

Public Apologies in the Age of Internet Influencers

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Abstract

With the rise of cancel culture on the internet, apology videos are becoming more popular by YouTubers and social media influencers. These videos are used to apologize for their wrongdoings. This research analyzes the use of image repair theory in apology videos and how these techniques affect viewers' response to the video. These responses are either positive or negative. This research seeks to gain understanding of how image repair theory has an impact on the effectiveness of cancel culture on influencers or YouTubers on the internet. Using content analysis, it was found that certain image repair techniques did have an impact on the negative or positive response to the video. It also found the amount of apology videos published by the influencer had an impact on viewers' reactions.

Keywords: cancel culture, YouTube, influencers, image repair theory, apology, social media, Social Blade, content analysis

Introduction

Influencers have been a large part in the growing popularity of cancel culture. Cancel culture is defined by CNN (2019) as “diminishing someone’s significance by personal boycott, public shaming, or ostracization”. An inevitable result of cancel culture in an era of social media influencers is YouTube apologies. YouTube has evolved into a place where anyone can speak their mind and have a platform. This led to the growing popularity of YouTube influencers. YouTube influencers have a larger impact on their audience than other celebrities because they are able to make a

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connection with their audience (Cohen, 2020). These influencers are viewed more as regular people than traditional celebrities. This makes them marketable to large companies. Cohen (2020) also found “70% of subscribers say that YouTube personalities change and shape pop culture and 60% of them say they would make buying decisions based on the recommendation of their favorite YouTube star over the recommendation of a TV or movie star.”

These influencers are influencing the decisions people make which makes them role models for their audience. This means there is a large backlash when they make a mistake, leading to a YouTube video apology. Popular YouTube celebrities have multiple apology videos published on their channel, and yet after each video they still have a fan base who continues to help the influencer make money. This shows there is no change in their actions. These apology videos are used as a scapegoat for their inappropriate actions. The problem lies with the reason for the apologies and the

size and age of their audience. According to Dredge (2017), there are over 17,000 YouTube channels with over 100,000 subscribers. Dredge (2017) also stated that teenagers were more influenced by “YouTubers” than traditional celebrities. If they are automatically forgiven for their actions, it shows their impressionable audience that these are appropriate actions. Understanding the makeup of these apologies allows viewers to make a more informed decision on who to follow and when apologies are genuine. Through this research, researchers seek to gain understanding of how image repair theory has an impact on the effectiveness of cancel culture on influencers or YouTubers on the internet.

Literature Review

Social Media Persuasion

To have a large following on any social networking site, it requires persuasion of the audience. Riboni (2017) analyzes the language used by beauty video creators to attract their audience: “Makeup application flaws are revealed by makeup gurus as another strategy to build rapport with the audience, to show that they can be self-ironic and also to minimize the risk of losing viewers” (p. 198). Building a relationship between the viewer and the creator is key to an increase in viewership. In the case of beauty YouTubers, it is about acting like a real person with real flaws. If they struggle to do things right in makeup application, it makes viewers feel as if they are one and the same. Riboni (2017) equates the growing viewership in beauty channels to their knowledge of makeup and their ability to create a channel distinguishable from the others. The large quantity of videos makes it difficult for viewers to choose between them, so being creative persuades viewers to click (Riboni, 2017).

Another paper discussed a YouTuber named Zoella and her rise to fame. Her fame can be attributed to her ability to communicate with her audience: “Zoella is careful in the tutorials to communicate a sense of equality with her audience and, hence, to accentuate ordinariness. Repeatedly, she emphasizes that she is not a professional expert but simply an amateur who wants to share her personal interests” (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5242). Her ability to make her fans feel like friends creates a bond with creator and viewer, persuading them to watch her videos. Researchers also found that her vulnerability gave them a reason to click, “...she performs authenticity through straight confessional videos” (Jerslev, 2016, p.5243). These videos included being open about her panic attacks and her struggle with hate on the internet.

Creating this connection can persuade users to donate money or even buy products the creator endorses. In a study from 2019 researchers stated, “...we find that blogger expertise, campaign intent, hedonic value, and interactions among these variables influence engagement on blog and Facebook platforms” (Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks, p.89).

Other YouTubers use comedy and shock value to persuade viewers. Researchers Pereira, Moura, & Fillol (2017) searched for an explanation as to why viewers are persuaded to watch YouTubers. They found two key indicators: humor, which was offensive or immature, and self-centered behavior (Pereira et al., 2017). Personality also persuades users. It creates brand trust, the brand being the creator.

Kim, Kwon, and Kim (2018) did research on creating brand trust. Their findings concluded that positive personality dimensions like conscientiousness and agreeableness created brand trust.

For social media influencers it is all about the brand. Lifestyle bloggers use open communication as their brand through vlogging. T. Lewis (2010) researched the branding of lifestyle experts stating, "Through their instructional role as life specialists as well as through their own highly visible lifestyles as exemplary consumer-citizens, celebrity lifestyle experts play a pivotal role in affirming certain modes of consumption-based personal values and ways of living" (p. 594). A lifestyle expert's brand is also about selling a product to make them money. If they do not live up to this brand, they will not make money.

Influencer/YouTuber Communication

The way internet celebrities communicate is important to understand how someone becomes canceled. They work to create a brand for themselves. This brand is then communicated to their viewers through the use of language, body language, and editing of their videos. Some researchers suggest there is a formula to influencer communication. "The adoption of formulas which are repeated in all tutorials seems to suggest that, in order to promote their channel, popular beauty vloggers aim at making their videos easily distinguishable from the plentiful similar ones featured on YouTube, by (among other means) using language strategically" (Riboni, 2017, p. 195). Part of the formula involves "...frequently occurring engagement markers to be found in makeup tutorials are conversational features, questions and directives, evaluative items, and finally deictic expressions which are typical of face-to-face interaction" (Riboni, 2017, p. 196). This formula leads to connection with the viewers' that other celebrities never develop with their audience. This form of communication with their audience makes influencers seem like normal people giving them the ability to influence their audience more effectively.

Other researchers found it more difficult to predict how audiences would react to the creators' online persona. Duffy and Hund (2019) interviewed bloggers who revealed that it was difficult to make users feel content with the content being posted. Followers wanted influencers to be real and authentic but not too authentic (Duffy and Hund, 2019). This leads to users censoring themselves to their followers as explained by Duffy and Hund (2019):

..social media users' activities are structured by a command to project themselves as 'real.' But many of our interviewees—as highly visible content creators facing intensified scrutiny and policing—took considerable measures to stay within the perceived boundaries of this authenticity ideal... social media users sought to avoid posting images that could cast them in a negative light" (p. 4989).

Authenticity in communication from the creator is exhibited in Jerslev's (2016) research on Zoella: "Zoella's communication with her followers, whom she addresses directly, straight to camera, thereby giving the impression of connectedness, with continuous updates on her life." and a temporality of presence and continuity" (p. 5241).

Internet celebrities contrast with traditional celebrities. Their communication is direct and immediate with supporters (Jerslev, 2016). Direct and immediate communication comes from the ability to have intimacy with followers, "...[PewDiePie's] use of slang as a practice of social swearing, which not only simulates casual conversation between friends, but actively reduces social distance, creates the illusion of intimacy, and ultimately helps to establish his unequaled status on YouTube" (Pereira et al., 2017, p. 113).

Unlike traditional celebrities, internet celebrities show more of their life. Their life is on display because it is what made them famous. The "vlog" is a popular format for internet celebrities. Vloggers carry a camera with them during their life and upload it to YouTube. Hou (2018), a researcher from the Netherlands, focused on the internet celebrity. They stated, "the 'slice of life' vlog creates a situation where celebrity practitioners play the role of themselves in their own lives for the sake of staging their lives" (p. 548). This is different from the original celebrity who can separate their life from their character, while internet celebrities are playing a character of themselves. Hou (2018) described this connection, "social media celebrities maintain managed connectedness with viewers and subscribers" (p. 551).

Youtubers come in different forms. News Youtubers are more popular in recent years. R. Lewis (2019) researched the way political Youtubers communicate. R. Lewis (2019) stated that these Youtubers view themselves as a balance to regular media "by building intimate trust with their viewers over time, partaking in long conversations, and maintaining a level of transparency about their production process; they claim to counter the mainstream media's perceived sensationalism and suppressive tactics."

Crisis Communication Through Social Media

In the research on crisis communication, studies found source credibility was important for the audience. Van Zoonen and Van der Meer (2015) stated, "These findings shed light on the importance of strategically matching the crisis-response strategy and the source for organizations to optimize their crisis responses" (p. 382) and "the employees as an online source of information can provoke favorable effects on reputation through source and content credibility" (p. 382). Negative forms of crisis communication were also found: "the negative effect of denial and diminish strategy on organizational reputation was found to be less profound when communicated by employees" (Van Zoonen and Van der Meer, 2015, p. 382).

Image repair theory, originally called image restoration theory, has been used by celebrities, politicians, and athletes for years to avoid the consequences of their mistakes. Image repair theory consists of techniques to repair one's image, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997b). Image repair is popularly used in the entertainment industry as a way to apologize for one's actions. In researching the use of image repair by the entertainment business, it was found that denial and evasion of responsibility were popularly used first followed by mortification (Oles, 2010). Oles (2010) analyzed Oprah Winfrey's use of Benoit's theory when apologizing for her actions on her show and the use of a controversial book in her book club. Oles (2010) found that she used

an evasion of responsibility technique and defeasibility. Oprah stated she was “unaware” of the damage she caused by airing an episode about the dangers of red meat (Oles, 2010). Oprah also chose to deny the claims by shifting the blame to others, including her staff in both incidents (Oles, 2010). After these did not work, she moved to mortification which seemed to work in her favor (Oles, 2010).

Benoit (1997a) analyzed how Hugh Grant got his image back after being caught with a prostitute while in a serious relationship. Hugh Grant focused on mortification. His main use of this was to accept responsibility for his actions and express concern for the people he hurt through his actions. He did use denial at one point: “The strategy of denial was useful in limiting the scope of the charges against him. His use of mortification meant that he did not issue a blanket denial, and the fact that his denial was limited to certain accusations may have made it sound truthful” (Benoit, 1997a, p. 262). This choice of using denial would not work if mortification had not been used as well. The mortification downplayed the denial because he still admitted to doing something wrong while denying claims by the media that made it a larger scandal than it was. During this crisis, Hugh Grant appeared on multiple late-night talk shows to talk about this scandal. This was considered bolstering. He used this method again by expressing concern for his girlfriend and their family. These things made his apologies more sincere according to Benoit (1997a).

In 1994, Benoit used image repair theory to analyze the interviews with Tonya Harding after the suspected hit placed on her competitor Nancy Kerrigan. The main strategies Tonya Harding used were bolstering, denial, and attacking one’s accuser (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). She used bolstering to help her reputation. She explained in her interview that she was verbally and physically abused by her ex-husband and her mother. She also talked about her dream of going to the Olympics, expressed concern for Nancy Kerrigan and promised to donate to the Special Olympics (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). She used denial by rejecting the accusations that she put a hit on Nancy Kerrigan. She then resorted to attacking the accuser, who was her ex-husband by stating he would do anything to hurt her. She said, “I just want to know why. I never did anything to hurt him. If I ever did anything it was to stick up for him and protect him. And he does this to me” (qtd. in Benoit & Hanczor, 1994, p. 424).

It was decided in this paper that her use of these strategies did not repair her image the way it was intended to. Her statements were contradictory to her actions and her image. According to Benoit and Hanczor (1994), “Tonya Harding was a brash, independent rebel. She was headstrong and proud, a strong competitor who went her own way regardless of what others may have thought” (p.425). The image she portrayed through her image repair was of “a meek, tentative, frightened person who tried her best to meet the expectations of her husband” (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). Benoit and Hanczor (1994) also found her strategies were less effective because there was no proof to her words, “... all of Harding’s defense rested (only) on her words. Consider her attempts at bolstering. Her apparent attempts to gain sympathy rested on her assertion that Gillooly and her mother had abused her. No corroborating evidence was presented” (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994, p. 426).

Defeasibility as a form of denial is popular with apologies. Benoit (2006) found this was common for President George W. Bush when discussing the results of foreign policy decisions he made while president. He denied he misled the American people

about why the U.S. went to war in Iraq. In Bush's defense, Bush stated, "there is no such thing ...[as] ironclad, absolutely solid evidence" (Benoit, 2006). He did not believe he should be held responsible because there was a lack of accurate information. During John F. Kennedy's campaign for president, there was scrutiny about his religious beliefs. He was a devout Catholic and used image repair to convince voters that his beliefs would not affect his ability to become president. He used denial, explaining, "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I do not speak for the Catholic Church on issues of public policy" (qtd. in Benoit, 2019, p. 5). Though he was a Catholic, he used denial to show his faith would not affect his presidency.

Lastly, image repair is not used by just celebrities; it is used by whole organizations. Two popular grocery stores in Australia applied image repair to their own scandals. Woolworths used sensitive topics to market their products. This was considered inappropriate by consumers. Grimmer (2017) analyzed these strategies and found "Woolworths used the strategy of reducing offensiveness, specifically bolstering, in response to the crisis. At no stage did they apologize for the campaign; instead they reinforced their positive qualities" (p. 24).

Coombs and Schmidt (2000) researched which image repair strategies were more effective to receive a positive response from the public. In this study, they used corrective action, bolstering shifting blame, and mortification. The research stated, "Any one of the four strategies alone or the combination separation strategy, would produce the same effect on the organization's reputation and potential supportive behavior, whereas all but shifting blame would produce similar effects" (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000, p. 173).

Discrimination and Racism

A common theme among apologies is the use of discriminatory language and racism. Celebrities commonly apologize for using discriminatory language and for being racist. In 2013, Furgerson and Benoit analyzed Rush Limbaugh's "apology" for calling a Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke a "slut" for advocating for birth control health care coverage. His use of image repair for this was to reduce effectiveness. He did this by claiming he meant well. Limbaugh stated, "And who's the villain? I am. I'm the villain for pointing out the consequences of women giving over control of birth control to the government. I'm the villain for pointing out the absolute insanity of all of this" (qtd. in Furgerson & Benoit, 2013, p. 281). He also used denial to explain that he did nothing wrong. He also attacked the accuser stating that what she was asking for was "stupid" and attacked Barack Obama for "violating the Constitution" (qtd. in Furgerson & Benoit, 2013, p. 282). While he used image repair theory, the researchers concluded this was only persuasive to people who were not offended by the original statement. This is because he never offered a formal apology for using the offensive word "slut."

In 2015, Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, and Perry used image repair to analyze Paula Deen's comments on race including her use of the "n-word." She released official apologies and three YouTube videos. The image repair strategies used were mortification, minimization, attacking one's accuser, and bolstering (Len-Ríos et al., 2015). When minimizing the racist rhetoric, Paula Deen used a colorblind approach

of defeasibility to minimize the issue of race. The researchers explained that, “the defiance strategy, in effect, claims that putting ‘race’ into the equation is unfair, that it absolves public figures of having to address the complexity of racial inequality by arguing that if they did address race, it would lead to a biased, unfair outcome” (Len-Ríos et al., 2015, p. 151). This worked positively for Paula Deen’s apology.

With the changing of communication in the past 10 years, social media and YouTube have become a popular form of communicating to large audiences. This opens up a new pathway to research for image repair theory, its uses in modern society, and usage by social media influencers. These influencers are profiting off of their scandals and these apologies. It is important to understand the results of image repair theory in influencer communication.

Research Questions

RQ1: What image restoration techniques are most popularly used by influencers when having to apologize to their viewers?

RQ2: Do these techniques result in a positive or negative reaction to the apology from their audience?

RQ3: Does the amount of apologies on their channel have an effect on the reaction to the apology?

Methodology

This study will apply Benoit’s image restoration theory to YouTube apologies by popular influencers. This will be done by doing a content analysis of six videos from popular influencers on YouTube or “YouTubers.” Qualitative content analysis is used to categorize qualitative data into predetermined groups (Given, 2012). According to the SAGE Encyclopedia, “qualitative content analysis can be helpful in answering ‘why’ questions and analyzing perceptions” (Given, 2012). This is different from the original quantitative analysis which is less used in communication research (Given, 2012). In this research these groups use the image repair techniques of denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997a).

Table 1. Image Repair Strategies (Benoit, 2006)

Strategy	Definition
Denial	
Simple Denial	Did not perform act
Shift Blame	Another performed the act

Evade Responsibility	
Provocation	Responded to another's act
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability
Accident	Mishap
Good Intentions	Meant well
Reducing Offensiveness	
Bolstering	Stress positive traits
Minimization	Act less harmful than believed
Differentiation	Act less harmful than similar acts
Transcendence	More important values
Attack Accuser	Reduce accuser's credibility
Compensation	Reimburse victim
Corrective Action	Plan to repair/prevent recurrence
Mortification	Apologize and express remorse for acts

Using image repair theory, the researcher will do a content analysis to find out which techniques from this theory were used more frequently across all six videos. By doing this it will allow a view of which techniques worked and which didn't based on what "YouTubers" used which techniques. The reaction from the video will then be analyzed using features from YouTube and the website Socialblade.com.

To answer RQ2 the YouTube "like" and "dislike" feature will be used. A larger dislike ratio is assumed to mean it was taken negatively and a larger like ratio is assumed to mean it was positively received. Another way to gauge audience reaction is the use of Social Blade. Social Blade is a website that tracks the statistics of almost all YouTube channels. This website allows users to see subscriber count and view count for each week. This will allow the researcher to see how the apologies were received based on how many people unsubscribed. RQ3 will be answered by looking at each influencer's channel to see how many times they have apologized for their actions and where these videos fall in the timeline.

The results section will include a brief summary of each controversy, an analysis of their use of image repair theory, and their subscriber analytics before and after the posting of their apology. The videos being analyzed are "So Sorry" by Logan Paul, "A Long Overdue Apology" by Tana Mongaeu, "Doing What's Right" by Jeffree

Star, "Taking Accountability" by Shane Dawson, "A Message" by Jenna Marbles, and "No More Lies" by James Charles.

Results

Logan Paul

"So Sorry" by Logan Paul was the shortest video at 1 minute and 44 seconds. This video is in reference to a video Logan Paul posted of the Aokigahara Forest in Japan. In the video he showed the body of a man hanging from a tree in this forest after committing suicide. This video used the least amount of image repair techniques. It focused on mortification. He apologized for his actions, explaining he thought his actions were inappropriate and disrespectful. He also used evasion of responsibility. He used the accident form of this technique stating, "I've made a severe and continuous lapse in my judgement" (Paul, 2018). He also explained that this was "unplanned."

Since the video was posted on December 31, 2017, Logan Paul steadily gained followers. The week he posted the original video, he peaked for weekly increase in subscribers (*Figure 1*).

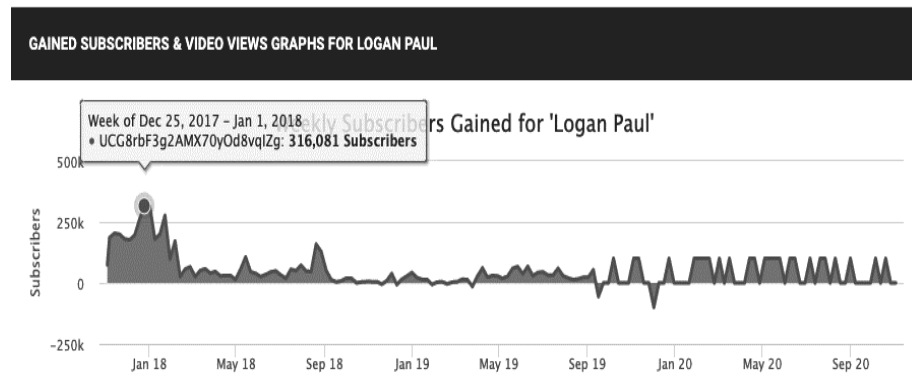


Figure 1. Logan Paul weekly subscribers gained for the week of December 25, 2017 - January 1, 2018 according to socialblade.com (*Logan Paul YouTube Stats, 2020*).

There was a dip in weekly subscribers after posting the apology. Paul's daily subscribers continued to go down and stayed down until September of 2018 (*Figure 2*).

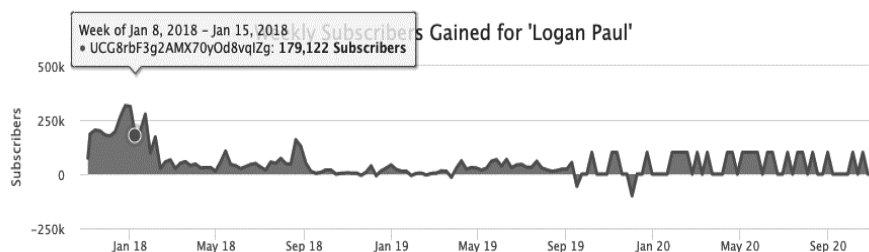


Figure 2. Logan Paul weekly subscribers gained for the week of January 8, 2018 - January 15, 2018 according to socialblade.com (*Logan Paul YouTube Stats*, 2020).

In December 2017, Paul had 14,067,925 subscribers. In January, after posting his apology, he had 15,276,058 subscribers. After the posting of the apology, he increased the amount of subscribers to his account. The data for weekly total subscribers did not go all the way back to January of 2018, but the monthly data shows that he is increasing overall.

This video has 58,675,189 views. It has 1.7 million likes and 2.4 million dislikes. This was his first and only apology video.

Tana Mongeau

“A Long Overdue Apology” by Tana Mongeau was 14 minutes and 46 seconds long. This video is in response to past racist behavior and inauthentic apologies in the past for her repeated behavior. This past behavior included using racial microaggressions toward former friends, using racial slurs on Twitter and other social media platforms, and lack of responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic after being seen attending large house parties with other influencers (Dodgson, 2020). She was also called out for performative activism on Twitter and Instagram for not addressing the rumors about her use of racial slurs while openly stating she supported the Black Lives Matter movement (Dodgson, 2020). She was also criticized for how long it took her to respond to these allegations and create an apology video.

In this video she used mortification, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, and corrective action. Mortification is the most commonly used in this video. She stated, “First and foremost, I want to apologize for how long this video has taken. There is no excuse, reason or thing to say to make that okay, and I want to take full accountability for that” (Mongeau, 2020). She also stated that she did not deserve a platform because of her actions continuing her use of mortification throughout the video. Evasion of responsibility was used in the form of defeasibility. Using defeasibility, she emphasized she now knows what she was doing was wrong, but at the time she did not know. This is done when discussing her performative activism. She explained that she had good intentions. She thought, “I was doing my justice by posting about Black Lives Matter and Breonna Taylor...” (Mongeau, 2020). She makes sure to state that she understands by not addressing her past, she was being performative with these posts, even if she did not know it at the time.

To reduce offensiveness, she used compensation to convince her followers that she wanted to make a difference. She chose to donate to the NAACP and Feeding America. Corrective action is frequent throughout this video as well. She stated that she now knows the offensiveness of her actions and is working towards being a better person and ally to people of color. She explains she is using the mistakes in her past as a way to work toward understanding her white privilege. Mongeau also uses corrective action when discussing her platform and her content. She wants to create content that is not harmful to society and use it as a form of change: “I don’t want to come back to this platform until I am someone who can shape the youth in far better ways than the things I watched growing up shaped me. I don’t want to be the reason a

young girl grows up the way I did” (Mongeau, 2020). She lists that her video was demonetized and provides petitions she signed to support people during the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Tana Mongeau was “canceled” in June 2020 after old friends created videos “exposing” her racist behavior. After this, many Twitter users found videos and tweets of her using the racial slurs. She did not address this formally until September 4th, 2020. In June and into July her weekly subscriber gains chart showed no increase in subscribers but no negative results (Figure 3).

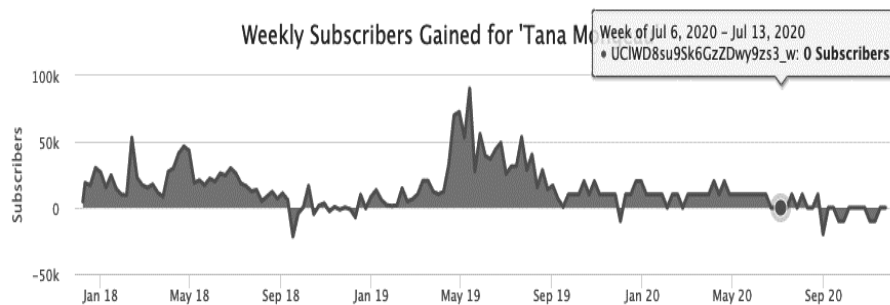


Figure 3. Tana Mongeau’s weekly subscribers gained for the week of July 6, 2020- July 13, 2020 according to socialblade.com (Tana Mongeau’s YouTube Stats, 2020).

After addressing the scandal in September she was in the negative for five straight weeks. The most she lost in one week topped out at -20, 000 subscribers. Overall after publishing this video she lost 60 subscribers.

In this chart (Figure 4), it shows that from July through November, there was no overwhelming growth in her followers, there was also no overwhelming loss in followers. Her followers have plateaued.

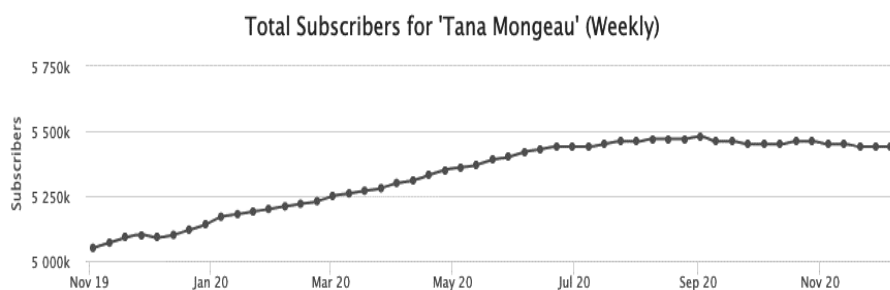


Figure 4. Tana Mongeau’s weekly total subscribers according to socialblade.com (Tana Mongeau’s YouTube Stats, 2020).

This video has 1,894,669 views. There are 40k likes and 110k dislikes. She has five different apologies on her channel and this is the most recent one.

Jeffree Star

“Doing What’s Right” by Jeffree Star was 10 minutes and 36 seconds. This video was about allegations put on Star by other YouTubers and past racist comments. These allegations originated from past “drama” among other beauty YouTubers. Star had made allegations toward James Charles. These allegations were brought back up in a video posted by another beauty YouTuber Tati Westbrook. She claimed Jeffree Star and another YouTuber Shane Dawson manipulated her into trying to ruin James Charles’s career. She said they were manipulating her to release a video that would destroy his career (Tenbarger, 2020). They also spread sexual harassment allegations about him. She also stated they had wanted James Charles “out of the way” (Tenbarger, 2020). Jeffree Star also has a history of racist tweets and demonstrated use of slurs.

This was the only video that did not use mortification as the main focus of the apology. He simply just apologized to James Charles but does not apologize for the racist behavior. There was no formal apology. His “apology” used denial, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action. He used simple denial stating, “I didn’t try to take anyone down. I am not a villain in a movie. This isn’t a Netflix series with a crazy storyline.” He went on to say “... a lot of things that are happening and being said are false” (Star, 2020).

His use of reducing offensiveness includes using transcendence. He used transcendence by claiming there are bigger problems that Americans should be focusing on. After discussing his wrongdoings, he said, “Now Breonna Taylor still has no justice. Black trans women are being murdered every day and the news is silent.” and “...it’s really time to reflect on the big picture” (Star, 2020). He also used the technique attack the accuser against Tati Westbrook for accusing him of trying to destroy someone’s career. Bolstering is used in response to the accused racism. He says his company has been ahead of other cosmetic companies in being inclusive of all people. He explains, “I will always use my platform and voice for good. I remember when brands were making 10 concealers and 15 foundation shades and they thought that was correct. I remember speaking up very loudly to my peers and other people in this industry saying that it was wrong...I stick up for what is right and I always will” (Star, 2020). His use of corrective action was him explaining he is reflecting on his

actions and how he wants to start a new chapter in his life. This video was posted on July 18, 2020. Starting in June his total subscribers started to drop; during this time he was at a max loss of -200,000 per week. Since June his subscribers have been trending downwards and he has not had a gain in daily followers since June (*Figure 5*).

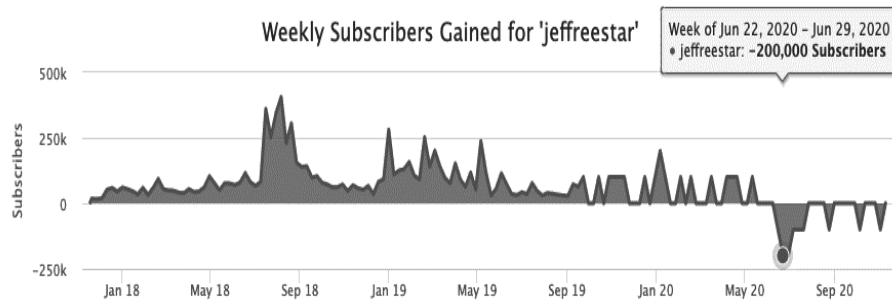


Figure 5. Jeffree Star's weekly subscribers gained for the week of June 22, 2020- June 29, 2020 according to socialblade.com (*Jeffree Star YouTube Stats, 2020*).

After his apology in June his total subscribers have been going down. In September the numbers plateaued then continued to go down starting in November (*Figure 6*).

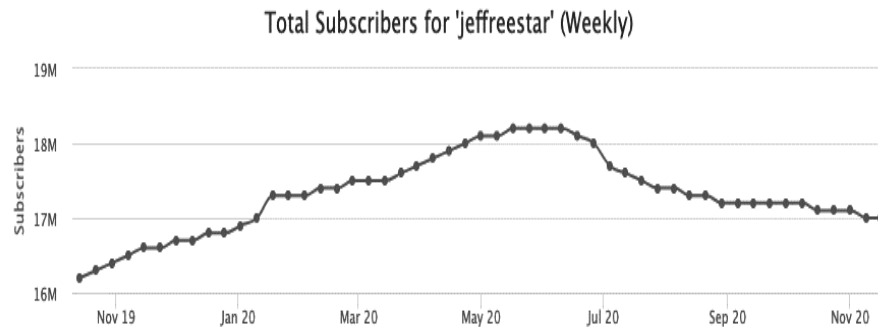


Figure 6. Jeffree Star's weekly total subscribers according to socialblade.com (*Jeffree Star YouTube Stats, 2020*).

This apology has 13,103,780 views. After posting this apology he has overall lost 1.1 million subscribers. This video has comments and the dislike feature turned off. On his channel, Jeffree Star has three apology videos. This is the most recent.

Shane Dawson

“Taking Accountability” by Shane Dawson is 20 minutes and 28 seconds long. This apology video is about the same drama Jeffree Star addressed in his video and past inappropriate behavior including racist jokes, blackface, and telling jokes that sexualize children. This video focused on mortification but also included evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denial, and corrective action. He focused on apologizing for his past, saying he doesn’t deserve a platform. He stated, in reference to using blackface and portraying stereotypes, “I’m sorry, I don’t even know how to fully apologize because it seems like something that is irredeemable... I should lose everything” (Dawson, 2020). Next he used evasion of responsibility in the form of defeasibility. He claimed he was uneducated on how blackface was wrong but now understands what he did was wrong. To reduce offensiveness, he used bolstering discussing the bad things that have happened in his life that led him to believe these things were funny. He said, “My childhood, my past, I’ve had a lot of pain. I’ve had a lot of bad things happen to me... I took that pain and made them into jokes” (Dawson, 2020).

He used denial by saying, “I don’t have hate for any race. I don’t have hate in my heart for anyone” (Dawson, 2020). Another use of denial is when discussing his pedophilia accusations. He claimed that the video people were sharing as proof of him sexualizing children was edited to cut out the parts where he said, “Pedophilia is disgusting.” He claimed they were jokes and said, “I swear on my life, I am not somebody who would ever talk about a child, like in seriousness, I would never talk about a child in any way that was inappropriate. That is disgusting. That is gross. That is not something I would ever do” (Dawson, 2020). Last is corrective action, which is used repeatedly throughout this apology. In response to his use of blackface he said, “I’ve watched so many videos on the history of blackface and how it was created to make fun of black people.” He continued, “Since I’ve apologized for those things in the past, I have made a lot of changes in my life, changes in every facet of me” (Dawson, 2020). He also explained that he does not use racial slurs ever anymore and never should have, even for comedy purposes (Dawson, 2020).

This video was posted on June 26, 2020. Before the controversy he had 23,300,000 subscribers, and from there his subscribers dropped rapidly. The most subscribers lost per day were 500,000 (*Figure 7*).



Figure 7. Shane Dawson’s weekly subscribers gained for the week of June 22, 2020- June 29, 2020 according to socialblade.com (*Shane’s YouTube Stats*, 2020).

His total subscribers have been trending down since the posting of this apology. He is now at 21,200,000 subscribers, losing 2,100,000 subscribers. This video



has comments and dislikes disabled. There are three apology videos on his channel and this is the most recent (*Figure 8*).

Figure 8. Shane Dawson’s total subscribers weekly according to socialblade.com (*Shane’s YouTube Stats*, 2020).

Jenna Marbles

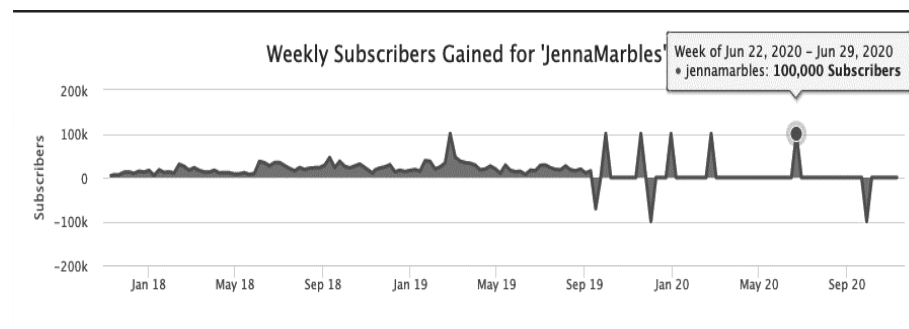
“A Message” was originally posted on Jenna Marbles’s YouTube channel on June 25, 2020. She quickly removed it, but it was reposted by another channel called ThisVideoIsBack. The apology was 11 minutes and 10 seconds. This video is regarding old content from when she first started YouTube. These videos include racially charged

jokes, blackface, and gender stereotypes. She focused on mortification, but they also use evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action.

Mortification in this video is simple. She acknowledged that her past content was offensive and she was not proud of it. Her evasion of responsibility refers to her use of blackface. She used the evasion of responsibility technique of accident. In a video of her impersonating Nicki Minaj viewers claimed she was doing blackface. She apologized for doing this, and then explained, "I do just want to tell you that it was not my intention to do blackface" (Marbles, 2020).

Her use of reducing offensiveness involves bolstering of her character and the growth she has made as a person. She explained why she had not taken these videos down sooner, "I think there was a time when having all of my old content exist on the internet showed how much I have grown up as a person which I'm very proud of..." (Marbles, 2020). The last technique used was corrective action. The way Jenna Marbles used this was by using a YouTube feature where creators can make their videos private so they are not viewable to the public. She stated, "...I have spent a lot of the last few days privatizing almost all of my old content... I'm literally not trying to put out negative things into the world" (Marbles, 2020).

Since this video is a repost of the original video by another creator the likes and dislikes for this video are not accurate and will not be included. After the original



videos posting she gained followers (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Jenna Marbles' weekly subscribers gained for the week of June 22, 2020- June 29, 2020 according to socialblade.com (Jenna Marbles YouTube Stats, 2020).

Overall she did not lose followers. After the video was posted she gained followers and plateaued until November (*Figure 10*).

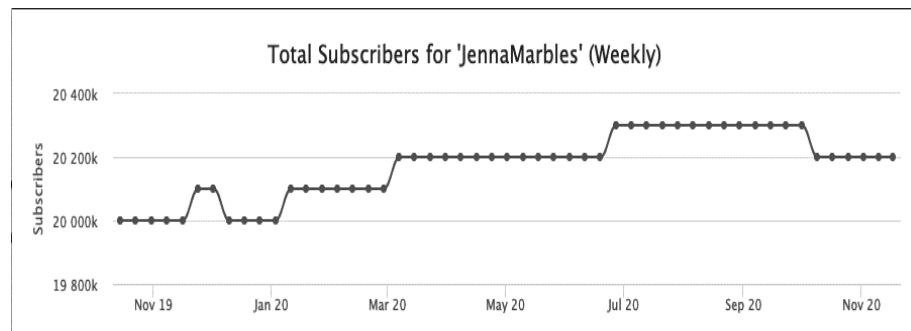


Figure 10. Jenna Marbles total subscribers weekly according to socialblade.com (*Jenna Marbles YouTube Stats*, 2020).

Before the video was posted she had 20,200,000 subscribers. After the video was posted she had 20,300,000. She is now back to the amount of followers she had after the video was posted. She has two apology videos on her channel and this is the most recent.

James Charles

“No More Lies” by James Charles is 40 minutes and 34 seconds long. This video is in response to accusations by Jeffree Star, Tati Westbrook, and other people on Twitter. They accused him of using his celebrity status to sexually harass straight men and “convert them” (Tenbarger, 2020). Westbrook was also upset with him for advertising a brand of beauty supplements that were not hers. This video discusses the vitamins but focuses on the sexual harassment allegations. This was part of the drama that caused the apology from Jeffree Star. This video focused on denial, but it also uses reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

Denial is used throughout the video, attempting to prove he did not do the things of which he was accused. Simple denial is used by showing what he calls “receipts.” These receipts are mostly pictures of messages between those involved. He states, “It is very important to me that this video has all the information and all the facts...” (Charles, 2019). He used facts and screenshots of conversations to prove that the accusations against him were not true. He also used clips from other videos for this purpose as well. He explained, “...I have never and will never use my fame, money, or power to manipulate or get any sexual actions from a guy. That is disgusting. It is not me” (Charles, 2019). He explained he is disgusted by the fake and destructive claims being spread about him.

He used multiple techniques of reducing offensiveness. He used minimization and attacks the accuser. Minimization was used to explain the accusation that he used his celebrity status to seduce straight men. Westbrook claimed that he said that he could do whatever he wanted because “I’m a celebrity. In response to this he

said, "... The 'I'm a celebrity' thing, is really incredibly frustrating to me because this is an inside joke between my friends and I that Tati has also participated in..." (Charles, 2019). He explains that "'famous' is synonymous with anything good so... if our boneless buffalo wings at Chili's are extra delicious one day... 'oh my god these wings are so so famous'" (Charles, 2019). He also used screenshots of these conversations to help explain the joke.

The next use of reducing offensiveness was attacking the accuser. This is frequently used throughout this video toward Tati Westbrook and Jeffree Star. He said Westbrook shared his story "...with no details, no facts, and no proof and twisted around and now serious allegations have surfaced that could permanently damage my career..." (Charles, 2019). He also responded to people on Twitter who have made allegations against him which he believes are not true. In response to this he says, "People are treating a #jamescharlesisoverparty as an open invitation to add to the narrative with lies which is not only harmful to me but it's also creating very very dangerous stereotypes around the LGBTQ+ community" (Charles, 2019). He also responded to Jeffree Star's comments by saying, "Jeffree's messaging about me both in private and in public was hurtful, defamatory, and extremely excessive but most importantly literally all based on lies" (Charles, 2019).

Corrective action and mortification go together in this video. Through his corrective action, he also apologized for his actions and anyone he hurt during this process. He apologized to his fans for disappointing them and explained that he has a lot to learn about relationships and his sexuality. He explained that growing up he did not learn much about flirting and he may come on too strong sometimes, but it's because he never had the chance to learn. He then said, "I can confidently say that with each experience I'm learning more and more and I've been able to better myself" (Charles, 2019).

This video was posted on May 18, 2019. This video had 53,615,210 views. Before this apology video was posted he lost 2,591,263 (Figure 11).

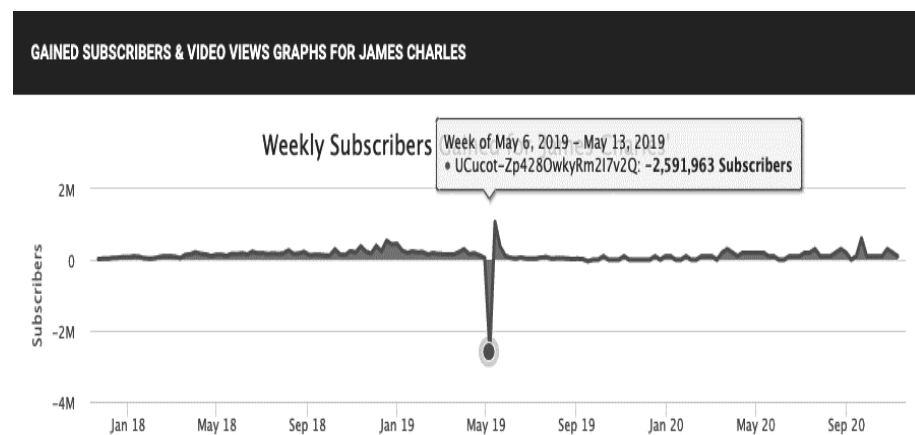


Figure 11. James Charles's weekly subscribers gained for the week of May 6, 2019 - May 13, 2019 according to socialblade.com (James Charles YouTube Stats, 2020).

After posting the video he gained 1,063,011 subscribers. His weekly subscribers gained has not gone negative since this scandal in May of 2019 (Figure 12).

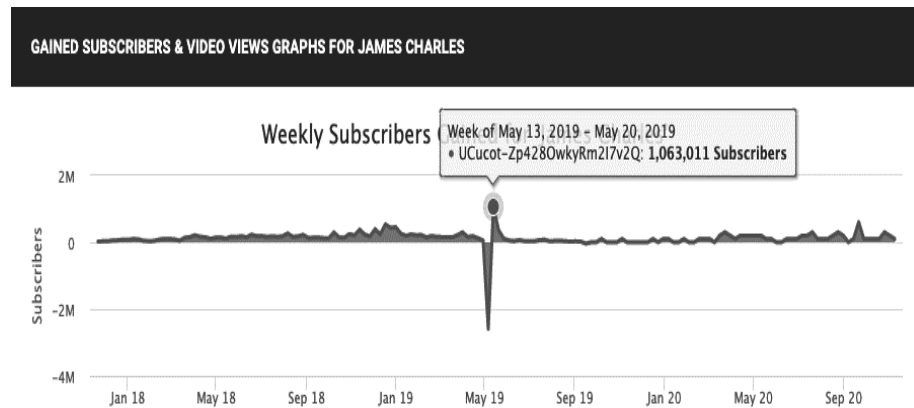


Figure 12. James Charles's weekly subscribers gained for the week of May 13, 2019 - May 20, 2019 according to socialblade.com (*James Charles YouTube Stats*, 2020).

His total subscriber count dipped in June but he has now made up all of these subscribers and more. Before this scandal he had 16,534,122 subscribers he is currently at 23,900,000 subscribers (Figure 13).

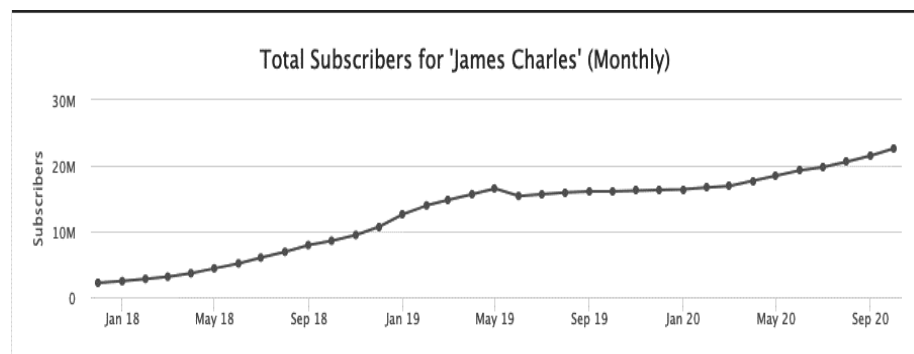


Figure 13. James Charles total monthly subscribers according to socialblade.com (*James Charles YouTube Stats*, 2020).

This video had 2.6 million likes and 612k dislikes. He has two apology videos on his channel both about this situation. This was the second one.

Discussion

Social media influencers have risen in popularity with the increasing usage of YouTube, and they have changed the way celebrities interact with their fans in a major way. This includes when they make mistakes. These videos are personal to their followers because there is a more personal connection to influencers due to how they communicate. They impact the way people communicate, influence advertising, and affect what is expected of celebrities. Through this research it allows a more in-depth look at how internet “scandals” and how and if cancel culture works.

Research Question 1: What image repair techniques are most popularly used by influencers when having to apologize to their viewers?

In the videos researched, all five categories were used throughout the six videos. The most popularly used image repair technique was corrective action. Each video had some form of corrective action. The next most used were mortification, reducing offensiveness, and evasion of responsibility. These were included in five out of the six videos. The least used was denial which was only used in two out of six.

Research Question 2: Do these techniques result in a positive or negative reaction to the apology from their audience?

This question was more complicated than originally expected. The influencer with the worst results from their apology was Jeffree Star. During his scandal, he lost 1.1 million subscribers and is still trending downwards. The only technique he did not use was mortification. He apologized but not for his actions or for hurting anyone, and he did not take responsibility for what happened. Compared to other influencers who used mortification at the center of their apology, he had a more negative reaction from his response. Without mortification, a video will not elicit a positive response but mortification alone does not elicit a positive response. He also used reducing offensiveness in the form of transcendence which was not present in another video. This could explain the strong negative response to his video compared to others who used reducing offensiveness.

James Charles had the most positive response to his video compared to others. His like-to-dislike ratio showed there was a positive reaction and his subscriber count went back up by over 1 million after posting his video. This video has one difference in techniques compared to all the others. While he and Jeffree Star both used simple denial, James's use of this was different and is what made his apology video more believable. Use of evidence or “receipts” was not used in any other video but was used as the basis for his video. This could be the reason why his video had a more positive response.

Evasion of responsibility in the form of defeasibility also seemed to have a negative response. In both Tana Mongeau's video and Shane Dawson's video they used defeasibility to explain away their actions. Both included that they did not know enough about blackface/microaggressions to know what they were doing was wrong.

They both also lost subscribers due to their scandals and videos. Shane Dawson is still losing followers.

Research Question 3: Does the amount of apologies on their channel have an effect on the reaction to the apology?

There seems to be a correlation between videos that were viewed negatively and the amount of apologies published on their channel. For five of six influencers studied, this was not their first apology video. Three out of the five had a negative reaction to their video. Jeffree Star, Shane Dawson, and Tana Mongaeu all had previous videos apologizing for racial insensitivity and other inappropriate conduct. All three of these had a negative response compared to Jenna Marbles and James Charles who continued to gain subscribers after their apology.

There could also be a correlation between negative viewer response, apology video frequency, and subject matter. Jeffree Star, Shane Dawson, and Tana Mongaeu all had a negative reaction and were apologizing for racial insensitivity, not for the first time. This is not fully supported because Jenna Marbles also apologized for racial insensitivity but had a positive response.

The viewers' response to the apology video hinged on their own belief that it was a genuine apology from someone who has changed. This means physical evidence is going to convince them more than false promises through using corrective action or mortification. Simple denial in the form of evidence or "receipts" was the most effective in allowing influencers to retain their followers. James Charles provided concrete evidence through text messages to show that he did not do the things he was accused of. Jenna Marbles showed her evidence through corrective action that showed change in her content and personality. These both resulted in positive responses from their audience and in James Charles's case, gained all his followers back.

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Limitations

The limitations of this study include the small quantity of videos analyzed. It also analyzed apologies from different types of influencers with different reasons for apologizing. A way to improve on this study might be to focus on one category of influencer or a specific reason for apologizing. Racial insensitivity was a popular reason for apologizing, so comparing apologies for the same reason might allow a better look into why these apologies work or do not work. Image repair theory also limited the study. Using a broader lens to study these videos would allow for a better understanding of how they persuade their viewers.

Conclusion

As social media grows it becomes more important for research to be conducted to understand the impact it has on our society. As it has grown, cancel culture has become more prevalent for those in the public eye. Apology videos come with this as well. Apology videos are different from the traditional apology because the creator has full control over the message they want to portray which makes image repair more common.

Each video used corrective action. Mortification, reducing offensiveness, and evasion of responsibility were included in five out of the six videos. Denial was only used in two out of six. The amount of apologies on their channel had a negative effect on their follower count if the video was about the same topic. Overall, the choice in image repair strategies did have an effect on the positive or negative reaction of the viewers. The most popularly used strategy was corrective action but this did not have a significant impact on whether or not viewers reacted positively. The use of mortification, evasion of responsibility, and reducing effectiveness had the largest impact on how the video was received.

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