

The Influence of Apology on Audiences' Reactions Toward a Media Figure's Transgression

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The present study investigates the influence of a media figure's apology on audiences' reactions toward a transgression committed by the media figure. The research participants were randomly assigned to two conditions (transgression without apology vs. transgression with apology). A media figure's apology reduced the harm caused by the figure's transgression on audiences' parasocial relationships (PSRs). When receiving the apology, the audiences who had stronger PSRs with the media figure exhibited higher levels of forgiveness for the figure's transgression. Stronger PSRs were associated with more positive perception of the apology. Furthermore, more positive perception of a media figure's apology was not only associated with higher levels of posttransgression PSRs but also related to higher levels of forgiveness. Perception of apology mediated the relationship between audiences' PSRs and forgiveness.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

This study shows that a media figure's apology can mitigate the harm of the figure's transgression to audiences' parasocial relationships. Audiences' parasocial relationships prior to the transgression influence their perceptions of the apology, which further influence their posttransgression parasocial relationships and forgiveness of the media figure.

Keywords: parasocial, apology, forgiveness

When people watch TV or movies, they sometimes feel that the figures or the characters on screen are directly talking to them and such feelings may arouse their internal and external responses (Auter, 1992; Auter & Davis, 1991; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Schramm & Wirth, 2010). This illusive interaction between media figures or characters and audiences is called parasocial interaction (PSI), and the media figures and characters are called "personae" (Horton & Wohl, 1956). On one hand, PSI is illusive because audiences are not engaged in actual interaction but "imagine" such interaction in their minds. On the other hand, it is real because audiences treat this interaction as genuine and reciprocal. When audiences are engaged in frequent, long-term, and regular PSI, PSI can develop into a parasocial relationship (PSR), which can exist beyond audiences' viewing processes. For instance, audiences may look forward to seeing their favorite personae in the future, keep

tracking them on social media, and miss them if they have not seen them for a long time.

Over six decades, PSI and PSR research has witnessed an exponential growth and researchers have been investigating the characteristics, causes, consequences, and development of PSI and PSR (see review in Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016). Since the advent of the 21st century, a few new subjects have emerged in this area, such as the distinction between PSI and PSR (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), PSI and PSR in social network sites or social media (Baek, Bae, & Jang, 2013; Bond, 2016; Lee, 2013; Lee & Jang, 2013; Powell, Richmond, & Williams, 2011; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010; Stever & Lawson, 2013), parasocial breakup (PSB; Bond & Calvert, 2014; Cohen, 2010; Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Cohen, 2003, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Hu, 2016; Hu, Young, Liang, & Guo, 2017; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011), PSI with different types of personae (Schramm & Wirth, 2010), and PSI and PSR with disliked personae (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Hoorn & Konijn, 2003; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Tian & Hoffner, 2010).

Among these subjects, the research on PSB in particular proliferates. PSB refers to the negative feelings that audiences experience when their PSRs with certain personae are terminated (Cohen, 2003). Researchers first investigated audiences' involuntary PSB with personae such as the finale of sitcoms (Eyal & Cohen, 2006) and the deaths of personae (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Then, a number of studies were conducted to explore voluntary PSB due to personae's transgressions (Cohen, 2010; Hu, 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Sanderson & Emmons, 2014).

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Despite the growing body of scholarship that addresses several important aspects of voluntary PSB, the role of apology is largely ignored. In reality, however, media figures often use apology as a crisis management strategy to repair their public images. As far as the researchers of the present study know, there is only one study that specifically examines how audiences react to a media figure's apology for his transgression (Sanderson & Emmons, 2014). Sanderson and Emmons's study reveals that there are individual differences in people's reactions toward the figure's apology, but why there are such differences remains unknown.

Therefore, there are three goals of the present study. First, it investigates whether a media figure's apology can influence audiences' emotional reactions, PSRs, and forgiveness. Second, it explores the influence of audiences' PSRs on their forgiveness of the media figure's transgression and their perceptions of the media figure's apology. Third, it examines how audiences' perceptions of the media figure's apology influence their emotional reactions, PSRs, and forgiveness. It needs to be noted that the present study focuses on media figures only (e.g., actors, actresses, talk show hosts, etc.), although personae can refer to both media figures and fictional media characters.

Audiences' Reactions Toward Involuntary and Voluntary PSR Dissolutions

Early PSB research focuses on people's reactions toward involuntary PSR dissolution. It is involuntary because these PSRs are terminated not due to audiences' willingness. For instance, Cohen (2003, 2004) asked the research participants to imagine their reactions if their favorite personae were taken off the air. Eyal and Cohen (2006) studied fans' reactions to the finale of the sitcom *Friends*. Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) investigated audiences' reactions to a disruption of TV programs due to a strike of writers. Cohen and Hoffner (2016) examined the relationship between fans' PSRs with Robin Williams and their grief over his suicide. In these involuntary PSB studies, which include both hypothetical and real PSR dissolution incidents, researchers have found that the patterns of PSR dissolution resemble the patterns of interpersonal relationship dissolution: PSR dissolution is associated with PSB, and the audiences having stronger PSRs with personae exhibit higher levels of PSB.

Such incidents as the finale of TV programs and the deaths of the media figures are not the only causes of PSR dissolution. Horton and Wohl (1956) contended that if audiences find their PSRs unsatisfying, they only have the option of withdrawing. People can voluntarily "break up with" certain media figures for the figures' transgressions (Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Transgressions refer to the incidents committed by actors that violate observers' expectations of how the actors should behave (Thompson et al., 2005). Prior research has shown that transgressions such as sex scandals can negatively influence people's favorability toward public figures (Kioussis, 2003).

In parasocial literature, a number of studies have been conducted to investigate how media figures' transgressions can undermine audiences' PSRs with them. Cohen (2010) investigated people's expected reductions in relationship closeness with friends and media figures due to moral, trust, and social transgressions. Although respondents reported closer relationships with their friends than with media figures, they expected greater reductions

in closeness in PSRs than in friendships for both major and minor moral violations. Hu (2016) found that a celebrity's scandal led to PSR reduction in audiences, and stronger PSRs predicted higher levels of PSB. However, the audiences' PSI with the celebrity during viewing after they learned of the scandal was not affected. Hu and colleagues (2017) further found that compared with disliked media figures' transgressions, liked figures' transgressions caused greater PSR reduction. However, despite the greater PSR reduction with liked media figures, due to fundamental attribution error, audiences were more likely to forgive the liked media figures for their transgressions. Audiences tended to attribute their liked media figures' transgressions to external factors whereas their disliked media figures' transgressions to internal factors, and fundamental attribution error partially mediated the relationship between PSR and forgiveness.

Audiences' Reactions to Media Figures' Apologies

People often make apologies after transgressions. It is a constructive step to repair images and restore relationships with others. Interpersonal relationship literature shows that apology plays an important role in healing the damage caused by transgressions (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1999; McCullough et al., 1998). Media figures often use apology as a strategy to manage their public image crisis caused by transgressions. However, this important strategy that often follows transgression is largely ignored in parasocial research.

As far as the authors of the present study know, there is only one study in parasocial literature that specifically examines audiences' reactions toward media figures' apology. Sanderson and Emmons (2014) analyzed fans' postings regarding the baseball star Josh Hamilton's apology for his alcohol relapse. His apology aroused polarized responses from fans. Some fans viewed his behavior as symptomatic of the human condition, admired his courage to admit the wrongdoing, and thus granted forgiveness. Some others, however, attributed the relapse to his character, perceived it as a relational transgression, and therefore chose not to forgive him. Despite these illuminating findings, it is yet to be explored whether media figures who apologize for their transgressions will receive more lenient reactions from their fans than those figures that do not. More importantly, it is unknown what causes fans' different reactions toward a media figure's apology.

Prior interpersonal relationship research on apology may shed light on answering these questions. Although there is a lack of consistent conceptualization of apology, researchers have discovered several key components in apology. These components are as follows: (a) acknowledgment of wrongdoing; (b) acceptance of responsibility; (c) expression of remorse; (d) offer of compensation; and (e) promise not to commit the transgression again (Lewis, Parra, & Cohen, 2015). Research has shown that apology following transgressions constitutes a critical stage in the process of repairing relationships. First, apology can cause the victims to believe that transgressors are aware of the hurt to the victims and feel guilty (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Second, it can elicit victims' empathy for the perpetrators with regard to the perpetrators' feelings and thoughts when they commit the transgressions (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Third, apology can make victims feel that transgressors are committed to relationships and care about other people's feelings (Exline,

Deshea, & Holeman, 2007). Fourth, apology can help restore victims' dignity harmed by transgressions and reduce their sense of injustice (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Worthington, 2003).

There are also research findings showing that apologies can cause people to react less negatively to transgressions. Scher and Darley (1997) investigated the influence of apology strategies on victims' impressions of transgressors. The research participants were asked to read a hypothetical transgression scenario in friendship, as well as the transgressor's apologies. Apologies were found to significantly improve the respondents' impressions on the transgressors. Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster, and Montada (2004) studied the relationship between the components of apologies, people's emotions (positive mood and inner harmony, anger, and moral indignation), and their cognitive judgments (the harmdoer's character and the appropriateness of the harmdoer's behavior). The researchers found that victims would react less negatively if transgressors admitted causing damages to relationships and offered compensation. Eaton and Struthers (2006) examined people's reactions to transgressions committed by coworkers, friends, and romantic partners. Transgressors' apologies not only mitigated negative emotions but also decreased the tendency of psychological aggression. In addition, recipients of apologies are less likely to exhibit retaliatory behavior and are less willing to punish transgressors (Gold & Weiner, 2000; Mullet & Girard, 1998).

In apology literature, forgiveness is probably the most often examined construct. Forgiveness is the extent to which a transgressor's faults are excused, suggesting the inclination to continue relationships and the unwillingness to withdraw from relationships. It is a motivational transformation that prevents people from exhibiting relationship-destructive responses such as revenge and avoidance and inclines people to contribute to relationship repair (McCullough et al., 1997; 1998). Weiner, Graham, Peter, and Zmuidinas (1991) contended that apologies can facilitate forgiveness because they can prevent the occurrence of fundamental attribution error (inferring that an offender's acts are due to the offender's character). Baumeister et al. (1999) argued that apologies can help alleviate people's uncertainties about transgressors' future behavior and thus elicit more chances of forgiveness. It is well documented in social psychology literature that harmdoers who apologize are more likely to be forgiven than nonapologizers (McCullough et al., 1997). For instance, in Darby and Schlenker's studies (1982, 1989), apologies were effective in reducing the negative repercussions for the transgressor, and more elaborate apologies led to more forgiveness. It is also found that apologies prompt forgiveness because they make people less eager to seek vengeance against the transgressors but more inclined to show leniency and mercy (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; O'Malley & Greenberg, 1983). Exline et al. (2007) reported that a perpetrator's response was the single largest predictor of forgiveness, and a perpetrator's apology was correlated with high forgiveness.

Therefore, in keeping with the thrust of previous interpersonal relationship studies revealing the effects of apologies on relationship repair, we propose the following three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: A media figure's apology can reduce the harm caused by the figure's transgression on audiences' PSRs.

Hypothesis 2: A media figure's apology can alleviate audiences' negative emotional reactions toward the figure's transgression.

Hypothesis 3: Audiences will exhibit higher levels of forgiveness of a media figure if the media figure apologizes.

Although there is abundant evidence showing the repairing effects of apologies on relationships, these effects may vary by individuals. As Sanderson and Emmons's (2014) study reviewed earlier shows, some fans chose to forgive Josh Hamilton whereas some others did not. Relationship closeness, a factor that is found to lead to different outcomes of apologies in interpersonal relationship literature (Exline et al., 2007; McCullough et al., 1998), may explain the fans' differences in forgiveness. On the one hand, issuing apologies demonstrates transgressors' willingness to repair relationships. On the other hand, forgiveness is a relationship-constructive set of motivational changes following a transgression. Parties involved in closer relationships are more likely to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors (McCullough et al., 1998). Therefore, if a media figure apologizes, audiences who have stronger PSRs with the figure should be more forgiving. The fourth hypothesis of the present study is as follows.

Hypothesis 4: When a media figure apologizes, audiences with stronger PSRs with the figure will exhibit higher levels of forgiveness for the figure's transgression.

Audiences' Perceptions of Media Figures' Apologies

Relationship closeness can also influence how an apology is perceived. Perception of apology needs to be considered because the subjectively perceived apology may not match the apology's objective content as a consequence of audiences' schematic perception (Schmitt et al., 2004). Whether an observer perceives a wrongdoer's apology as a sincere act or merely an attempt to avoid punishment is influenced by how close the observer feels to the wrongdoer (Darby & Schlenker, 1989). This can be explained by cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Transgressions cause dissonance between what people think the transgressors should do and what the transgressors actually do. Such dissonance motivates people to seek strategies to reduce the dissonance. The greater the dissonance, the more motivations people have to reduce the dissonance. Closer relations' transgressions cause greater dissonance, and thus people are more motivated to reduce the dissonance. Perceiving closer relations' apologies in a more positive way (e.g., genuine, sincere, etc.) can better alleviate the dissonance; otherwise the dissonance may get exacerbated.

Perception of media figures' apologies is of particular importance to parasocial research. Unlike interpersonal apologies that occur between transgressors and victims, media figures' apologies are usually issued via mass media to the public. Mass media disrupt the traditional apology discourse by inserting audiences as a third party into this discourse. Media expose what used to be private to the public lens and render interpersonal communication as overseen (King, 2008). Therefore, media figures' apology is not only a response to their victims for their transgressions but also a well scripted image-repairing performance in front of audiences. The audiences, on the other hand, are well aware of the performing nature of such apologies and thus are especially concerned about

its authenticity and sincerity. According to cognitive processing models, audiences are not passive learners and duplicators of media content. Rather, they actively engage in elaboration and processing, make sense of media figures' transgressions and their apologies from fragmentary inputs and frames of media coverage, and reach a sound overall impression as they are striving for cognitive consistency (Kepplinger, Geiss, & Siebert, 2012).

On the basis of the prior research on the association between relationship closeness and perception of apologies, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Audiences with higher levels of PSRs with a media figure will have more positive perceptions of the figure's apology.

Perception of media figures' apologies may further influence the outcomes of transgressions. Schmitt et al. (2004) found that subjective perceptions of apologies directly influenced people's reactions toward transgressions. Whether media figures' apologies will be accepted by audiences is dependent upon audiences' perceptions of the apologies (Sanderson & Emmons, 2014). Prior research shows that if apologies are believed to be insincere or perfunctory, they may fail to reach the intended effects or even exacerbate the damage caused by transgressions (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). In contrast, if people have more positive perceptions of apologies, they are more likely to have better impressions of transgressors and extend forgiveness (Risen & Gilovich, 2007; Robbenolt, 2003). Therefore, three hypotheses are proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 6: More positive perception of a media figure's apology is associated with higher levels of audiences' post-transgression PSRs.

Hypothesis 7: More positive perception of a media figure's apology will alleviate audiences' negative emotional reactions toward the figure's transgression.

Hypothesis 8: More positive perception of a media figure's apology is associated with higher levels of forgiveness for the figure's transgression.

As reviewed earlier, prior literature suggests a positive relationship between PSR and forgiveness (Hypothesis 4), a positive relationship between PSR and perception of apology (Hypothesis 5), and a positive relationship between perception of apology and forgiveness (Hypothesis 8). If people's liking of transgressors is high, they are more motivated to have perceptions that are more favorable to the transgressors. These perceptions in turn facilitate their willingness to grant forgiveness (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that perception of a media figure's apology is a mediator between audiences' PSRs and their forgiveness of the media figures. We propose a hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 9: Perception of a media figure's apology mediates the relationship between audiences' PSRs and their forgiveness of the media figures

Method

Sample

A total of 224 participants were recruited from a Midwestern liberal arts college. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 62 ($M = 20.34$, $SD = 4.76$) years. A total of 32% percent were male ($n = 72$), and 67% were female ($n = 151$). One participant did not disclose their gender information. In all, 80% of the participants were Caucasian ($n = 179$), 9% were African Americans ($n = 20$), 3% were Latin Americans ($n = 6$), 0.4% were Asian American ($n = 1$), 8% ($n = 17$) of the participants identified their ethnicity as "others," and one participant did not disclose their ethnicity information.

Procedures

We chose George Clooney as the media figure in this study. George Clooney is a well-known celebrity in the United States, and the research participants should be able to recognize him. We compiled a biographical profile of Clooney that focused on his acting career, the awards he had received, and the other social activities he had been engaged in.

At the beginning of the experiment, all the participants were asked to read Clooney's profile and fill out a questionnaire measuring their PSRs with the media figure as a pretest. After that, the participants were randomly assigned to two conditions.

In Condition 1 (transgression without apology; $n = 111$), the participants were asked to read a news article. The participants were told that article was published in *The New York Times*, but it was written by the researchers. The article was printed on a page with *The New York Times* logo on its top margin, which made it look like a news page from *The New York Times* website. The news article reported that George Clooney had been arrested for drunk driving and speeding a few days before the participants joined the study. The article described the process of how the celebrity was arrested, one witness's testimony, and the results of his alcohol test. In this article, Clooney did not issue any apology. After reading the article, the participants were instructed to complete another questionnaire including the aforementioned PSR scale as a posttest of PSR, emotional reactions toward the transgression, and forgiveness of Clooney for the transgression.

In Condition 2 (transgression with apology; $n = 113$), the participants were also asked to read a news article. This article was identical to the one used in Condition 1 except that it included Clooney's statement of apology. Previous literature on the influence of components of apologies shows that more severe transgressions require more elaborate apologies (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Weiner et al., 1991). Drunk driving and speeding constitute a very severe transgression, and it was treated as a major moral transgression in Cohen's (2010) PSB study. Therefore, the apology statement was designed to consist of all the five components of an apology mentioned earlier. In the statement, George Clooney fully acknowledged his wrongdoing, claimed to take the responsibility, expressed his remorse, made a commitment to compensate for the damage, and promised not to commit the transgression again. After the participants read the article, they also completed another questionnaire. This questionnaire was identical to the second questionnaire in Condition 1 except that it contained a measure of percep-

tion of the apology because the news article in this condition had a statement of apology.

At the end of each condition, a debriefing was given to the participants before they exited the experiment.

Measures

In addition to such demographic variables as age, gender, and ethnicity, PSR, perception of apology, emotional reactions toward transgression, and forgiveness were measured.

PSR. Both the pretest and the posttest of PSR were measured with the 10-item PSI Scale devised by Rubin and Perse (1987). This scale has been adapted to measure PSR with a wide range of personae and consistently proved to be valid and reliable. We slightly modified the wording of the scale to make it better fit the present study. The PSR measure used in this study included such items as “I look forward to seeing him on television or movies,” “I see him as a natural, down-to-earth person,” and “He makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.” The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s α of both PSR pretest scale and the PSR posttest scale was .90.

Perception of apology. Perception of apology was measured with five items selected from a couple of scales measuring subjective accounts of apologies (Robbennolt, 2003; Scher & Darley, 1997). This measure included such items as “How sufficient was his apology?,” “How regretful do you think he was?,” “How appropriate was his apology?,” “How apologetic do you feel he was?,” and “How bad do you think he felt?” These items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*). Higher scores on this scale mean a more positive perception of the media figure’s apology. The Cronbach’s α of this scale was .88.

Emotional reactions toward transgression. Emotional reactions toward transgression were measured with the eight-item Emotional Reaction scale toward moral transgressions devised by Laham, Chopra, Lalljee, and Parkinson (2010). The participants rated the extent to which they felt the following eight emotions in response to the transgression (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*): anger, contempt, distress, frustration, disgust, shame, disappointment, and revulsion. Higher scores on this scale mean more negative reactions toward the media figure’s transgression. The Cronbach’s α of this scale was .92.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness was measured with Hu et al.’s (2017) three-item, scale including “I would forgive this actor,” “I would remain loyal to this actor,” and “I would not follow this actor anymore” (reversely coded). The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s α of this scale was .87. We adopted this scale because PSR is a one-directional and illusive relationship, and thus many popular forgiveness scales in interpersonal relationship research cannot be directly used. These three items used by Hu et al. (2017) in their PSB study well reflect the present study’s view of forgiveness as the degree to which a media figure’s transgression is excused, suggesting audiences’ willingness to continue PSRs and unwillingness to terminate PSRs.

Ethical consent. The procedure for this study, as described earlier, received ethical approval from the institutional review board of Mu Hu’s institution. Respondents provided consent in the consent forms distributed before the study, where they were required to indicate agreement before proceeding with the study.

Results

Gender Difference

The media figure in the present study was male, so we examined whether there were any gender differences between male and female participants in the pretest of PSR, posttest of PSR, emotional reactions toward transgressions, perception of apology, and forgiveness. There were no significant gender differences in these variables (Table 1).

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that a media figure’s apology can reduce the harm caused by the figure’s transgression on audiences’ PSRs. We first conducted a *t* test to compare the pretests of PSR to check the validity of random assignment. The pretest of PSR of Condition 1 ($M = 3.32$, $SD = .55$) was not significantly different from that of Condition 2 ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .44$), $t(221) = -.27$, $p = .79$. This result suggests that our random assignment was valid. Then we conducted another *t* test to compare the means of PSR posttests in both conditions. The posttest of PSR with the media figure in Condition 1 ($M = 2.81$, $SD = .60$) was significantly lower than the posttest of PSR in Condition 2 ($M = 3.03$,

Table 1

Mean Comparisons of Pretest of PSR, Posttest of PSR, Emotional Reactions Toward Transgressions, Perception of Apology, and Forgiveness Between Female and Male Participants

Variable	Female	Male	<i>t</i> -values and <i>p</i> values
Pretest of PSR	3.34	3.30	$t(221) = 0.38$, $p = .71$
Posttest of PSR	2.90	2.96	$t(221) = -0.46$, $p = .65$
Emotional reactions toward transgressions	3.67	3.62	$t(222) = 0.18$, $p = .86$
Perception of apology	4.45	4.84	$t(114) = 1.02$, $p = .31$
Forgiveness	3.06	3.14	$t(221) = 0.52$, $p = .61$

Note. PSR = parasocial relationship. PSR pretest, PSR posttest, and forgiveness scale items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Emotional reactions toward transgressions and perception of apology scale items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Higher scores on the emotional reaction scale mean more negative emotional reactions toward the media figure’s transgression, whereas higher scores on the perception scale mean more positive perception of the media figure’s apology.

$SD = .51$, $t(221) = -2.16$, $p < .05$, suggesting that audiences' PSRs were less negatively influenced by the media figure's transgression if he apologized. Therefore, our first hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 2

In the second hypothesis, we anticipated that a media figure's apology can alleviate audiences' negative emotional reactions toward the figure's transgression. To test this hypothesis, a t test was performed to compare the means of emotional reactions toward transgressions between Condition 1 (transgression without apology) and Condition 2 (transgression with apology). The scores of emotional reactions toward transgressions in Condition 1 ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.45$) were not significantly different from the scores in Condition 2 ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(222) = 1.08$, $p = .28$, suggesting that the apology had no influence on audiences' emotional reactions to the transgression, so the second hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicted that audiences will exhibit higher levels of forgiveness of a media figure if the media figure apologizes. Similarly, we used a t test to compare the means of forgiveness in Condition 1 and Condition 2. There was no significant difference between Condition 1 ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .81$) and Condition 2 ($M = 3.19$, $SD = .61$) in forgiveness, $t(221) = -1.47$, $p = .15$, suggesting that the media figure's apology did not lead to more forgiveness, so the third hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 4

We proposed in the fourth hypothesis that when audiences receive a media figure's apology, stronger PSRs will be associated with higher levels of forgiveness. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted between PSR pretest and forgiveness in Condition 2 in which an apology was issued after the transgression. There was a positive relationship between PSR pretest and forgiveness, $r = .66$, $p < .001$, suggesting that upon receiving a media figure's apology, those audiences who had stronger PSRs with the figure tended to be more forgiving. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 5

In the fifth hypothesis, we proposed that stronger PSRs with a media figure are associated with more positive perception of the figure's apology. We conducted a Pearson correlation analysis between PSR pretest and perception of the apology in Condition 2. A positive relationship emerged, $r = .49$, $p < .001$, suggesting that stronger PSRs were associated with more positive perception of the media figure's apology. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis was supported.

Hypotheses 6, 7, and 8

The sixth, seventh, and the eighth hypotheses predicted that more positive perception of a media figure's apology is associated with higher levels of posttransgression PSRs, improved emotional

reactions, and higher levels of forgiveness. We conducted a series of Pearson correlation analyses between perception of apology and PSR posttest, emotional reactions, and forgiveness in Condition 2. There was a positive relationship between perception and PSR posttest, $r = .53$, $p < .001$, indicating that more positive perception of the media figure's apology was associated with higher levels of posttransgression PSRs. There was no significant relationship between perception and emotional reactions, $r = -.11$, $p = .23$, suggesting that audiences' perception of the media figure's apology was not associated with their emotional reactions toward the figure's transgression. There was a positive relationship between perception and forgiveness, $r = .52$, $p < .01$, suggesting that more positive perception of the media figure's apology was associated with higher levels of forgiveness. Therefore, the seventh hypothesis was not supported, whereas the sixth and the eighth hypotheses were supported.

Hypothesis 9

The ninth hypothesis predicted that perception of apology is a mediator between audiences' PSRs with a media figure and their forgiveness for the figure's transgression. To test this hypothesis, we followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure and ran a series of regression models. In the first step, we examined whether the independent variable (PSR pretest) had a direct effect on the dependent variable (forgiveness). The effect was confirmed because PSR pretest was significantly related to forgiveness, $\beta = .66$, $p < .001$. In the second step, we tested whether the independent variable (PSR pretest) had an effect on the mediating variable (perception). The relationship was also confirmed, $\beta = .49$, $p < .001$. In the third step, forgiveness (dependent variable) was set as the criterion variable and both PSR pretest (independent variable) and perception (mediating variable) were used as predictors in a regression equation. Perception had a significant effect on forgiveness after PSR pretest was controlled, $\beta = .25$, $p < .01$, and the equation of regressing forgiveness onto both perception and PSR pretest reached significance, $F(2, 110) = 51.86$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .49$. In the fourth step, the effect of PSR pretest on forgiveness controlling for perception was examined. After the mediating variable (perception) was controlled, the size of the direct effect identified in the first step (between PSR pretest and forgiveness) was reduced from $\beta = .66$ to $\beta' = .54$, suggesting that perception partially mediated the relationship between PSR pretest and forgiveness (Figure 1). Therefore, the last hypothesis of the present study was partially supported.

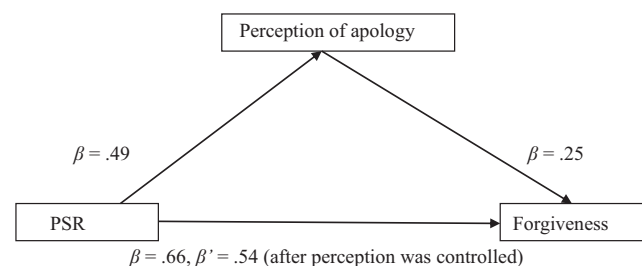


Figure 1. Mediating effect of perception of apology on the relationship between PSR and forgiveness.

Discussion

The present study enriches the parasocial literature by examining the influence of a media figure's apology on how audiences react to his transgression. A media figure's apology for his transgression reduced the harm caused by the transgression on audiences' PSRs. When receiving the media figure's apology, the audiences who had stronger PSRs tended to be more forgiving for the figure's transgression. PSR also had an effect on how audiences perceived the media figure's apology: Stronger PSRs led to more positive perceptions of the media figure's apology. Furthermore, more positive perception of the media figure's apology was not only associated with higher levels of posttransgression PSRs but also related to higher levels of forgiveness. Perception of apology was also found to mediate the relationship between audiences' PSRs and forgiveness.

The two hypotheses involving the variable of emotional reactions to a media figure's transgression (Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 7) were not supported. There was no significant difference between the two conditions (without apology vs. with apology) in terms of emotional reactions, and perception of apology was not associated with emotional reactions toward the transgression. This may be due to the Emotional Reaction scale that we used. The eight items measuring emotional reactions represent very strong emotions (e.g., anger, shame, etc.). However, PSRs, especially the PSRs with a media figure assigned by the researchers, may not be as strong as intimate interpersonal relationships and thus cannot adequately activate such strong emotional reactions (Cohen, 2010). The PSR pretest scores of the two conditions were 3.32 (Condition 1) and 3.43 (Condition 2) on a 5-point scale, and the emotional reaction scores of the two conditions were 3.78 (Condition 1) and 3.49 (Condition 2), respectively, on a 7-point scale. Therefore, the apology made by the media figure might not have caused much variation in these strong emotional reactions.

There was no significant difference in forgiveness between Condition 1 and Condition 2. Unlike what the third hypothesis predicted, the audiences who were exposed to the apology statement did not demonstrate higher levels of forgiveness than did those in Condition 1 in which the apology statement was absent. This result is inconsistent with the previous interpersonal relationship research findings. Such inconsistency may suggest the uniqueness of apologies made by media figures. Apologies in interpersonal relationships are usually made by transgressors directly to the victims, but the apology in this study, similar to the apologies by many other celebrities, was made by a media figure to the general public as a whole. It is a deindividualized message and thus is less personal than an interpersonal apology. Furthermore, it took the form of a formal statement published in a mainstream newspaper. As revealed by the abovementioned King's (2008) study on para-confession, celebrities' apologies through media are particularly subject to audiences' perceptions of whether they are genuine apologies or just staged performance for self-promotion purposes. Therefore, although apology and forgiveness both suggest the willingness to restore damaged relationships, simply receiving an apology from a media figure may not guarantee audiences' forgiveness.

In general, the results of the present study offer important insights into the influence of a media figure's apology on audiences. On the one hand, some of the hypotheses, proposed on the

basis of prior interpersonal relationship research, were supported. This may support Horton and Wohl's (1956) proposition that there is no such discontinuity between social and parasocial experience. PSR is experienced as of the same order as and related to interpersonal network. This is especially true nowadays when media have become a core element in people's daily life, and personae are common subjects of their daily conversations. Media frequently and routinely bring personae into media users' daily life and mold these personae into the substance of their living experiences, so much so that mediated experience becomes authentic experience (Piccirillo, 1986).

On the other hand, some other findings in this study (such as those regarding the relationships between apology and forgiveness and emotional reactions toward transgressions) are inconsistent with the corresponding findings in interpersonal relationship research. Such inconsistencies remind the researchers to be cautious when they attempt to deduce the mechanism of parasocial apologies from the research of interpersonal relationships, especially intimate relationships such as families, romantic partners, and close friends. Intimate relationships are characterized by mutually shared history, strong commitment, and future expectations, whereas PSR is poor in these characteristics due to its one-directional and illusive nature (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Therefore, there may be important quantitative and qualitative differences between the apologies within PSRs and interpersonal relationships, and as Lewis et al. (2015) put it, "the forms, functions, and outcomes of an apology are likely different in a romantic relationship than in a celebrity's apology to the public" (p. 48).

In spite of the contribution, a few limitations of the present study need to be pointed out so the readers can interpret the results of the present study with caution. First of all, the media figure in this study, George Clooney, has a positive image in public. He has been rated as one of the top five celebrities with the best reputations (Jennifer Lawrence has the best celebrity reputation, just as we suspected, 2014). However, people sometimes have to encounter disliked figures in media, just like they have to engage in involuntary interpersonal relationships in real life. There is a wide array of interpersonal research exploring involuntary relationships with disliked others (Card, 2007; Hess, 2000), but only a small number of studies have examined disliked personae in parasocial literature despite some researchers' call for more research on negative PSRs (Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008). The inquiry into the effects of apologies made by disliked media figures may fill this void.

Second, the transgression in the present study is a moral transgression, and audiences were not the direct victims of the transgression. However, some other transgressions by celebrities directly hurt certain audiences. Recently, Jennifer Lawrence had apologized for her joke about sacred rocks in a Hawaiian archaeological site (McKenzie, 2016), and Steve Harvey had apologized for his offensive remarks about Asian men (Yam, 2017). Therefore, it is worth comparing the influence of apologies on the audiences who are the targets of such transgressions (such as the Hawaiian community and the Asian community in the abovementioned incidents) and on those who are not the targets but have negative feelings simply because they believe that the celebrities have done something wrong. Risen and Gilovich (2007) have discovered the differences between transgression targets and observers in terms of their acceptance of apologies. In their study,

targets and observers had different perceptions of various forms of apologies and exhibited different patterns of apology acceptance. The researchers further found that such differences were caused by different pressure sources that targets and observers encountered respectively. For targets, they accepted apologies because of the apology–forgiveness social script and their motivations to be seen positively by others. For observers, however, the acceptance of apologies was mainly due to their desire to feel good about themselves.

Third, the media figure used in the present study is an actor. There are other types of media figures, such as athletes, politicians, clergies, newscasters, and so forth. People have different expectations from these different types of media figures, and therefore the type of media figures may influence people's perceptions of media figures' transgressions. The same transgressions committed by different types of media figures, or different transgressions committed by the same type of media figures, may have different influences on audiences. A clergy's adultery scandal may be perceived as more severe than such a transgression by a pop star because people expect the former media figure to live a more self-disciplined lifestyle. A baseball player who uses a corked bat to gain an advantage in a game may undermine fans' confidence in the franchise or in the integrity of the sport, whereas a much admired athlete's patronizing prostitution may cause people to doubt his morality and his eligibility to be a role model. Future PSB researchers need to take media figure type and transgression characteristics into consideration.

Fourth, the present study, like many other social science studies, used college students as its sample. College is a very special time in a person's life, so college students are distinct from other populations in many aspects. Peterson (2001) conducted a widely cited meta-analysis study comparing the studies using college student subjects and nonstudent subjects. College students' responses were found to be more homogeneous than nonstudents'. In addition, the effect sizes derived from college student samples were often different from those derived from nonstudents in terms of both direction and magnitude. Therefore, as far as the present study is concerned, readers need to be cautious when attempting to extend its findings to other populations. Replications of the present study on nonstudent samples may be necessary before any generalization conclusions of this study's findings can be made.

Fifth, the media figure's apology did not make a difference in audiences' forgiveness in the present study. We suspected that it was due to the impersonal and deindividualized nature of the apology statement in the newspaper article. However, media figures nowadays often use social media to release news and keep in touch with their fans. Many media figures, such as aforementioned Steve Harvey and Jennifer Lawrence, have used Twitter and Facebook to make apologies for their transgressions.

In contrast to traditional media, social media are different in both content and format. As to content, a media figure's social media chronologically delineate the information about the figure (e.g., work, hobbies, travel, interaction with other media figures, likes, dislikes, and so on). Much of such information may not be reported by traditional media, but it constitutes a unique lens for audiences to peek into the personal life of the figure. As to format, media figures' social media are (or at least seem to be) managed by the figures themselves, which may arouse a more direct sense of intimacy in audiences in contrast to traditional media. In addition,

sometimes one single social media post can combine multiple components (text, pictures, sound, and videos), so audiences need to use multiple channels (reading, listening, and viewing) to process the content of the post. Furthermore, audiences can not only read, listen to, and view the figures' social media posts but also reply to the posts, forward them to other audiences, and discuss them with other audiences on social media. Therefore, according to media richness theory (Walther & Parks, 2002), social media are richer media (media with higher levels of multiplicity of cue systems, availability of feedback, message personalization, and natural languages) in comparison to traditional media. As far as apology is concerned, it is an emotionally arousing process that requires richer media to convey. Therefore, it is viable to speculate that media figures' social media are better at lending themselves to efficient communication of such emotionally complex tasks as apologies. However, more empirical research needs to be conducted to empirically test this speculation.

Sixth, the present study was conducted in a classroom, which is different from the contexts in which the respondents use media in everyday life. How people use media in a research setting and natural settings may be different. For instance, when the participants read the news article, they knew that they were in a study and thus refrained from conversing with others about the article and using Facebook or Twitter. In addition, their reactions to the event were measured immediately after they read the article. However, in their daily life, news article reading occurs in their social contexts wherein it is interwoven with other forms of communication (e.g., TV viewing, face-to-face interaction, social media use, etc.). In addition to reading a single news article about a certain event, they may surf different sources trying to learn more about the event, exchange information with their families and friends with regard to the event, and engage in clicks, likes, and interaction with strangers about the event. These activities as a whole shape their perceptions of the event and influence their reactions toward the event. In other words, the reactions toward a news event are the outcome of different media exposure, rather than the effect of reading a single news report. Therefore, the research setting of the present study may threaten its external validity.

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