

*Celebrity Apologia: Vanessa Hudgens and Dylan Sprouse*

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**Approval Page**

I certify that I have read and viewed this project and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Communication.

Capstone Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin A. Stein". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze image repair strategies used by celebrities, specifically younger celebrities. *Apologia* is a formal defense by an organization or person needing to apologize to the public for an inadmissible action. This research focuses on apologies for sexual indiscretions with younger celebrities. Using Benoit's image repair theory, a content analysis was conducted to examine two young, Disney celebrities. Vanessa Hudgens, Disney star on "High School Musical" and Dylan Sprouse, Disney star on "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody" each had a nude photo released to the public that was meant to be private. Their public apologies were coded and transcribed to identify the main image repair strategies used and in which contexts. The research completed found that their primary strategies were bolstering, mortification, shifting responsibility, and transcendence. The strategy most commonly used within the study was mortification.

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## Introduction

Apologies are often not the easiest thing for some people to execute. It takes a copious amount of courage and pride to be able to apologize for something, especially if the person does not think he/she did anything wrong. It is very interesting to see all the different strategies people use to apologize. The techniques that celebrities use in apologies are interesting to study because they find so many ways to go around just simply saying, "I am sorry," and their mistakes and apologies are often in the limelight.

Celebrity *apologia* is important to study because celebrities are constantly in the media and their images are what helps make them money. If celebrities are not good at public apologies it can ruin their reputations, and by consequence, their careers. One benefit of *apologia* to the general public is that it can help people in their personal lives to better their relationships that might have been compromised (Engel, 2002). "Apology has the ability to disarm others of their anger and to prevent further misunderstandings" (Engel, 2002). *Apologia* can be used in many ways and can be used as a solution to various problems.

Over the years, there have been numerous times where celebrities had to apologize for something. "While celebrity scandals have long since been associated with Hollywood, the celebrity apology became a mainstay in 2006; so much so that the Associated Press dubbed 2006 the *Year of Celebrity Apologies*" (Charlesworth, 2007). A couple of the most memorable apologies are Kanye West when he interrupted Taylor Swift, Vanessa Hudgens when her nude photos were leaked, and Justin Bieber when he apologized for his nude pictures, his vandalism, and his DUI. Many of these apologies lead to celebrities trying to make their case and win back their fans. Although celebrities have different reasons for apologizing, they all have to face the fact that they committed these acts and own up to them.

For celebrities', apologies are more about avoiding negative consequences than about repairing damage to relationships. The celebrity apology has become its own currency, an integral part of the transaction between stars and the public in which stars often offer up a well-crafted "sorry" in order to keep the public happy and keep their careers intact (Blay, 2019):

There are good celebrity apologies and bad ones, but it seems the rubric for whether they are in fact "good" or "bad" has very little to do these days with whether the star is even truly sorry. Their actual contriteness is incidental. It is more about *how* they apologize, whether they (and/or their team) know the right words to say and when to say them. (Blay, 2019)

It does not matter how significant or insignificant their indiscretion was, because celebrities are always in the spotlight; they are required to apologize just to maintain their reputations.

With social media being the prominent platform it is, younger celebrities have set a trend for getting in trouble for sexual indiscretions. Disney Channel is home to multiple celebrities that have been in the press for sexual content being leaked to the public. Disney Channel's stars Vanessa Hudgens and Dylan Sprouse are two of the most memorable celebrities that got in trouble for sexual indiscretions.

Vanessa Hudgens, American actress and singer, was eighteen when her nude photo was leaked. She was the star of Disney's movie "High School Musical" and continued to grow her career to become a singer as well. "High School Musical" was in the process of filming its third series when these nude photos of Hudgens came out. Disney said in a statement, "We hope she's learned a valuable lesson" (People's Staff, 2007). They did not let these photos affect their

decision to cast Hudgens in the third film of the “High School Musical” franchise and negotiations for the cast and creative team still continued.

Vanessa Hudgens’ first response to the photo leak was mortification. Hudgens did not mean for these photos to come out and was ashamed of it. “It is a personal matter and it is unfortunate that this has become public,” the representative said in a statement (Keating, 2007). Hudgens apologized and expressed how she wished these photos were never taken:

I want to apologize to my fans, whose support and trust means the world to me,”

Hudgens said in a statement issued about a day after the photo surfaced. “I am embarrassed over this situation and regret having ever taken these photos. I am thankful for the support of my family and friends. (Keating, 2007)

Hudgens’ reaction was effective because it showed fans that she took ownership of what happened and felt remorse for her indiscretion.

Another sexual scandal involving Dylan Sprouse, Disney’s star in the series *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, happened in 2013 when Sprouse’s ex-girlfriend leaked nude photos of him that he sent her. Dylan Sprouse, 27 years of age, is an American actor and entrepreneur. His main shows were on Disney Channel, with his twin brother Cody, in the series of *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* and its spin-off, *The Suite Life on Deck*. Sprouse was only 21 when this scandal took place.

Rather than mortification, Sprouse employed transcendence as his strategy of apology. Not long after these photos were leaked, Sprouse addressed the issue and tweeted this message to his more than 747,000 fans, “I messed up... but I’d be a fool not to own up to it. Got to move past it I suppose.” Sprouse also added, “whoops, guess I’m not 14 and fat anymore” (Britney, 2013). Instead of trying to deny that the photos were of him, as many stars who have been in this

position have done, Sprouse came clean on Twitter and confessed that he did take these photos. Sprouse's reaction was effective because it showed fans that he was not trying to deny his actions and took ownership of what happened.

Both of these celebrities used *apologia* in making their public apologies. Although there are multiple scandals similar to these, Vanessa Hudgens and Dylan Sprouse stand out because of their stature within the Disney Channel, the amalgamation of different *apologia* styles, and using the media to do so.

This professional thesis will focus on the different strategies people in the limelight use to apologize, specifically Hudgens and Sprouse. This study uses Benoit's theory to analyze and discover different strategies these Disney stars used when making a public apology.

### **Literature Review**

To examine the strategies used by celebrities to apologize for their actions, this paper depends on the theory of *apologia* and the image repair framework. These theories have been used extensively in the literature, allowing many to study these theories more intensely.

In this section, the researcher will study more of a theoretical approach with the studies from Prasch and Ware and Linkugel. It will then go into applied research when scholars analyze different studies of celebrity *apologia*. Next, this portion will go over celebrity *apologia*, followed by the image repair theory.

#### ***Apologia* Theory**

Stein (2008) did a study on *apologia*, where he expressed how and why *apologia* is used. "When individuals and organizations are forced to explain their behavior, they will typically account for the undesirable action by lessening responsibility for the act or by lessening the significance of the hurt caused by the act" (p.19). *Apologia* allows people to realize what they

have done wrong and make things right by apologizing for their actions.

*Apologia* theory, the study of apologies, can be seen as a form of self-defense. There are multiple ways one can use this theory to apologize and try to keep a good image for themselves. Prasch (2015) completed a study on President Nixon, that states how Nixon was a professional of self-defense. Prasch (2015) stated, “some of his most rhetorically successful addresses were those that defended some aspect of his character or political position” (p. 271). This form of *apologia* was also expressed in a study done by Ware and Linkugel. Ware and Linkugel’s study established the genre of *apologia* by claiming that speeches of self-defense constituted a distinct form of public address (as cited in Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 274).

There are various ways that *apologia* can be used. Ware and Linkugel (1973) argued that rhetors may make use of four models of resolution: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. They had made this argument off of what psychologist Robert P. Abelson’s work claimed. Since then, many other scholars have used the generic criticism of *apologia* to analyze other excerpts from political speeches delivered during history.

Ware and Linkugel (1973) stated, “In life, an attack upon a person’s character, upon his worth as a human being, does seem to demand a direct response” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p.274). This statement is in an effort to show that just because someone makes a mistake, it does not make it acceptable to attack their character. Everyone is human and will make mistakes at some point in life. *Apologia* gives the accused an outlet and ability to clear their conscious once they apologize.

The effect of a genuine public apology should be to transform the relationship in a way or ways that cause it to function better to achieve mutually agreed goals between the two conflicting collectives (Gough, Dahl-Lang & Spencer, 2015). In order for a public apology to be

made, someone has to take the first step. A public apology should recognize the effects on the character of the person involved to make sure the minds of the offender and offended is changed. Only an apology that is perceived by all members of the relationship to be sincere, honest, and genuine can work to facilitate this rejuvenation of the relationship (Gough, Dahl-Lang & Spencer, 2015).

### **Celebrity *Apologia***

While celebrity scandals have long since been associated with Hollywood, the celebrity apology became a mainstay in 2006; so much so that the Associated Press dubbed 2006 the “Year of Celebrity Apologies” (Charlesworth, 2007). Celebrities are known to be a unique kind of rhetor. Celebrities are known to be a unique kind of rhetor. They are thought of as individuals, but due to their work they are also known as an organization as well. Celebrities are well known and create work for many other people with the business they are in. In other words, celebrities are in the limelight so much that they always have to be cautious of the actions they take and what they say because the steps they take in crafting their apologies are designed to save both the individual and the organization (Charlesworth, 2007). When celebrities make apologies, they have to make sure they say the right thing so they can redeem their image. Koesten and Rowland (2004) expressed that *apologia* “offers a person, organizational leader or a nation a means of accepting guilt in order to create a new image as a redeemed individual or nation” (p. 70).

While public apologies are media events, we contend that they are also examples of persuasive messages situated in meaningful interpersonal exchange (Cerulo & Ruane, (2014). Apologies are not the easiest things to do sometimes, but they are especially not easy when you have to make a public apology like celebrities. When it comes to public apologies, the public will latch on to whatever sounds dubious (Posnanski, 2010). The people that listen to these apologies

listen very carefully to make sure they are sincere and are lies. It takes courage to get up in front of the people that look up to you and apology for something you did.

### **Applied Image Repair Studies**

Benoit used a similar framework as the *apologia* theory for his image repair studies. In a study, Brown (2012) said, “Because our image is important to us, when we believe that our image is threatened by some attack, we are motivated to take necessary steps to protect it. An attempt to repair one’s reputation when faced with allegations is inevitable”.

Benoit’s analytical framework offers an effective way of identifying rhetorical strategies, while at the same time, gleaning benefits from its typological structure (Compton, n.d.). William Benoit’s (1995a, 2000, 2014) image repair typology outlines five strategies and multiple tactics that can repair an image, post-attack. These five strategies are denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, mortification, and corrective action.

*Apologia* theory has often influenced the responses given from not only politicians, but celebrities as well. When a celebrity fails to obtain the image, they desire to portray, they are held responsible for apologizing for what they did so it does not reflect poorly on the organization they built. Celebrities have more than just their image to uphold, and they have various steps they can take to protect their image.

While all people have image management concerns, a celebrity’s image is vital to his or her success (Johnson, 2011). Christian Bale is a good example of a celebrity that has an appreciation for mistakes that came back to haunt. In July 2008, on the set of the movie, Terminator Salvation, this is exactly what happened. Director of photography, Shane Hurlbut walked back and forth on the set, trying to fix a lighting problem during a scene Bale was performing. Annoyed, Bale stopped the scene and hurled angry profanity at Hurlbut. Grobianus

reports that Bale used the “F” expletive forty times in the four-minute tirade (Johnson, 2011). Being in the limelight for a while could result in an instance like this, where although Bale was not guilty, it still reflected badly, and that is why image repair is used.

Bale shows an example of bolstering when he made his public apology. Bale used bolstering with this question: “I ask everybody to sit down and ask themselves: have they ever had a bad day? Have they ever lost their temper and really regretted it immensely?” (Johnson, 2011). When he asked this question, it invited the audience to empathize by realizing they are not immune from bad days either, and no one would want to be in his position being publicly accounted for an incident that was done in private and privately resolved. This empathy puts the audience on the same level as Bale which helps with his image.

After widely reported allegations of moral indiscretions with a known Louisiana prostitute, Jimmy Swaggart confessed in a weeping monologue that Time magazine called “the most dramatic sermon ever aired on television” (as cited in Giuliano, 1999, p. 1), on Sunday, May 22, 1988, at the Family Worship Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Swaggart used three different image repair strategies in his apology. He used mortification, provocation, and bolstering. Swaggart used mortification in his first statement. He reportedly confessed to a lifelong fascination with pornography, and encounters with a prostitute. He claimed, however, they did not have sexual intercourse (Giuliano, 1999). The prostitute, Debra Murphy, later confirmed their relationship was more pornographic than sexual (Legg, 2009). Provocation was then used when, “he spoke against the pornography industry, saying that they were the real ones to blame” (Giuliano, 1999). On several occasions, Swaggart employed bolstering by comparing himself to King David (Giuliano, 1999), emphasizing that he was saving people from hell, and relating dreams where he killed giant snakes representing sin and the Devil. Overall with this

apology, Swaggart tried to gain the forgiveness of the Louisiana church officials with using different strategies of image repair.

There are many ways one can shape an apology. Some of the most common forms of apologies are: bolstering, mortification, shifting responsibility, and transcendence. In the research, there were many articles highlighting overall usage of *apologia* but not many specifically on celebrity apologies. This study will be able to fill the gap by looking at celebrity *apologia* of younger people under fire because of social media.

### **Research Question**

**RQ:** What are the dominant *apologia* strategies used by Vanessa Hudgens and Dylan Sprouse in making a public apology?

### **Methods**

The *Apologia* Theory and Benoit's Image Repair Theory are used to analyze an apology made by Disney stars, Vanessa Hudgens and Dylan Sprouse, and how they utilize the image repair process. Benoit's image repair theory has been used prior to analyze other image repair circumstances.

### **Text Samples**

The texts that were chosen were done so because these were the main outlets of their apology. Both of these Disney stars apologized for their actions, but in different styles. Hudgens main approach was taking blame and asking for forgiveness. While Sprouse's approach was more transcendence and joked about the incident that happened.

This study will use ABC News interviews, CBS News, HecklerSpray and HuffPost reports to examine and compare the strategies Dylan Sprouse and Vanessa Hudgens used in their

apologies. It will also help give a better understanding of image repair and why celebrities use it in their public apologies.

The statements made by the two Disney stars using the different *apologia* styles will be the center focus of this study. Hudgens made a public apology for her actions that was delivered to a national audience and was heavily covered in the news. Sprouse made a public apology on Twitter and in other press releases to his fans.

### **Theoretical Framework**

*Apologia* is made up of five models that can be used to help fix a problem. *Apologia* – taken as speech in defense – has shifted to the modern understanding of apology in which acknowledgement of wrongdoing and expressions of regret are expected even if additional actions are not taken (Negash, 2006). By understanding the idea of what an apology should consist of, and why one should be given, the enforcer has a better chance at the apology being accepted by the listeners.

Image repair theory is closely connected to *apologia*, but brings different aspects to the conversation. While *apologia* suggests a variety of reasons for apologizing, Benoit's image repair theory helps to repair the person's image. Benoit's (1997) image repair theory is based on the theory of *apologia* and expresses the many ways to give an apology.

Benoit's theory is made up of five strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. These five strategies are then broken up into 14 subcategories. These subcategories include: simple denial, blame shift, provocation, defeasibility, accidental, good intentions, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accuser, compensation, corrective action and forgiveness (Benoit, 1997).

**Denial**

The first image repair strategy is denial and comes from the *apologia* theory. Benoit (1997) stated that there are two different types of denial, simple denial or evasion of responsibility. Simple denial states that the accused did not commit the act that they are accused of (Benoit & Drew, 1997). Evasion of responsibility attempts to shift the blame by arguing that they “were provoked and responded to the act of another, argue defeasibility due to a lack of information or ability, or claim the event was an accident, or that it had good intentions” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 168).

An example of denial being used is when Queen Elizabeth responded to the tragic death of Princess Diana in 1997. Benoit and Brinson studied Queen Elizabeth’s discourse positively. They point out that simply giving the speech acted as her strongest statement of denial to the charges that the royal family did not care about Diana’s death, or the grief of the people (Johnson, 2011).

**Evading Responsibility**

The second strategy is evading responsibility which occurs when someone cannot deny their actions, but they try to use the four components that make up this strategy. Evading responsibility includes four tactics: provocation, defeasibility, accident and good intentions. Provocation is where the accused may claim that the act was necessitated in response to another act.

Defeasibility is when the act was beyond the accused’s control. A good example of defeasibility is when Queen Elizabeth stated her strong emotions were “difficult to surmount,” which offered a reason for her slow reaction to come to the emotional aid of her people (Johnson,

2011). She is trying to claim that her emotions were out of her control and tried to get sympathy for that.

The final two tactics for evading responsibility are accident and good intentions. Accident is where the actor may make an excuse for the things out of their control. Good intentions are when the act was not what was intended. Accident and good intentions were used when Christian Bale (2011) stated, "It was an accident. I meant well." Bale is trying to make up for the actions he did while on set for a movie and the words he said to his producer. These are the many different tactics that can be used within evading responsibility.

### **Reducing Offensiveness**

Reducing Offensiveness is a third option as an image repair strategy. This strategy has six different subcategories that can be used which include: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser and compensation. These are all different ways to try to take offense and make it seem less offensive. These strategies try to take what happened and make it seem like it is not as big of a deal.

Bolstering refocuses the attention onto past positive acts to reduce the negative perception (Brown, n.d., 18). This strategy tries to identify with the audience with something they may have in common. Bale shows an example of bolstering when he made his public apology. Bale used bolstering with this question: "I ask everybody to sit down and ask themselves: have they ever had a bad day? Have they ever lost their temper and really regretted it immensely?" (Johnson, 2011). In this example, Bale is trying to connect with the audience by asking them a question they can relate to showing that he is human as well.

Minimization is used to claim that something was not as bad as it might originally have seemed. This strategy is a shift of perceived offensiveness of the act. An example of this may be when Bale states, “The situation is overblown. It isn’t so bad” (Johnson, 2011).

Transcendence is shifting the act into a more positive view to reduce the negative perception. With attacking the accuser, the accused can attack the accuser’s credibility or compensate the victims of the offensive act (Brown, 2012, p. 19). The final strategy is compensation. Compensation is when the accused tries to pay off the person that accused them. This strategy, although, does not change what the accused did or correct what they did.

### **Corrective Action and Mortification**

Corrective action and mortification are often used in unison. Corrective action is when an accused can use corrective action to rectify damages caused by the act or changes things so it does not happen again. This strategy involves the accused showing commitment to preventing a specific act from occurring again. The mortification strategy is when the accused admits their wrong and asks for forgiveness. These strategies are both used more often than other strategies, because they are sincere and come across as apologetic. An example of corrective action could be, “This will not happen again. I am a changed person.” An example of mortification used by Bale (2011) is when he said, “I am wrong. I deeply regret my actions. I seek forgiveness.” Bale is asking for the forgiveness of his producer and fans. He admits what he did was wrong and wants the forgiveness of his people.

### **Use of the Theory to Analyze the Texts**

*Apologia* theory and image repair strategies are used to analyze the data to understand the apology strategies that came from Hudgens Sprouse. Benoit’s image repair theory helps with understanding the effect an apology and works best in analyzing texts. This study focused on the

strategies Hudgens and Sprouse used in making an apology. Statements made by these two stars were analyzed and placed into the right image repair strategy for which they were used.

The apology made by both Hudgens and Sprouse was analyzed for the scandal in which had occurred. A transcript of Vanessa Hudgens' apology on ABC News, CBS News and HecklerSpray was used to see what strategies, from Benoit's image repair, she used in her apology. Hudgens' apology took place September 7, 2007.

A transcript of Dylan Sprouse's apology on HuffPost, USA Today, and US Magazine were used to see what strategies he used in his apology. Sprouse's apology took place on December 15, 2013. By using Benoit's image repair framework an analysis was conducted to see what strategies were used. Also, to determine if the strategies were similar with the sexual indiscretions that these Disney stars were facing.

### **Results**

The results of this study show that the primary strategies used were bolstering, mortification, shifting responsibility, and transcendence. These strategies seemed to be the most effective for these stars as they made their apologies, by still showing they knew they were in the wrong.

#### **Mortification**

There are numerous examples of mortification in the apology given by Hudgens, and it was the main strategy she used. Mortification is when the person admits responsibility for their action and asks for forgiveness. When mortification is used, it shows the person understands they did wrong and know they need to apologize.

Vanessa Hudgens' first response to the photo leak was mortification. In several instances, she claimed that she really did not mean for the picture to become public, and she was sorry for it

coming out. For example, on ABC News, she explained (2007): “I want to apologize to my fans, whose support and trust means the world to me” (p. 1). Vanessa apologized to her fans because she knew that she never wanted this picture to come out to the public in the first place. Hudgens also stated, “It is a personal matter and it is unfortunate that this has become public,” the representative said in a statement (Keating, 2007). Hudgens apologized and expressed how she wished these photos were never taken:

I want to apologize to my fans, whose support and trust means the world to me,”

Hudgens said in a statement issued about a day after the photo surfaced. “I am embarrassed over this situation and regret having ever taken these photos. I am thankful for the support of my family and friends. (Keating, 2007)

Hudgens’ reaction was effective because it showed fans that she took ownership of what happened and felt remorse for her indiscretion.

Another example of mortification is when she takes responsibility and realizes she should have never taken these pictures. For example, when she said (2007), “I am embarrassed over this situation and regret having ever taken these photos” (p. 1). This reaction is effective because she is accepting responsibility, which is a sign of mortification.

### **Bolstering**

Bolstering is another commonly used strategy of apology. This type of apology is when a person discusses his/her positive attributes to offset negative perceptions. Vanessa uses this strategy at least once in her apology. For example, on ABC News (2007), she said, “I want to apologize to my fans whose support and trust means the world to me” (p. 1). She is apologizing here, but is trying to offset the issue that happened by thanking her fans. This statement shifts the focus from the act she is apologizing for, to her gratitude for her fans, effectively drawing

attention away from the negative and toward the positive.

Another example of bolstering comes from Sprouse's sexual indiscretion when he posted on his Twitter account. Sprouse posted, "Whoops, guess I'm not 14 and fat anymore" (Jefferson, 2013). He is trying to make light of the situation and focus on his positive attributes of not being fat anymore. Sprouse is acknowledging his nude pictures were leaked and using bolstering to make the scandal look less negative. This is effective because he is showing his fans a more positive way to make a bad incident not seem as bad.

### **Transcendence**

Another strategy Hudgens and Sprouse used was transcendence. This is when a person places the harmful act in a more positive context. Hudgens does this multiple times throughout her apology. For example, on ABC News (2007), she states, "This was a photo, which was taken privately. It is a personal matter, and it is unfortunate that it has become public" (p. 1). Vanessa is aware of the act she did, but is trying to make it more positive by explaining she did not mean for it to come out to the public eye. She is not trying to blame anyone but trying to make it seem like it is not as bad. Another example of her using this strategy is when, on HecklerSpray (2007), she said, "At least some people are learning from my mistakes" (p. 1). Hudgens' reaction is effective because she is trying to see the bright side through all this and make it a learning experience for everyone.

Sprouse also used this strategy multiple times in his apology. During his apology, he was trying to make light of the situation and did not think he was in the wrong. Not long after these photos were leaked, Sprouse addressed the issue and tweeted this message to his more than 747,000 fans, "I messed up... but I'd be a fool not to own up to it. Got to move past it I suppose." Sprouse also added, "whoops, guess I'm not 14 and fat anymore" (Britney, 2013).

Instead of trying to deny that the photos were of him, as many stars who have been in this position have done, Sprouse came clean on Twitter and confessed that he did take these photos. Sprouse's reaction was effective because it showed fans that he was not trying to deny his actions and took ownership of what happened.

Another example of Sprouse using transcendence is in the US Magazine (2013), he stated, "The reason I'm making light of the situation is because I don't think what I did was wrong," he writes on his personal Tumblr Page (p. 1). Sprouse (2013) continued to say, "To be blunt, I was proud of my progress in the gym, thought I looked hot, and wanted to share it. There is an odd taboo with the human form (especially in the USA) and I don't particularly think it's a good thing to teach people that you should 'hide yourself' as something incredibly sacred. Blah blah blah, that's a medieval notion" (p. 1). He is trying to turn this bad situation into a better one and is also trying to teach a lesson.

### **Shifting Responsibility**

The final strategy Hudgens and Sprouse used in their apologies is shifting responsibility. This strategy is when a person shifts blame to someone or something else. It appears that Hudgens only uses this strategy once because for the most part, she took responsibility for what happened. She used this strategy, on HecklerSpray (2007), when she said, "It's screwed up that someone screwed me over like that" (p. 1). She is not taking responsibility for her actions here and is trying to blame the person that uploaded them.

An example of when Sprouse shifted responsibility is when he said he sent the photos to the wrong person. Sprouse (2013) did admit that he made a mistake, saying, "Secondly, the real problem here was not me sending my pictures to someone, but rather, sending them to the WRONG someone. The real travesty is a misplaced trust, and while I am certainly to blame for

it, it is a shame that my private life was somehow forcibly dragged into the public's perception of me" (p. 1). Unlike Hudgens, he is taking responsibility for his actions but only for sending pictures to the wrong person. He shifts the blame onto his ex-girlfriend and blames her for why the pictures got leaked.

Every strategy that was used in these apologies served its own purpose when it comes to the strategies of image repair. Benoit's image repair strategy allows *apologia* to be studied and broken down to further understand the concept.

### **Discussion**

Mortification, bolstering, transcendence and shifting responsibility were most commonly found in the analyzed text and illustrate various ways to form an apology.

The main focus of the research question was finding the dominant *apologia* strategies used by Vanessa Hudgens and Dylan Sprouse in their apologies. This research question was answered by analyzing texts and transcripts of their apologies.

Although there have been previous studies of *apologia*, these particular studies stand out as being unique because they explored the distinctive ways two young Disney stars apologized to the public. In Hudgens' case, she took responsibility and tried to rebuild her reputation and restore trust by making her public apology with national press releases. Unlike Hudgens, Sprouse also took responsibility for his behavior, but downplayed it as no big deal and did not express remorse for his actions. He focused his apology on his social media pages. When you make a social media apology, it is important to make sure that as many viewers see it as possible (LaVange, 2015). Social media apologies are a good strategy to reach a wider audience and to make your apology known. These media posts allow celebrities to respond to their fans'

comments and make their apology feel sincerer. They also allow their fans to feel connected to them and allow them to mend the relationship and maintain fans.

Both Hudgens' and Sprouse's strategies for their public apology were effective in mollifying the public media and their fans in particular even though they were two different approaches. Since 2007, when Hudgens' photos were leaked, she sold over 570,000 copies of her album, released a new album in 2008 and starred in *High School Musical 2* and 3. In February 2016, Sprouse was cast as Jughead Jones in The CW's teen drama series *Riverdale* and in 2019 he starred in *Five Feet Apart*. Even though these stars both experienced sexual indiscretions, they were able to continue their careers afterwards and move past it all.

These strategies were also effective because they were sensible responses under the circumstances. Hudgens apologized for her actions and took the blame for them. She could have denied that she took the pictures or tried attacking the person that leaked them, but she knew what she did was wrong and needed to own up to it. Sprouse took a different approach and was very upfront. He even said he could deny that he sent these pictures but knew that was a lie. He said people make mistakes and that these pictures got in the wrong person's hands. Sprouse also could have attacked his ex for leaking the photos or just shifted the blame onto her. Instead, he took responsibility and handled the situation. He did try to make it seem like it was not as big of a deal and tried to turn it into a positive incident. The way both of these stars handled their specific scandals shows their fans they were sorry and that the pictures were never supposed to get out to the public.

There were many strategies that Hudgens and Sprouse did not use. These include the following: simple denial, provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions, minimization, differentiation, attack the accuser, compensation, and correction action. This study did not use

these strategies because they did not play a significant role in Sprouse and Hudgens' apologies. Both stars did state that the pictures were not intended for the public but when they were exposed they tried to make it seem positive. Neither of them used any form of evading responsibility, because they were not trying to deny the fact that they took the pictures or argue that the episode did not occur.

### **Conclusion**

The findings that were present in these apologies are meaningful because they show the strategies which celebrities use to apologize. The two apologies that were studied are unique because they show a present-day take on *apologia*. Both of these stars are still dealing with the repercussions of their actions since they will always be known for their nude pictures getting leaked. These Disney stars were able to move on with their careers, Hudgens starring in both *High School Musical 2 and 3* and Sprouse starring in the show *Riverdale*, and these sex indiscretions did not have a huge impact on them. Understanding when to use each strategy will make it easier in the future to identify how to apologize for similar incidents.

There has been plenty of research done on *apologia* and the different approaches that have been taken in making an apology. For future research, an interview from the Disney producers could be done to get their take on the scandal. Having a producer's perspective would have provided more content for the study and how this scandal affected the Disney stars' careers. Also, analyzing a bigger Disney star than Hudgens, would give the researcher the ability to have more input from fans and see the impact the scandal had on their career. Future research on *apologia*, should analyze apologies Disney stars have made concerning different types of scandals to determine if similar strategies are used. It would also be useful to see how effectively

certain strategies work together. Future research should also determine if the apology was accepted by the media and in the public eye.

The limitations of this study included, the lack of content that was able to be analyzed and only studying two Disney stars. There were not a lot of interviews or posts that were made for these incidents like one may think. This made gathering and analyzing the texts more difficult. Overall, just locating press conferences of apologies was a challenge, let alone specific ones for this study.

Doing this study showed the importance of apologies and the impact they have on the public eye. Image repair has become very important in the celebrity world as media has increased in today's world. Benoit's Image Repair strategies give celebrities the ability to keep a positive image in the public eye, apologize for their actions, and attempt to repair them.

Overall, image repair is important to use, and it is important to understand the different strategies. It is meaningful to use these strategies, especially when the media gets a hold of a scandal, to be able to give a formal apology. Being able to give a proper public apology is important as celebrities strive to keep a positive image in the public eye and keep their fans around.

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