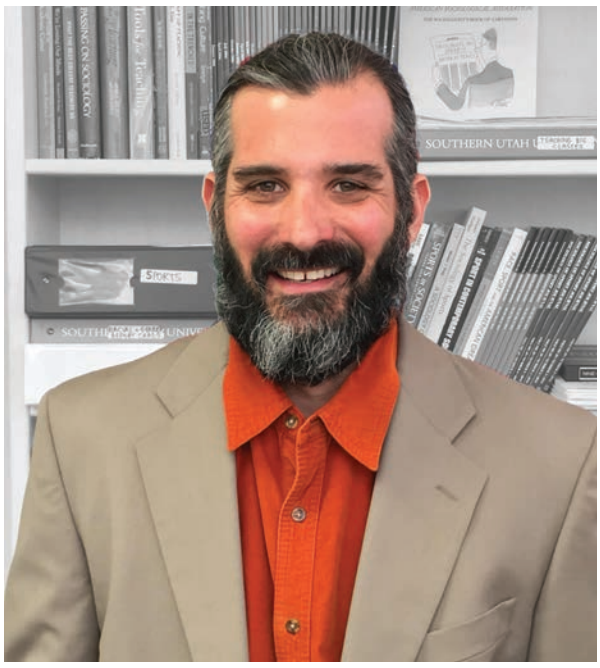
Relevant RHETORIC

"Taco the Puppy is Super Sick":

Student Excuses as a Unique Form of *Apologia* Rhetoric



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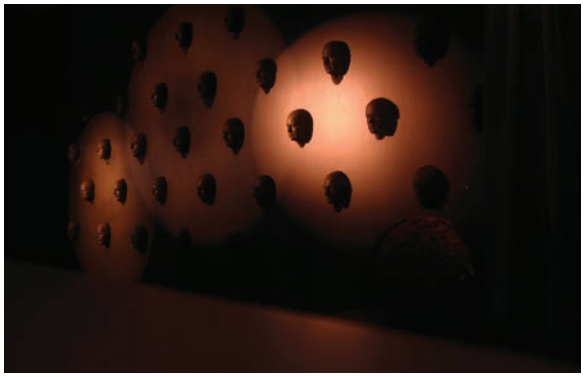
College students use a plethora of excuses in their interactions with professors in order to accomplish various goals, such as securing more time to complete an assignment or to obtain a reprieve for an absence. But why? Simply put, some students attempt to limit their responsibility for the negative behaviors necessitating the excuse. Our focus is not on whether the excuse is true, but rather to understand the manner in which students construct messages so that they function to account for their undesirable classroom behaviors.

Reasons to Study Student Excuses

There are two primary reasons to study student excuses: the importance of face-work and the overall pervasiveness of student excuses.

Face-work

First, the study of student excuses is warranted because it is important for educators to understand what motivates some students to provide excuses for inadequate fulfillment of class expectations. The existing literature suggests, at least generally, that excuses and justifications function to assist the teller of these accounts in maintaining and repairing image or "face".[1] Benoit stresses potential consequences in failing to maintain a positive face: "…[O]ur image or reputation is extremely vital to us. Face, image, or reputation contributes to a healthy self-image. Others may shun us, or mistreat us in other ways when they believe we have committed a wrongful act. We can feel embarrassed and even depressed when we become aware that others think we have engaged in wrongdoing."[2] Goffman compares this negative self image to a kind of social humiliation when he says that stigmas can be "deeply discrediting."[3] When we sense that we are vulnerable to criticism by others, "it leads to internal guilt and external threats to our face, both of which motivate a reaction from us." In fact, the maintaining of face is so important that Benoit identifies it as the "key goal of communication."[4] Whether students are aware of any habitual rhetorical patterns when it comes to maintaining positive face with professors, many do utilize discourse, in the form of *apologia* (persuasive defense)[5], to repair or alleviate threats to their reputations. They may have an underlying sense that, especially in the professor-student context, "presentations of self do make a difference in the world. People evaluate other people based on their front-stage performance."[6] As students recognize that college is a bridge between their adolescence and adult lives, they likely recognize the real-world consequences of failing to maintain a positive face with professors.



Pervasiveness of student excuses

A second reason for studying student excuses is their overall prevalence. Student excuses are common in higher education and they seem to occur with all manner of classes, teachers, and students. Caron, Whitbourne, and Halgin provided some data as to the frequency of student excuses several decades ago. They found that in a sample of undergraduate students, 68% had reported giving fraudulent excuses to professors and that many of these excuses were occurring every semester. Combining these totals with the number of legitimate excuses reported by students, they noted that the use of student excuses as a form of communication between students and teachers was extensive.[7]

There is little quantitative data to support the high frequency of student excuses today, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of their pervasiveness. In fact, Lee joked in a humorous editorial that "The death of a loved one has become such a facile excuse that the 'dead-grandmother syndrome' is an inside joke for many instructors."[8] She further cites a satirical essay in the Connecticut Review that suggested that "exams were causing so many grandmothers to die that it was presaging the downfall of American Society" and that the best solution was for "universities to only accept orphans." In the absence of numerical data, there is an army of professors, each with his or her own stories of that time when the student missed an exam for a Taylor Swift concert or failed to complete an online assignment because the Internet went down. One professor tells the squirm-inducing story of a girl that brought to class bloody photographs as proof that she had a surgery to have a lump removed from her breast.[9] Lee speculates that "with tuition rates skyrocketing and job markets tightening, the stakes have never been higher for busy students desperate to juggle looming deadlines."[10] When students fail to meet them, they use creativity and sometimes evidence to add veracity to their excuses.

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of student excuses and how they attempt to maintain face in interpersonal professor-student exchanges regarding student failures or mistakes. Although much of the existing research on image repair and face-saving strategies was originally examined in interpersonal contexts, such as romantic relationships and friendships, the literature has taken a stark turn toward strategies occurring in the public sphere. Generally, scholars today examine the image repair occurring in political, organizational, and celebrity contexts. This study will instead focus on image repair in the more private context of interpersonal relations between professors and students. Specifically, we analyze the rhetorical strategies present in 324 emails from students to professors, in order to explore the face-work, image repair, and *apologia* strategies associated with student excuses.

We begin our exploration of this topic with a brief review of the most relevant literature on this area, explain our qualitative approach to analyzing student excuses, offer a summary of the key strategies used by students in their face-saving strategies, and draw some conclusions about what we can derive from these findings.

Previous Scholarship on Image Repair and Student Excuses

Although the birth of inquiry into apologetic discourse can probably be traced back to Socrates' defense against charges that he corrupted the youth of Athens, we begin our discussion of the genre with more current literature on *apologia* or image repair.

Apologia *Research*

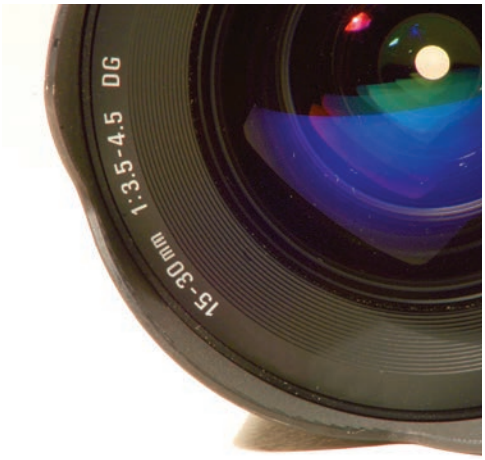
Scholars have long been studying image repair,[11] but it was Benoit who integrated the previous approaches to the study of *apologia* and offered an expanded typology more comprehensive than earlier ones.[12] He provided fourteen strategies, consisting of simple denial, shifting the blame, provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, compensation, corrective action, and mortification (see Table 1).

General strategy / Tactic	Example
Denial	
Simple denial	I did not embezzle money.
Shift blame	Steve took your wallet, not me.
Evade responsibility	
Provocation	I insulted you but only after you criticized me.
Defeasibility	I was late because traffic delayed me.
Accident	Our collision was an accident.
Good intentions	I didn't tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.
Reducing offensiveness	
Bolstering	Think of all the times I helped you.
Minimization	I broke your vase, but it was not an expensive one.
Differentiation	I borrowed your laptop without asking; I didn't steal it.
Transcendence	Searching travelers at the airport is an inconvenience, but it protects against terrorism.
Attack accuser	Joe says I embezzled money, but he is a chronic liar.
Compensation	Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll give you dessert for free.
Corrective action	Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we'll have it dry cleaned.
Mortification	I'm so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.

Table 1. Benoit's apologia *(image repair) strategies. Versions of this table can be found in Benoit (1995 & 2015)*

Applications of the different theories of image repair to specific contexts have been numerous, particularly the use of Benoit's fourteen strategy framework. These studies have most frequently been conducted in the political sphere, as scholars have examined the persuasive defense of U.S. presidents,[13] senators,[14] and members of Congress.[15] Other scholars have explored *apologia* offered by various corporations accused of wrongdoing, such as Exxon's oil spill,[16] Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol cyanide poisonings,[17] and Dow Corning's faulty breast implants.[18] Perhaps the fast-

est growing area of public *apologia* research is celebrity or athlete image repair. Recent studies include analyses of the Duke University Lacrosse scandal,[19] Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic tirade,[20] Dan Rather's CBS "Memo-gate" scandal,[21] and Michael Vick's prosecution for dogfighting.[22] Space constraints limit the extent to which we can summarize this large body of "applied" *apologia* studies; there are literally hundreds of studies examining the image repair in politics, organizations, entertainment, religion, and international relations.



Research on Student Excuses

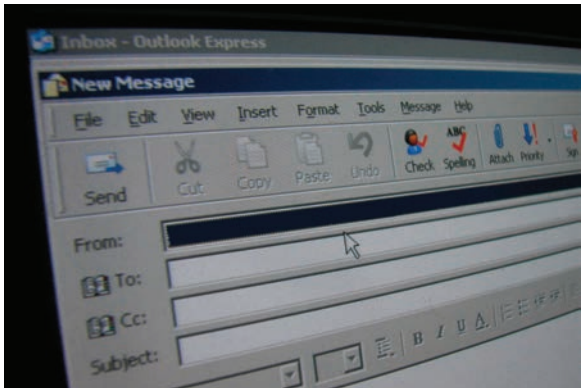
One area that has been relatively ignored in the landscape of image repair scholarship is that of interpersonal face-work. For example, researchers have done little to examine the content of strategies used by students as they make excuses to their professors. We would argue, however, that the more current frameworks for the theory of *apologia* provide an effective lens for exploring student excuses and image repair because they allow us to examine both the content and form of the messages. In other words, we can assess *what* the students are saying to repair their images with professors and also *how* they are saying it. As such, we will explore the primary themes/rhetorical strategies present in student emails to professors following perceived wrongdoing and evaluate how consistent these themes are with Benoit's theory of image repair.[23]

Methods

Apologia has been studied using a variety of methods. However, Benoit's method, which integrates the previous approaches, is the most comprehensive because it includes all of the strategies addressed in the previous literature.[24] Because Benoit offers such a broad typology of strategies, it afforded us an opportunity to analyze the text by situating the student email excuses in clearly defined categories. At the same time, it does not exclude the possibility of other strategies emerging that have previously not been identified in the literature.

Image Repair Strategies

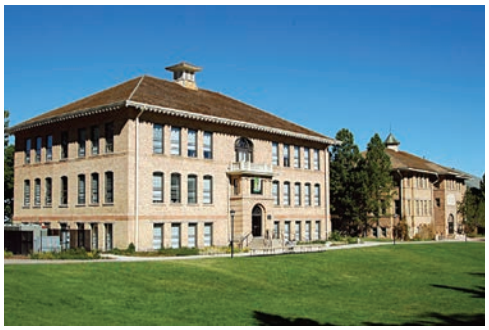
Benoit's theory operates on two premises. One is that communication is a goal-oriented activity. The other is that the maintenance of a favorable image is one of the principal objectives of the discourse. The typology contains five major categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Three of the previous categories have sub-categories, making a total of fourteen image repair strategies. The denial category consists of simple denial and shifting responsibility. The evading responsibility category consists of provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. The reducing offensiveness category consists of bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation.[25] The strategies are de-



fined and illustrated in Table 1. This typology will be applied to the students' image repair efforts before evaluating the discourse.

Texts Used in the Analysis

The sample of texts consists of 324 emails from 18 different professors at Southern Utah University (SUU).[26] Because the sample is essentially a convenience sample derived from professors who responded to our email query asking for student excuses and because our analysis is interpretive, we are not trying to generalize our results. Rather, the end goal of this exploratory analysis is theory building, as we wish to expand the theory of *apologia* to include deeper discussions of how individual strategies work in interpersonal contexts.



SUU. Photo credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:C.Maylett

Analysis

From the analysis of the student excuses, seven main strategies emerged (see Table 2). These primary strategies were defeasibility, accident, shifting blame, bolstering, transcendence, mortification, and corrective action.

Defeasibility

In these excuses, students would argue that the causes of their failure events were a result of a lack of information, volition, or ability. They would offer a variety of circumstances to demonstrate these deficiencies.

Overwhelmed. One defeasibility strategy was for students to claim that their lives were so busy that they had difficulty managing some of the professor's expectations. For example, one student sent the following email: "This semester, I let of lot of things get to me. The stress has been overwhelming and the thought of entering the real world at such a young age is extremely stressful." Another student declared that the requirement to give a speech in class was causing tremendous anxiety:

> Yes, I purposely did not sign up for a time. I don't want to miss out on the points, but I really don't want to speak in front of the

> class. Just thinking about it makes me feel sick. I could probably handle a smaller group. Would I be able to pass the class if I didn't give any of the speeches and got all A's for everything else. I don't want to be a quitter, but the speeches are giving me such horrible anxiety.

These students argue that they should be excused from attributions of wrongdoing because the stress levels in their lives are high and uncontrollable.

Strategy	**Characteristics of Student *Apologia***
Defeasibility	lack of information, volition, or ability
Overwhelmed	feelings of anxiety or stress
Lack of knowledge	lack of information
Schedule conflict	prioritizing other scheduled events
Accident	lack of control
Weather problems	stormy weather prevents travel
Mechanical/technical issues	vehicle or computer problems
Health of self/others	physical/medical issues
Shifting Blame	blaming others for failure
Bolstering	emphasizing positive student and/or professor qualities
Never happens	claiming the failure event is highly unusual
Not like me	arguing the failure is outside of the student's character
Praise the professor	expressing kind words toward professor
Transcendence	claiming altruistic reason for failure
Mortification	apologizing or taking responsibility
Sorry for the inconvenience	expressing sorrow for being troublesome
I'm embarrassed	demonstrating shame or humiliation
Sorry for the late notice	addressing the timing of apology
Corrective Action	prevent recurrence of problem

Table 2. Apologia *(image repair) strategies in student excuses*

Lack of knowledge. Another type of defeasibility strategy used by several students was to claim a lack of knowledge or understanding necessary to complete course requirements. In one email, a student claimed that "I am trying to work on it this whole week and I am just really confused on what you are wanting from me." Another wrote that, even a month into the semester, he or she did not realize that the class had even begun:

> im sending you this message in regardes that I have not attened class at all, I switched in late, and my advisor told me that it is just a class that I have to attened certian seminares and just write papers on them. When I logged into my portal the other day before I got into canvas I looked at my classes and it said that we have class on Wednesdays and thursdays at 7:00-8:50.

These examples illustrate a pattern whereby some students claim a lack of knowledge when emailing their professors.

Scheduling conflict. The last defeasibility strategy used in student excuses was to argue that something more important in their schedule prevented them from completing assignments or attending class. Frequently, the scheduled conflicts involved school-related extra-curricular activities. One student wrote to the professor: "I am on the soccer team here at SUU and we will be traveling this weekend and I was told about an hour ago that I will be traveling with the team to Texas for our game Friday." Other students claimed work or family events should supersede class: "I apologize, but I will be 30 minutes late for class this morning. I have to take my kids to school & talk to their teachers." When students would claim they had a scheduling conflict, they would often ask professors to excuse these absences as "worthy" substitutes for class attendance.

Accident

Students would often argue that the causes of their failure events were outside of their control and they would offer a variety of circumstances to demonstrate this lack of control. Some of these excuses involved events that happened to themselves personally, whereas other excuses were accidents involving other people.

Weather problems. One explanation for why students could not complete assignments, take exams, or attend class was due to inclement weather, most often snow. Whether the environment was already bad or simply carried the potential to become problematic, students claimed that these circumstances prevented them from fulfilling their responsibilities. For example, one student wrote: "We're leaving earlier to Fallon, Nevada for that funeral today because of the weather." Another student offered the weather among other reasons:

> Hey I am just letting you know that I might not be in class tomorrow...it is really hard for me to get around campus with the snow because I am still relying on my crutches. I have already slipped several times today and I am really scared that I am going to hurt myself again and my ankle can't handle that sort of trauma at the moment.

In these cases, weather provides an adequate excuse for missing class because they are circumstances over which the students perceive themselves to have no control.

Mechanical/technical issues. Another common accident strategy was to claim that mechanical or technical issues arose. The most common mechanical issues were related to transportation. For example, one student wrote: "I was fully ready to do my presentation but unfortunately as I was ready

to leave my house early this morning, I noticed that I've had a flat tire." Likewise, another email stated: "I will not be attending class today because my truck will not start and I have no other way to get to class sorry." The most common excuses relating to technical issues dealt with failing electronic equipment. The following illustrates this strategy:

> I have been trying to print off my assignment all morning but my printer doesn't seem to be working the way it should so i am attaching my assignment to this email so i can turn it in one way or another.

Another student expressed frustration with trying to utilize technology while on vacation during the semester: "I tried to get on line while I was off on my cruise, but my laptop wouldn't work." In each of these cases, the student asserted that he/she was not responsible for the failure event because automotive or other technical problems were unexpected and outside of his/her control.

Spaced it/forgot. In this type of accident, students would simply argue that they forgot about class or a specific assignment. Some common explanations included "I CAN NOT believe that I completely spaced sending that in to you," "Well I didn't make it to class because I was doing other things and completely forgot," or "I completely forgot that the testing center was closing early on Thursday and I missed the stats test." With this strategy, students would generally not provide additional explanations as to why they forgot. They just indicated that it happened unintentionally and implied that there is not much they can do about it.

Health of self and others. In another type of accident strategy, students would claim that the unforeseen problems of other people, such as family and friends, would negatively impede their ability to complete their own required school tasks. For example, one student claimed that her puppy was in need of medical attention:

> Taco the puppy is super sick. They thought he had Parvo, but the test was negative. So, they don't know. Ended up at the Vet ER for 4 hours late last night in St. George…Today he's not moving and still won't eat or drink anything. I need to stay home with him and keep giving him liquids and make sure he doesn't get worse.

Another argued: "Hey I am really sorry but I have had the worst weekend of my life…I got pulled over twice and now I am taking my sister to the hospital." The various circumstances ranged from simple medical procedures, such as "My friend went to the dentist this afternoon because his gums were really sore and was told he needs an emergency root canal procedure tomorrow. He asked me to drive him tomorrow at 11" to the more life-threatening such as "My grandfather died this weekend. His funeral will be Tuesday so I will not be in class." Regardless of the specific conditions, each event was asserted to be outside of the control of the friend or family member and, therefore, outside of the student's control simply by association.

Although students would claim other peoples' problems were also their problems, they would often argue that certain circumstances affected them personally. This was evidenced in emails about health issues, where students would offer a number of maladies as excuses for their academic failures. In our sample alone, students were affected by blood clots, wisdom teeth, depression, anemia, food poisoning, seizures, twisted ankles, hives, compression fractures, vertigo, and sleeping problems. In one of the more colorful examples, a student wrote: "During my visit to Sacramento, California over Thanksgiving break, I was severely stricken with a new superbug called Clostridium Difficile aka C.diff, a highly contagious intestinal bacterial infection." Many students, however, simply claimed to be affected by more common sicknesses, such as a cough or the flu. The following illustrates this type of image repair: "My roommate and I have been sick in bed all weekend and it seems to have gotten worse today." Although the medical issues varied greatly, student usually claimed that they were too physically impaired to attend class or complete the work required of them.

Shifting Blame

Another common image repair strategy used by students in their emails to professors was to argue that someone else was responsible for their failure to perform adequately in class. This strategy is often confused with defeasibility and accident, which blame unforeseen circumstances for a failure event. When shifting blame, students would specifically blame another person rather than an external and often intangible circumstance. A good example of this strategy is where students would fault other professors for their own shortcomings. One student wrote:

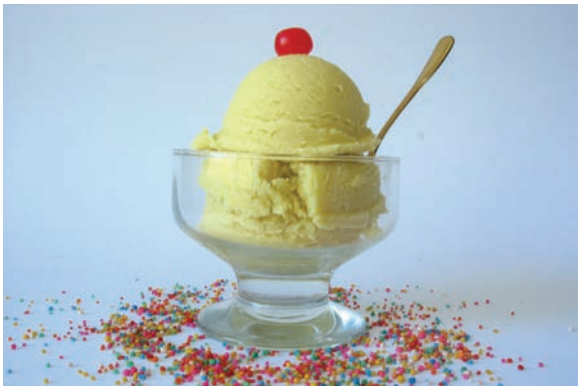
> I attempted to cram in all of my final credits to earn that degree, and I was definitely blind sighted by the standards each of my upper division classes were going to hold me to…(I am sending this after an all nighter of finishing my Persuasion Research Paper).

This student asserts that he/she failed to get his/her paper in on time because the expectations of other professors were higher than originally anticipated. Another professor was blamed for holding the student hostage in conversation:

> I was talking to Dr. [name omitted] about a research paper due in his nonverbal class and he wouldn't stop talking. You would think the guy would have caught my nonverbals, but he didn't. It wasn't until about 1:35 that he asked if I was supposed to be in class! Anyways I had a great chat with Dr. [name omitted], but sadly missed out on our last class for a while!

Other students blamed their spouses, babysitters for canceling, children for messing with their computers, and doctors for ordering them to miss class. One student even blamed his/her grandparents, arguing:

> I fully intended on being in class today, but today also happened to be the day I called my conservative grandparents to tell them I'm engaged, and it didn't go as well as hoped. Had to take a little personal time and eat a lot of ice cream.



The unifying feature of all of these examples is that the students attempt to shift responsibility from him or herself to someone else.

Bolstering

Another strategy used by students is to bolster their image or the image of their professor. This strategy occurs when students attempt to counter the harm done to their image by emphasizing other positive qualities. One common theme within this strategy is where students argued that their misbehavior was a very rare occurrence and not their normal behavior. For example, a student emailed a professor: "I have never asked for extended time and have never missed an assignment. However, I am asking if I can turn in both the due assignment and the video assignment on Wednesday?" Another email stated: "I'm so sorry I missed class today, it not like me to miss class, but I came down with the flue last night." Finally, one student emailed a professor:

> I want you to know that I am actually a good student. Last semester I made the Dean's list, while taking the capstone course for my degree along with a few other core classes and 16 credit hours. I've never failed a class in my entire life. This doesn't mean you owe me any kind of help or redemption, because I know I don't deserve it. I just want you to understand that this isn't normal for me, and that I've never messed up to this point.

This student, just like the ones mentioned above, is using the bolstering strategy as a way to deflect blame.

In addition to praising their own personal qualities, students would also praise their professors as a way of offsetting the negative behaviors. For example, one student emailed a professor:

> I am sorry but i don't think i will be able to make it class today. I have a very bad cold as of right now… Im quite sad to miss out on your class because i love your lectures but i think i should stay home since I have bad cold!

Likewise, another student emailed a professor: "I wanted to apologize for not being a very good student this semester… Thank you for being a great and patient teacher…" Another email stated:

"I am so so sorry… I guess I don't realize that I am being a distraction… I very much enjoy your class and think you are a great teacher." Finally, a student email to a professor said:

> I wanted to say again that I appreciate everything that you have helped me with and to say that you have provided me with every opportunity to learn and grow in your classes. I have not completed my assignment as you might have guessed… you have made every effort to help me and again I appreciate it…I did not prepare enough for this class nor put forth the planning necessary for my success and I will own that… I have the utmost respect for you, your dedication and your passion for learning. Your contribution to the field of communication is very great and has had an effect upon me that I will not forget.

Although all of the emails apologize initially, they contain the added emphasis of praising the professor in one way or another.

Transcendence

Transcendence occurred when students claimed there was some higher purpose behind their failure event. In our sample, students would say there was a higher purpose in staying home sick instead of spreading germs to their classmates. For example, one student wrote: "I have a strain of the flu that is highly contagious. I do not wish to spread the virus to anyone else. So, I will not be in class until next Monday." Another student expressed the altruistic motive of protecting classmates during finals week: "I think it is best for me to stay away from public settings for a few days, being so close to finals and the end of the term, I would hate to be responsible for another's illness next week!" Even though a self-imposed quarantine was the primary transcendence strategy, other students claimed they could not turn their work in on time because "I want it to be perfect." In this case, the argument was made that the quality of the students' work should trump the deadlines.

Mortification

In using mortification, students would take some form of responsibility for their actions. Three subthemes emerged from our analysis of the mortification strategies. The first is where students would argue that they were "sorry for any inconvenience." The second subtheme involved students claiming they were embarrassed by their behavior. The last subtheme showed students expressing apology for the late notice of their excuse.

"Sorry for the inconvenience." According to our data, this strategy consists of a statement of misbehavior quickly followed by the words "sorry for any inconvenience." Interestingly, this strategy most often involved missing a class, but some students even used this strategy after missing an exam. Here are some illustrative examples: "I will not be in class on Thursday due to family matters… thank you and sorry for the inconvenience," "I won't be able to make it to

class today because I have gotten the flu… sorry for the inconvenience," "I am very sorry for missing class today, I became sick early this morning… sorry for the inconvenience," "I will not be retaking the Chapter test before class today. Sorry for the inconvenience." And finally, "Professor, could I take the final I missed this week? I'm so sorry for the inconvenience." Clearly, many students apologize for inconveniencing their professor.

"I'm embarrassed." Another important mortification subtheme to arise from our data was for students to mention in their emails that they felt some form of embarrassment. One illuminating example is the following email:

> I just took the final and I didn't do to well… is there anything I can do this summer to be able to redeem my grade or would it be possible to receive an Incomplete?... I am very embarrassed by this semester…

Another student also expressed shame over their performance:

> So I'm completely embarrassed by the piece of crap paper I turned into you on Wednesday. Therefore, for the sake of my honor, I'm rewriting it. Go ahead and use the version I sent on Wednesday. That is only fair…

Similarly, another student wrote:

> For my time on Friday to present, I feel I am not even ready. Without a starting point I am lost and don't even know where to start. I should of come to talk to you after class but I felt a little embarrassed to go talk to you cause I didn't realize that our papers were due this week.

In addition, we should note that a few student emails used the words "disappointed in myself" and "upset with myself" instead of "embarrassed."

"Sorry for the late notice." "Sorry for the late notice" is another common mortification subtheme to arise from our data. Indeed, many students in our analysis used the words "sorry for the late notice" (or "sorry for the short notice") in their emails. For example, a student wrote to the professor: "I am unable to attend class today as I am no well. I am sorry for such a late notice." Similarly, a student emailed a professor: "Due to being sick I will not be able to make it to class today. Sorry for the late notice." One student emailed a professor: "I am sorry that this is so short notice but I was wondering if you could please email me the online version of the notes for Friday and Monday..." All of these emails contain a common thread: a student apologizing, not for their

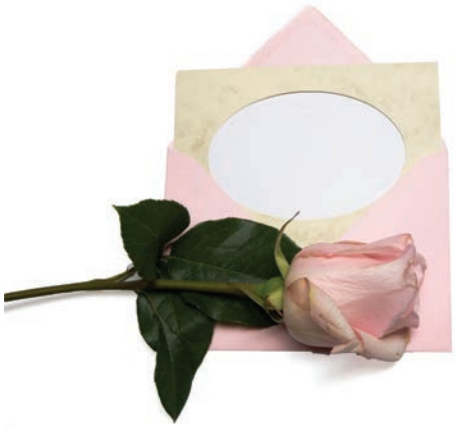
behavior, but for the fact that they did not give the professor advanced notice of their transgression.

Corrective Action

Corrective action is another important theme to surface from our data. This theme entails the student making future promises as a way to offset his or her current mistake. For example, a student emailed a professor:

> I apologize for missing the test this morning… if there is anyway to reschedule the test I would greatly appreciate it. If there isn't I will do my best to be diligent in passing your course the rest of the semester.

One student emailed a professor: "My alarms didn't go off this morning and I apologize for missing the test…please just let me know what I can do and I promise it won't ever happen again." Like the other student, this student hopes that promises of upstanding behavior in the future will make good on current misbehavior. Finally, one student wrote to the professor: "…I apologize for the missing the test… please just let me know what I can do and I promise it won't even happen again." In short, several students promised corrective action in the future in an attempt to lessen the negative consequences of current slip-ups.



Discussion

This study analyzed the *apologia* strategies utilized by college students in their excuses to professors. This is a significant shift from the vast number of *apologia* studies that have examined the face-work of politicians, organizations, and celebrities by moving the research focus to a less public context. The strategies used by students in this study were generally consistent with Benoit's *apologia* framework at least on a broad level, but contained subtle nuances in the language that seem uniquely suited for image repair in an interpersonal context.[27] These linguistic flourishes should not be labeled as "strategies," but did alter the general tone of the excuse. The level of detail provided varied from the incredibly specific and often personal to the very cryptic. For example, one student offered this vague excuse: "I am currently taking care of something that came up unexpectedly…Unfortunately, what I had to take care of was unavoidable." Another student claimed: "I just needed to let you know that I can't make it to class today. I have to help my wife with some stuff that she has to get done." In both of these examples, the "stuff" that had to be taken care of is not explicitly provided and therefore the professor is left with very little explanation as to the reason for the absence.

Another linguistic feature was students' use of the term "honest" or "no lie" to emphasize the authenticity of whatever strategy was being employed. Some examples of this include: "I'm re-

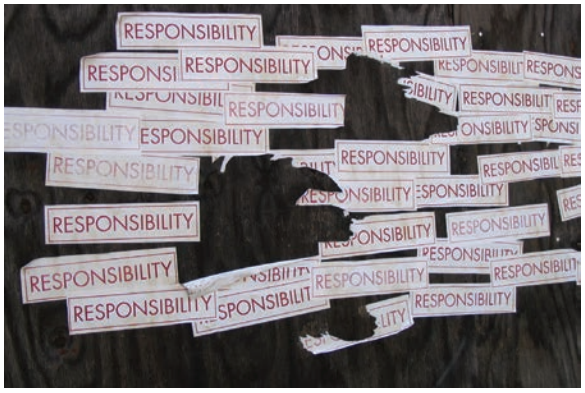
ally sick this morning, no lies about it, I feel horrid," and "I apologize for not attending class today. To be honest I was out-of-town and did not arrive back to Cedar City until late last night." These emails involve students telling their professors that they have legitimate explanations for their (mis)behavior. The "honest/no lie" language might demonstrate that students are aware that there is nothing particularly original about their explanations for wrongdoing, whether they are true or not. The language suggests that they might know that their professors have heard many excuses and they do not want to be just another in a long line of familiar refrains, so they use discourse to emphasize that their excuse is true when others in the past by different students might not have been. Other student excuses would use language to establish a conciliatory tone toward whatever the final outcome may be. They would say things like "if not, I understand." For example, one student emailed a professor: "I was wondering if I could get my assignment to you a little bit later today… if not, I completely understand." Likewise, another student wrote: "I was just wondering if it's possible to make up the quiz I missed yesterday, I understand if I can't since I missed it because I was late." Both of these students are essentially asking for special treatment, but acknowledging that they understand if the professor is unable to "bend the rules." Other students would add emphasis to their strategies by saying "thanks for understanding" when they provide an explanation for their wrongdoing. To illustrate, an email from a student to a professor stated:

> Unfortunately do to the heavy snow in Salt Lake City all planes have been grounded for the night… I don't know if ill be able to come home to make any of my classes. Thank you so much for your patience with me this long trip.

Another email from a student to a professor said: "I have been throwing up all morning, so I won't be able to make it to your 10:00 or 11:00 class. I'm sorry for missing. Thank you for understanding." We also noted that with instances where students accepted responsibility for their failures, the tone was sometimes much stronger ("I'm embarrassed") than others ("Sorry for inconvenience/late notice"). A shallower tone can minimize the offense and come off as less sincere than deeper expressions of remorse. These subtle shifts in wording demonstrate that even within Benoit's broad framework, there are different approaches to expressing the student excuses through language. This may be a unique feature of interpersonal *apologia* as it is hard to imagine a CEO or politician emphasizing that his or her words are completely honest or thanking the audience in advance for any forgiveness they might offer. These kinds of expressions seem more suited to a private context rather than a public one.

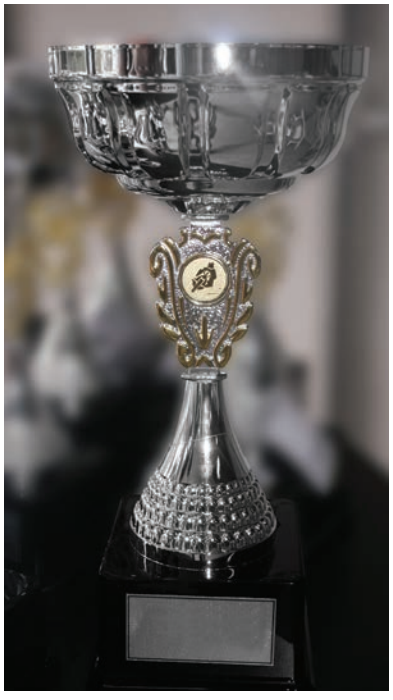
In exploring the main image repair strategies contained in the emails, students overwhelmingly utilized the strategies of defeasibility and accident over all other *apologia* strategies. One explanation for this could possibly be the innate human desire to explain the causes of our own behaviors

as externally driven. Although previous research has not connected attribution theory and *apologia* strategies, discussion of attribution theory seems appropriate here. Attribution theory suggests that we tend to assign causality to internal factors (personal qualities) when other people have caused negative events and assign causality to external factors (environmental) when we have caused a negative event.[28] These kinds of situational attributions are likely to help students make sense of an act of wrongdoing without the discomfort of acknowledging they might be the cause of a failure event.

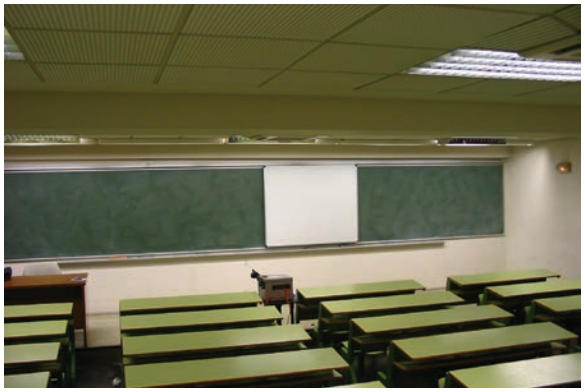


The final interesting finding to emerge is that students praised their professors in their emails. This choice of words expands the category of bolstering within the interpersonal context of student excuses by attempting to counteract the negative effects of the harmful act through flattery. However, in this case, praising the professor focuses on flattering the teacher, whereas traditional forms of bolstering include self-flattery as a way to offset the harm caused. This new type of bolstering is also reminiscent of the persuasive compliance gaining strategy of pre-giving,[29] whereby a person offers one thing prior to asking for something in return. The new variation on bolstering creates a situation where the professor would want his/her response to a student request to be something worthy of praise. Students also used traditional forms of self-bolstering (where they would emphasize that they are generally a good student), and such bolstering may not resonate with professors who have no previous experience with this student. If the professor knows these self-compliments are true from personal experience, it could realistically function to counteract the negative effect of the present offense. If the professor has no previous experience with the student, he/she may judge the student based solely on his/her current experiences.

Like all research efforts, the current study has limitations. First, since we used convenience sampling in one university, it is not known whether our results apply to other samples. In order to have more generalizable findings, future research can use probability samples drawn from a random sample of universities. Second, we lacked external evidence (media commentary or public opinion polls) to support our own interpretations of the text, since this was not possible within the private context of student excuses. Although we analyzed and interpreted the data carefully, future research should make use of traditional verification processes. Finally, because we focused solely on student excuses, the professors' discourse in response to these excuses was not examined. It is important for future researchers to analyze professors' interpretations of, and responses to, student excuses. Such work would provide a more complete analysis of *apologia* and interpersonal communication. Furthermore, a fruitful line of research is the study of *apologia* in other interpersonal contexts, such as romantic relationships, and how those strategies compare to those



used in public contexts as well as those used in other interpersonal contexts, such as student emails to professors. This type of research would shed much light on image repair strategies in general, and more specifically on the types of repair strategies that are used in public versus private. Whether dealing with sick puppies, loquacious professors, or ailing grandmas, student excuses provide an interesting, abundant, and unique type of discourse for scholars to examine.



Endnotes

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[2] Ibid., 2.

[3] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 3.

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[5] We use the terms "face-work," "*apologia*," and "image repair" interchangeably throughout the paper.

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