be effective, however, it must both meet an audiences' expectations and be perceived as funny. Anything less results in a failed apologia.

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