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## Can You Spot the Apologia? Spotify, Joe Rogan, and Avoiding Cancellation

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In early 2022, Spotify and podcaster Joe Rogan faced backlash and threats stemming from some of Rogan's COVID-related podcast content. Via a qualitative case study, we analyze the situation, Spotify and Rogan's employment of corporate apologia strategies, the short-term financial/share-of-voice results stemming from their use, and consider theoretical and practical implications for the utilization of corporate apologia, avoiding cancellation and misinformation management.

*Keywords: public relations, crisis communication, corporate apologia, podcasting, cancel culture, misinformation*

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Organizational crises are often characterized by threats – threats to the environment in which the organization operates, to the stability of systems utilized by the organization, to an organization's image and legitimacy, and ultimately to the organization's very survival (Seeger et al., 2003). Joe Rogan, known as “the world's most famous podcaster” (Starling, 2022) and media platform Spotify faced backlash in late 2021 and early 2022 for Rogan's controversial podcast episodes related to COVID-19. The episodes attracted negative attention from a group of scientists and others after Rogan featured guests with views considered harmful toward public vaccination efforts against COVID-19. The situation escalated after prominent artists such as Neil Young and Joni Mitchell requested Spotify remove their music from the platform, causing negative publicity and threats to the organization's business model, reputation, and livelihood via “cancel culture” – a call for boycotting due to social justice-based transgressions (Ng,

2020). Some crisis experts were quoted in media coverage as stating “not canceling Joe Rogan... could be a problem” (Popli, 2022, para. 3) for Spotify. While cancel culture has been examined in other areas like critical studies (e.g. Ng, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021), marketing (e.g. Salanha et al., 2022), and universities involved in a racially charged crisis (e.g. Veil & Waymer, 2021), the phenomenon and how to avoid it in terms of for-profit entities and personalities have not yet been studied from a public relations-centered crisis communications perspective.

In this study, we examine how Spotify and Rogan utilized corporate apologia strategies to avoid falling victim to cancellation and the resulting post-crisis impact on financial performance, subscriber counts, and image. First, we provide background information about Rogan’s podcast, its host Spotify, and the events preceding the crisis. We then review literature on corporate apologia and its distinctions in crisis communications. Next, we examine Spotify and Rogan’s statements through the lens of corporate apologia and assess to what extent these strategies were employed, finding apologia was utilized. Finally, we discuss the results of the case with regard to increases in financial, subscriber/listenership, and reputation levels for both Spotify and Rogan while considering the ability to avoid cancellation via corporate apologia.

## BACKGROUND

Since its launch in 2008, Spotify has become the world’s most popular audio streaming subscription service with 433 million users (*About*, 2022). Spotify amplified its podcast expansion with a multi-year exclusive licensing deal with Joe Rogan Experience (JRE) in May 2020. Since its first episode in 2009, JRE has used humor and curiosity to discuss far-ranging topics like neuroscience, sports, comedy, health, infectious disease, and more (Spotify, 2020).

The exclusive podcast deal received interest for a variety of reasons. First, it was a clear signal that podcasting was now “big business,” as the agreement easily eclipsed the prior year’s then-record transaction of \$10 million for “My Favorite Murder” on Sticher (Steele, 2020a); companies like Omnicom Media Group concurrently announced it planned to spend \$20 million for advertising on Spotify-hosted shows (Steele, 2020b). Second, Rogan’s huge audience — more than 11 million listeners per episode, with three to four episodes per week (Andrews, 2022) — would be listening (and watching) on Spotify exclusively. Third, Rogan would net a rather eye-popping amount from the agreement, initially reported to be more than \$100 million (Steele, 2020b), but now believed to be possibly double that (Bissada, 2022). These factors, and Rogan’s status as the world’s “most successful” podcaster (Stevenson, 2020), contributed to a significant amount of coverage from traditional and online media.

Rogan and Spotify continued to make headlines as the pandemic progressed, as the exclusive aspect of the licensing agreement tended to tie the two together in news reports (e.g., Flegenheimer, 2021; Starling, 2022). Rogan, who has a penchant for courting a wide variety of guests for appearances on JRE (e.g., Bennett, 2022), does not shy away from controversial subjects involving COVID-19, vaccines, health, and treatments, including evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein and Dr. Pierre Kory’s discussion of Ivermectin as a form of treatment and prophylaxis in the summer of 2021 (e.g., Children’s Health Defense Team, 2021). However, a tipping point seemed to occur at the end of 2021. On December 31, Rogan released a podcast episode featuring virologist and medical doctor Dr. Robert Malone, credited with co-creating the mRNA technology (see Malone et al., 1989, and Verbeke et al.,

2019) utilized by purveyors of two major COVID-19 vaccines, Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna. Malone stated the Biden administration withheld data on Ivermectin that would have proven its usefulness as a treatment (Bradley, 2022). Attention to Malone's interview heightened after the publication of an open letter to Spotify on January 12, 2022. The letter, signed by 270 medical professionals and others, upbraided Rogan for allowing content and views they felt could potentially result in vaccine hesitancy and degraded public trust in medical research, among other concerns (Bradley, 2022; also see Sosa et al., 2022). The demands in the letter included an admonition for Spotify to "take action against the mass-misinformation events which continue to occur" (Sosa et al., 2022, para. 2) as well as "establish a clear and public policy to moderate misinformation" (para. 5). On January 24, singer Neil Young posted a letter on his website to his management and to an executive at Warner Records, which was deleted the following day (Maas, 2022); Rolling Stone reported the letter stated, "They can have Rogan or Young. Not both" (Greene, 2022, para. 2). On January 28, Joni Mitchell followed Young's lead and removed her music (Mitchell, 2022).

Perhaps surprisingly, Spotify did not capitulate to these artists (Andrews, 2022) nor members of the public, including stockholders and investment groups (e.g., Cleveland, 2022) who were seeking to censor Rogan and/or pressure Spotify to do so. This case will look at Spotify and Rogan's actions and statements through the lens of corporate apologia and will consider apologia as a potential strategic stance to escape demands for cancellation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Organizational Crisis

An organizational crisis is often characterized as a threat to an organization's survival involving the environment or systems in which the organization functions or a threat to its image, reputation, and legitimacy (Seeger et al., 2003). Crises are situations that demand resolutions and may present opportunities as well as threats of loss (Milburn et al., 1983; Fink et al., 1971). According to Pearson and Clair (1998), an organizational crisis is "a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolutions, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly" (p. 60). According to Coombs (2002), it is the threat to the company's viability and very survival that distinguishes a crisis from a mere problem. During a crisis, one of the highest priorities is protecting an organization and repairing injury to its reputation (Ferguson et al., 2018). The effectiveness of an organization's communication strategy largely influences public opinion and ultimate organizational well-being following a crisis. Organizations can utilize specific message strategies to create positive audience attitudes toward an organization following a crisis (Benoit, 1995). Understanding how stakeholders will react helps inform crisis communication strategy and detail post-crisis strategy.

### Apologia

The discourse of corporate apologia is based on the concept of rhetorical apologia, which is "usually a public speech of self-defense" following a charge against "a man's moral nature, motives, or reputation" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 274). Downey (1993) described apologies as manifesting "a variety of styles including appeals to traditional cultural values, invective, references to a greater divinity, reliance upon legitimate bases of power, factual accounts of an issue, and inductively reasoned organization" (pp. 42-43). Abelson (1959) identified four "modes of resolution" (p. 344) that could be

used when individuals encounter an interpersonal “belief dilemma” (p. 343), according to Arendt et al., (2017), “these four common strategies—denial, bolstering, differentiation, transcendence—can be used separately, in combination, or with a number of lesser-known strategies in order to create a successful, persuasive message” (p. 518).

The concept of rhetorical apologia inspired a new study in corporate apologia (Arendt et al., 2017), which is defined by Coombs et al. (2010) as a “communicative effort to defend the corporation against reputation/character attacks” (p. 338). Hearit (1995), drawing on Sproule (1988), drew distinctions between individual-based apologia and the “new organizational rhetoric” (p. 1) of the contemporary era and the concurrent organizational apologia employed. Similar to Abelson, Hearit argued, “corporate apologia is a public response to a social legitimacy crisis, a response that seeks to distance institutional actors from their wrongdoing and reaffirm adherence to key social values” (1995, p. 1). Corporate social legitimacy theory claims corporations’ well-being depends on the social environment and the public’s perceptions of its value; in other words, the corporation’s success depends upon the public’s, or the “community’s,” perception of its legitimacy, both financially and socially (Pfeffer, 1978). Thus, Hearit (1995) called corporate apologia “a discourse of re-legitimation” (p. 6) in response to charges of “wrongdoing” that allow the organization to “create identifications with the public values they are reputed to have violated” (p. 6). Thus, rather than dealing with charges against individual character or morals, charges of wrongdoing may result in potential “social legitimation crises” (Hearit, 1995, p. 3) that may be addressed via corporate apologia.

Whereas individual apologia typically takes the form of public speeches, corporate apologia (and corresponding kategoria) may take a variety of forms, for example, in internet newsgroups and white papers (Hearit, 1999), over social media and other word-of-mouth mechanisms (e.g., Liu et al., 2011), and in public statements to media sources (Hearit, 1999; Liu et al., 2011) from CEOs, other organizational sources, or even customers (e.g., Kim & Park, 2017). Further, corporate legitimacy in modern society is increasingly based upon a sense of moral legitimacy rather than simply following the law and previous states of a more stable, homogenous society with correspondingly stable social expectations to remain legitimate (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Therefore, image-focused strategies including corporate apologia are increasingly important in managing an organization’s reputation and ability to operate (Benoit, 2018); the decisions made to defend a corporation can affect many people (Benoit, 2015). Arendt et al. (2017) noted that “apologetic rhetoric has evolved from one instance of apologetic rhetoric such as one speech to a series of statements, or a campaign, of apologetic rhetoric strategically planned and employed to restore the image of a person or organization” (2017, p. 518).

Denial as a strategy is an “instrument of negation” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278). Hearit and Brown noted that in a corporate apologia setting, “guilt is rejected... This denial is accompanied by an opinion/knowledge dissociation in which a company argues that there is a false perception that is guilty of the transgression and that, upon closer examination, the ‘true facts’ of the case reveal that the organization is indeed a law-abiding citizen” (2004, p. 460). Hearit and Brown also outlined a strategy using a scapegoat of some sort, usually utilizing an individual/group dissociation strategy (e.g., “it wasn’t us, it was this particular employee”) (2004). They found that Merrill Lynch utilized denial when faced with charges they misled potential investors prior to the “dot com bubble” market crash and recession of the early 2000s, publicly denying the charges made by the New York Attorney General (Hearit & Brown, 2004).

Coombs (2006) noted that bolstering and denial are “reformative” corporate apologia strategies because they seek to change how publics feel. Abelson (1959), along with Ware and Linkugel (1973), pointed out that bolstering at its basis is the opposite of denial since the strategy reinforces identification with a fact or issue, presumably one the audience views as positive. Arendt et al. posited that, on the corporate level, identification with the audience or of something the public values is only part of a possible bolstering strategy; the inclusion of “facts, data forensic evidence, or anything that supports the plea of innocence” (2017, p. 518) also indicates a bolstering strategy. Hearit noted on the corporate level, “the use of such a strategy of identification is used to remind auditors of key values held in common that, most often in the case of companies, takes the form of jobs” (1999, p. 294). In a 1996 crisis incident involving racist language from executives, Texaco used a bolstering strategy during crisis mitigation efforts by “reminding people of Texaco’s policies against discrimination and noting the actions where [sic] outrageous” (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000, p. 166). Studies have shown bolstering as a strategy is “most effective when it is directly related to the charge” (Coombs, 2006, p. 166) because it shows the organization is formally at odds with the charges in question and helps leads to separation; Coombs & Schmidt (2000) also found that bolstering strategies resulted in experiment participants assuming corrective action was being taken as well.

Differentiation is the strategy that attempts to “serve the purpose of separating some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278). In other words, the specifics of the particular case at hand are separated from the previous larger general sense of the issue. Coombs et al. (2010) noted that often audiences are asked to wait for a more complete body of evidence to come forth before making a judgment on the case; evidence leading to “a different more, [sic] favorable interpretation... Essentially the character attack is re-defined as a more favorable event” (p. 340). Ice (1991) described how Union Carbide utilized differentiation when they suggested that circumstances surrounding an accident at a plant in India (particularly, safety issues associated with a subsidiary and subcontractors) would not happen in one of their American facilities because of the differences in ownership and safety measures; the accident was thus “conceptualized as the fault of the safety standards of the subsidiary rather than a problem endemic to the Union Carbide Corporation” (Ice, 1991, p. 348).

Transcendence can be considered the opposite of differentiation in that “elements, instead of split down, are built up and combined into larger units organized on a superordinate level” (Abelson, 1959, p. 346). The initial charge is framed as part of some larger good and/or new context allowing for a more positive interpretation of the situation (Coombs et al., 2010; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Often a moral element of the situation is invoked. Hearit (1997) posited that “successful utilization of a transcendent strategy entails two elements: redefinition and an appeal to higher values” (p. 220) and includes opinion/knowledge, business interest/societal interest, and current/future dissociation elements. He found that Johnson Controls utilized transcendence when responding to charges that their Fetal Protection Policy, a policy prohibiting women from working in hazardous battery construction due to the dangers of lead contamination and corresponding birth defect problems, was discriminatory to women (1997). Johnson Controls attempted to reframe this prohibition as preventing employees’ babies from developing lead-related birth defects as a moral issue and injustice to those babies, their families, and society in general, thus redefining a “‘sin’ into a ‘virtue’” (Hearit, 1997, p. 217).

## Cancel Culture

According to Ng, “cancel culture,” (or perhaps, rather, the act of engaging in cancel culture) can be defined as “withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective” (2020, para. 3). This effect can create crises for organizations through amplification of stakeholder activism effects and pressures on organizations to change behavior (Coombs, 2021). The effect is enabled and intensified in online platforms including social media sites (Coombs; 2021; Clark, 2020); the short-message nature of Twitter in particular can encourage “ideological rigidity and lack of nuance” (Ng, 2020, para. 6).

In addition to businesses paying for their transgressions by being “canceled” and boycotted (e.g., Shalal & Shepherdson, 2020; Saldanha et al., 2022), reports of “cancel culture” chilling speech have been made on college campuses among students (e.g., Friedersdorf, 2017) and professors (Norris, 2021); the effect has been associated with ideological purity, zealotry, and binary thinking (e.g., Brooks, 2019). Norris (2021) has explained the phenomenon by invoking Noelle-Neuman’s (1974) Spiral of Silence theory, which postulates when speakers perceive their opinions to be at odds with the existing majority, they are more likely to be reticent to express those views. However, cancel culture seems to utilize the theory in the offensive sense; that is, in classic Spiral of Silence theorizing, the effect of one’s perceptions of their views as at odds with the majority is to silence heterodox viewpoint expression, whereas in cancel culture, “punishment” via boycotts or other online campaigns can result from perceived transgressions and associated expressed moral outrage. Saldanha et al. (2022) also noted “cancel culture goes beyond traditional boycotts or discontinuing purchase of products to include online public shaming of the person or brand” (p. 3). Thus, some scholars have utilized Two-Step Flow Theory (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) as a theoretical foundation (e.g., Mueller, 2021), where opinion leaders distribute info through social media that gets translated into actions; “connectivity in the digital age has created the perfect storm for cancel culture” (Mueller, 2021, p. 2). While Saldanha et al. (2022) have examined cancel culture in terms of marketing, and Veil and Waymer recommended crisis communicators “make room for dialectic tensions in crisis narratives” (2021, p. 8) in response to racially charged crises and calls for erasure, cancellation in the public relations literature (as well as other areas) is nascent and no studies have been identified that explore methods to avoid it. We believe this is the first such study to examine corporate apologia as a strategy to avoid cancellation.

### Research Questions

Corporate apologia has taken a number of forms but typically consists of four basic strategies: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Since corporate apologia focuses on protecting or defending the organization against attacks on its character and/or reputation, this would theoretically serve as an appropriate response strategy for Spotify and Rogan. Thus:

*RQ1:* To what extent does Spotify utilize a strategy of corporate apologia via denial (a), bolstering (b), differentiation (c), and transcendence (d), when attempting to address the Spotify/Rogan crisis?

*RQ2:* To what extent does Joe Rogan utilize a strategy of corporate apologia via denial (a), bolstering (b), differentiation (c), and transcendence (d), when attempting to address the Spotify/Rogan crisis?

Apologia and its associated strategies have been noted to be effective in certain situations; in others, success may be more difficult to determine due to the long-term and/or idiosyncratic nature of some of the situations examined in the literature (Arendt et al., 2017). Insofar as apologia was utilized as a strategy, there are certain shorter-term effects that can be ascertained from available information, thus:

*RQ3:* How successful was apologia as a tactic in terms of insulating or protecting Spotify from financial difficulties and subscriber decreases as a result of cancellation pressures?

*RQ4:* How successful was apologia as a tactic in terms of insulating or protecting Rogan's reputation and subscriber/listener levels as a result of cancellation pressures?

## METHODS

A qualitative case study method was utilized to examine Spotify and Rogan's language in the light of corporate apologia. Specifically, pattern-matching as a data analysis strategy, where the researcher looks for certain theoretically predicted patterns in those patterns that are observed in the particular case data (Yin, 1994), was utilized to look for correspondence between corporate apologia tactics and modes of resolution identified in the literature and the actions of Spotify and Rogan in response to the group of scientists and concerned artists. Textual, rhetorical analysis within a case study is a method commonly utilized in crisis communication research (An & Cheng, 2012) and specifically in the area of corporate apologia (Avery et al., 2010; Coombs et al., 2010). Source material for apologia (RQ1 and RQ2) included content from January 10 (the date the Sosa et al. letter was posted) to February 7, 2022 (the date Spotify CEO Daniel Ek sent an internal memo confirming Spotify would continue to support Rogan). The materials gathered included the Sosa et al. (2022) letter, official statements from Spotify, quotes from Spotify officials provided to news outlets, and a video posted on Joe Rogan's Instagram account. Spotify's quarterly and annual reports and coverage for the relevant time periods were also examined to ascertain financial performance and show popularity, as were YouGovAmerica polls to track popularity and fame levels (RQ3 and RQ4).

## FINDINGS

The statements made by Spotify on multiple occasions (and by Rogan himself) in the latter days of January and early February are good examples of various aspects of the discourse of corporate apologia. For example, in one of the initial statements provided to NBC News, Spotify says, "We have detailed content policies in place and we've removed over 20,000 podcast episodes related to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic" (Madani, 2022, para. 4). This is a statement representative of the mode of denial, more specifically, Hearit's concept of "opinion/knowledge dissociation, which challenges the validity of the charges by redefining them as groundless. Here a company asserts that critics' claims are mere opinions and do not represent fact, thus bifurcating the previously unitary charge" (1995, p. 7). A statement from Spotify's head of global communications and public relations Dustee Jenkins also reaffirmed Spotify's denial, claiming the Rogan episodes "didn't meet the threshold for removal" and that Spotify "[applies] policies consistency and objectively... not influenced by the media cycle, calls from any one individual or from external partners," all of which had "been in place for years" (Carman, 2022, para. 2-8). Where the Sosa et al. (2022) open letter declared "Spotify is enabling its hosted media to damage public trust" (para. 1), demands Spotify "take action" (para. 2) and asked Spotify to "mitigate the spread of misinformation" (para. 2) and further asserted "the company

presently has no misinformation policy” (para. 2), Spotify asserted it has already taken action and does have policies in place around content.

Similarly, CEO Daniel Ek utilized bolstering when, in a statement posted to Spotify’s online press room, he noted that “from the very first days of the pandemic, Spotify has been biased toward action” (Ek, 2022, para. 7), noting the company’s COVID-19 Informational Hub, educational resources, donated ad inventory to support vaccine awareness and other activities, thereby aligning themselves with a more general sense of vaccine acceptance and other anti-pandemic measures in contrast to the anti-vaccine stance purported by Sosa et al. (2022). Ek also utilized several corporate apologia strategies via a memo to employees. He began with differentiation, explicitly stating Rogan’s comments “do not represent the values of [Spotify]” and Ek recognized the situation is leaving employees feeling “drained, frustrated and unheard” (DUK editor team, 2022, para. 17). In this explanation, Ek reiterated that Spotify has greater and more positive values that better align with employee perceptions, despite any of Rogan’s actions. Through differentiation, he attempted to reaffirm Spotify’s commitment to its employees’ wellbeing to reduce social legitimization crises (Hearit, 1995). Ek continued by attempting to remove blame by explaining Spotify is not a publisher of JRE, but merely a platform (DUK editor team, 2022). This messaging aligns with Ware & Linkugel’s (1973) description of differentiation, which attempts to remove this singular relationship from Spotify’s full operations; Ek instead argues “these kinds of disputes will be inevitable” and is not necessarily a responsibility that falls on Spotify as the content platform (DUK editor team, 2022, para. 22). Later in the memo to employees, Ek explains, “canceling voices is a slippery slope... it’s critical thinking and open debate that powers real and necessary progress... If we believe in having an open platform as a core value of the company, then we must also believe in elevating all types of creators...” (DUK editor team, 2022, para. 19-21). This is an example of transcendence, where Spotify compares its actions to the more “valued object” of free speech and debate. This small transgression of unfavorable content is part of a bigger picture, and it is necessary to allow the content in order to uphold free speech values.

In a video posted to his Instagram account on January 30, Rogan also employed a number of the aforementioned strategies associated with apologia. Rogan began by stating he thinks people have a distorted perception of what he does on the podcast, ultimately framing the show as a forum for “interesting conversations” (Rogan, 2022). This is an example of transcendence, in particular, the “opinion/knowledge dissociation” identified by Hearit (1997) because it contrasts what he framed as some publics’ perceptions of the show with what the show is actually about. He referenced the appearances by Drs. McCullough and Malone, established their credentials as medical and vaccine experts and said he invited them not to spread “misinformation,” but because he wanted to hear other opinions. This is the use of denial against charges of the willful spread of misinformation and also differentiation by framing their appearances and opinions as another example of his attempts to prompt conversation and presentation over a diverse set of ideas. He also referenced the effectiveness of cloth masks, the spread of disease by those vaccinated, and the “lab leak theory” as examples of subjects “banned” by social media platforms; he explained many of these topics are now becoming acceptable topics of conversation despite being previously labeled “dangerous misinformation” by users and the platforms themselves. Therefore, he claimed “dangerous misinformation” is not an appropriate term in reference to his podcast episodes, attempting to differentiate these conversations and guests with the concept of misinformation. He then said he gets things wrong, but when he does, he tries to correct it,



and that he is ultimately interested in the truth. This statement also contains elements of differentiation as he separates possible deception from a presumably willful act, framing it as a part of a process of ultimately arriving at truth, therefore it is “cognitively divisive and concomitantly transformative” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278). It is also an example of bolstering since Rogan explained this process as ultimately correcting mistakes and arriving at the truth rather than simply being wrong on occasion, thereby identifying “himself with something viewed favorably by the audience” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 277). It is also transcendental because it moves the audience’s focus away from the individual incorrect views and toward the ultimate goal of conversation and truth-seeking, thus placing the activity within a larger context that moves Rogan into a more abstract (and favorable) situation (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Rogan utilizes transcendence again when stating his desire to hear multiple opinions, even from those who are pro-vaccine; he reminds audiences he previously hosted other medical figures on the show prior to Malone and McCullough, including Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Professor Peter Hotez, and epidemiology expert Michael Osterholm who espoused more mainstream views, which thus frames hearing various viewpoints as part of an overall process to find truths. He then invoked differentiation when explaining he is not trying to promote misinformation or to be controversial, he is just trying to talk to people. Finally, he utilized transcendence again when he claimed to try his best to balance out viewpoints and find a better point of view, not just about COVID-related issues, but about everything in general. This appeal to truth and occasional missteps as a part of a truth-finding process thereby frames the Malone and McCullough appearances as only a small part of a larger, more beneficial whole.

### **Outcomes for Spotify and Rogan**

The crisis created initial threats for Spotify and Rogan. There was an outcry from Spotify users online, leading to hashtags on social platforms including #DeleteSpotify and #CancelSpotify (Spangler, 2022). Traffic to the cancellation page for Spotify Premium reportedly spiked 196% the week the open letter was published (Popli, 2022). One survey found 19% of Spotify users canceled or planned to cancel their service (Spangler, 2022). Employees also expressed unhappiness with the company, as addressed earlier via Ek’s town hall and internal memo (DUK editor team, 2022). Some crisis experts were quoted in the media as questioning Spotify’s motives as profit- vs. customer-driven, and stating “not canceling Joe Rogan... could be a problem” (Popli, 2022, para. 3).

However, these negative reputational outcomes had little to no effect on Spotify’s financial success. A recent quarterly report showed continued growth throughout 2022, with a 20% increase in monthly active users and a 13% increase in paid subscribers year-over-year (“Spotify Reports Third Quarter 2022 Earnings,” 2022). Though Spotify does not release subscriber or listenership info for podcasts, Rogan asserted he added two million subscribers after the controversy (Hibberd, 2022), and recent estimates put per-show viewership at 11 million (Popli, 2022). In addition, Spotify reported 182 million premium subscribers in the first quarter of 2022, which increased from the previous quarter’s 180 million, with 15% growth year-over-year and a 24% increase in revenue vs. the previous year; this growth was in spite of Spotify pulling its service from Russia in response to the Ukrainian invasion (Pallotta, 2022). An article on CNN business noted, “although Rogan may have caused a massive PR headache for the company, Spotify didn’t experience a mass exodus because of him — at least not from those who pay for the service” (Pallotta, 2022, para. 6). YouGovAmerica’s popularity and fame tracker showed the Joe Rogan Experience’s fame and popularity levels both increased from Q4 of 2021, where they were 59% and 24%, respectively, to 70% and 31% in Q1 of 2022, and 70% and 33% in Q2 of 2022

(YouGovAmerica, n.d.b); for Rogan himself, his fame and popularity levels were 78% and 34% in Q4 of 2021, rising to 84% and 38% in Q1 of 2022 and moving to 79% and 36% in Q2 of 2022, indicating more popularity and fame post-crisis (YouGovAmerica, n.d.a). Finally, Spotify's year-end report for 2022, using data from January 1 to November 26 (Dellatto, 2022), put the Joe Rogan Experience at No. 1 on the platform's global podcast charts (Spotify, 2022), retaining the spot he held in 2020 and 2021 (Dellatto, 2022).

## DISCUSSION

Hearit posited that corporate apologia is primarily “a discourse of re-legitimation” where “efforts typically require a dual strategy of positive and a negative rhetoric. Corporations seek to distance themselves from their illegitimate behaviors and then create identifications with the public values they are reputed to have violated” (1995, p. 6). Both Spotify and Rogan appeared to utilize all four elements of corporate apologia: denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence (RQs 1 and 2), distancing themselves from “illegitimate behaviors” (i.e., platform vs. publisher) and overarching values in Spotify's case and creating identifications with the values of free speech, inquiry, and truth-seeking in Rogan's, for example. Through the employment of the four elements of corporate apologia, it appears the situation resolved itself in the short term without discernible damage to either Spotify's subscriber and user growth (RQ3) or Rogan's audience numbers and popularity (RQ4), thus escaping calls for cancellation.

These findings are somewhat at odds with some of the extant literature in this area. For example, Arendt et al. found denial was the most utilized but also the least effective image repair strategy in their 2017 meta-analysis and explained denial combined with evasion of responsibility typically fails (2017); however, Spotify's “evasion of responsibility” through its transcendence and bolstering strategies, particularly pointing out that they do not want to become “content censors” (Ek, 2022, para. 1), perhaps worked in their favor more than previous crises examined by the literature. Arendt et al. also noted that denial paired with reducing offensiveness was not successful in the Cannes Film Festival's response to charges of under-representing women-directed films because, in part, it “did not promise any sense of corrective action, and appeared as though it was uninformed” (2017, p. 523). While Spotify did not necessarily promise much new corrective action in terms of subjugating Rogan, they did resolve to add a content advisory around COVID-19-related content and did appear to be informed, noting both their pro-vaccine education and funding and that they are “committed to learning, growing and evolving” (Ek, 2022, para. 8).

This case also illustrates success in particular modes of resolution where some have not. For example, Hearit (1997) notes that Johnson Controls' transcendence strategy failed because it could not successfully attain a dissociation between moral and business ends, which Spotify and Rogan may have been able to do in this case, keeping profits out of the minds of the public while relying on overarching cultural values of free speech and debate. Perhaps Spotify and Rogan were also successful because the issue was less about image repair and more about image maintenance. Rowland and Jerome (2004) hypothesized that image repair and image maintenance are two purposes in conflict with each other, which is a cause of disagreement of apologia characteristics in the literature. They proposed apologia is more connected with image protection rather than image repair, which needed more situational development and research, and that image maintenance involves concern for victims, bolstering of

“individual or organizational values, make it clear that no harm was intended, and/or actively take steps to prevent the harmful action from occurring again” (2004, p. 198). As shown, that is what Spotify and Rogan did through the discourse of their apologia.

Additionally, the results point to a potential way to escape the effects of “cancel culture” where businesses and/or personalities are “called out” and active support is withdrawn in favor of active public shaming (Saldanha et al., 2022). Saldanha et al.’s Consumer Cancel Culture Framework (2022) introduce the concept of “warmth competence,” where “a perceived presence of either warmth or competence in the influence target acts as a shield against the consumer engaging in cancelling behaviour. In this instance, the consumer is more likely to forgive and forget the folly of the celebrity or brand in question if the incident does not exceed a certain threshold” (p. 6). While Rogan and Spotify may have had some element of warmth or competence pre-crisis, their use of the four modes of resolution rather than capitulating, apologizing, and admitting fault likely invoked feelings of competence, thereby enabling them to avoid cancellation. Had they admitted fault, the competence element would have diminished, and thus the warmth and competence dimension would be less likely to shield Spotify and Rogan from cancellation according to this theoretical framework. This also fits with the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model) that predicts a “depersonalizing effect of anonymity” (Spears et al., 2002, p. 558) online, wherein in- and out-group identities become more prominent in a digital environment. Spears et al. (2002) found that computer-mediated communication facilitated social support for the expression of views perceived as normative for one’s group even when punishable by an out-group. Without perceptions of support from or membership in a group opposed to Spotify and/or Rogan, active publics may not have been able to form around the issue(s) effectively. In Kim and Grunig’s Situational Theory of Problem Solving (2011), one’s problem-solving motivations are affected by recognition of the potential problem, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition. We propose the use of apologia served as a mechanism for decreasing these three variables, and, along with a less salient referent criterion, would therefore lead to less problem-solving related communicative action (2011), thereby decreasing perceptions of salient group support. Additionally, Kim et al. (2011) found evidence for the “problem chain recognition effect,” wherein publics, through “the process of information search and exchange... are likely to recognize similar or related problems” (p. 176). By removing cues and social support for cancellation from the environment via apologia, Spotify and Rogan may have splintered opinions and avoided negative effects that in turn would have been potentially compounded due to deindividuation and anonymity online, resulting in cancellation, as active publics were unable to form around the issues. Additionally, though some scholars have taken a more liberal view of what issues constitute grounds for cancellation (e.g., Mueller, 2021; Saldanha et al., 2022) other literature indicates cancel culture primarily deals with issues that are considered “social justice”-related (e.g., Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Ng, 2020) rather than simply “what is deemed by the public as unacceptable activity or behaviour” (Saldanha et al., 2022, p. 2). In addition to simply maintaining their reputations, framing the issues away from social justice-related themes such as public health and toward the values of free speech, debate, and ultimate truth through their use of apologia, Rogan and Spotify may have moved the issues away from types lending themselves to cancellation. Also, as Mueller (2021) notes, “the cancel culture movement has been scrutinized through a protracted, heated debate regarding freedom of speech” (p. 2). By relying on free speech- and debate-related frames through apologia, Spotify and Rogan directly countered the notion of cancellation altogether.

### Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusion

The case study method, while widely utilized in crisis communication studies and literature (An & Cheng, 2012), nonetheless renders questions about generalizability (Stake, 1978; Bennett, 2004). However, as Stake (1978) claims, the case study method relies on common understandings of a researcher and readers' experiences to understand a phenomenon, thus providing an epistemological approach that is in harmony and creates "a natural basis for generalization" (p. 5); if the target case is representative of a "constituent member of a target population... then the demands for typicality and representativeness yield to needs for assurance that the target case is properly described" (p. 7). We hope our analysis consists of elements of the Spotify/Rogan situation that are "properly described" with regard to corporate apologia, and thus, lend the results to some level of representativeness given the specifics of the situation.

External factors may also attribute to Spotify and Rogan's avoidance of "cancel culture." Despite outrage and calls to "delete Spotify," only a fraction of users ultimately followed through with a brand boycott, citing it is too difficult to find a replacement and that the brand is already too embedded in their life (Spangler, 2022). Spotify's continued success following the crisis may be more accredited to users' laziness to disassociate with a brand rather than Spotify's effective apologia strategies. Future research could address this discrepancy between cancellation intention and execution, and how those distinctions impact long-term reputation.

Corporate apologia is an aspect that has formed the basis of many other crisis response strategies (Benoit, 1997; Coombs et al., 2010; Arendt et al., 2017). From this case, practitioners can see the importance of reaffirming brand and public values in the midst of a crisis. Rather than employing an overly accommodating response for customers, Spotify reaffirmed its mission to provide a platform for all voices and opinions (DUK editor team, 2022). Specific utilization of corporate apologia responses allowed Spotify and Rogan to achieve successful avoidance of cancellation: denying unsupported claims; counteracting negative claims with positive actions via bolstering; removing the association with specific artists via differentiation, and drawing attention to bigger missions of free speech via transcendence. Rather than capitulation or apology, and possibly encouraging cancellation as a result of encouraging or providing tacit evidence for in- and out-group comparisons (Spears et al., 2002), the platform and Rogan were able to use apologia to reframe and reflect charges and criticism of their respective characters. Of course, as Arendt et al. (2017) also note, there are short-term apologia successes and long-term ones as well, and thus it may take more time to find if these strategies will indicate success for Spotify and Rogan financially and reputationally for the years to come.

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