



Please, Listen! Clarifications by Cancelled K-Pop Idols and Actors on Social Media

Shifaneyra Aliya Sabella Effendi¹, Rhaina Syifa Awwalya Sujadi², Desi Lutfiana Widyaningsih³

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta, 236111060@mhs.uinsaid.ac.id

² Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta, 236111057@mhs.uinsaid.ac.id

³ Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta, 236111058@mhs.uinsaid.ac.id

Abstract: This study analyzed the communication strategies used in clarification messages posted by Korean idols and actors on social media when facing canceled culture. This study used a qualitative approach, and the data used in this analysis was collected from clarification posts on official social media platforms, such as Instagram and X (Twitter), from a number of public figures in the Korean entertainment industry between 2018 and 2024. The analysis of this data was made by using Benoit's (1997) *Image Repair Theory*, Walton's (2007) *Clarification Dialogue Model*, and Alsharif's (2023) *Emotional Appeal*. This study found three types of clarification strategies that are often used by figure manufacturers in their clarification letters: (1) *Apology*, which is an acknowledgment of mistakes and a promise to improve behavior, (2) *Explanation*, to correct misinformation and provide context for what is happening, (3) *Emotional Appeal*, manifested through expressions of humility and acknowledgment of the feelings and difficulties of the victim to evoke sympathy from the audience. The results of the study show that clarification on social media was a complex crisis management strategy. The three strategies not only served to repair their damaged reputation, but also became a means of negotiating their close relationship with fans and showing behavior according to cultural norms in Korea, which emphasize sincerity and humility.

Keywords: *cancel culture, clarification, image repair, K-Pop, social media.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cancel culture has become a frequent phenomenon for idols and public figures in the K-pop industry. Their enormous influence as global icons makes them the target of public scrutiny, and their behavior is constantly monitored so that even minor mistakes can trigger public anger and condemnation. This cancel culture refers to the withdrawal of all forms of support (viewership, social media followers, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) from those who are considered to have done something unacceptable or highly problematic, as described by Ng (2020). In the case of Korean idols and actors/actresses, especially in South Korea, this mass withdrawal of support results in real social punishment

such as boycotts, online criticism, and even dismissal from entertainment programs. So, with this context, clarification from these public figures is an important strategy to maintain their public image and can ease conflicts with their fans and the general public.

This phenomenon can be explained by looking at the one-way relationship between public figures and their fans. Because fans feel close to their idols, they become more emotional when their idols get into trouble. In our current digital era, social media plays an important role in quickly spreading criticism and anger from fans and the public, while also serving as a tool for idols or public figures to immediately clarify and apologize. For example, in 2022, an actress was cancelled after driving while under the influence and damaging public infrastructure, causing social media to be suddenly full of anger from the public and her fans. However, through the same media (Instagram), she was able to immediately post a handwritten apology letter in Korean and English to calm the situation for the global community and try to recover her image and reputation.

In the last decade, there have been many studies discussing cancel culture and strategies for clarification in the public space, such as Putri & Kusuma's (2025) analysis of the reception of cancel culture among K-Pop idols and the reasons why fans are involved in this phenomenon, as well as Febrianti et al. (2023) analysis of K-Pop fans' perceptions of cancel culture and its impact on the fandom community.

Although there have been many studies on cancel culture, research on the clarification strategies of K-Pop idols and actors/actresses who have been affected by cancel culture on social media is quite limited. For that reason, this study formulates one research question:

“How do cancelled K-pop idols and actors deliver their clarification on social media?”

To answer the research questions, an analysis will be conducted by applying three theories on communication strategies. The first is Benoit's (1997) theory on image repair strategies, which is used to analyze the strategies employed by public figures in an effort to repair their image and reputation, such as denial and/or expressions of regret. The second applies Walton's (2007) clarification dialogue model to analyze how public figures explain and clarify to clear up misunderstandings, remove any ambiguity, and make sure their message is interpreted correctly and appropriately by the public. And the last one comes from Alsharif (2023), which is about the application of emotional appeal, is used to see how public figures use emotional aspects such as sadness, weakness, and others in an effort to touch the hearts of readers and repair the emotional relationship between public figures and the community and their fans.

By combining these three theories, this study aims to understand the strategies of public figures in their clarification and the dynamic relationship between public figures and their fans on social media. This approach is expected to answer how image rehabilitation efforts are carried out in the face of cancel culture in the entertainment industry in South Korea.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ng (2020) looks at the phenomenon of canceling as a form of social punishment where a public figure is boycotted, criticized, and their support is withdrawn or abandoned by the public and their fans for doing something considered inappropriate. In the Korean entertainment industry, this often happens because actors and idols have more expectations from society and fans. This is similar to the explanation by Jung and Shim (2014), which explained that idols are not only entertainers, but also become global representatives of Korean culture, so that even the smallest personal mistake can be seen as a shame or public failure.

Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory provides an essential framework to analyse how public figures attempt to repair reputation after scandals; recent experimental studies on crisis communication confirm that combining apology with corrective action and informational clarification tends to be more effective than apology alone (Nöhammer, Schorn & Becker, 2022).

To deal with this, the affected public figures have several strategies. Benoit (1997), in his theory of image repair, explains several ways that are usually used, such as denying the allegations, promising to correct mistakes, or admitting and apologizing. This theory can help in analyzing the clarification of public figures on social media in their effort to regain the trust of the public and fans. Coombs (2007) also adds that the success of these clarifications greatly depends on the type of case the public figures are involved in and the responsibility they feel for the case. In the world of K-pop, this theory shows that only saying sorry is not enough. It is also important to explain clearly and logically, and to be able to touch the feelings of the public and their fans to make their apology sound truly sincere.

Walton's (2007) Clarification in a Dialogue Model explains how speakers provide contextual information to remove ambiguity; recent content-analytic work shows that the phrasing of crisis messages (i.e., whether the message contains explicit clarification acts or only general statements) affects public acceptance phrasing differences are empirically measurable and relevant for reputation outcomes (Fannes, Claeys & Van Gorp, 2025).

As Marwick and Boyd (2011) noted, social media plays a very important role in this entire process. X (Twitter) and Instagram seem to make the line between a public figure's private life and public image disappear. Nowadays, they are forced to show their sincerity in public, which can be seen in their handwriting when writing apology letters. This is one of the efforts to maintain a feeling of closeness and emotional connection between public figures and their fans. This apology strategy is related to fan culture, where emotional closeness and loyalty strongly influence whether their apologies will be accepted or not. In short, social media can be a place where an idol's image can be ruined, but it can also be the main place to rebuild their own reputation (Machado, 2022).

Besides that, cultural perspective also plays an important role in understanding their clarification style. Through his thoughts, Sanderson (2011) sees that in communication, using emotional language, expressing feelings, and showing weaknesses are very effective strategies.

This can be found in the culture of *K-pop* fans, where they highly value sincerity. For the fans, an apology full of emotional expression and showing the weak side is considered strong proof that the public figure truly regrets their behavior. In other words, this strategy is the most effective way for the public figure to show that they are also a normal person behind their perfect image.

This emotional dimension is also supported by Alsharif's (2023) Emotional Appeal framework, which highlights how expressions of shame, gratitude, humility, and vulnerability function as persuasive strategies to evoke empathy from the audience. In the context of Korean entertainment culture, where sincerity is highly valued, emotional appeals become an essential component of effective clarification messages.

Empirical work on digital apologies and emotional persuasion supports the importance of affective language in online apologies: discourse studies show that explicit emotional displays (shame, regret) increase perceived sincerity and account acceptance (Ruytenbeek & Decock, 2024).

METHOD

1. Data and Data Sources

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method because its purpose is to describe and analyze linguistic strategies in the language used in clarification letters and apologies on social media from public figures such as K-pop idols or actors/actresses who have experienced canceled culture. This qualitative approach is suitable for this research because it involves analyzing the use of language and its meaning.

The research utilized data sources from clarification posts or apology messages on social media from *K-pop* idols or actors/actresses who have experienced and faced the phenomenon of canceled culture between 2018 and 2024. The data was collected from official social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter/X, which are the primary media for direct communication between public figures and their audience. This is because cancellation culture towards K-pop entertainers often occurs on these two platforms, and these platforms are also a place for them to repair their reputation.

The textual data used for this research refers to written posts and also the captions. These data enable an in-depth analysis of the linguistic strategies that exist. Through this data, this study can see how language is not only a tool for communication but also a tool for rebuilding trust and appealing for forgiveness in the virtual world and in the socio-cultural context of K-pop.

In collecting textual data for this research, there are several limitations: 1. The actual data is written in Korean, but this analysis used the official translations that are available in the captions of the posts. 2. There are posts that have been deleted by the relevant actors, so we used translations that were posted by trusted media sources.

This approach was chosen to ensure the authenticity of the data while at the same time accommodating the limitations of access to the original posts, yet still maintaining the focus of the analysis on linguistic strategies in clarification messages.

2. Data Analysis

This research uses analysis by describing examples of clarification and explaining their communicative function in the context of cancel culture. This follows Benoit's (1997) *Image Repair Theory*, where the focus is on denial strategies, action repair, guilt and responsibility acceptance, and image repair efforts—or, in other words, reducing negative impressions on their reputation. This theory is then combined with Coombs' (2007) *Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)*, which assesses the truthfulness of the response provided.

With a more detailed analysis, a relationship emerges between the strategies used and public response. For example, an apology strategy that contains detailed explanations has proven to be more effective in restoring public trust because it shows sincerity and reasonable reasons. Meanwhile, emotional appeal strategies, such as handwritten letters expressing their sadness, usually receive positive responses from loyal fans but more often receive more criticisms from the online community at large.

By combining Benoit's (1997) theory and Coombs' (2007) crisis communication theory, research shows that clarification on social media is not just words but also a meaningful cultural representation in the digital world—where language becomes a tool for negotiating identity and repairing relationships and reputations.

Table 1. Distribution of Apologetic by Celebrity Types

	Opening Apology	Neutralizing Allegations	Emotional Appeal	Regret and Gratitude	Future Promise
Idol	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Actress	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Idol-hybrid	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

1. Apologetic Strategies

1.1 Definition

Apologetic strategies are a type of clarity strategy that idols or actors use when they face canceled culture. These strategies involve admitting mistakes, feeling sorry for them, and publicly apologizing to try to fix their image. The goal is to show real feelings, take personal responsibility, and make people feel sorry for them. In cancel culture, apologizing is often the first and most important step in making fans trust the

idol again. This aligns with William L. Benoit's (1997) *Image Repair Theory*, which says that directly admitting guilt and expressing remorse is one of the best ways to fix a bad reputation.

1.2 Examples from X and Instagram

A good example of an apology strategy from the Actress, who faced cancel culture after a drunk driving incident in 2022. Soon after the incident became famous online, she posted a handwritten apology letter on Instagram. In the letter, she admitted her mistake, expressed deep regret for the harm she caused, and apologized to the public, the authorities, and her fans. This is common in the K-pop world, where handwritten letters are seen as a sign of sincerity and taking responsibility.

Another similar case was with the Idol, who faced bullying accusations in 2021. He wrote a formal apology on Instagram and stopped all public activities for several months. His message was short but heartfelt, including an acknowledgment of the pain he caused and a promise to think about his actions.

A similar situation happened with the Idol-hybrid in 2020. A stylist and an editor claimed she treated the staff badly during a photoshoot. Later, she posted an apology on Instagram, saying she was sorry for her rude behavior and felt really bad about it. She also met the staff member in person to say she was sorry directly. This shows both embarrassment and efforts to fix things, because she apologized publicly and also took real steps to make things right with the person she upset.

From these examples, it can be seen that the usual forms of apology strategies usually include: (a) A handwritten apology letter posted on Instagram; (b) An emotional message expressing regret; (c) Taking a break from public activities as a sign of responsibility.

2. Explanatory Strategies

2.1 Definition

Walton (2007) says that clarification is an action used to clear up any misunderstandings, clear up any ambiguities, and make sure the audience understands the speaker's message correctly. Walton's definition of clarification is a response to a problem of understanding, where one side asks for an explanation and the other side gives information to avoid ambiguity and/or misunderstanding and to provide an understanding that is in agreement with the speaker. In this study, explanatory strategies refer to clarification acts used by cancelled idols and actors to provide contextual information, correct public misinterpretations, and explain the background of the controversy. Rather than only expressing remorse, these strategies function to clarify intentions, specify circumstances, and prevent audiences from forming incorrect assumptions about the event. Through these explanatory efforts, idols attempt to guide

the public toward a shared understanding and reduce negative judgments triggered by misinformation or incomplete narratives circulating online.

2.2 Examples from X and Instagram

In his public statement, the Idol clarified that the controversy arose from misunderstandings and stressed that he had never intended to cause harm. This shows an effort to explain the context and reshape audience assumptions regarding his motives. Similarly, the Actress stated that she immediately cooperated with authorities after the incident and denied claims suggesting that she attempted to avoid investigation. Her clarification directly addressed public speculation and corrected misinformation circulating online. Meanwhile, the Idol-hybrid explained that accusations of abusing her position were untrue and emphasized that she had already resolved the matter privately with those involved. This statement aimed to correct false narratives while demonstrating responsible action behind the scenes.

3. Emotional Appeal

3.1 Definition

According to Alsharif (2023), emotional appeals (or affective appeals) are defined as strategies that target the audience's emotions to encourage them to take action or form a certain mindset. In the context of written communication, these emotional appeals are realised through language that involves emotions, such as giving compliments, expressing gratitude, using positive statements, or even showing vulnerability by positioning themselves in a lower position.

3.2 Examples from X and Instagram

A comparative analysis of apology statements from the Idol, the Actress, and the Idol-hybrid reveals the application of different emotional appeals strategies as reflected on social media platforms such as X and Instagram, as seen in the following excerpts:

Idol : *"I am **ashamed** of my past actions... the **pain** that I've inflicted onto others... I wish to say **thank you** to those people who were hurt..."* (Instagram, 2020)

Actress : *"I am disappointed and so **ashamed** of myself for the wrong I've done... I have **damaged so many people**... There is **no excuse** for this indecent incident..."* (Instagram, 2023)

Idol-hybrid : *"I deeply apologise for having hurt her due to my **immature attitude**... I am **embarrassed** by my lacking actions... I am **reminded of how precious staff are**..."* (X, 2022)

Discussions

1. Apologetic Strategies

These actions fit with Benoit's (1997) *Image Repair Theory*, especially in terms of mortification and corrective action. Mortification is shown when idols admit their mistakes and apologize, while corrective action happens when they promise to change or take time to reflect.

Also, W. Timothy Coombs' (2007) *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT) explains how important this strategy is. When the public believes a person is responsible for a problem, a clear apology and showing regret are the most effective ways to stop damage to their reputation.

Handwritten letters can show emotions because of something called parasocial interaction. Fans who feel strongly about their idols might see these letters as showing real regret. This strong feeling can make some fans forgive their idols, even if most people still don't approve.

2. Explanatory Strategies

These examples reflect Walton's (2007) theory of the clarification model of dialogue, in which public figures give clarifications to clear up any misunderstandings and to avoid any wrong conclusions. The Idol's statements and explanations serve as responses to the public's misunderstandings, and they try to create an accurate context and also manage and guide public understanding, just as Walton's theoretical framework describes. The Actress's statement illustrates a clarification response that supplies factual detail to counter rumors and eliminate ambiguity in public perception. The Idol-hybrid's explanation represents a corrective clarification act, where false claims are explicitly addressed and replaced with accurate context. Collectively, these statements demonstrate how idols employ explanatory strategies not merely as image maintenance, but as clarification speech acts aimed at restoring shared understanding, reducing negative assumptions, and managing public interpretation within the cancel-culture environment.

3. Emotional Appeal

3.1 Relation to Theories

From the three examples, a consistent pattern can be seen where all three show several specific affective moves within the framework of Alsharif's (2023) theory. In the context of apologising, this strategy is manifested through writing that touches the readers emotionally.

1. Self-Degradation Strategy

Alsharif (2023) explains that self-degradation is an attempt to place oneself in a lower position to provoke sympathy from the audience. These three celebrities consistently use this strategy with different variations: (1) The idol uses the word "*ashamed*," which indicates deep regret for his past behavior. This is in line with the characteristics of self-degradation, which Alsharif (2023) describes as "*portraying his status as lower*"; (2) The actress strengthens her self-degradation by repeating the phrases "*so ashamed of myself*" and "*disappointed*," which emphasize regret. This pattern of repetition is in line with Alsharif's (2023) pattern of using excessive language to reinforce emotional effects; (3) The idol-hybrid chooses the word "*embarrassed*," which is more polite but still effective

in showing a lower position. This shows the ability to adapt self-degradation strategies according to context and public personality.

2. Focus on the Victim/Other Strategy

Following Alsharif's (2023) theory of affective moves, which emphasizes the importance of focusing on the reader's emotions, the three celebrities showed different abilities in how they acknowledged the negative impact on the victims: (1) The idol uses the powerful phrase "*pain that cannot be washed away*" to describe the emotional suffering of the victims. This phrase is classified by Alsharif (2023) as an affective appeal, which is classified as figurative language to raise empathy; (2) The actress is more complex, mentioning "*damaged so many people*," which includes direct and indirect victims. This approach shows an expansion of the focus on the victim, as mentioned in Alsharif's (2023) research on the complexity of affective moves; (3) The idol-hybrid specifically mentions "*having hurt her*," which shows personal recognition of individual victims. This is according to Alsharif's (2023) findings on the effectiveness of targeted acknowledgment compared to general statements.

3. Gratitude Strategy

Referring to Alsharif's (2023) category of affective moves about the expression of gratitude as an unusual strategy in persuasive communication, only the Idol used this strategy effectively: The phrase "*thank you to those people who were hurt*" is an application of the gratitude move, which Alsharif (2023) describes as "*expressing gratitude in unexpected contexts*." This strategy has a dual function: it shows humility while acknowledging the kindness of the victims, which provides an opportunity to apologize.

4. Valuing Others Strategy

According to the concept of complimenting in Alsharif's (2023) framework, only the Hybrid Idol applies this strategy through the statement "*how precious staff are*." This statement is classified as a valuing others strategy, which Alsharif (2023) identifies as a strategy to "*build emotional connections through recognizing the value of others*." Idol-Hybrid not only apologizes but also reaffirms the value and contribution of the relevant person to themselves.

3.2 Analysis of Comparisons and Implications for Theory

The findings of this study reveal variations in the use of emotional appeals in each of the three public figures' apologies. The idol showed the most use of emotional appeals, using three different strategies, while the actress and idol-hybrid were more selective in their strategy use. These variations indicate that the use of strategies was adaptive to the public personality and appropriate to the context of each public figure's mistake.

The pattern of emotional appeals used by these three public figures shows the influence of Korean culture, especially in South Korea, where manners are highly valued. This is in accordance with Alsharif's (2023) theory, which explains that cultural factors also strongly influence how a person delivers an emotional message.

From the analysis of the three apologies by South Korean public figures, it can be understood that Alsharif's (2023) theoretical framework on the use of emotional appeals can be applied in different contexts. The different uses of emotional appeals based on the context of each public figure can help readers understand the problems and the crisis they are experiencing, and understand the culture behind them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has answered the research question by examining how K-pop idols and actors affected by cancel culture convey their clarifications on social media through a combination of *Image Repair Theory* (Benoit, 1997), *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (Coombs, 2007), and *Affective Moves Framework* (Alsharif, 2023). The analysis shows that the public figures mentioned above employ three main clarification strategies, namely apologetic, explanatory, and emotional appeals, as part of their efforts to repair their public image and restore trust in the digital environment.

The results of this study present a new role in the literature on cancel culture, digital communication, and image repair by showing that clarification on social media is not only useful as a form of self-defense, but also as a form of affective performance that negotiates honesty, responsibility, and sympathy. Furthermore, these findings have practical implications for crisis communication practices and entertainment industry management, suggesting that authenticity and emotional transparency remain key to rebuilding the relationship between celebrities and fans in the K-pop industry.

Further research is recommended to focus on cross-cultural comparisons of clarification strategies between Western and Asian entertainment contexts, along with audience reception analysis to explore how fan perceptions influence the success of image repair efforts. This direction of study will expand on the findings presented here and contribute to a broader understanding of how public figures navigate digital accountability and moral expectations in global media culture.

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