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Spilling The Tea: How YouTube Commentary Channels Keep Influencers And Micro Celebrities Accountable

1. Introduction:

Influencer apologies have become mainstream. On April 3, *Saturday Night Live* aired a sketch starring actor Daniel Kaluuya and comedian Kyle Mooney titled “Viral Apology Video.” In it, Mooney plays an influencer who plays dangerous pranks on the public and his friends, later apologizing for causing harm in multiple viral videos. Many fans noticed that the video seemed to be a direct parody of YouTube influencer David Dobrik’s latest video, where he addresses sexual assault allegations against him and a friend that was frequently featured in his videos (Haylock, 2021b). The video followed a separate, shorter apology posted on a secondary channel. The first video was under three minutes long and had comments disabled. While *Saturday Night Live* representatives did not confirm that Dobrik was the subject of the parody, it was clear to viewers who it was about (Haasch, 2021).

Dobrik’s scandal was covered extensively in the news, in both entertainment sites and mainstream news outlets. But he’s not the first influencer to have apologized for past wrongs. With the rise of influencers and social media has come the rise of public apologies from influencers. *New York Magazine*’s entertainment and lifestyle brand *Vulture* has an entire section dedicated to stories on celebrity apologies. Indeed, some may say we are living in the “age of apology” (Okimoto et al., 2015).

Mainstream media does not cover the scope of YouTube influencer apologies, however. Dobrik has millions of followers and has published more than 600 videos. But the YouTube community is vast, and many who are considered micro celebrities have followings not quite large enough to catch the attention of legacy media outlets. Thus, the Youtube commentary channel was born.

YouTube commentary channels, also called “tea” channels, as the word has become slang for gossip or a morsel of juicy information, have become an extremely successful genre in their own right, with some accounts earning six figures a month off of their content (Lorenz, 2019). The accounts meticulously follow feuds between YouTube personalities and summarize and recount the drama happening in YouTube micro communities -- including when apologies occur. In a 2019 interview with internet culture reporter Taylor Lorenz, Lindsey Weber, a host of the entertainment podcast *Who? Weekly* said she believed commentary channels acted as “media for inside the community.” She said news outlets were unable to “fully understand the platform” of YouTube, and thus commentary channels functioned as the news would in breaking down what was happening between accounts. Thus, similar to local news outlets, they function to keep those in power (influencers with large followings) in check.

When looking at the success of a YouTube apology, we must now consider how the apology is initially viewed upon first upload, as well as how the apology is processed by viewers and fans once mediated through a commentary channel’s summary. In the following sections, I will discuss the existing literature available on apologies and image repair, YouTube and authenticity. I will also propose a possible study to see whether YouTube commentary channels affect an audience’s perception of a YouTube personality’s remorse in an apology.

2. Literature Review:

In order to begin researching YouTube apologies and the metadiscourse that happens on the site when a YouTuber issues a public apology, one must first understand the basics of the structure and purpose of apologies. There's a rich and multidisciplinary well of research into apologies and image repair. A giant among the concept of image repair is William L. Benoit, who posited a theory of image repair that identified five categories of strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, corrective action and mortification. (Benoit, 1997).

Many public apologies function as an act of image repair, such as when the *New York Times* had to apologize for the scandal that occurred when reporter Jayson Blair was revealed to have plagiarized or fabricated his stories (Hindman, 2005). Similarly, because of a YouTube influencer's wide reaching audience and business relationships with sponsors, a public apology might also function as a form of paradigm repair for the influencer's brand. However, fans of an influencer often feel a unique closeness to them. Influencers wield power over their fans via these parasocial bonds, but their fans also hold power as they determine an influencer's popularity and relevance. Thus, apologies are a key part of conflict resolution in sustaining these parasocial relationships, and an influencer's public apologies must also function as an interpersonal apology to the fans they have disappointed. In contrast to the strategies of image repair, effective interpersonal apologies must include and admittance of fault, admittance of damage, expression of remorse, request for forgiveness and an offer of compensation (Schmitt et al., 2004, as cited in Sandlin et al., 2018).

Thus the influencer, once an offense has been made, has the difficult task of repairing his or her image publicly while crafting an apology that comes across as a sincere, interpersonal interaction. Additionally, it's impossible to appeal to everyone who might watch the apology, as

the social media environment introduces collapsed context — where an unknown and potentially audience makes it difficult to assess how to behave (Boyd, 2010, as cited in Sandlin, 2020). In a 2018 study on image repair, Sandlin concluded that online behaviors are much more complex than individual, interpersonal interactions, despite mimicking them in the public apology format.

This complex management of both public and interpersonal reputations brings forth another type of apology that can often be more effective: the pseudo-apology. Pseudo-apologies contain apologetic language but come just short of a genuine apology in ways such as when an individual expresses remorse or sympathy without actually accepting responsibility for the offensive act (Bentley, 2015). Bentley argues that often pseudo-apologies can be *more* effective than genuine apologies, especially when considering who the intended audience is: a third party or the victim of offense. Bentley dissects an apology from Rush Limbaugh as a case study of a pseudo-apology in which he apologizes to his audience without genuinely apologizing to the woman he offended, Sandra Fluke. Similarly, in Dobrik's initial apology video, he addressed his audience and a fellow YouTube personality, but not the woman who accused him of sexual misconduct (Dobrik, 2021a). Pseudo-apologies are often a way of skirting around liability concerns as well, (Bentley, 2015) and in Dobrik's case, unequivocally admitting guilt in his ongoing sexual misconduct case may have been a legal liability for his brand at the time.

Part of the reason Dobrik's apology was seemingly parodied on national television came because he issued two. His initial apology was posted on a secondary channel with fewer followers, and he turned off the comment function. It was under three minutes in length, and, with the title "Let's Talk," it was less of an apology and more of an acknowledgement "the conversations going on in the internet" rather than an admittance of guilt and request for forgiveness. Dobrik says that consent is extremely important to him, and acknowledges that

consent may be taken away at any time without ever directly addressing the woman who accused him of misconduct. He says he's learned from his mistakes, and that he's been disappointed in friends and distanced himself from influencers and deleted videos in the past, but does *not* directly mention the video that the alleged sexual assault occurred in as an example, or name the man involved in the video of the assault. (Dobrik, 2021a). Dobrik later uploads a longer, almost eight minute video to his main account, with the comment function turned on, where he apologizes for the inadequacy of his first apology, and directly addresses the controversy around him and speaks to the alleged survivor directly. It's not hard to see the similarities between the sketch and real life.

Josh Compton deepens the existing body of image repair theory by analyzes this very specific form of a regretted apology, where the offender is apologizing for having made an apology, in a 2016 paper. He argues that it is telling to compare which image repair strategies may have been used in the second apology as opposed to the first, and how that may affect perception of remorse and forgiveness (Compton, 2016).

Kadar et al studied the phenomenon of the public *ritual* apology. While the context of the study looked at cases of public ritual apology on Chinese social media, there are American cases where we see this happening. Public *ritual* apology does not present room to evade responsibility; rather, they serve as an admittance of guilt and acceptance of punitive action, and it is "symbolic and expected to restore the moral order of the public rather than grand actual reconciliation." There isn't always necessarily an appeal for forgiveness (Kadar et al, 2018). While Dobrik's second apology may not rise to the level of a public ritual apology, another influencer's Youtube apology serves as a good example. In a now deleted video, Jenna Nicole Mourey, known as Jenna Marbles on YouTube, announced she was leaving the platform and

apologized for racially insensitive and misogynistic behavior featured in past videos. Mourey has been on the platform for more than a decade, and notably the incidents she apologized for were more than a decade old. Also notable that an apology was not demanded from her for these videos, and did not ask her audience to forgive her. Mourey voluntarily gave examples of when she felt she did wrong, apologized, and signed off from the platform. (Hauser et al, 2020). She has not been active on any of her social media platforms since posting the video in June. Responses to Mourey's video were largely positive (in stark contrast to responses to Dobrik), and many fans expressed regret that Mourey had deplatformed herself. One commentary channel, *Psych IRL*, which is run by a psychology research assistant using her degree to analyze pop culture, even called Mourey an "exemplary YouTuber" and hailed her decision as the "end of authenticity" (Psych IRL, 2020).

The stark differences between public response to Mourey and Dobrik's apologies bring up an important second facet to the apology: what makes an apology successful? What factors affect whether or not remorse is adequately perceived by the intended audience of an apology? What makes a public apology "authentic" in the eyes of the audience? Many of the studies already discussed try to tackle these questions.

Because of the mediated nature of online apologies, it can be difficult for audiences to judge sincerity in an apology (Sandlin, 2018). Additionally, the rise of the "YouTube apology" may contribute to a normative dilution of the genre. Okimoto et al argue that the public apology as an image repair strategy has been normalized, paradoxically resulting in the reduction of its value. The more audiences demand public apologies, the less they mean and the less they are perceived as sincere (Okimoto et al, 2015). Dobrik's fans and critics called for him to address and apologize for the sexual assault he was accused of facilitating for days, but did not accept it

as sincere once he uploaded his second apology. Many accused him of being insincere, as the second apology came only after several major brands cut ties with the vlogger, therefore reducing his potential to earn income from his channel (Amatulli, 2021). Because the public apology is now an expected everyday occurrence, Okimoto et al found they were ironically less likely to “elicit feelings of intergroup forgiveness” (2015).

Forgiveness, however, is not always the marker of a successful apology. Ellwanger in fact cautions us against wrongly assuming that public apologies seek forgiveness. Therefore, not being forgiven does not necessarily mean a public apology was inauthentic or unsuccessful (2012). He goes on to outline four elements of an authentic apology according to Philip Vasallo: “the offender states the precise offense, admits the offended party deserved better treatment, assures every action will be taken to avoid future offenses, and compensates the victim in some way” (Ellwanger, 2012). Ellwanger explores the metanoic nature of public apologies as an attempt to modify the speaker’s entire identity or ethos. It is not the repair of the image then, but a complete reboot, reconciling the offender with a new ideology rather than solely with the victim of the offense. He also ponders over the ritualistic element of public apologies, calling it “ritualistic public punishment and humiliation.” For Ellwanger, metanoic discourse in public apologies implies the denial of the past self and the beginning of a new era. Forgiveness need not be a factor if the offender is reinvented as someone new.

Through an analysis of an incident between Mel Gibson and a police officer that resulted in an antisemitic outburst from the former, Ellwanger brought up an interesting point in iterations of apologies. He talks about how the media at the time kept Gibson’s story in the spotlight, prompting him to edit and change his apology as people continued to talk about him. While there was not a lot of academic discourse available on the genre of YouTube commentary videos

available, these creators function in much of the same way. Commentary channels keep YouTube personalities in the public eye, sometimes far longer than they would want. And the fact that YouTube videos have a comment section distinguishes them from typical mainstream media, as comments allow for conversation, feedback and interaction. If a public apology was disseminated as a press conference on national TV, the reception could be a lot different.

This interaction now happens not just in the original apology videos an influencer might put out, but in the comment sections of videos analyzing their apologies and behavior. Thus, a viewer's opinion now goes through multiple levels of mediation. These channels themselves have gone through a transformation. While they used to be called "The TMZ of YouTube" (Lorenz, 2019), a more social justice focused group of commentary creators has emerged within the last five years. As consumers sought to support influencers they felt were authentic and ethically aligned with them, they needed "researched, fact-checked and fair reporting on influencers (Haylock, 2021a) — a subject that, as mentioned, is lacking in mainstream news outlets. Thus, commentary YouTubers rose to the occasion, holding influencers accountable for their actions.

These actions have gone on to serve not just the YouTube community in an online space, but have had real world effects. In 2021, D'Angelo Wallace published an hour and nine minute long video summarizing the actions and naming dozens of influencers who flouted COVID-19 lockdown rules. A niche within the YouTube commentary community, the MLM commentary genre, has combated misinformation surrounding the business practices of many major multilevel marketing companies, which take advantage of (overwhelmingly) women looking to take control of their finances. "AntiMLM YouTube" has gained immense popularity on the

platform, and its creators aim not only to prevent others from joining multilevel marketing schemes, but also warn consumers of multilevel marketing products in disguise (Tiffany, 2021).

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

While the body of research on apologies and image repair is vast, with many studies focused on YouTube as a medium specifically, there is a lack of research specifically on YouTube commentary channels. And there are a lot of questions to be answered pertaining to its introduction. Has this genre changed the format of the public YouTube apology since its introduction? If so, how so? Do commentary channels change opinions? As commentary channels become popular and the individuals become YouTube personalities or influencers in their own right, how do they remain impartial or unbiased or authentic? What makes audiences trust these commentary channels more than the actual influencer? Of these questions, I'm especially interested in how individuals in the Commentary YouTube community acquire trustworthiness and authenticity, and how/if commentary videos change public perception of influencers. In the following sections, I'll discuss potential methodologies for answering these questions.

3. Proposed Methodology

In order to potentially discover what makes for a trustworthy YouTube commentary channel, I would propose a focus group or survey. Commentary channels have come a long way from the TMZ of YouTube to more well researched and thought provoking content, but drama channels still exist. Similar to how *Vulture* or *Variety* report on the entertainment industry very differently from how *People Magazine* or tabloids do, I believe various strategies that commentary YouTube channels use to promote trust and exude authority. A focus group could narrow down these strategies. A group of viewers would be asked to watch several videos

summarizing and analyzing a scandal or controversy in the YouTube space. The controversy would have to be big enough that many commentary YouTubers will have jumped on the opportunity to cover it. David Dobrik's sexual assault allegations would be a good example. James Charles, a popular makeup artist on the platform, has been embroiled in multiple scandals that have built upon each other through the years dubbed "Dramageddon." In each of these cases, the personalities are prominent enough to get mainstream media attention, and therefore have multiple videos about them on YouTube from various channels. Upon viewing all of the different options, the proctor would engage in a conversation with the focus group to determine which commentators they felt were trustworthy. Topics talked about would range from which videos they felt portrayed a situation most thoroughly, who they felt like represented the situation the most fairly, etc. Videos should be shown in different orders to each individual, in case there is bias for either the first or last video shown to a participant on a particular subject.

Using the information from these conversations, a survey could be produced in order to conduct subsequent studies on the topic while gathering more qualitative data. That way, it will be possible to chart potential correlations between factors.

In order to determine change in public opinion, I can think of two methodologies. One would be to gather participants that have not had previous knowledge of a scandal or controversy to watch a YouTube apology from a content creator. Participants would fill out a survey asking whether or not participants felt the content creator was sincere or remorseful for the incident, whether they felt the creator was guilty or not, and whether or not they felt like the creator deserved forgiveness. Further questions could be asked about whether the participant felt like the creator was a good person, an honest person, etc. The participant would then watch a

commentary video breaking down the apology and controversy and fill out another, similar survey. The answers for the two surveys can then be compared.

Because of YouTube's interactive nature, I think it would be interesting to do a textual analysis of YouTube comments to potentially analyse how viewers' perceptions may change due to commentary videos. The first few hundred comments on an apology video and subsequent commentary videos on the proposed controversy could be analyzed and data points extrapolated according to the language used in the comment. Researchers will code for forgiving/accepting language as well as the opposite. Examples could include phrases like "He doesn't look sorry" or "I'm glad he's taking responsibility." as well as more direct comments like "I forgive him," "He should get a second chance," etc. categories of types of positive and negative comments can be coded, they can be compared between original apology videos as opposed to commentary videos to see if comments skew positive or negative for each video. This method has some flaws, as we cannot guarantee the same people are watching each video. Additionally, it's been shown that approximately 0.5% of YouTube users comment on videos (Dubovi, 2020) so the audience may not be representative of overall public perception as a whole.

4. Potential Results

I believe that we'll find similar results for characteristics that make for more trustworthy commentary channels as we do with journalists. The most popular commentary channels right now, such as Psych IRL and D'Angelo Wallace, all have similar characteristics. Their production quality is high, they speak casually and even toned to the listener, and have high production quality in their videos. Their videos include clips from videos, citations from articles and are usually between 30 minutes to an hour long. The inclusion of direct clips and quotes increases transparency and gives an air of impartiality.

Psych IRL distinguishes herself from other commentary channels by taking advantage of her degree in Psychology. She includes citations from studies and uses psychology terms and definitions in order to analyze the behaviors of YouTube personalities. Higher education, even if not necessarily related to the subject of the videos being produced, may result in perceived higher intelligence and therefore higher trust levels.

Lower quality “drama” channels will show a marked lack of citations. They tend to be shorter and may include short recaps of controversies without overall analysis, or may not include as much context as high quality “commentary” channels.

For research into whether commentary channels actually change public opinion, I believe that survey participants will show a change in opinion, even if they watch a commentary video that aligns with their initial analysis of a YouTube creator. Participants would either change their opinion to match those of the commentary video or double down on their interpretation if the commentary video aligned with their ideals. I believe, if shown “commentary” vs “drama” videos, however, you might see opposite results. Drama, or lower quality videos, may be interpreted similarly to tabloids, especially if respondents initially had a positive impression of the YouTube creator.

I’m not sure if a textual analysis of YouTube comments would work or not. I’m interested in doing a study with textual analysis, because I’m fascinated by the interactive nature of YouTube, but I’m not sure if this is the best application. As mentioned, there are a lot of factors that could affect the results, rendering them insignificant. The intended audience of a public apology and that of a commentary video may be too different to be able to compare comment section samples.

While the framework for studies in apologia and image repair is vast, I believe there is a gap in the research when it comes to the metadiscourse on YouTube as presented by drama and commentary channels. YouTube influencers and the commentary channels that scrutinize them are heavily linked in how they interact on the platform and they definitely affect each other's content, and YouTube apologies have been around longer than the drama channels have. Additional research into the relationship between the two and their effects on each other and the platform as a whole will be an interesting field of research yet to be explored.

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