My (Racism) Apology:

A Case Study of YouTubers' Apology Videos for Racist Acts

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Abstract

YouTube's popular content creators, known as YouTubers, use their platform as a vital communication and crisis management tool. When YouTubers need to manage their public image, they frequently use their platform to post public apologies in the form of what is colloquially known as an "apology video." Frequently, these apologies are for racially-based offences, such as racial slurs, race-based jokes, racist actions towards others, or blackface. This case study analyzes the language used by six YouTubers in eight apology videos for racist transgressions. It uses textual and rhetorical analysis to compare and contrast the structure and themes of these apology videos, analyzing the apology strategies used, and critical discourse analysis to place the initial racist actions and subsequent apologies in a wider social and racial context.

Introduction

YouTube is one of the two most used social media platforms in the US (the other being Facebook), with 73 percent of adults and 94 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds reporting its use (Smith and Anderson, 2019). The platform's popular content creators, known as YouTubers, have become public figures in their own right and are thus subject to public scrutiny; YouTubers also "use self-representational techniques that create an illusion of mutual and close relationship between him/her and the followers" (Hokka, 2020, p. 6), making intimacy between YouTubers and their followers a foundational feature of YouTube as a platform. Because social media have become vital communication and crisis management tools, YouTubers frequently use their platform to post public apologies in the form of what is colloquially known in the YouTube community as an "apology video." Often, these apologies are for racially-based offences, made either on or off the platform.

In this case study, I will analyze the language used by YouTubers in their apology videos for racist transgressions. This study will analyze eight YouTube videos posted by six YouTubers, posted from 2014 to 2020. I will use textual and rhetorical analysis to compare and contrast the structure and themes of these apology videos, analyzing the verbal behaviours and apology strategies used. I will also use critical discourse analysis to consider the initial racist actions and subsequent apologies, including two of the YouTubers who have multiple racially-based apologies to their name, in a wider social and racial context.

Literature Review

My research will draw from and contribute to the extensive body of apology theory and the components that constitute an apology (Slocum et al., 2011; Bentley, 2015; Bippus & Young,

2020), specifically that of apologies in the public and social media-based sphere (Bentley, 2015; Burford & Augoustinos, 2018). Drew and Hepburn (as cited in Burford & Augoustinos, 2018) "suggest that apologies have three main structural components: [Apology word or phrase] + [Transgression/Admission] + [Account]" (p. 26). Another notable apology structure, typically "used to express regret for distal past problems (referring to past conduct that is deemed problematic)" is as follows: [Apology word or phrase] + [Naming the offence] (Cirillo, Isabel, & Ticca, as cited in Burford & Augoustinos, 2018, p. 26). A study by Bippus and Young (2019) identified that accepting responsibility, articulating an apology, and identifying the specific wrong-doing are consistently perceived as the most important elements of an "ideal" apology (p. 50).

Some research has been done on the phenomenon of the YouTube apology by Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018, 2020), although the focus of their work is largely on public perception and what public relations professionals can learn about structuring effective apologies rather than the content and context of particular apologies. Little research exists regarding specific categories of apologies by social media personalities, including racially-based transgressions, as this phenomenon is a recent development, only coming about in the late 2010s. Daniels (2013) has also speculated that the lack of attention to racism in the social studies field "is partly attributable to the fact that the field of race and Internet studies is undertheorized" (p. 709).

Some related research that I will build on is that of Hokka (2020), who provides a valuable close read of YouTube content creators, YouTube's business practises, and the neoliberal ideology that has contributed to the normalization of racism on the platform, with a particular focus on the YouTuber PewDiePie, one of whose apologies is included in my data set. Matamoros-Fernández (2017) has proposed the concept of 'platformed racism,' a new, mediated

form of racism derived from the culture of social media platforms and the specific cultures of use associated with them, which can provide some explanation and context for the racist acts that led to a subsequent YouTube apology. I will also draw from Stikkers' (2014) analysis of a pragmatic understanding of what "racism" is, "as participating in and hence benefiting from racialized patterns of inequality" (p. 14) and the well-documented discrepancy noted by Bakanic (1995) "between overwhelmingly tolerant responses to closed-ended questions about racial attitudes, and the ample evidence of continuing discrimination" (p. 68).

Research Method

In this case study, I use textual and rhetorical analysis. This type of content analysis "counts frequencies of themes, phrases, or ideas" (Wilkinson et al., 2019, p. 244) and uses this data to construct a picture of a given situation. I will use this structure to compare and contrast the structure and themes of the selected apology videos, analyzing the verbal behaviours and apology strategies used to consider whether these apologies are effective based on these merits.

This study also uses critical discourse analysis to contextualize the initial racist actions and subsequent apologies. This methodology is key to revealing and understanding the "processes of social construction that constitute social and organizational life" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 2). Discourse analysis is also vital to understanding the dynamics of power relations when it comes to race, as all of the YouTubers highlighted in this study are White (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 12). In this study, it is crucial to analyze the racist actions and subsequent apologies, including two of the YouTubers who have multiple racially-based apologies to their name, to put this phenomenon in a wider social and racial context.

Burford and Augoustinos (2018) provide a valuable example of how to conduct case study analysis on similar cases through their analysis of racial slips and follow-up apologies. I created transcripts of each video, making note of speech actions that fell into the elements of apology that I had selected, as well as the context of each apology (what the racist act(s) was). This data was then used to sort the apologies into different categories based on their content to better analyze the discourse.

Method of Data Collection

The videos selected for this case study were chosen on a basis of popularity and notoriety on the platform. A 2020 visual essay by Kakkar and Goldenberg analyzing apology videos from popular YouTube videos was a valuable starting point. As little scholarly data is available on this topic, online journalism editorials were a good resource for compiling videos as well (Abad-Santos, 2018; Alexander, 2020; Makalintal, 2018).

I have analyzed eight videos in which YouTubers apologize for racist actions. I worked from transcriptions and YouTube analytics of all of the videos, and, in cases where the original upload had been deleted, referenced a reupload of the same video by another YouTube user.

Data Analysis

My data analysis included eight apology videos, each of which was coded according to the type of racist act(s) the apology was issued for. ‘RACISM.’ (2017) by Jeffree Star, is in response to multiple incidents of past behaviour, including racist jokes, actions towards others, and use of racist slurs. ‘A Message’ by JennaMarbles (2020) addresses past YouTube videos including one that was interpreted by many as blackface and another that has a racist joke. ‘My

Apology' by Laura Lee (2018) was posted in response to her past racist tweets.'My Response' (2017) by Pewdiepie was an apology issued after he used a racial slur on a gaming livestream. Two YouTubers have multiple entries, with two videos by Shane Dawson (2014, 2020) addressing problematic past behaviour, including racist jokes and use of blackface in previous videos, and two videos by Tana Mongeau (2017, 2020) addressing her use of racial slurs and racist actions towards a fellow content creator. Each apology was also evaluated as to whether the YouTuber clearly accepted responsibility, articulated an apology, and identified the specific wrong-doing, which Bippus and Young (2019) identify as the most important elements of an "ideal" apology (p. 50).

Discussion

All of the videos articulated an apology in some form, but whether they accepted responsibility or identified the specific wrong-doing varied, as seen in Table 1. In some apologies, it was difficult to parse the specific act that was being apologized for without seeking external information, as it was not clearly delineated or explained by the apologizer.

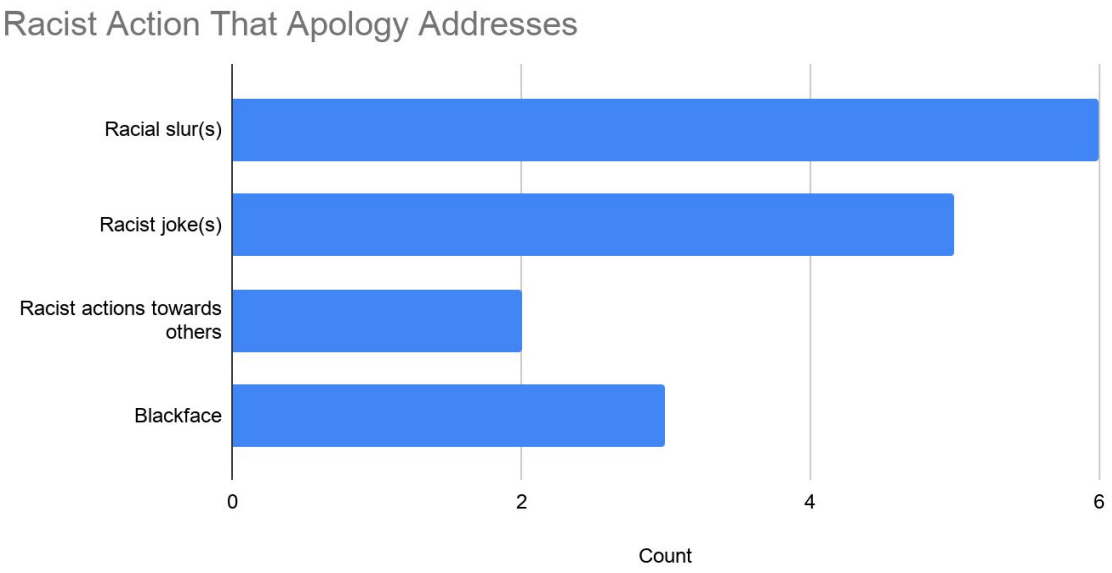
Table 1

Apology Elements of YouTube Apology Videos

YouTuber	Video Title	Accepted Responsibility	Articulated an Apology	Identified Specific Wrong-Doing
Jeffree Star	RACISM.	Somewhat	Yes	Somewhat
JennaMarbles	A Message	Yes	Yes	Yes
Laura Lee	My Apology	Yes	Yes	Yes
PewDiePie	My Response	Yes	Yes	Yes
Shane Dawson	My Apology (Blackface & Offensive Videos)	Somewhat	Yes	Yes
Shane Dawson	Taking Accountability	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tana Mongeau	An Apology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tana Mongeau	a long overdue apology	Yes	Yes	Somewhat

The majority of racist actions were the use of racist slurs, as seen in Figure 1, which were apologized for in six of the eight videos. All of these instances were uses of the slur "n****r" or "n***a." Aside from two jokes about East Asian/Chinese people, the remainder of the racist incidents were targeted at Black people.

Figure 1



It should be noted that many apologizers make an effort to differentiate themselves from what kind of person they perceive a "racist" to be. Hokka (2020) highlights that this "personalist ideology," which predates YouTube culture, often occurs when White people justify racist acts (p. 8). Jeffree Star, referring to videos of him shouting racist slurs at people on the street and a skit where he makes a joke about throwing battery acid at a Black person to lighten their skin, says "I do not know who that person was … that person was depressed, that person was just angry at the world, that person felt like they were not accepted, that person was seeking attention" and that "the intent behind my words back then, it was not about race, racism does not live inside me" (2017). Shane Dawson, in his 2014 apology, even as he addresses his use of blackface and other racist jokes from past YouTube content, clarifies that he's "not racist, but … I understand why some people think that." Racist actions are dismissed by many of the YouTubers as "stupid" (Laura Lee, 2018; Pewdiepie, 2017; Shane Dawson, 2014, 2020; Tana Mongeau, 2017), "ignorant" (Laura Lee, 2018; Shane Dawson, 2014; Tana Mongeau, 2017), "said in the heat of the moment" (Pewdiepie, 2017), or used for "shock value" (Jeffree Star, 2017), rather than acknowledging systemic racism that has created an environment where bigotry has become normalized against racialized groups or their own implicit racial biases. Feagin (as cited in Hokka, 2020) uses the term 'social alexithymia' to describe the White cultural pattern in which feelings of the racially insulted are totally bypassed in judging whether or not racism was involved. As Hokka notes, "[this] cultural model has provided White people with a licence to use racist language 'among friends' with a shared understanding that 'in reality' they are not racists … considering that it is the person's intentions and 'true' ideologies are what matter, not the used words that sometimes may 'slip'" (2020, p. 8).

Except for Pewdiepie, who is Swedish, the YouTubers highlighted are American. Stikkers (2014) remarks on this impossibly high bar as to what is considered "racist" by many White Americans, highlighting how many "obvious" examples of White racists have claimed not to be racist (p. 4). This perception sees racism "as people who harbor ill will toward nonwhites doing bad things to them" (DiTomaso, as cited in Stikkers, 2014, p. 4) and also "establishes [White] people as the sole arbiters of what counts as "racist" because … only they know their intentions" (Stikkers, 2014, p. 5).

Conclusion & Further Research

Apology videos have become a part of YouTube culture, and as more accountability is demanded from public figures, it's likely that they will continue to be posted on the platform. Many of these apologies are for racially-based offences and follow typical apology patterns noted by Slocum et al. (2011), Bentley (2015), and Bippus & Young (2020), although some do not directly accept responsibility and identify a specific wrong-doing. It is of particular note that most of the initial racist acts were directed towards Black people, which reflects the current racial climate in the US. If I were doing this research again, I might particularly focus on those apologies and their relation to that climate, or analyze in greater depth the two apologies from either Shane Dawson or Tana Mongeau.

More research is necessary as to the phenomenon of White people apologizing for racism on social media and its potential to be used as a constructive opportunity for education and racial progress, rather than a chance to simply absolve the apologizer of any supposed racism. As shown by the repetition of apologies by two YouTubers, posting an apology alone is not enough and continues the pattern of many White people's reactions to accusations of racism mentioned

by Stikker (2014). A continuing analysis of racist actions post-apology would also be an opportunity for future study, especially in the case of Jeffree Star. As Hokka (2020) has done in the case of Pewdiepie, further research could focus on the culture of YouTube and the company's ideology, and how it has fostered and, as Matamoros-Fernández (2017) would say, platformed racist content, in the case of Shane Dawson. More research is required to to acknowledge the salience of race and racism on YouTube and to continue to shed the "fantasy of a color-blind web" (Stikkers, 2014).

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