Will Smith's Oscars Slap: Apologia and the Use of Time

Brent Kice, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of Communication, University of Houston–Clear Lake

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Abstract
Actor Will Smith faced a need to repair his image after slapping Chris Rock at the 2022 Academy Awards. This essay analyzes Smith's March 28, 2022 Instagram apology and July 29, 2022 YouTube apology to assess his attempt at Benoit's (2015) image repair strategy of mortification. In doing so, the essay argues for the use of time as a determining element in gauging authenticity in mortification. The essay clarifies the verbal demarcation of moments in time and the nonverbal use of time to establish perceptions of authentic character growth.
Keywords: Apologia, image repair, mortification, Will Smith, Slap

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During the live broadcast of the 2022 Academy Awards on March 27, 2022, Will Smith left his seat, walked onstage, and slapped host Chris Rock in response to a joke Rock made about Smith's wife Jada Pinkett Smith. Smith then returned to his seat and yelled, "Keep my wife's name out your [expletive] mouth" two times. Smith would later go on to win the Oscar for Best Actor that night. While accepting the award, he apologized to the Academy and his fellow nominees but did not apologize to Rock directly. As can be imagined, Smith's actions created quite a controversy, and Los Angeles police were prepared to arrest Smith for battery (Reardon, 2022). Smith resigned from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on April 1, 2022, and on April 8, 2022, the Academy issued a punishment that banned Smith from attending Academy events, including the Oscars ceremony, for ten years (Arkin and Dasrath, 2022). Chris Rock did not publicly address the incident until his live Netflix comedy special on March 4, 2023 in Baltimore, Maryland. Smith issued a public apology via Instagram on March 28, 2022 (Arkin, 2022). Smith issued another public apology via YouTube on July 29, 2022. While the text-based Instagram apology on March 28, 2022 acted as a formal apology to Chris Rock, the fact that a video-based apology was issued four months later clarifies that Smith likely did not feel the initial apology was successful enough at repairing his image. Thus, this essay seeks to explore the strategic use of time as an *apologia* assurance. In this manner, the need for additional apologies, as well as consideration of the length between apologies will be addressed. To achieve this, the essay reviews the current literature on *apologia*, addresses the explicit mortification of Smith's apologies, assesses the verbal phrasing of time within his apologies, and identifies the tactical nonverbal acts of time within Smith's apologies to distinguish this unexplored element of the *apologia* genre regarding image repair.

Literature Review

Ware and Linkugel (1973) argued for the establishment of *apologia* as its own genre of study, presenting four factors: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Benoit (2015; 2021) proposed five response strategies

as part of his image repair theory: denial, evade responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. In particular, the strategy of mortification involves an apology, admission of guilt, or asking for forgiveness. This strategy draws out the sincerity of the speaker and appears most relevant in Smith's apology, as will be discussed below. Provocation, a subcomponent of evasion of responsibility, frames the offending act in question as a response to another act, thereby offering justification. Implications of this tactic in Smith's apologies will be explored below as well. Su et al. (2022) combined a critical feminist approach to Benoit's image repair theory to discern social power regarding apologies surrounding accusations of sexual violence. In particular, they pointed out how Benoit's strategies can be blended together, such as with mortification, thus, counteracting the taking responsibility of mortification. In this regard, displays of toxic masculinity may be perpetuated via apologies to extend power, a possibility regarding Smith's violent slap of Chris Rock. Kauffman (2018) pointed out an unsuccessful attempt by a celebrity to distance himself from an egregious act by constructing then blaming an alter ego thereby evading responsibility.

The rhetoric of atonement addresses the need for a rhetor to portray authenticity to atone for an egregious act (Koesten & Rowland, 2004; Jerome, 2008; Jones-Bodie, 2020). Such a strategy requires a rhetor to "acknowledge wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness; based upon reflection offer a thorough change of attitude and relationship; take steps to develop a different kind of present and future; through public action or private mortification demonstrate the authenticity; and seek atonement in a public forum," (Koesten & Rowland, 2004, p. 75).

Edwards (2010) distinguished the genre of *apologia* from collective *apologia* wherein a greater span of time occurs, such as a government apologizing for past injustices. This is of note from the literature due to the acknowledgement of time as a defining factor within *apologia*. Janssen (2012) furthered this distinction by addressing how corporations attempt to protect culpability of their current selves from actions of their past selves. Consequently, Holdener and Kauffman (2014) illustrated the use of the third person when a rhetor engages in mortification as a means for the rhetor to distance the rhetor currently from an act in question in the past. Additionally, they pointed out how such a strategy can be used to display growth in maturity.

Most explored from an intercultural communication perspective alongside high context and low context cultures, chronemics, or the nonverbal use of time (Hall, 1976), offers a significant contribution in determining success or failure of apologetic image repair. Although Hall's generalized designations of the categories by culture have been called into question (Kittler et al. 2011), the analysis in this essay will not focus directly on cultural perceptions of time.

Although Edwards (2010) distinguished *apologia*'s shorter timeframe from an act in question to an attempt to repair one's image versus collective *apologia*'s expansive amount of time, such as decades or centuries, Edwards' use of time as a parameter gives credence to the use of time within existing *apologia* image repair strategies. In the case of Smith, rather than examining time as a means of delineating a sub-genre, I argue that the strategic use of time when issuing an apology should be considered when assessing a rhetor's sincerity, especially regarding their mortification strategy. Benoit (2021) acknowledged that the strategy of mortification itself can be ubiquitous, stating, "there is no accepted standard for which of these elements [admitting guilt, asking for forgiveness, expressing regret or remorse, and apologizing] must be present for a defense to qualify as 'an apology," (p. 3). Thus, the appearance of rhetorical tactics to aid an audience in assessing the sincerity of an apology is beneficial.

However, the use of time in nonverbal communication can be linked to a rhetor's personality trait, such as extraversion or introversion. For instance, extroverts have shorter pauses when speaking online as well as face to face (Feldstein & Sloan, 1984; Dewaele & Furnham, 2000; Kalman et al. 2013). This component must be accounted for when examining authenticity surrounding time, which pauses comprise. Regarding Will Smith's *apologia* and image repair, this study is most concerned with how he portrays Benoit's (2015) mortification strategy verbally and through the display of time both verbally and nonverbally.

Methods

The following rhetorical analysis applies Benoit's image repair theory to the text and nonverbal elements of Will Smith's March 28, 2022 Instagram text-based apology and his July 29, 2022 YouTube video-based apology to discern the unique ways that time intertwines with Smith's attempt at mortification as a strategy for image repair. Special attention is paid to apologetic phrasing indicative of Benoit's mortification strategy as well as phrases and nonverbal actions denoting the use of time as an influential component to the rhetor's strategy.

Results and Discussion

Smith isn't only apologizing to Rock or the Academy, his secondary, and perhaps more meaningful audience, is the public. His ethos as a blockbuster star may have been called into question by public individuals contemplating if they allow Smith into their personal homes via the media they consume. To be frank, some may feel that he let the public down, due to the decades-long ethos he constructed. So, Smith found himself in a position of seeking forgiveness not just from Rock and the Academy, but from the public at large. Thus, since his slap harmed his ethos, showcasing authenticity was essential to repairing his image.

Mortification

In Smith's case, he appears to take on the image repair strategy of mortification due to his initial Instagram post explicitly stating "I would like to publicly apologize to you, Chris. I was out of line and I was wrong," (Arkin, 2022). Additionally, Smith stated, "I would also like to apologize to the Academy, the producers of the show, all attendees and everyone watching around the world. I would like to apologize to the Williams Family and my King Richard Family," (Arkin, 2022). Furthermore, Smith stated, "I deeply regret that my behavior has stained what has been an otherwise gorgeous journey for all of us," (Arkin, 2022). But as mentioned, such sincerity in mortification may become questionable due to his missed opportunity on the Oscars night. As an additional example harming a successful mortification attempt, Smith stated, "Jokes at my expense are part of the job, but a joke about Jada's medical condition was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally," (Arkin, 2022). This line in his otherwise strategy of mortification may be perceived as evading responsibility, or, more specifically, provocation, a justification for the offending act.

In his YouTube video, Smith (2022) states the following to Rock, "I apologize to you. My behavior was unacceptable. And I'm here whenever you're ready to talk." He also apologizes to Rock's mother and family. Additionally, he states, "This is probably irreparable" in reference to his past relationship with Tony Rock, Chris Rock's brother. He also apologized to his wife, kids, and family "for the heat that [he] brought on [them]." Additionally, he apologized to fellow nominees, adding, "I'm sorry really isn't sufficient." Aside from explicit apologies, Smith also expresses remorse. He states, "There is no part of me that thinks that was the right way. To behave in that moment." In response to a question asking if he reacted in response to direction from his wife, he stated,

"I made a choice on my own, from my own experiences, from my history with Chris." This illustrates the rhetor taking responsibility for his own actions. To the question, "What would you say to the people who looked up to you before the slap or the people who expressed that you let them down?" he states:

> *The work I'm trying to do is I am deeply remorseful, and I'm trying to be remorseful without being ashamed of myself. I'm human and I made a mistake and I'm trying not to think of myself as a piece of [expletive]. So I would say to those people, I know it was confusing, I know it was shocking. But I promise you, I am deeply devoted and committed to putting light and love and joy into the world* (Smith, 2022).

Between Smith's initial Instagram apology and subsequent YouTube apology, it appears that he satisfies the makings of mortification. He explicitly apologized to multiple people and explicitly expressed remorse for his actions. Other than a brief mention of the joke about his wife causing him to act emotionally, he does not appear to evade responsibility. However, Smith is a professional actor, a Best Actor winner, so the authenticity of his apology may be called into question due to the unexpectedness of Smith's violent slap violating the public's perception of his blockbuster ethos. Aside from his own testimony, his nonverbal communication remains to gauge his sincerity, specifically his use and portrayal of time. Su et al. (2022) pointed out disparities in the authenticity of mortification; therefore, Smith's nonverbal actions may reveal potential competing messages.

Time

Smith responded swiftly the next night after the offense, then waited four months for his second apology. However, as previously indicated, his acceptance speech at the Oscars ceremony less than an hour after the slap did not address an apology to Rock. This would have been the most immediate opportunity for Smith to present an apology. Lack of doing so calls into question the sincerity of subsequent apologies, hence, the use of time is integral to establishing that sincerity. Smith (2022) titled his five-minute, 44 seconds YouTube apology video "It's been a minute…," denoting the passage of time as an integral component of his video apology four months after his initial text-based apology. The four-month time distance between Smith's initial Instagram post and his YouTube post may be used by Smith to show growth on his part, in line with Holdener's and Kauffman's (2014) findings. Furthermore, he explicitly states,

"I spent the last three months replaying and understanding the nuances and the complexities of what happened in that moment." Such a display of the passage of time simulates a new person making new, positive decisions.

Smith's (2022) YouTube video begins with audio of background noises of what appears to be Smith getting ready for the video with text overlaid on a screen. The text contains the phrases "It's been a minute... Over the last few months, I've been doing a lot of thinking and personal work..." Additionally, the text states, "You asked a lot of fair questions that I wanted to take some time to answer," (Smith, 2022). The background audio contains Smith taking a deep breath before finally speaking after 23 seconds into the video. The video takes on a question-and-answer format where he reads questions, apparently from the public, then responds to the questions. A multi-camera setup is used, likely to portray the perception of authenticity while the audience can hear his "ums" while he considers his answers. Whether Smith had access to the questions beforehand is not known, but from an image repair standpoint, critics must assess what is presented. In this case, a produced video that showcases real-time pauses is evident. The noticeable use of disfluences before answering a question, such as "um," portrays a perception of spending time in thought. Although the amount of time is slight, a thoughtful answer may be perceived as wisdom, or the portrayal of contemplation. This is in stark contrast to his reaction at the Oscars. Once again, he portrays a contrast with his past self.

Smith relies on time-delineated phrases to, first, establish the moment of the egregious slap. He repeats the phrase "in that moment" four times. Through repetition of the phrase, he is distancing his other actions from the act in question. Second, after separating the slap as a separate moment in time, he is situated to address himself in a more positive light, similar to the tactics identified by Janssen (2012) distinguishing corporations' past selves from their current selves and Holdener and Kauffman (2014) of a rhetor speaking in the third-person. Smith also distinguishes the slap with the phrase "your moment" regarding the overlapping Oscars experience of his fellow nominees. Lastly, Smith references an ambiguous future moment requiring others to be present. For instance, regarding Rock, Smith states, "whenever you are ready." Regarding the viewing public, he states, "if you hang on, I promise we'll be friends again." In both of these instances, it should be noted that others are being asked to perform a task. Rock is asked to be "ready" and the audience is asked to "hang on." Rhetorically, the impetus is placed on others to do the future waiting. This is notable since such an

expectation of action by others may be perceived as inauthentic by some.

Conclusion

This essay highlights the importance of the strategic use of time in measuring the authenticity of a rhetor's mortification strategy of image repair within the genre of *apologia*, specifically, the verbal demarcation of moments in time and the nonverbal use of time to establish perceptions of growth. Smith uses phrasing to mark the egregious slap as a separate moment in time from which he later distances himself temporally. Additionally, he uses time itself to portray a contemplative individual reaching conclusions as a changed man. These two tactics of time are efforts to establish the authenticity of his explicit mortification attempt at *apologia.* While this analysis does not attempt to make an overall judgment of the success or failure of Smith's *apologia*, it does address his attempts at mortification, with special attention paid to his explicit satisfaction of mortification along with his use of time as a tactic to instill authenticity in his message. It should be noted that do to the violent nature of Smith's action, potential success of his apology may reinforce social acceptance of violent, masculine behavior, as pointed out by Su et al. (2022).

A limitation of this analysis involves cultural perceptions of time, an area discussed since Hall's (1976) initial research but called into question by some regarding national designations. However, exploration of cultural perceptions of time may add unique perspective to an audience's judgment of authenticity regarding a rhetor's strategy of mortification. In other words, how much time is appropriate to demonstrate self-reflection and change regarding an authentic apology may be influenced by culture.

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