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An Open Conversation: Deliberating Perceptions of Power Through New Media

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AN OPEN CONVERSATION: DELIBERATING PERCEPTIONS OF POWER
THROUGH NEW MEDIA

by

Abigail M. Barnes

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Communication
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate aims to critically assess how mediated participants utilize new media spheres deliberate upon perceptions of power through rhetorical criticism and critical discourse analysis. Since the conception of social media, users have utilized the platforms to network, negotiate, and dissent from controversies through mediated public deliberation. The present study aims to nuance how Habermas' original conception of deliberative rhetoric has transformed through new media deliberation. To exemplify this change in deliberative rhetoric, the present study will also critically evaluate online social movements through the case study of the AOC Tik Tok Challenge, responses to online controversies through YouTube apology videos, and the comment data from YouTube apology videos to understand how responses to controversy are accepted, rejected, and renegotiated through public discourse. Research findings suggest that deliberative rhetoric has shifted from a focus on matters of policy to issues of ideology. Further, social media discourse suggests that new media proposes new methods of argumentation through an emphasis on individualistic messaging contributing to larger public sentiment and the use of parasocial relationships to articulate perceptions of hegemony.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Carol. You told me that you have no clue what public deliberation is, but your love and enthusiasm for my “very long paper” sure kept me writing about it.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

In 2005, Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim shared a vision that would alter the digital landscape in unprecedented and unanticipated ways. Rather than relying on physical copies of home video cassettes and burned discs, the trio launched a video sharing website that would allow for the immediate upload and distribution of personally recorded video content (Hosch, 2023). The company, now known as YouTube, cultivated an interactive and zealous userbase. Within the first four months of YouTube’s beta launch, the video sharing and commenting site surpassed 25 million uploads and led to the company being acquired by internet giant, Google, and has since displayed an upwards trajectory without any indication of leveling out (Downey, 2021).

As of 2023, YouTube content creators upload 3.7 million videos to the platform daily—breaking down to about 2,500 videos uploaded per minute and users consuming 5 billion videos per day (Adavelli & Tonogbanua, 2023). YouTube’s growth and popularity resulted in certain content creators amassing large sets of fans and becoming “internet famous.” While this fame created name recognition and, later, monetary opportunity for these creators, internet fame seemed to only exist in the YouTube and social media sphere. Although YouTube and, later, other social media stars were initially bound to the fringe networks of the media, established commentary and criticisms of mainstream media began to apply and arise in the online domain.

Criticisms of power began to develop within the community through video comments, users’ social media reactions, and through a brand of YouTube content creators known as “commentary” or “drama” channels that reported and provided their personal insight on YouTube controversies that were lacking in the reporting of

mainstream celebrities. However, these channels do not resemble gossip columns like those in the Page Six reporting; these commentary channels pinpoint controversies of power by locating users' reactions to content creators' misgiving to display larger trends and effects in the new media sphere. In the words of YouTube creator, documentarian, and commentator, Swoop, these discussions of power are constituted within new media "...is not drama, it's dangerous" (SWOOP, 2021). As criticisms of new media regarding power become similar to those of its traditional counterpart, I argue that we must turn to one of the most important differentiations between new and traditional media: the ability for users to interact, communicate with, and renegotiate an internet celebrity's content. This differentiation points to the central question of the present study: how do we use new media spheres to deliberate our perceptions of power in the physical world?

This dissertation aims to answer the broader inquiry to critically assess how mediated participants utilize new media spheres deliberate upon perceptions of power. Habermas (1989a) suggests that societal and individual concerns overlap as the public and private spheres of argument intertwine as he states, "the extent of the public and private have become intermeshed realms...a re-politicized social sphere that could not be subsumed under the categories of public and private from either a sociological or a legal perspective" (p. 176). However, as technologies have evolved and participation in public deliberation has been displaced over time and context, Wahls-Jorgenson's positioning argues that as participants in public discourse can articulate their own identity and related needs, the discourse found in mass-mediated engagement becomes "exhibitionist" as the dialogue develops into "a display of individual identities and opinions" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 308) As such, I argue that new media and participatory social media networks

become the foreground of where individual implications of power are dissected through public arguments of mediated controversy. In order to investigate and critically assess this phenomenon, this dissertation will be comprised of individual case studies that aim to understand how we deliberate power through new media.

Overall, this dissertation will be comprised of various socially mediated case studies to investigate power-oriented deliberations within new media spheres. Following this introduction, chapter 2 of this dissertation will contextualize the project in scholarly discussions of public deliberation, new media, and controversy as well as identify gaps in literature to form the research questions that frame the subsequent chapters. In order to establish a practical understanding of internet controversy and to nuance the theoretical underpinnings of an ideological turn in public deliberation, Chapter 3 will consult the genre of YouTube commentary channels and an overview of coverage from various controversies. Chapter 4 will turn to the case study of the “AOC TikTok Challenge to investigate how counterpublics form online in opposition to mainstream controversies of power and how the characteristics of social media shape mobilization of online social movements. While Chapter 4 focuses on online reactions to mainstream events, Chapter 5 contextually and critically assesses video responses from content creators embroiled in controversies local to the online domain to investigate how accepted and rejected responses to controversy attempt to align with public discourse. From there, Chapter 6 aims to critically investigate comment data from these responses to understand how apologies are accepted, rejected, and negotiated by the public.

CHAPTER II - REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The proposed study aims to answer the broader question of how online publics interpret, respond to, and mobilize online controversy. More specifically, the proposed study aims to provide a model to analyzing online discourses of power abuses of gender, sexual orientation, sexual assault/harassment, racism, and classism and, most importantly, how the public uses these controversies to blend public and private spheres of argumentation. This critical study is informed by Habermas's public sphere and theory of communicative action and its developments through technological advancements. Further, the critical rhetorical approach of power and ideology is used to nuance the understanding of emergent online counter-publics. Finally, the proposed study consults apologia and image repair theory to understand the apologies of content creators and how the parasocial relationships formed between creators and users influences the nature of discourse.

Evolution of the Public Sphere

Habermas (1989b) describes the public sphere as a space where "private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (p. 176). Habermas's original conceptualization of the public sphere was one in which individuals would gather to engage in face-to-face discussion. The goal of participants is what Habermas (1990) refers to as the "ideal speech situation." In this ideal speech situation, there is one common goal among all participants: a rational consensus unbound by manipulative coercions and solely rooted in logic and evidence. Further, Habermas provides some basic principles for the ideal speech situation to flourish: First, all competent subjects are allowed to participate in discourse. Second, all assertions

welcome to introduction to discourse, are subject to questioning, and are ready for commentary from other participants. Third, no one may be prevented from the rights listed in the first two rules (Habermas, 1990). However, as the theory has matured, the bands of the once physically constrained public sphere have been augmented to include deliberation that develops across time and space—often in abstract, non-tangible domains.

Wahl-Jorgenson (2001) expands insights of public deliberation found in the public sphere to include mass-mediated discourse in print journalism through letters to the editor. First, the author posits that dialogue found in mass mediated discourse allows readers to consume and articulate multiple positions before developing a shared understanding on the state of social or public policy. Public debate is displaced across time and space of print journalism as individuals “discursively [take] into consideration the views of all those concerned about particular political issues, this position holds, we can reach the most just decisions and bring about a truly informed ‘consent of the governed’” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 305). Therefore, the present dialogue “separates the public from the crowd” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 306).

While the role of dialogue emphasizes elements of Habermas’s ideal public sphere through careful consideration of a several different subject positions before reaching a rational decision on how to proceed with public policy, activism found in displaced public deliberation propagates the possibility of counter-publics. Fraser (1990) conjectures that contributions to public discourse from marginalized groups have been diminished in the public sphere. In turn, these groups create alternative discourses to deliberate their needs that are not articulated in mainstream discourse. Fraser posits,

This argument gains additional support from the revisionist historiography of the public sphere, up to and including very recent developments. This history records that members of subordinated social groups-women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians-have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (1990, p. 67).

Through these parallel streams of discourse, Wahl-Jorgensen argues that the deliberation present in mass-mediated public discourse allows for activism to flourish and complicates the traditional understanding of “publics” as “the notion of the counterpublic allows us to conceive of the public in the plural” (2001, p. 307). In consequence, while these activist groups or counterpublics may have common goals for public or social policy, the way in which they achieve their solutions to societal problems could differ. So, as participants in public discourse can articulate their own identity and related needs, the discourse found in mass-mediated engagement becomes “exhibitionist” as the dialogue develops into “a display of individual identities and opinions” (p. 308). Through an argument that newspaper editors tend to prioritize exhibitionist, identity baring letters for individual respondents rather than letters articulating group needs from activist groups, Wahl-Jorgenson posits that agenda setters or mass-mediated public discourse prioritize emotion-laded arguments rather than rational ones that Habermas idealized. In turn, deliberation of democratic values takes a turn from conceptualizing the public good towards sharing of private accounts that make it difficult to relate.

However, while these private accounts may be prioritized through mass-mediated discourse, Habermas (1989b) gives context to where these private concerns form as he differentiates between the public and private spheres. While the public sphere is a space where ideas are verbally articulated, discussion occurs, and ideas are exchanged amongst individuals, the private sphere maintains the matters of personal, domestic life. However, Habermas contends that the public and private sphere often over-lap when he states “the extent of the public and private have become intermeshed realms...a re-politicized social sphere that could not be subsumed under the categories of public and private from either a sociological or a legal perspective” (Habermas, 1989b, p. 176).

Consequentially, the state has assumed the duty of individuals in public deliberation through technical language. Habermas facilitates the development of technical overtaking of public decision making by arguing that society has two avenues to express their advocacies: organizations that claim to represent the direct interests of private interests and assume political agency or through “parties which, fused with the organs of public authority, established themselves, as it were, *above* the public instruments they once were” (Habermas, 1989b, p. 176). However, the technical subsumption of interests debated within public discourse further lends itself to the prevalence of liberalism found in the public sphere rather than collective goals. Goodnight (2012) points out that the public sphere is “eroding” with the role of “personal and technical groundings of argument” (p. 258). With the rise of social fragmentation within audiences, the author contends that politicians no longer run campaigns based off of policy for the public, but personality that in which individuals can identify resulting in “privatism celebrated and the discourse continued” (p. 259).

Public Sphere, Communicative Action, and New Media

New media—especially social media—has allowed for individuals to create, contribute to, and engage in new discourses and public deliberations in ways originally unintended by Habermas (1989b) and his conception of the public sphere (Manovich, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). Its accessibility and interactivity has allowed for both structural and identity based inclusion that is necessary for counterpublics to form and thrive (Riegert, 2015). In the face of institutional fact-checking and a wide access to reputable sources via the Internet, harbingers of “fake news” irrationalize Habermas’s intention of a “rational” public sphere and propose their own “counter knowledge” from alternative information systems (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). This struggle for recognition of individualized truths has become a controversy of equal weight to what the truths suggest themselves. As such, even though new media allows for accessible discourse, that new-media and its constitution of various counterpublics complicates Habermas’ thesis of communicative action.

Originally, Habermas’s conceptualized the public sphere in relationship to mass-media that prioritized voices of the elite and had access to structural institutions (Habermas, 1989b). In turn, Habermas (1989b) proposed a public sphere where ordinary individuals can engage in discourses of public concern rationally to achieve consensus. Habermas’ (1984, 1987) theories of communicative and strategic action were built in the hopes of/on the basis of an untethered, objective rationality to explain this deliberative process. As such, Habermas (1984) argues that communicative action is the practice in which individuals cooperatively argue in public discourse to achieve a common goal; if the goal was not a common one, then there was a fundamental recognition of the goal’s

reasonableness. Strategic action, however, is the inverse and rooted in neo-liberalism; individuals argue to achieve their own, personalized goals. A large amount of this question has been addressed in my previous answers in nuancing public sphere theory, counter-public theory, and new social movement theory. Therefore, this portion of the essay will be focused on specific characteristics of new media and how it contributes to—especially my own—wider understanding of new media and how (counter)publics function in a “fake news” society facing right-wing extremist discourses.

Bruns and Highfield (2015) describe a restructuration of the public sphere with the internet, most specifically Twitter. This restructuralization does not consist of a singular public sphere, however; rather, it is a plethora of many fragmented but overlapping, connected publics (Bruns & Highfield, 2015). While, for the space of space and time, this is a fundamentalist approach to Habermas’ theories, the implications thereof are clear: counterpublics’ propositions of counter-knowledge, aforementioned pathos-centric, identity-based arguments, and methods of agitation and agonism are counterproductive to Habermas’ communicative action. In order to dissect the nature of participant driven internet discourse, it is imperative to unpack Habermas’ communicative action through two defining characteristics: first, fragmented publics on the internet and parallel discourses to mainstream discourses before revisiting how these aid the momentum of right-wing extremist counterpublics.

Fragmented and Individual Publics

The fragmented and individualized nature of a cyberspace public sphere has only compounded the lack of rationality and merit-worthy goals that Habermas’ underscores as fundamentals of communicative action. Sunstein (2008) preempted a post-truth era by

positing that individual content creation (i.e., blogging) creates distinct polarization that can lead already fragmented publics to nest in their respective “information cocoons” perpetuated through their echo chambers of suggested material and commenting (p. 94). Further, the practice of group-polarization describes how individuals find their own “spheres” based off of their individual outlooks, beliefs, status, or identity (Sunstein, 2008). In turn, individuals create echo chambers of polarizing views—or blatant obscuring of fact—based off of influence, comparison, and corroboration within their respective spheres (Sunstein, 2008, pp. 92–93). In these echo chambers, there is very little room for Habermas’ rationalization—let alone his conceptualization of public deliberation. Common goals that are established are ones that do not serve the well being of society, but that of a specific public united by identity. Toepfl and Piwoni note that discourses found in comment threads “create an image of public opinion that is strongly tilted toward counterpublic positions and thus systematically deviates from representative public opinion” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018, p. 485).

These “tilted” viewpoints that favor a respective counterpublic rather than a reasonable goal that has societal merits further delineates the digital sphere from Habermas’ goal. Although the digital landscape of mediated discourses are fragmented, their relative qualities in snowballing discourses helps propel right-wing extremist, irrational beliefs. Heitmeyer underscores how the incohesive nature of digital public discourse can compound into oppressive ones by noting, “ideologies of inequality on the one hand, such as exaggerated nationalism, racist denigration, and totalitarian views of the law, are associated with varying levels of acceptance of violence on the other” (2003,

p. 401) In turn, it shows consideration of “illegitimate” forms of deliberation such as violence (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019, p. 10).

In the wake of a “post-truth” society, these echo chambers serve as reinforcements for right-wing extremist counterpublics as their views are legitimized by their mediated peers. Wahlstrom and Törnberg note that confirmation of hyper-conservative views in these publics/networks of larger conservative interests serves as a mode of self-legitimization that can lead to radicalized violence (2021). Further, the replication of these discourses in other spheres and features of them on mainstream media strengthen a right-wing extremist’s collective identities and perpetuates their discourse as it is now perceived as legitimate from the counterpublic (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019).

Parallels to Mainstream Discourse

Mainstream media and social media use has become more interconnected and reliant on each other with the sharing of news stories leading to comment wars on Facebook and tweets (or lack thereof) from former president Trump making breaking news on primetime news networks. Brun and Highfields (2015) describe this phenomenon as the “process of an evolving social media ecology and the mediasphere; while further enabling debate and discussion, in different forms and with different affordances, they continue to complicate and challenge our conceptualisation of a ‘public’ sphere—whether in the singular or plural” (p. 18). Both mainstream discourses and alternative modes of deliberation both seek to inform each other. As Kaiser and Rauchfleisch note, “counterpublics cannot be thought without the mainstream public sphere that marginalises them. Reaching the mainstream public sphere via social media

or mass media is thus eminent for counterpublics”(2019, p. 12). Yet, the overlapping can skew what is considered “public” and “private.”

Wright (2012) designates these discursive formations as “third spaces” (p. 254). He argues, “a Third Space is an online discussion forum with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations. The key link between participants is not (normally) their location but specific issues or topics” (Wright, 2012, p. 254). These third spaces serve as the intersection of the cultural and the deliberative. He notes that tests of these discourses would fail according to a traditional, strict application of Habermas’ framework. But, with flexibility of the researcher and an understanding that these deliberative conversations are happening within personal, private discourses (the example he gives is on a Wife-Swap forum. I have not visited one yet, but by my defense I sure will be able to say whether or not his account is factual) would reveal a more accurate insight into how political discourses manifest in the public (Wright, 2012). Regardless, Habermas’ communicative action that is untainted by personal interest is not withheld when deliberation occurs in individualized contexts. As I mentioned before, the internet is a breeding ground for counterpublics and these counterpublics are affective by nature. Despite these discourses happening in mediated form, the emotional and irrational aspect of their communication is still intertwined with human nature as Lünenborg points out, “we must acknowledge that affect is constituted relationally, through the interaction between humans and non-human artifacts like media technology and public space” (Lünenborg, 2019, p. 327).

Habermas’ original hope of communicative action serves to be both agitational and antagonistic on social media. I argue, though, that in some domains, this is not

necessarily negative that the parallel discourses seek to dispel stereotypes and hegemony perpetuated from mainstream discourses of power. Schroeder (2018) argues that new media can create a revitalized agenda that “shifts more closely to issues or groups that have been overlooked” (p. 14). For example, counterpublic activism in #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) sought to emphasize the systemic practice of police brutality that mainstream media did not (Nummi et al., 2019) and Japanese counterpublics used social media to illuminate the humanitarian crisis in Hong Kong (Leung & Lee, 2014).

However, agitational and antagonism from fringe counterpublics point to irrationality and lack of a common good, largely through their use of counter-knowledge to propagate myths that bolster their own identities. Counterpublics, particularly right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists have rejected legitimate science because it is not produced or understood by them, what they view as the “common-people” (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). These “alternative facts” that are characteristic of a post-truth society place a “strong emphasis on counter-expertise” and their “opponents are deemed to be wrong not only in terms of morals, or knowledge, but in their view of what constitutes knowledge in the first place, that is, their epistemological premises about the world” (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 24). The acceptance of facts and new arguments does not lie within rationality, but their own worldview and standpoint.

Insights to how digital publics are more representative of collective identities rather than diverse, larger publics can inform the study of right-wing extremist counterpublics in a number of ways. First, often functioning under a “post-truth” paradigm, these counterpublics do not only articulate themselves as excluded from mainstream discourse but seek “alternative facts” that counteracts arguments from the

wider-public. This practice is not to simply dispel perceived myths that mainstream media propagates that attributes their exclusion; rather, it is an articulation of their own perceived identity to reject facts from experts and seek counter knowledge from other excluded “common people” (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Second, fragmented internet discourses serve as echo chambers that further perpetuate a collective identity and group-polarization (Sunstein, 2008; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). Finally, engagement with mainstream media’s comment thread recontextualizes these discourses outside of their inner-spheres and can serve to recruit to continue to gain momentum by “tilting” the dialogue to one that is believed to be a prevailing public opinion (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018)

As such, the present study aims to model the disruption of Habermas’s original conception of the public sphere and communicative action through online discourse. Through locating what classifies as a controversy (leading to online public deliberation) while pointing to the hybridity of online argument’s blending of the personal and private spheres, I ask:

RQ 1: What are the publicly agreed upon characteristics that qualify a controversy that invites public deliberation?

RQ 2: How does online argumentation restructure Habermas’s original notion of public and private argument

Counterpublics and New Information Technologies

Fraser’s (1990) attribution of counterpublics is a rectifying concept to Habermas’ (1989b) conception of the public sphere that prioritized those with the ability to speak—often white men—on issues of public concern. The emphasis on rational debate, common consensus, and “public” issues through Habermas’ public sphere

framework leaves little room for non-prioritized discourses, marginalized identities, and private issues that have become political (i.e., hate crime legislation, “Don’t Say Gay” laws, re-authorization of the Violence Against Women act). Fraser’s (1990) postulation of counterpublics provides theoretical nuance and applicatory insights into locating and studying non-mainstream discourses that contribute to the wider public. Yet, emancipatory goals should not be considered the defining characteristic of counterpublics. The full context of Fraser’s designation of counterpublic status is imperative to fully understanding their discursive formation and their relationship to the wider public(s) as she explains,

Let me not be misunderstood. I do not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian; and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization. Still, insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space. In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out. In general, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies (1990, p. 67)

Fraser(1990) and Felski’s (1991) proposition of counterpublics helps rehabilitate Habermas’s indiscretion in ignoring identities that are ignored in mainstream discourse. My deviation from Habermas’s ideal speech situation and public sphere is remedied with

theoretical commitments to New Social Movement theory that is rooted in Habermas's (1989b) structural transformation of the public sphere and satisfies my commitment to the study of ideological discourse in new media. New Social Movement (NSM) theory is rooted in the Habermas's (1989b) structural transformation of the public sphere and is largely involved with the Marxist ideological approach of struggle. Habermas schemes the study of NSM by arguing that while struggle is still present in modern society, the traditional struggle of the production of goods has been replaced with a struggle over the production of meaning and ideology. (Habermas, 1989b) suggests that "new conflicts" are concerned with equality, individual self-realization, and human rights and suggests that

...new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they are carried out in sub-institutional, or at least extraparliamentary, forms of protest; and the underlying deficits reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the media of money and power. The issue is not primarily one of compensations that the welfare state can provide, but of defending and restoring endangered ways of life (p. 392).

In short, the new conflicts are ignited by distribution problems but by questions having to do with the grammar of life.

In contrast to the earlier materialist sites of conflict, this mode of struggle is riddled with the complexities of identity and the deliberation of seemingly private affairs. The construction of private identity is further developed by Felski (1991) through her argument that the public sphere is no longer an adequate space for resistance and, thus,

instituting change. Thus, counter-public spheres, most specifically feminist counterpublics, exist to provide alternate discourse. Like Fraser, Felski notes that mainstream public deliberation ignores marginalized groups such as women, the LGBTQ+ community, and racial minorities. In consequence, these counterpublic groups articulate parallel deliberation. As counter publics are typically comprised of marginalized groups that wish to articulate the needs of their respective unified identities, NSM's are also often "directed towards an affirmation of specificity in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, and so on" (Felski, 1991, p. 166). Felski argues that counter-public spheres "[acknowledge] the relative autonomy of the cultural and ideological spheres" and emphasizes "the communicative networks, social institutions, and political and economic structures through which ideologies are produced and disseminated" (Felski, 1991, p. 9).

Touraine (1985) also signifies that societal struggles are displaced from the realm of economic tangibility to cultural exigencies by arguing that New Social Movements complicate "the production of symbolic goods, that is, of information and images of culture itself" (p. 774). Additionally, while economic and political concerns may exist within these movements, culture is still prevalent throughout these struggles. The production of symbolic goods that are deliberated within NSMs is seen as hallmark of the initiatives of these movements by Melucci. Melucci (1985) comments on the organizational structure of NSM's by asserting "the organizational form of contemporary movements is not just 'instrumental' for their goals. It is a goal in itself. Since the action is focused on cultural codes, the form of the movement is a message, a symbolic challenge to the dominant patterns" (p. 801). The challenge to dominance from these

movements is present in the structuring of the organizations. However, the movements themselves do not only become a participant in public discourse, but they are articulated in the advocacies they wish to convey.

However, the largest development to new media and public sphere is posited by DeLuca and Peeple's (2002) through the notion of "the public screen." The "public screen" exhibits how social media users take part in public deliberation in the digital sphere through users' documenting of mediated news events and, in particular, the framing of violence at rallies, marches, and protests. The institutionalized value placed on modern corporate organizations in a capitalist society has "colonized" public life and deliberation (p. 126). In turn, protestors utilize social media to offer alternative images and framing to social movements that are absent in discourse that is developed within and projected from the technical sphere. Thus, protestors partake in public deliberation in "the public screen" as a mode of "participatory democracy" (p. 128) that allows for individuals to easily enter deliberation against the competing forces of corporations through the accessibility of social media. Thus, "dissemination" (p. 145) of intentionally framed image events and information instead of the traditional conceptualization of interpersonal conversations has become a better representation of "the public sphere" in the age of digital communication.

In addition to "the public sphere" evolving into a "public screen," DeLuca and Peeple's (2002) argue that the accepted version of "the public" is no longer relevant (p. 131). Instead of "the public," viewers construct their understanding of what is happening in the public sphere not with the dialogue itself, but how image events are framed and circulated. The "remediation" of the events suggests that as a phenomenon is translated

from “the real world” to the “public screen”, the events “refashioned” from one medium to another. Therefore, their meanings can also be translated differently social media from their portrayals on broadcast networks (p. 132). As these events are translated from one medium to another, the “hypermediacy” of the image events do not convey the same meaning in the “public screen” as the “real world.” Instead, the images are framed and manipulated as they become mediated (p. 145).

The researchers provide a valid model to analyze the disruptions of discourse between old, broadcast media and new-media that is created and negotiated through public users. This contemporary theoretical contribution to the study of new media validates previous critical arguments that advocate ideology as a multifaced, polysemic force that is interpreted and is represented in various ways (see (McGee, 1980; McKerrow, 1989; Wander, 1983). Further, the remediation of events from one medium to another supports McKerrow’s (1989) argument that fragments are polysemic and it is the duty of the researcher to reorder and transform their meaning. In practice, DeLuca and Peeple’s public screen offers a model to investigating a multimodal, digital public deliberation that does not rely on Habermas’s (1990) rational consensus; instead, their model shows what discourses and ideologies are go “viral” through the mediated sphere.

Despite the strides made in remediating Habermas’s public sphere into a digital context, DeLuca and Peeple’s study ignores a large faction concerning the rhetoric of new media. The premise of “the public screen” relies on digitally distributed images and arguments that are based *outside* of the digital realm. For example, the images and commentary circulated are based on depictions of an in-person movement. While scholars have contended that digitally created social norms are reproductions of offline

behaviors (DiMaggio et al., 2001), the rise of movements and discourse unique to the digital sphere is an avenue largely ignored by DeLuca and Peeples and, subsequently, how public deliberation occurs in the digital sphere. This posits two concerns: First, new media could be viewed to remedy my, and other scholars', departure from Habermas's contention that anyone can join public deliberation (1990). The public's growing accessibility to new media technology and opportunities for mediated engagement is only growing. However, the public screen's basis in analyzing events that happen in the physical life world and are transported to the digital realm rather than considering movements that are constituted online leaves many avenues of discourse, especially from the common public who are not attending the physical events, ignored. While DeLuca and Peeples' analysis of the public screen explains how news events are represented online, the duo's analysis could not pre-empt the rise of news events that are emergent from internet culture.

This willful ignorance of a purely online domain compounds into a second concern: a dismissal of several discourses of ideology in practice. The free exchange of ideas through alternative discourse present in solely mediated spheres offers a polysemic insight into how power is renegotiated and internalized or resisted through marginalized counterpublics. As McGee and Wander (1980; 1983) argue, it is imperative to see how ideological arguments are used in practice and the various contexts that shape them. Ignoring discourse that is rooted in the digital sphere lends itself to a mainstream bias. Additionally, as McKerrow (1989) beckons, a critical rhetorician must reorder the fragments of ideological discourse; neglecting online social movements and its respective

dialogue leaves many fragments unaccounted for and skews rhetorical transformation. In order to reorder the fragments of ideological discourse, the present study aims to answer:

RQ 3: In what ways are individual reactions to controversial content used to exemplify larger societal unrest regarding controversies of power?

Recent developments in the rhetorical study of new media have begun to shift towards discourses and movements constituted in the digital sphere. Consequently, contemporary rhetorical theory has started to develop critically investigations into public discourses that is constituted and maintained through digital networks. (Ehrenfeld, 2020) advocates for rhetorical frameworks to analyze digitally networked public dialogue through the critical study of ecologies. The author argues that while social media has been examined with ecological models in the past, that a rhetorical approach is necessary to properly assess how rhetors transform a digital public sphere. Ehrenfeld (2020) argues that the ecological turn in rhetorical studies and new media, one that “turns toward systemic understandings of rhetorical circulation and material interrelations” hinders rhetors full understanding of online social movements (p. 305).

Consequentially, Ehrenfeld argues that ecological approaches to online discourse “have tended to deemphasize ethical commitments that have always been central to social change” (2020, p. 305) To remedy the insight lost through ecological models as opposed to critical models of analyzing online deliberation, Ehrenfeld posits three remedies: 1) investigating the historical context of the ecologies, 2) identifying the role of “rhetorical imaginaries” present in social media ecologies and 3) assessing the role of the rhetor in these ecologies.

Ehrenfield's postulations serve to rehumanize the role of rhetors in a digital context, advocating that online rhetors should be studied relativistic to their networked peers to gauge the impact of their discourse. This consideration would seem to somewhat remedy Fotopoulou's (2016) complication of displacing social movements to the digital sphere. In an analysis of online feminist movements, Fotopoulou points to the traditional collective goal of in-person feminist social movements and contrasts it with the "libertarian promises that make up a shared social imaginary of the internet of an empowering technology" as online activists complicate the traditional social movement features of "access, connectivity, immediacy, labor, and visibility" (p. 4). While Ehrenfield's model has yet to be widely applied, it shows promise on a couple of fronts. First, considering McGee's (1980) insight into how context and social conditions shape ideological discourse and, in turn, rhetorical imaginaries that house digital deliberation. Second, Ehrenfield's consideration of the unique constraints online rhetors face in advocating for change, remedying Fotopoulou's (2016) complications of access and connectivity.

As the form and function of social media allows for individuals and publics to connect, share ideas, and rapidly form subaltern publics rapidly, Wahlström and Törnberg (2021) point to how the interactive nature social media contributes to the discursive formations of counterpublics through accessible forums. The researchers state that these forums "make *trans-local group dynamics* possible, where potential perpetrators can prepare emotionally and morally for actions that are widely repudiated in the broader society" (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021, p. 16). What makes the mediated forums unique is that hastens the pace of radicalization through evasion of interpersonal or geographic

constraints; articulations of agitation and radicalization are expediated through how “mobilizing for violent actions is the motivational ‘*why me?*’, moving from consensus mobilization to action mobilization” (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021, p. 16). . The interactive nature of social media compounds the formation and retention of similiarly minded participants within their counterpublics and their decisions to continue to identify with the groups despite articulations from competing discourses (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2015).

In addition to social media forums, comment sections of mainstream media outlets allow for participants of public deliberation to antagonize and agitate mainstream discourse (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). The practice of strengthening the collective identity within the counterpublic and increasingly agitating methods of permeating mainstream discourse can be considered a symbiotic relationship manifested through new media (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). The use of new information technologies to produce, alter, and share reproductions of knowledge allows fringe counterpublics to transcend bounds of specific articulations of exclusion to a “role of a shared identity” (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017, p. 382). Further, as Rohlinger and Bunnage (2015) point out, the role of “efficacy and voice” within the counterpublics not only aids their mobilization efforts, but solidifies members identities within the counterpublic so they do not leave. In turn, the groups not only continue to grow, but maintain a strong base.

Apologia and Image Repair

In framing this study as a conversation between everyday internet users and larger content creator, it is necessary to dissect the content creator’s responses to alleged misgivings. Not only are the controversies and reactions characterized through mediated

discourses, but the types of apologies are as well. Jennings notes that as the evolution of available media technologies reflects a trend in more personable apologies issued by a content creator to a wide-scale audience by stating “ What was once the domain of the Notes app, in which celebrities would share “screenshotable” statements from their iPhones, has been replaced by a more personal kind of ritual: the YouTube apology (or Instagram Live apology, or TikTok apology, or, when it’s a brand at fault, the aesthetic Canva apology)” (2021, pp. 1). Therefore, it is important for the proposed study to examine 1) the strategies used by public figures to restore good-will to their audiences and 2) how the need for an artful, successful apology is necessary to retain the parasocial relationship between content creator and audience member.

Ware and Linkugel (1973) consider apologia to be a genre oratory known as “the speech of self-defense” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 274). This defense occurs when (typically a public) individual is responding to an attack on their character, image, or status and a statement is made that “attempts to reconcile a derogatory charge with a favourable view of his character (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 275). Ware and Linkugel (1973) draw upon Abelson’s resolution of belief dilemma theory to establish four modes of defense: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence.

Denial includes the speaker outright refuting “alleged facts, sentiments, objects, or relationships” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 275). Additionally, Ware and Linkugel note that denial also encompasses the denial of ill intent of whatever offends their audience (1973, p. 275). Rather than trying to change the audiences mind on their disdain for a certain statement or action, the speaker attempts to renegotiate their intent that, unfortunately, led to the dispute of character. Bolstering is the opposite of denial in that it

is the speaker's attempt to associate themselves with something the audience views favorably (Ware and Linkugel, 1973). Ware and Linkugel (1973) define differentiation as the act of a speaker distancing their offense from greater, more damning offenses. Lastly, transcendence is the speaker justifying the perceived offense through connection to broad, abstract concepts such as a higher power, societal values, etc. Denial and bolstering are considered to be reformatory in that these strategies do not attempt to change the audience's understanding of the offense. Differentiation and transcendence are transformative in that the speaker tries to change the view of the situation for the audience (Ware and Linkugel, 1973).

Benoit (1995) expands on Ware and Linkugel's (1973)'s understanding of apologia by developing image restoration theory (or image repair theory) to explain how a speaker can rehabilitate their image once the speaker is held responsible for an offense action. In order to understand the revitalization and preservation of a speaker's reputation, Benoit outlines five principles: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action.

Similar to Ware and Linkugel (1973), denial is refuting the offense occurred and/or revealing the true instigator of the offense. Evasion of responsibility is minimizing the speaker's accountability for an action through provocation (their action is a response to an equally or more offensive act), defeasibility (out of control of the act), accident, or good intention. Corrective action is spoken intention to rectify the wrongdoing through restoration or prevention. Finally, mortification is the confession of the offense and request for forgiveness.

Regarding the public sphere and apologia, Kruse (1981) notes that image repair in apologia produces a public discourse that is essential in one reconciling their image while Sheldon and Sallot (2008) differentiate those different types of public officials warrant different restorative strategies. That is, celebrities (or, for the purpose of this study, YouTube creators), politicians, and corporate CEO's. Thus, it is imperative to consider offenses, defenses, and offenses within different contexts. The next section of this literature will extend the traditional understanding of apologia and image repair in the context of modern communicative forums.

New Media, Social Media Entertainment, and Apologia

Benoit (2014) notes that "As we adopt new media...we need to investigate image repair in those media" (p. 132). Scholars have grappled with how to approach the study of new media, though. Whether it be through the lens of a unique form of media, a hybrid between innovation and tradition, or in the same light of mass media (Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Caplan, 2001), it is evident that the voice of the public in the online sphere presents another opportunity to dissect how defenses are communicated and perceived. The study of image repair and apologia in new media/social media entertainment has regularly been approach through an applied social scientific and quantitative approach in the field of public relations. In terms of apologies on social media, Moody (2001) argues that social media allows for celebrities to quickly publish responses on their own without gatekeeping, but that they still adhere to a traditional image repair approach to be accepted.

Sincerity is also an important aspect to the public's receptiveness (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). Sandlin & Gracyalny find that the strategies of reducing offensiveness

as well the mix of reducing offensiveness and denial were perceived as insincere from the public (2018). The same study helps justify the use of comments as a tool for gaging public receptiveness to an apology by noting that positive comments about the creator's reputation were associated with sincerity from the creator while negative comments about the creator's reputation were associated with insincerity (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). Insights into sincerity and insincerity of an internet celebrity's apology are further complicated when considering the perceived personal relationships, or parasocial relationships, unique to YouTube creators.

Despite its differentiation from traditional media, theoretical models that are usually applied to traditional media, such as parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships (PSI/PSR), could be applied to new media as well (Kurtin et al., 2018). Chen (2016) suggests that "participants in YouTube videos are like traditional TV characters who can arouse viewers to parasocially make more friends and socialize with them" (p. 248). Additionally, the click-rating (likes or dislikes) of videos have become a colloquial measure of feedback of PSR to content creators (Chen, 2016). Khan (2017) also suggests that the "strongest interaction on YouTube is the commenting behavior" (p. 243). Thus, in reading the comments from the public, it is important to refresh our understanding of public sphere theory and the art of public deliberation in examining discourse in a digital sphere.

The trichotomy of new media, public deliberation, and apologia is further complicated by digital footprints left by a content creator and how interlocuters (as well as the public) reproduce documentations of a creator's shortcomings in times of controversy. Known colloquially as "receipts" these documentations in the form of media

recordings, screenshots, and other tangible corroborations that pose contradictions to a persons' alleged misgivings have turned the known association of the word from "a proof of purchase" to "a proof of occurrence"(Adegbuyi, 2021, pp. 7). Thus, the apologetic strategy of "denial" is not readily available to many content creators who utilize the digital landscape to express their views and, in turn, find themselves in controversy. When denial is inaccessible for the creator, the act of providing or altering a narrative is an operative method to increase the likelihood of an audience-accepted apology. Although not referring to a digitally mediated context, Theye (2008) argues that the use of narrative, if well-designed, can be by the rhetor in order to enable a more successful apology. The aid of a narrative can be located in the use of narratives as framing-devices. As such, the rhetor giving their own narrative to explain a controversy appeals to, as Fisher (1987) suggests, the innate role of the story-teller that is embedded in human experience. Theye notes that "And if the rhetor manages to frame his or her negative action and to create a connection with the audience while maintaining narrative rationality, the rhetor has a healthy chance of recovery" (2008, p. 174).

In considering the role of apologia, new media, and parasocial relationships and interactions, the present study aims to ask the following:

RQ 4: How can the use of traditional apologia theory explain what apologies are accepted/rejected/negotiated in an online forum?

RQ 5: How do parasocial relationships/interactions formed with content creators affect the public deliberation of an online controversy?

Method

The proposed study will use a mixed methodology to investigate the nature of online controversy and social media discourse.

Rhetorical Criticism as Methodology

The first methodological orientation of this study is situated in the field of rhetorical criticism. More specifically, the present study is underscored by Foss's (2009) definition of rhetorical criticism as "the human use of symbols to communicate. This definition includes three primary dimensions: (1) humans as the creators of rhetoric; (2) symbols as the medium for rhetoric; and (3) communication as the purpose for rhetoric" (p. 3). In terms of methodology, rhetorical criticism requires critics to investigate texts, acts, movements, and other artifacts in a systematic manner. In an in-depth definition, Foss advocates that rhetorical criticism is

a qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes. Thus, definition includes three primary dimensions: (1) systematic analysis as the act of criticism; (2) acts and artifacts as the objects of analysis in criticism; and (3) understanding rhetorical processes as the purpose of criticism. (Foss, 2009, p. 6)

While rhetorical criticism is embedded with a rich understanding of the text and respective ramifications, Foss reminds rhetorical critics that the "rhetorician engages in rhetorical criticism to make a contribution to rhetorical theory" (Foss, 2009, p. 7).

Additionally, the proposed study consult's McKerrow's (1989) argument that rhetorical criticism is polysemic in its nature and should aim to be transformative. According to McKerrow, a rhetorician's aim is not to uncover a singular truth; rather, the goal of critical rhetoric is to recognize that various social realities exist within a "rhetorically constituted universe of discourse" and it is the job of the rhetorician to reorder them to make sense of the perspectives (McKerrow, 1989, p. 103). In turn, critical rhetoric "seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power) (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). S

McKerrow argues that despite the ubiquitous force that power has on discourse, it is the task of the rhetorician to make sense of its workings on societal consciousness through non-traditional texts and artifacts. McKerrow argues, "It *is* the case that state power exists, is repressive, and is accessible to critique. It is *equally* the case that power is not only repressive but potentially productive, that its effects are pervasive throughout the social world and that these effects are accessible to analysis" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 101).

Further, McKerrow (1989) establishes that our objects of study, traditionally singular texts or artifacts, should be considered as threads in a tapestry of discourse, or what he refers to as "fragments" of the whole of discourse. Consequentially, each of these fragments represents a version of reality or truth reflected in McKerrow's seventh principle of critical rhetoric: "Fragments contain the potential for *polysemic* rather than *monosemic* interpretation" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 107). McKerrow argues that separate readings of the same text contain different meanings by positing, "a polysemic critique is one which uncovers a subordinate or secondary reading which contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms (McKerrow, 1989, p. 108). The

product of a polysemic reading, as McKerrow argues, yields an edification that shows how the subordinated either 1) internalize power or 2) resist power and how those in power are legitimized.

McKerrow's insight into the polysemic nature of fragments positions the present study to investigate the rhetoric of new media on a few fronts. First, a multi-faceted reading that acknowledges multiple social realities allows for a refined reading of ideological discourse in a mediated space that manifests multiple identities to express, create, and renegotiate ideological meaning of shared artifacts. Second, in navigating a polysemic reading of ideological discourse, this theoretical commitment binds the study to understanding how power can multiple identities differently. Third, removing myself from my interpretation of societal truth to further understand how power is created and negotiated through various publics.

Reimagining Rhetorical Artifacts in a Mediated Space

As the aims in methodology changed from a speaker-centered orientation to inclusion of various aspects that shape ideology in rhetorical discourse (and vice-versa) matured, as did the method's primary object of study. The conceptualization of rhetorical criticism as its own methodology rested on the common artifact of public speeches and their respective speakers. However, as I will discuss in this section, the evolving media of rhetoric has shaped the methodology of criticism.

Nakayama and Krizek (1995) argue that there is an "everydayness" to the study and critique of ideology. In the previous section, calling for rhetoricians to investigate commonplace practices. Cloud (1996) proposes that mainstream texts (such as Oprah Winfrey's biography) are an object of critique due to their popular and pervasive nature.

She argues “that critics continue to attend carefully to the most persuasive, most popular, and most widely available dominant culture narratives and icons in order to understand and critique...the continuing force of racism, sexism, and class-based exploitation in our society” (Cloud, 1996, p. 131). This sentiment of dominant culture’s influence beyond public address will be addressed, explored, and modeled in the proposed study.

In efforts to understand discourse, an emphasis on public address shifted to the study of groups or social movements in rhetorical criticism. Social movement criticism places emphasis on rhetorical discourse perpetuated by members of social movements as well as organizations and individuals who seek to provoke and respond to them. A distinctive feature of social movement rhetoric is that it involves multiple rhetors (Burghardt & Jones, 2017b, p. 375)). Griffin (1952) notes that the “point of focus in the movement study” lies in the discontent with the status quo, a longing for change, and the success or failure of current effort (p. 184). Students of movements ought to “isolate the rhetorical movement within the matrix of the historical movement” (p. 185). While researchers often concern themselves in the rhetoric of a movement’s leadership (Simons, 1970), the role of the participant becomes an equally valuable object of study in movement criticism (Zaeske, 2002).

However, rhetorical criticism is not only limited to verbal communication or physical assembly. Studies in visual rhetoric argue that images possess politically charged messages ranging from environmentalism to the subjugation of women (DeLuca & Demo, 2000; Palczewski, 2005). Explorations of visual rhetoric also include an expansion of ideographs to a multi-modal analysis to be studied visually (Edwards & Winkler, 1997). The field’s expansion to include visual forms as valid rhetorical artifacts

expands to rhetorical considerations of place and space, particularly regarding monuments (Blair et al., 1991; Donofrio, 2010; Foss, 2009).

The expansion of what is considered a rhetorical artifact and its acceptance into the field is expansive. While the rhetorical analysis of traditional public address is still a popular area of inquiry, rhetoricians have started applying criticism to their everyday lives moving beyond the limited non-traditional artifacts I have highlighted and to the rhetorical criticism of food, sound, performance, digital media.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a methodology used to study the constitution and use of discourse (language use) and its relationship to individuals who engage in discourse as well as the social and political structures and contexts where it is situated (Catalano & Waugh, 2020). Catalano and Waugh (2020) emphasize that CDA pays particular attention to “the way in which language is implicated in issues such as power and ideology” and that CDA scholars study “what effect it has, and how it reflects, serves, and furthers the interests, positions, perspectives, and values of those who are in power” (p. 2). Additionally, CDA is considered a “normative” critical methodology; that is, CDA analyzes discourse as representations of social patterns and ideological struggles and the method is used to make evaluations on rights and wrongs. Fairclough (2010) adds that CDA “addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them” (p. 11).

From an initial description, critical cultural analysis and rhetorical criticism—primarily contemporary critical rhetorical analysis—share many of the same attributes. Similar to rhetorical criticism, CDA addresses social issues, relations of power, ideology while engaging in social action (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). These goals seemingly align with the aspirations of a number of critical rhetoricians (see Cloud, 1996, 2017; Dunn, 2010; McKerrow, 1989; Morris, 2002) and are consistent with the vision that began the ideological turn for rhetorical criticism (see Black, 1965; McGee, 1980; Wander, 1983, 1984). Despite

the similarities in their critical inclination to closely examine how power functions, especially through every day, taken for granted practices, there are key differences that differentiate the two methodologies. However, despite the key distinctions between the two methodological practices, the present study aims to model how rhetorical criticism and critical discourse analysis can inform each other in studying online controversy and argument.

Informative Distinctions for the Present Study

As previously established, critical discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism—particularly critical rhetorical analysis—have established common goals in explicating how power works through society and is manifested and constituted through discourse. Given the locale, data collection, and power-informed subject matter that guides the present study, I plan to exemplify the need of using CDA to supplement the contemporary understanding of rhetorical criticism. Through this section, I point to the assumption that power is negotiated and equally considering the weight of discourse surrounding a given artifact and an emphasis on competing discourses in rhetorical criticism.

As discussed in the previous section tracing the evolution of critical methodology, rhetoric has had some departures in method since the ideological turn regarding what constitutes as a rhetorical artifact, courses in which a rhetorician should trace rhetorical discourse, and an abandonment of traditional criticism that focuses on the speaker and their public speech. While critical methods can appear “disjointed” (Burghardt & Jones, 2017b, p. 517) from a socio-scientific standpoint, most critical rhetorical research is grounded by a common practice of a close-read of an artifact(s), nuancing rhetorical inquiry through theory, and drawing conclusions that are dedicated to social reform. Critical discourse analysis, however, regularly employs critical, qualitative, and quantitative methodologies to study discourse (Catalano & Waugh, 2020). In this sense, CDA is not defined by a singular methodology; rather, its only obligation to method is which one the researcher can best use to draw conclusions from their corpus of texts and make recommendations to challenge oppressive ideologies maintained through discourse.

In this comes a commitment to study “naturally occurring language use” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2) from public actors as opposed to “abstract language systems and invented examples” (Catalano & Waugh, 2020, p. 3). Further, while rhetorical criticism evolved into a critical methodology analyzing power relations, the practice of analyzing data from a critical point of view is inherent to the method of CDA from its conception (Fairclough & Wodak, 1996). This practice lends itself to the next two features emphasized in CDA: working through a large corpus of discourses to demystify ideology in practice and the use of recontextualization of social practices and discourse to understand how ideology is reconstructed through social histories.

Artifacts and Discourses

Albeit, the accession of non-traditional texts and artifacts in rhetorical criticism as standard practice has become an essential concentration among scholars who find rhetorical meaning outside of public address, turning to popular media, cultural and social groups, and the meaning constituted through space and place. However, a unifying factor across the study of an array of rhetorical artifacts is an in-depth analysis of a singular text or phenomenon that is illustrative of the larger workings of ideology in society; studies that look at a compilation of artifacts are the exception to the norm rather than standard practice. The field has also turned to ideological discourse surrounding a particular artifact to help understand ideology’s pervasive force (see McGee, 1980; Wander, 1983). However, such discourse is used to *supplement* a rhetorician’s insight into the larger rhetorical influence of an artifact and/or speaker and contextualize a text to understand its rhetorical appeals and characteristics.

CDA, howbeit, systemically analyzes larger corpuses of discourse as its primary goal. From a critical perspective, The study of the broader works of ideology in discourse help us understand “the way in which language and other forms of social semiotics not merely convey social experience but play some major part in constituting social objects (the

subjectivities and their associated identities), their relations, and the field in which they exist” (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 474). Therefore, CDA not only focuses on discourses that take place from actors in an institutional, formal setting (i.e., political debates), but through larger domains such as mediated forums, sociohistorical systems, movements, and mass media (Wodak, 2020). Such outlook allows for a more comprehensive route in studying new objects of knowledge such as new media discourse with a large corpus of actors and imbedded multi-modal analysis of ideology. This lies in the fundamental assertion that ideology is not only molded by discourse, but discourse constitutes ideology. As Catalano and Waugh point out, “discourse perpetuates social patterns like domination, discrimination, exploitation, dehumanization, naturalization, and (ideologically driven) ‘common sense’” (2020, p. 2).

(Re)contextuality of Rhetoric and Discourse

Rhetorical criticism has developed to integrate analysis of how ideological understandings of an artifact are relative to the societal contextualization of the text, especially from a post-modern understanding (McGee, 1980; McKerrow, 1989; Wander, 1983, 1984). As McKerrow (1989) argues, it is the duty of the critic to reorder a plethora of fragments of meaning assumed from a text and transform it into rhetorical meaning. This transformative process, however, lies in a polysemic reading of an artifact to understand multiple points of view of how ideology is formed. Rather than a critic engaging in multiple readings of a text to understand the different manifestations and internalizations of ideology, critical discourse analysis orients researchers towards studying different discursive formations as the basis of their critique. Analyzing the distinct systems of discourse from different publics allows for CDA researchers to gather ideological meaning as expressed through different publics rather than tasking the critic with the duty of multiple readings.

As Fairclough (2010) notes, relations of power are discursive and such discourse is what establishes culture and society. However, discourse can be seen as “recontextualizations of social practice (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 4). Therefore, CDA methodology employs a larger scope than rhetorical criticism in its pursuit of understanding that context is an evolving form

of discourse. Context in rhetorical criticism is used to look at the timeliness and exigencies of a rhetorical situation that a rhetor responds to (Bitzer, 1968). However, the role of context and recontextualization understands discourse as “chains of events and text” that are manifestations of ideological power (Fairclough, 1989, p. 420). How objects of inquiry for CDA are recontextualized lies in the understanding that social practices are dynamic in relation to changing power structures or, as Holzschleiter (2010) notes, “the influence of historically grown macro-structures of meaning, of the conventions of the language game in which actors find themselves.” The role of recontextualization in critical discourse analysis is underscored by the field’s assumption that all discourse is mediated (Fairclough & Wodak, 1996). Wodak points to the wide reach of discourse by mentioning “Embedded in larger socio-historical configurations and structures, discursive practices can operate with various types of media—oral, written, multimodal, allowing large or small numbers of participants to communicate over shorter or longer distances” (2020, p. xxiii).

In turn, social practices are constituted by mediated production of texts and discourse. Fairclough posits “discursive practices are cut off from their embeddedness in action and transformed into discourses which are articulated together in new ways according to the logic of the recontextualising practice; and transformed from real to imaginary, and brought into the space of ideology” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 399). As such, a hallmark of CDA is to understand how social histories transcend time and place and their respective ideologies are recirculated among several different discursive formations. While McGee (1980) argues that ideographs (and ideology) should be studied diachronically across history and synchronically in current practice within rhetoric, CDA research begins with the assumption that social practices are recontextualized in discourse throughout history and both temporal orientations are considered through the concepts of differentiation and addition of how texts are represented across different discourses.

While there are other features that differentiate the methodological practices of CDA and rhetorical criticism, many are characterized by distinctions in the larger concepts I have

mentioned above. For example, a critical discourse analysis that is flavored by a semiotician would be more concerned with data reliant on language structure, a pragma-dialectician could characterize their theoretical footing within strategic maneuvering, a CDA formalist might look at more established discursive formations such as political debates, etc. However, I have established that three broad differences between CDA and rhetorical criticism is the role that theory plays in research with CDA more emic in its approach and rhetorical criticism more etic. Moreover, data collection in rhetorical criticism has more of a unified process whereas CDA varies between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Next, rhetorical critics use discourse to supplement their understandings of a rhetorical artifact while discourse serves as CDA's primary area of inquiry. Finally, the role of context and recontextualization differs between CDA and rhetorical criticism as rhetorical criticism looks at different contexts of a particular artifact and CDA is interested how discourse is recontextualized throughout different formations. With these key distinctions in mind, I turn to areas where rhetorical criticism can be informed by the distinctions of CDA.

Data Collection and CDA

Critical discourse analysis regularly employs critical, qualitative, and quantitative methodologies to study discourse (Catalano & Waugh, 2020). In this sense, CDA is not defined by a singular methodology; rather, its only obligation to method is which one the researcher can best use to draw conclusions from their corpus of texts and make recommendations to challenge oppressive ideologies maintained through discourse.

In this comes a commitment to study “naturally occurring language use” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2) from public actors as opposed to “abstract language systems and invented examples” (Catalano & Waugh, 2020, p. 3). Further, while rhetorical criticism evolved into a critical methodology analyzing power relations, the practice of analyzing data from a critical point of view is inherent to the method of CDA from its conception (Fairclough & Wodak, 1996). This practice lends itself to the next two features emphasized in CDA: working through a large corpus of discourses to demystify ideology in practice and the use of

recontextualization of social practices and discourse to understand how ideology is reconstructed through social histories.

CDA, however, systemically analyzes larger corpuses of discourse as its primary goal. From a critical perspective, The study of the broader works of ideology in discourse help us understand “the way in which language and other forms of social semiotics not merely convey social experience but play some major part in constituting social objects (the subjectivities and their associated identities), their relations, and the field in which they exist” (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 474). Therefore, CDA not only focuses on discourses that take place from actors in an institutional, formal setting (i.e., political debates), but through larger domains such as mediated forums, sociohistorical systems, movements, and mass media (Wodak, 2020). Such outlook allows for a more comprehensive route in studying new objects of knowledge such as new media discourse with a large corpus of actors and imbedded multi-modal analysis of ideology. This lies in the fundamental assertion that ideology is not only molded by discourse, but discourse constitutes ideology. As Catalano and Waugh point out, “discourse perpetuates social patterns like domination, discrimination, exploitation, dehumanization, naturalization, and (ideologically driven) ‘common sense’” (2020, p. 2).

Negotiated Power

CDA operates off of the assumption that language holds no power by itself. That is, CDA “critically analyzes the language use of those in power, who are responsible for the existence of inequalities and who also have the means and the opportunity to improve conditions” (Wodak, 2002, p. 10). This is a commonality between CDA and rhetorical criticism. Where rhetorical criticism can largely be informed is through CDA’s recognition that the power a text or discourse holds is determined by varying conceptions of power that are “part encoded in and determined by discourse and by genre” (Wodak, 2002, p. 10). As such, texts are not necessarily authored by a singular person nor should they be perceived as a source that constitutes ideology alone; rather, rhetorical criticism should consider texts as “sites of struggle” of discourses and battlegrounds of competing ideologies (Wodak, 2002, p.

10). These sites of struggle represent “effects in differences” in social structures and is manifested as expressed power (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak, 2002, p. 11). As Fairclough notes, that differences are “difference is a matter for social negotiation and renegotiation as wordings are repeated in shifting contexts” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 174).

These insights lead me to suggest that rhetorical criticism, particularly critical rhetorical analysis, could be enriched by considering the negotiated power of the text or artifact they are investigating. Again, I am only evaluating the norm of rhetorical critique rather than the acceptations. With this distinction in mind, I argue that the field of rhetorical criticism has relied on a “top-down approach to studying their rhetorical artifacts, looking at the text constituting the meaning and having the prevailing influence. Suggestions from McGee (1980) and Wander (1984) to consider the ideological conditions surrounding the text do not nuance out the reflexive role that ideology in practice (i.e., discourse) has as rhetors and auditors engage in rhetorical discourse. As consequence, a limitation that faces rhetorical criticism is the text as the end-all-be-all constitutive force of power rather; this ignores the other half of the ideological struggle—negotiations of power yielded by discourse that give the text meaning. By approaching a rhetorical artifact as a site of struggle rather than a phenomenon that maintains or exudes power over auditors, rhetoricians stand to gain insight into the pervasive nature of ideology and a more wholistic understanding of how, despite over a hundred years of rhetorical advocacy, we are still plagued by the same ideological struggles.

The concept of negotiated power through a text can be largely explained by the use of intertextuality and. Regarding intertextuality, Fairclough explain:

The connection between text and social practice is seen as being mediated by discourse practice: on the one hand, processes of text production and interpretation are shaped by (and help shape) the nature of the social practice, and on the other hand the production process shapes (and leaves ‘traces’ in)

the text, and the interpretative process operates upon ‘cues’ in the text (2010, p. 94)

Therefore, power can be seen as a formulation yielded through the interdependent relationship between the text itself, the context of social practices, and interpretations of the auditors. As such, the present study does not hold the rhetorical approach of considering ideological as supplementary reinforcements to their argument of power from the text. Instead, the present study adopts it as an equally dominating force in their argument in nuancing how power is negotiated. Such insights could further illuminate the actualities of rhetorical discourses and properly weigh the consequences of ideological forces. As such, the role of the rhetorician as an interventionist, an advocate for change, would be better informed by more wholistic understanding of power and, in turn, perhaps offer more practical solutions to ideological grievances in societal discourse.

Consideration of Competing Discourses

Through considering the rhetorical text itself as site of struggle rather than a product of struggle or source of power, rhetoricians should also consider another competition present in ideology: competing discourses. Wodak (2020) argues that “the constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over power and where power is challenged” (p. 11). Rhetorical criticism, regardless of approach, is unified by the sentiment that, at the very least, language influences and is a dominating force. Therefore, a consideration for the ideologies yielded by language--constitutive of power and represented through discourse—warrants broader consideration for rhetorical criticism to consider competing discourses within their studies.

This calls for a greater use of a regular practice of CDA in the present study—recontextualization. van Leeuwen (2008) argues that “all discourses

recontextualize social practices” (p. vii). Additionally, the role of recontextualization is transformative to the meaning of a text when brought into a new context (Fairclough, 1989). McKerrow (1989) argues that recontextualization should occur regarding different types of readings of a text from different auditors (i.e., those who resist an ideology, internalize, or are empowered by it). While this is a good start for the field of rhetorical criticism, a standard practice of polysemic readings and investigating—rather than hypothesizing—competing discourses would seek further to “demystify the discourse of power” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91).

Fairclough furthers that recontextualization of discourses can serve in a practical sense to unearth relationships between "chains of events and texts" (1989, p. 420). Considering this approach to recontextualization could yield two benefits for rhetoricians. First, in looking at the relational conventions of discourses/texts’ meaning as perpetually building off one another, the present study can deepen the analysis of ideology functioning in practice throughout societal and rhetorical discourse. Looking for causal relationships through recontextualization would aid rhetorical critics in not only locating controversies and areas of inquiry for broader research interests, but in tracing the dynamic nature of ideology as a constantly changing force. Second, considering recontextualization serves as a measure and check for rhetorical rigor. Tracing discursive histories and understanding how a text is represented in different contexts of the surrounding discursive formations have conglomerated can aid the rhetorician in ensuring they are carefully transforming a fragmented rhetorical discourse through a true polysemic reading across time and space.

Theoretical Grounding

The present study is largely informed by Habermas’s public sphere theory and theory of communicative action. Although the study’s inquiry into online dialogue and deliberation should follow under a Habermasian framework, a broad approach to critical

and ideological rhetoric will guide relevant findings—especially since data collection is restricted to controversies of power abuse. While the present study is not aiming to transform or develop theory *or* hold a steadfast theoretical underpinning. Instead, the role of a theory through the present study is one that seeks to inform the methods taken. The role of rhetorical theory and the method of rhetorical criticism often seek to inform each other yet are informed from two different perspectives: etic and emic.

As Black (1980) notes, an etic perspective—often the practice of the method of rhetorical criticism—approaches a phenomenon from the outside-in. This point of view applies pre-existing theory and allows researchers to put it into practice and nuance the happenings of a particular artifact to explain its purposes and respective impacts. By contrast, an emic standing—often used in rhetorical theory—studies “behavior as from inside the system” and engages in theory building to negotiate and develop meaning. As such, the comprehensive role of the rhetorician is to exercise discernment at the inevitable interchange between an etic and emic stand point. Black describes how rhetorical critics navigate the symbiotic relationship between rhetorical theory and method by positing, “To the extent that a rhetorical critic works in good faith, [they] abandon [themselves] to the requirement of an idea or to the textures of an alien experience. In more senses than one, the critic is an actor” (Black, 1980, p. 336). I make this detour to explain that while I take key theoretical commitments from the ideological turn, the methods embedded in the arguments are equally foundational to contemporary practices of rhetorical criticism. Therefore, this section will briefly revisit the ideological turn and place an emphasis on the methodological insights that have evolved the discipline. As such, an overarching critical rhetorical theoretical approach to power and ideology will guide this study through an emic approach. As I outline below, the study of power is largely informed by the ideological turn in rhetoric, most notably through the words of McGee, Wander, and McKerrow.

Critical and Ideological Rhetoric

Critical rhetorical theory is characterized by its study of “competing realities, or ‘metanarratives’” when addressing issues of power and oppression. Often considering the power struggles regarding “race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, gender, sexuality, and material conditions,” critical rhetorical theory is rooted in activism (Burghardt & Jones, 2017a, p. 517). In short, critical rhetorical theory does not only address the rhetorical strategies used by the rhetor/through the artifact but engages in activist discourses and remedies to promote societal change.

The turn to a critical approach to rhetoric can be traced to the ideological turn in rhetorical studies, starting with McGee's (1980) foundational “ideograph.” In essence, McGee defines an ideograph as a short phrase or word that is commonly used in [political] discourse but is heavily laden with ideological meaning (e.g., <liberty> or <freedom>). While commonly used by those in power and the public alike, they represent a shared political/social societal consciousness. However, my theoretical grounding is more concerned with the conditions of which he argues justifies an ideographic criticism and, thus, an ideological and critical theoretical paradigm of rhetoric. Three theoretical commitments I inherit from McGee’s argument are that of a shift away from concrete language use in the field of rhetoric, a study of the conditions that contributed to the embedded meaning of an ideograph (or in my studies, a text or artifact), and the renegotiation as to what is considered an object of study in rhetoric.

McGee’s foundation of the ideograph is rooted in the general rejection of symbolist constructs (scholarship in the tradition of Burke, Dewey, Cassirer) but the embrace of “their focus on *media* of consciousness, on the discourse that articulates and propagates common beliefs” (McGee, 1980, p. 15). The touchstone of ordinary language and shared meaning through poetic abstraction of ideographs lends itself to the study of not only a singular,

traditional rhetorical text, but the discourse that shapes a societal consciousness of and relationship to a particular ideology. As McGee argues, the use of the abstract terms to communicate ideology and power are the truth of the public's consciousness and a signifier of "collective commitment" (McGee, 1980, p. 15). In short, the meaning shaped through ideological discourse reveals societal truths. McGee speaks to the magnitude of ideology's pervasiveness and argues that neither the oppressed or oppressor are immune to its reinforcement on attitude or behavior as he posits "...ideology is transcendent, as much as influence on the belief and the behavior of the ruler as on the ruled" (McGee, 1980, p. 5). McGee's insight allows rhetors to nuance discourse and further explore not only how ideology is exercised but maintained by the elite. As a critical scholar, McGee's influence on my study has two effects: 1) The forced recognition that both the proletariat and elites are bound to power and consequentially 2) Opportunities to address injustice by considering both sides of the discourse exchange, from commonality to aristocracy, to fully make sense of abstractions that provide a reflection of social reality.

How this meaning is shaped leads to the second commitment I derive from McGee: ideographic study not only considers how the phrases have evolved through history— diachronically— but look at the conditions and context that constitute their meaning *and* how they are used in the practice of discourse at a given moment— synchronically (McGee, 1980, pp. 12-13). The role of time and discourse lays the foundation for how, at least I believe, scholars ought to study mediated discourse. Particularly when using memes, reiterations of a single audio recording to contextualize diverse representations of non-mediated realities, and language articulated and reinforced by specific online sub-groups as objects of study, it is imperative to understand both the origins of artifacts as well as how their meanings are re-negotiated in the status quo. Considering the diachronic and synchronic meaning of these

mediated objects of knowledge enriches the rhetorical study of discourse and how power is communicated through the reach of new media. The objects of study that new media offers also lend themselves to the third theoretical commitment I derive from McGee's argument: what is considered a valid artifact in rhetorical studies.

Similar to my commitment to McGee's postulation that we must look at ideographs (or, in my case, mediated objects of knowledge) in practice to understand their full reflection of societal consciousness, we must not limit ourselves to the rhetorical tradition of only considering formal speeches as valid rhetorical artifacts. Rather, ideographs—and ideology—should be considered as “*forces* for when people actually make use of them presently” (McGee, 1980, p. 12). McGee's emphasis of discourse in practice alleviates the burden of rhetoricians to only study speeches from the elite to assess ideology. Instead, we should also consider the public sense-making and rearticulations of these abstractions of ideology to not only gain a comprehensive understanding of the functions of ideology, but a nuanced praxis of identifying how power is continuously motivated. While I depart from McGee's overtones of the dismissiveness of Marxist theory and study technologies that are well ahead of his time, the tenants in which he modeled the ideograph inculcate the essence of my research agenda by considering the pervasiveness of power to the common people as well as the elite, the historical and present conditions that shape meaning of discourse, and using artifacts that are easily accessible to the public and their expressed negotiations of the power they represent.

The study's conjectures with McGee are reinforced through Wander's (1983, 1984) commentary on the field's need for an ideological turn. Wander (1983) argues that we should not shy away from an ideological purview within rhetorical studies, but unsheathe its ambiguities “for the possibility of real or ‘emancipatory’ change” (p. 2). This leads to the

first commitment I borrow from Wander and how I orient myself in critical rhetorical theory: with an understanding of how ideological underpinnings not only effect discourse, but also societal consciousness, it is the obligation of rhetorical scholars to object grievous rhetorical practices and assume an activist role. The critique of Burke, Wichelns, and Heidegger contends that looking at the mere adequacy of political discourse (especially speeches) in conveying a message alienates scholars from the real world conditions that constitute the discourse and, in turn, maintain oppression. Wander points to discourse circulating during the Vietnam war to illustrate his point. He argues that bureaucracies, often the sources of traditional rhetorical artifacts, “strive to maintain secrecy to ward off criticism” (Wander, 1983, p. 8). Disregard for conditions surrounding the artifact and a mere speaker-focused analysis limits the researcher from considering what McGee (1980) reminds us are forces that shape the public and elite’s social conscious.

As consequence, researchers fall victim to, as Wander suggests, the issue that plagued reporters during the Vietnam war: a reliance of information manipulated by a government trying to conceal their shortcomings and wrongdoings (Wander, 1983). Later, Wander (1984) follows up on the to-do list of rhetorical scholars by arguing that another object of study ignored by the field is not what is present in the speech or who the artifact is addressing; rather, who and what is missing through symbolic action. Arguments, addresses, and information that is invisible or unstated can be a marker of empowerment or used as a way to disempower others. This assertion aids my theoretical backing in examining power and identity—more specifically, what identities are recognized and participate in discourse. And, further, that the absence of particular identities in discourse does not mean they are exempt from ideological power; instead, we turn to alternative discourses that shape their own perceptions of power. As Wander sought to recover the art of ideology in rhetorical

scholarship, the present study is tasked with a similar goal. Sociopolitical critiques through all avenues of persuasion, including the everyday discourse and artifacts, constitutes rhetoric as a viable, applied avenue of knowledge in the larger field of communication.

McKerrow's (1989) postmodern considerations of ideology and the state of critical theory in rhetoric further direct this study's approach to the study of power. McKerrow argues that critical rhetoric ought to be transformative. A rhetorician's aim is not to uncover a singular truth; rather, the goal of critical rhetorical theory is to recognize that various social realities exist within a "rhetorically constituted universe of discourse" and it is the job of the rhetorician to reorder them to make sense of the perspectives (McKerrow, 1989, p. 103). In turn, critical rhetoric "seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). Similar to Wander and McGee, McKerrow argues that despite the ubiquitous force that power has on discourse, it is the task of the rhetorician to make sense of its workings on societal consciousness through non-traditional texts and artifacts. McKerrow argues, "It *is* the case that state power exists, is repressive, and is accessible to critique. It is *equally* the case that power is not only repressive but potentially productive, that its effects are pervasive throughout the social world and that these effects are accessible to analysis" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 101).

Yet, McKerrow (and myself) depart from the former scholars in the belief that there is a singular societal truth or reality. As McKerrow suggests, a postmodern critique allows for critical rhetoric to "...[stand] on its own, without reliance on universal standards of reason" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 109). Rather than a supposed universal truth that is imposed on a rhetorical object of study to understand the complications of power, a fundamental theoretical assumption I take from McKerrow is that "dimensions of dominations and freedom" are "exercised through a relativized world" (McKerrow, 1989,

p. 91) He points to two critiques at the disposal of rhetoricians engaging in critical research: First, critiques of domination as to what oppressive forces we should free ourselves of and, second, critiques of freedom that point to societal “truths” that can illuminate social change (McKerrow, 1989).

The “Critical” in Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis, however, is less reliant on the concrete use of theory as a guiding principle with Wodak and Meyer (2009) noting the field’s lack of attempts to establish their own common theories. Van Dijk (2008) argues that CDA’s approach to core theory is noticeably absent by noting “the lack of theory about the norms and principles of its own critical activity” (p. 82). Instead, the argument of the researcher is considered most valid through “an ‘extensive’ elaboration of why one’s critique is particularly reliable” (Forchtner, 2011, p. 2). While both rhetoric and CDA share commonalities in a Marxist conception of power and ideology (as well as various other theorists who succeeded Marx), critical discourse analysis employs a transdisciplinary approach to theory that rhetorical criticism does not. In essence, CDA does not use theories that are constituted within the field and has no goals cultivate theory specific to the discipline. CDA, instead, draws upon longstanding theories across disciplines and uses them to critically analyze discourse. Grounded theory (Charmez, 2006) is a practice often used by CDA researchers in their theoretical footing in regards to the critical study of discourse. Although CDA has roots in linguistics in discourse analysis, the critical aspect of CDA shifts the focus away from micro levels of linguistic units (sentence structure, pronouns, etc) and focuses on a comprehensive purview of power and language through discourse (Wodak, 2020). However muddled the theory-criticism relationship is

in rhetorical studies, the field continues to maintain the practice of developing and using theory that is constituted in the field, providing reiterations and recontextualizations of standing theory to fit a communicative setting. As rhetoricians fluctuate between an etic and emic orientation, critical discourse analysis remains largely emic in its use of theory.

CHAPTER III – Public Consensus to Public Consciousness: New Media’s Shift in Deliberation

Through the previous chapter, I provided an overview of literature that informed the creation of study and situated the research questions that guide the overall investigation within the corpus of literature. Currently, there is a gap in understanding how deliberative rhetoric has evolved alongside the development of social media. Although public deliberation is present through reactionary social media content, social media has also changed the nature of what qualifies as a controversy worthy of deliberation. As such, the form of deliberative rhetoric has also shifted from discerning over matters of policy towards matters of ideology. In order to assess the shift in focus of modernized deliberation, this chapter explores the characteristics that constitute an online controversy. This sets up a framework that will guide the specific case studies in the chapters that follow.

The discussion in this chapter is guided by two research questions. First, what characterizes an online event into an online controversy that qualifies public deliberation? In order to isolate the characteristics of online controversies that invite public deliberation, I work through several examples of events and their subsequent discourses throughout the chapter. Further, I turn to the common generic characteristics of YouTube commentary channels that report on the controversies and subsequent viewer reactions to establish what qualifies as an internet controversy.

The second research question guiding this chapter concerns a modern theory of digital deliberative rhetoric. Specifically, how can Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, and the deliberation that occurs therein, be modified to account for contemporary

online argumentation? I argue that traditional understandings of deliberative rhetoric have deteriorated and has been replaced by a new form of deliberative rhetoric through modernization of technology, access to public argumentation, and a shift of interest from deliberations of policy towards deliberations of ideology.

Shifting Deliberation from Policy to Ideology

Habermas (1989b) defines the liberal public sphere to consist of “private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (p. 176). The public sphere is located at the intersection of social and political life, but “outside of the formal state apparatus” (Postone, 1992, p. 164). A social space consisting of institutions and cultural arenas in which individuals can confer about public issues, the public sphere includes “all those conditions of communication under which there can come into being a discursive formation of opinion and will on the part of a public” (Habermas, 1992, p. 446). Through public deliberation and the “exchange of arguments and counterarguments,” Habermas posits that the evaluation of different ideas and positions can lead to “a rationally founded agreement on the part of all those who might be affected, insofar as they take on *the role of participants in a rational debate*” (p. 447, emphasis in original). When the public sphere is functioning adequately, public opinion is formed “by citizens engaged in critical public debates,” and is not merely “the aggregation of individual opinions as revealed by market research or opinion polls” (Postone, 1992, p. 164). This, Habermas suggests, is a necessary condition of democracy in an advanced industrialized society.

While the concept of the public sphere presupposes the binary opposition between public and private, Habermas suggests that “a re-politicized social sphere originated that

could not be subsumed under the categories of public and private from either a sociological or a legal perspective” (Habermas, 1989, p. 176). In essence, the public’s task of deliberative rhetoric has been replaced by specialized, or technical, forces of the state. Habermas argues that, with the subsumption of public decision making by bureaucratic institutions, society is left with two options: organizations assembled around the advocacy of private interests and “parties which, fused with the organs of public authority, established themselves, as it were, *above* the public instruments they once were” (p. 176). Furthermore, Habermas (1992) presciently worried about the “ambivalent nature of the democratic potential of a public sphere whose infrastructure is marked by the growing selective constraints imposed by electronic mass communication” (p. 457).

While Habermas does not consider rhetoric as such, his theories have been taken up and developed further by rhetoricians who hold out hope that “rhetorical theory... can provide guidance for reconstructing reasons, reinserting a reconfigured ethics into the fabric of private and public life, and restoring a meaningful, useful conception of the public sphere” (Fisher, 2008, pp. 48–50). More pointedly, Farrell (1993) argues: “Rhetoric is the primary practical instrumentality for generating and sustaining the critical publicity which keeps the promise of a public sphere alive” (p. 199). At the same time the public sphere has arguably undergone a structural decline, Goodnight (1982) argues that deliberative rhetoric has deteriorated in parallel. Goodnight posits that as discourse becomes more technical, the lay person cannot keep up with the necessary verbiage or knowledge to meaningfully contribute to public deliberation. As a result, current public deliberation, according to Goodnight, has been diluted to appeal to the

masses and can never yield a meaningful debate; thus, true policy matters are obscured from the public and the art of deliberative rhetoric is lost to the ordinary citizens.

While the emergence of new communicative technologies and the popularization of mass media to the everyday citizen should contribute to a livelier public sphere through accessibility to discourse and a plethora of information, Goodnight argues that mass media only provide a fragmented semblance of public discourse. He examined a series of news reports covering Reagan era budget cuts, and explained how the reporting ultimately undermined democratic deliberation:

“The reports always presented the individual as a victim of social forces. Decision-making bodies, apparently bereft of human emotion and lacking common sense, were to make decisions based upon inscrutable principles...The reports were crafted in such a way that no intelligent assessment could be made concerning the issues involved. One had no idea of the reasons for the cuts, the credibility of the sources, the representativeness of the examples, etc. But even beyond these characteristic inadequacies, the stories simply did not invite action... the participation invited was that of watching the drama play out.” (p. 207).

Rather than addressing the matters and controversies at the heart of deliberative rhetoric, Goodnight argues that public deliberation has become too muddled for the everyday citizen through the information overload of mass media and, more importantly, the fundamental framing of stories to an audience of observers rather than to active participants in a rational-critical debate (evidenced, *inter alia*, in the omission of any coursework in rhetoric or deliberation in the standard curriculum of journalism schools

today). This ambiguity leaves Goodnight with a final call to rhetoricians and argumentation theorists as he urges them to locate, evaluate, and critique "those practices which replace deliberative rhetoric" (p. 208).

Since Habermas's initial conceptualization of the public sphere and Goodnight's assessment of the state of deliberative rhetoric, communicative technologies have evolved that have not only empowered the public to seek information at will but engage in meaningful debates that transcend time and space through new media technologies. However, the combination of an overload of information and the unconstrained ability to misinterpret, negotiate, and translate knowledge has led to what the World Health Organization has referred to as "an infodemic" (2020). Further, the public's ability assess current controversies and its relevant evidence is shown to influence political, economic, and social well-being—particularly through new media platforms (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

It is evident that the simultaneous access to information and public advocacy is a pervasive force to the public. With the growing ubiquity of new media, including social media and platforms constituted by user-generated (or curated) content, everyday citizens have access to a growing public sphere and, in turn, partake in deliberative rhetoric. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the state of deliberative rhetoric in contemporary public sphere through new media discourses. I argue that deliberative rhetoric has evolved to be less about policy decisions and more about ideological conflict. Through this portion, I will survey the history of how the public sphere and deliberative rhetoric theory has evolved with changes and accessibility of the public to communication technology. Further, this section seeks to answer Goodnight's call to assess how deliberative rhetoric currently takes form while nuancing and modernizing previous

insights to how the public sphere expands with technological development. The final aim of this section is to situate the current state of deliberative rhetoric in discourses that focus on ideology and the acceptance or rejection of dominant hegemonic codes through controversies that are constituted by and within new media technologies. First, I will assess the constraints for public controversy posited by the structure of YouTube commentary channels. Then, through assessing how new media constitutes new arguments, individualization in the digital sphere, and the shift from public consensus to public consciousness, I argue that deliberative rhetoric has taken a decidedly ideological turn from policy decisions.

Constraints of Controversy

In assessing the intersection of public deliberation and controversy, Goodnight (2003) suggests that “Habermas's theory of argumentation enters into critical practice through describing, interpreting, evaluating and intervening into social controversy” (p. 121). Further, Goodnight argues that the public posts and context derives interruptions and issues that complicate a concise stream of discourse. In turn, these interferences accrue as demands placed upon interlocutors serve as a “force for better argument” to arise through discourse (Goodnight, 2003, p. 121). As the next section will explain, emergence and accessibility in new media technologies has aided rising public awareness of social issues and abetted in their capacity to participate in deliberation through invitational discourses surrounding controversy. As information sharing has overwhelmed the public domain with unprecedented access to news events, I argue that the genre of content creators known as “commentary channels” enable the public to quickly synthesize controversies that occur in the digital sphere through concise reporting

of events, catch the viewer up to speed on the status of deliberation, and then transform them from viewer to interlocuter in public deliberation.

The genre of “commentary channels” on YouTube can be likened to that of citizen journalism. As accessibility to new media technologies emerged, traditional use of mainstream media to consume news events was replaced with localized, individual accounts of “citizens” transformed the mediascape and produced a form of grass-roots journalism with immediate capacity for release. Further, as individuals began to report on and post news events, a leveled media landscape enabled home-grown journalists to become more politically motivated (Rodríguez, 2001). The rapid evolution of, access to, and participatory potential within new media technologies have accelerated. Thus, as mediated actors become more interconnected on a mediated platform, similar controversies of public figures are displaced to the online local.

As controversies are displaced to a mediated format, the role of citizen journalism is double embedded in digital spheres. Not only do commentary content creators utilize new media technology to report on news events, but their content is constituted by the very platform in which they disseminate information. As McLuhan (1964) famously noted, “the medium is the message” (p. 25). Further, the likening to citizen journalism also becomes muddled as commentary channels are popularized and the content creators become public figures themselves, amassing hundreds of thousands of followers on their respective YouTube channels (Social Blade, 2024). In garnering a fanbase, the content creators become entrenched as a contributing factor in public interest rather than a source for information. In their dual role of content creator and citizen journalist, these commentary channels go beyond reporting on the news events of the controversies

themselves; they also provide their own assessment based off of a synthesis of public argument found through highlights of synthesized comment data and amassed social media responses. As such, the typical format of a commentary video proceeds as follows: First, the content creator grabs the audience's attention through a brief summary of events. Next, the commentator underscores what aspect of power imbalance this news event exemplifies before dissecting the chronology, details, and ramifications for the news event. From there, the creator dissects discourse for emergent themes while showcasing screenshots and reactions from individual accounts to represent different veins of argument within the deliberation.

A common theme throughout various commentary channel content is that of a controversy that invites public reaction. However, the controversies are not isolated nor inconsequential; a common stasis point of controversies reported on by commentary channels are centered upon abuses of power that occur and are deliberated upon in mediated forums. The way this stasis point is repeated across channels varies. Some channels, such as Swoop and D'Angelo Wallace, preface their videos with what power imbalance is exemplified. Swoop, in particular, dismisses accusations that mediated controversy is an inconsequential form as drama as she frames her work with the tagline, "It's not drama. It's dangerous" (SWOOP, 2021). The subjects of reporting vary from an influencer using his platform to romantically pursue young (or under age fans), a family channel exploiting fans to buy faulty products, or providing a timeline of an inappropriate response of a content creator to a YouTuber content. Regardless of the individualized occurrence, most reports are embedded with a common attribute: an internet persona in a position of power violated expectations fair distributions of their influence.

Other than a violation of expectations of power than constitute coverage of internet controversies on these channels, indicators of power abuse are not prescribed by the commentators. Rather, allegations of an influencer abusing their power are articulated by the viewers through their comment and social media responses in reacting to the perceived misgiving. Similar to Deluca and Peeple's (2002) suggestion that the term "public screen" provides a productive orientation to our understanding of how (hyper-)mediated discourses circulate and disseminate through a digital sphere, a commentary channel's choice in dictating what events are refashioned into the commentary video emerges from public involvement in the argument surrounding the controversy (p. 125). Commentary channels do not feature an online news event in isolation, as it is occurring, or based off of their own interpretations of events. Rather, the focus is on presenting the whole controversy—especially the discourses that transformed the subject matter into controversy. As such, commentary channel coverage of online controversies underscores the use of contextuality in identifying notable characteristics. Fairclough and Wodak (1996) argue that all discourse is mediated, but discourse participants articulate their arguments by repurposing meanings found in other discourses. Further, as Wodak notes, discursive practices are embedded within "larger socio-historical configurations and structures" and can "operate with various types of media—oral, written, multimodal, allowing large or small numbers of participants to communicate over shorter or longer distances" (2020, p. xxiii).

As such, commentary channels turn to contextual framing from multiple discursive formations to select a mediated event that is transformed into a controversy. That is, they turn to public discourse to locate controversy rather than seeking "breaking

news” to frame an event as controversial. Commentary channels integrate their process of locating the controversy into their videos as their content heavily features snapshots of comment discourse, social media posts, or circulations of documentary evidence present in deliberation. Known colloquially as *receipts*, these documentations in the form of media recordings, screenshots, and other tangible corroborations that pose contradictions to a persons’ alleged misgivings have turned the known association of the word from “a proof of purchase” to “a proof of occurrence”(Adegbuyi, 2021, pp. 7). Further, in discourses of power, receipts are used as a documenting force for marginalized actors to reinforce narratives of power abuse (Brekke et al., 2021). If receipts can be viewed as documentation of discursive testimonials, commentary channels can be seen as curators rather than framing forces of controversies of power.

Yet, while they gather emergent arguments from public discourse, commentary channels weave their collection of public arguments together with a critical narration. They locate similar arguments and form them into conglomerates to represent different factions of public discourse. An example of this practice can be found by turning to the commentary channel known as Spill Sesh and her coverage of 8 Passengers, a family-vlogging channel known for broadcasting their strict disciplinarian parenting tactics. The narrator, known as “Spilly,” categorizes different responses critiquing 8 passengers into factions such as child welfare concern, outrage towards the parents in facilitating power abuse, and discontent with YouTube as a platform for allowing 8 passengers to monetize content documenting perceived child neglect (Spill Sesh, 2022). However, to ground these characterizations of public discourse, Spilly displays and narrates individual comments that are representative of argumentative factions in the discursive formation.

In locating the controversy through public discourse found in comment and social media responses, commentary channels heavily emphasize the role of the parasocial relationship between content creator(s) and viewers. Rather than focusing on the level of engagement a viewer feels about the strength of the perceived relationship, comment channels emphasize how the public utilizes the parasocial relationship to deliberate upon controversies of power. As I mentioned before, commentary channels rely on responses and receipts from the public to generate their content. However, in addition to using those responses to represent argumentative sentiments, they also point to how these sentiments are articulated by the public's parasocial relationships. As commentary channel content creator D'Angelo Wallace notes through many of his videos, the public feels entitled to articulate extreme support or extreme dissent through their parasocial relationships (D'Angelo Wallace, 2023). Wallace clearly labels articulations of parasocial relationships through his content.

Yet, other commentary channels also feature responses of how a controversy effected their perceived relationship with a creator through comments reflecting on trust, hurt, or anger. However, as I will nuance in subsequent chapters, I also argue that the public utilizes their parasocial relationships as a vehicle to articulate their sentiments towards larger ideological conflicts and how could be resolved. Commentary channels presenting the state of viewer's parasocial relationships in occurrences of controversy suggest that instead of engaging in larger structural power-centric discourses, discourse participants utilize internet controversy as a smaller scaled case study to articulate their arguments.

An analysis of commentary channels and their strategies in covering internet controversies provides a framework for how these controversies are mediated and deliberated upon through digital spheres. Coverage from these channels suggest that controversies arise from public argument, are contextualized through receipts and other discursive formations, and often hinge on a parasocial relationship between discourse participants and the content creator to mobilize larger structural arguments of power and power abuse. With this delineation of understanding an internet controversy as opposed to “gossip” or “drama,” the next section will turn towards how deliberative rhetoric has been reshaped through internet argumentation.

New Media, New Arguments

As media technologies have developed, accessibility for private, lay citizens to engage in the public sphere has prospered. However, this accessibility comes at a cost to Habermas’s initial framing of the public sphere. The fundamentals of Habermas’s public sphere theory and the art of public deliberation was rooted in interpersonal, physical engagement. That is, Habermas initially intended for public deliberation to be solely comprised of face-to-face discussion with one interlocuter speaking at a time in a fixed location. However, as communicative technologies advanced and marked the shift of a society no longer bound to communicating interpersonally, public sphere theory developed to nuance the specifics of mediated discourse. Deliberation that was once constrained to a specific time and location with whatever interlocuters were present now needed theory that could account for arguments that occurred in abstract, non-tangible domains.

The emergence of print journalism and reader engagement through letters to the editor was a unique development in the progression of public deliberation theory. The ability for readers to engage in regional and national public policy matters to those in power, or those who set the agenda of news dissemination, shifted the rules for Habermas's "rational" debate and the framework for public consensus. Wahl-Jorgensen (2001) explains that the dialogue occurring in print journalism and the published letters allows readers to consume and articulate multiple positions before developing a shared understanding, or public consensus, on the state of social or public policy. Unlike Habermas's initial conception of public argument following a precis of two-way communication, print journalism displaces the debate across time and space as interlocutors "discursively [take] into consideration the views of all those concerned about particular political issues, this position holds, we can reach the most just decisions and bring about a truly informed 'consent of the governed'" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001, p. 305).

The use of dialogue in the deliberation found in print-journalism lends itself to tenants of Habermas's idealized public sphere through the application of multiple subject positions preceding a rational decision on how to make a decision. However, the activism embedded in luxated public deliberation necessities counterpublics (Warner, 2005). Fraser (1990) contends that arguments from marginalized groups have been limited in the public sphere. Therefore, the marginalized groups articulate alternative discourses to address their needs that are absent from mainstream discourse. Fraser notes,

This argument gains additional support from the revisionist historiography of the public sphere, up to and including very recent developments. This

history records that members of subordinated social groups-women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians-have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (p. 67)

Thus, Wahl-Jorgenson contends that mass-mediated deliberation enables activist argumentation and nuances the original Habermasian concept of “public” to pluralized “publics” (p. 307). So, while various counterpublics insist on common goals for public policy and public good, their solvencies could differ. Through the articulation of various participant identities, the discourse found in mass-mediated engagement becomes “exhibitionist” as the dialogue develops into “a display of individual identities and opinions” (p. 308). These “exhibitionist” installments of public argument led Wahl-Jorgenson to argue that those who curate public discourse (i.e., editors, agenda-setters, etc.) prioritize sensationalized narratives of individual identity rather than specific group needs and, more importantly, Habermas’s intended rationalization. In turn, deliberation of democratic values takes a turn from conceptualizing the public good towards sharing of private accounts that make it difficult to relate.

It is evident that developments in print-journalism and reader engagement expanded the scope of public discourse, and, in turn, what arguments are prioritized in mass-mediated public deliberation. However, new-media allows for participants to engage in wide-spread, publicized discourse at their own whim and will. More

specifically, social media networks that are constituted of user-generated content, such as YouTube and TikTok, allows for private citizens to engage in public deliberation without being bound by space or time and without forfeiting their agency in gate-keeping of their arguments. The ability to freely create, circulate, and respond to user-generated argumentation illuminates a unique aspect to deliberative rhetoric in the digital sphere: arguments that are authentic to the users eligible for public consumption.

While Wahls-Jorgensen's argument is compelling for analyzing mass-mediated discourses that are prioritized, gate-kept, and distributed by those in power, I argue that user-generated content complicates her line between "the public good" and "the sharing of private accounts that make it difficult to relate" (p. 308). The ability for users to not only express their positions but to do so unconstrained and uncensored can be viewed as a more accurate reflection of how private citizens attempts to rationalize and contribute to a discussion of the public good.

Scholars have noted Vlogging, the short-form TikTok videos, Tweets (now X), and YouTube content and commenting exist within a network and media ecologies (Fotopoulou, 2016; Ehrenfeld, 2020). While it is individuals sharing their identities and opinions, the direct access an awareness that their positions contribute to a larger network of ideas, arguments, and deliberation should redirect scholars from not only noticing the form in which the arguments occur, but "code" for common themes and theses to figure out what it is they are arguing about. As the digital sphere expedites the hypermediacy of mass information sharing, this section will focus on two examples of controversies that are constituted in and deliberated through new media forums: "mommy-vlogging" (and family channels) and TikTok sex worker information.

Mommy-Vlogging and Family Channels

YouTube is constituted and maintained by user-generated content. The content, most often short videos that are created and circulated by an individual user on the platform, is often viewed as a more personalized, niche entertainment in which audience members feel like they have a relationship with the content creator. YouTube is largely comprised of *vloggers*, or video bloggers, that will post curations of their daily routines and commentary for entertainment purposes. Although these videos are edited by the user for mass consumption, the free-lance nature of the videos production and its focus on the “real-life” of the creator instills a feeling of a “personal friendship” between a famed creator and their numerous viewers. “Mommy vlogs” or family vlogs serve as a subset of the vlogging genre that primarily feature mothers, but also nuclear parents, and their relationships with their children, milestone family events such as vacations and birthdays, and the daily hardships of parenting.

The same “relationship” that viewers feel that they have with the mommy/family vloggers that popularized them in the digital sphere simultaneously invokes commentary, reaction videos, and comment-thread arguments dissenting not only their parenting decisions, but the subgenre as a whole. Dissenters of family vloggers have noted how the content creators are monetized for exploiting their children’s right to privacy, nuanced how individuals under the age of 18 cannot consent to their likeness being represented publicly, and for sensationalized discipline practices that make for viral video content (Lee & Watkins, 2016).

However, the arguments that are present in comment threads, parallel Twitter discourses, and reaction videos are rarely deliberating on public child-labor policy, child

advocacy policy, or YouTube policies that allow for the viewing and monetization of minor content. Instead, comment can be largely coded into themes dismantling ideological dominant narratives of power regarding the autonomy of children. This includes, but is not limited to, culturally disrupting larger hegemonic values of privacy, power, and autonomy that run counter to dominantly embraced practices.

Tik-Tok, Sex Work, and Strip-Tok

Similar to YouTube, TikTok is a social media platform constituted and maintained by user-generated content. TikTok has become popularized through user-created short form video content that usually only lasts about 3 minutes, but can be no longer than 10 minutes. TikTok is also characterized by the users ability to create *sounds* that are first produced in an original creator's video then later can be used through other users subsequent videos. When users search for the sounds, they are directed to previous users' content who have previously used the sounds. Users can also connect to networks of like-minded users and similar content through the use of hash-tags found in the video's caption description that brand videos by themes, trends, and subject matter (Malik, 2022).

Users can search for content relating to a number of subjects from recipes, weight-loss tips, to book recommendations. However, the platform has been praised and blamed for its circulation of taboo subject matters such as sex work, also known as *strip-Tok*. This hashtag and network of users began posting tips and guidelines for those wishing to pursue sex-work as a career, the personal benefits of sex-work, and the realities to confront if interested in this line of employment (Connors, 2021). However, a deeper dive into the comments, reaction videos, and use of the hashtag reveals those who dissent the alternative lifestyle. Similar to dissenters of mommy/family vloggers, the

deliberative rhetoric present in digital sphere regarding strip-Tok is less about TikTok policies that prohibit explicit discussion of sex-work, what is considered “adult content” on the app, or the public policy regarding legalization of sex-work alongside traditional routes of employment. Rather, comments and video reactions revolve around the stasis points of normalization of human sexuality and gender expression rather than addressing TikTok’s company policies directly.

Information and Value Sharing with Mommies and Strippers

Although these are just two instances of public deliberation in the digital sphere, the argumentation surrounding mommy-vloggers and strip-Tok points to insights in how new-media has altered the substance of public debate more than the form. Interlocutors present on participatory social media networks such as TikTok and YouTube that are constituted by user-generated content seem aware of their position within the network. More specifically, users that are creating content on YouTube and TikTok are conscious of the fact that their videos and comments, therefore their messaging and arguments, do not exist in isolation. As consequence, the interlocutors underlying theses are those regarding the pervasiveness of power and ideology rather than policy-specific reform. Further, since these participants in the digital sphere are not constrained by gate-keeping or agenda setting, they are aware of their agency to address fundamental issues of hegemony and power that constitute practices and norms that constrain marginalized groups. Although the decision making does not result in tangible changes to the status quo, these groups engage in debates to fix the underlying causes to issues that routinely occur in the digital sphere of seemingly endless amounts of information.

Individualization in the Public Sphere

As mentioned in the previous section of analysis, rhetoric and deliberation in the digital sphere functions in networks and media ecologies (Fotopoulou, 2016; Ehrenfeld, 2020). However, especially in the cases of online social movements, contributions to public deliberation are often individualized through the private accounts of participants rather than through group unification. As Korstenbroek (2022) notes, media has a moral role in that it both constructs and is constructed by reality and possesses the tools to reconstruct the images of “self” and “other” to inform deliberative practices (p. 82). As traditional media becomes more fractured, the researcher argues that new media can be used to reconstruct “self” and “other” narratives. While Korstenbroek notes the limits of algorithms and bubbles within a new media ecology, the researcher notes that “communication within such spaces is messy and does not follow strict ‘rules’ of rational deliberation” without sacrificing the feeling of engagement with “digitally mediated stories of others” (p. 82).

This individualized approach allows for users to engage in a larger debate of hegemonic norms through the retelling of their own stories. This has been popularized heavily through the use of TikTok. While there is a particular song, sound, or hashtag that users will use to connect algorithmically and symbolically to the larger movement, the content provides their individual accounts with a particular issue. This is seen through users providing their own accounts of gender discrimination through the AOC challenge, racial prejudice through the “This is America” challenge, and recollections of various mental and behavioral disorders (Nesvig, 2020; McKenzie, 2021; Williams, 2020). All these movements are unified with one specific hashtag and sound. Further, each trend has

particular rules embedded within the canon. For example, for the “AOC Challenge,” most videos feature different, individual participants following the practice of putting their makeup on while lip-synching to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s point of personal privilege addressing violent language used against her by Representative Yoho. While there is a basic script and *techné* expected of each trend’s respective performance, individuals often provide their own commentary to show their individualized experiences. This is done through subtle departures from the genre’s form including specific captioning in the video’s description, extraneous closed captioning that details anecdotal discrimination against them as a member of a marginalized group, and nods to indigenous rituals and dress that point to intersectional aspects of identity-laden public debates. While these experiences are individualized and nuanced to account for each participants’ personal experience with wide-spread ideological norms, they can still be “coded” to emphasize the users addressing larger cultural disruptions rather than specific policies that need to be addressed to propel the public good.

Deluca and Peebles (2002) nuance Habermas’s public sphere to further account for technological developments in new media deliberative forums to show how in-person activism is translated online on social media. In doing so, the researchers coin the term “public screen” to represent mediated discourse occurring throughout social media users’ documentation of in-person social movement events and how small-spread instances of violence at the events was categorized as rampant by traditional media sources. The authors posit that the increase of the presence of media conglomerates has “colonized” public deliberation and, thus, deliberative rhetoric (p. 126). In turn, protestors resort to

social media to establish agency and control of the narrative by circulating alternative images as reckoning with “participatory democracy” (p. 128) that allows for individuals to easily enter deliberation against the competing forces of corporations through the accessibility of social media. Deluca and Peebles argue that “dissemination” (p. 145) of intentionally framed images rather than Habermas’s intended face-to-face conversations are a more accurate depiction of the public sphere in the age of digital communication.

As the public sphere is translated to a public screen in the development of new media technologies, Deluca and Peeple’s argue that the historically embraced notion of Habermas’s public is no longer relevant (p. 131). The public sphere has become constituted of the viewers’ understanding of the real world through the framing and circulation of image events rather than the dialogue that explains the phenomenon. The “remediation” of the events suggests that as a phenomenon is translated from “the real world” to the “public screen” and that the events “refashioned” from one medium to another (p. 132). Through this process, the meanings of image events on social media possess different meanings compared to traditional broadcast networks (p. 132). As these events are translated from one medium to another, the “hypermediacy” of the image events do not convey the same meaning in the public screen as the “real world.” Instead, the images are manipulated through their mediation (p. 145).

The authors refer to protestors using online deliberation through the public screen as a novel model of “participatory democracy” (p. 128) that levels the disadvantages of unequal opportunities access to deliberation through the convenience of social media. Thus, the authors argue that dissemination rather than the traditional notion of dialogue is

the more accurate impression of the modern state of public deliberation. While Deluca and Peebles provide an exemplary basis to understand how real-life events are reproduced online for publicity's sake, this project looks to expand how deliberative rhetoric that is constituted online functions. When it is constituted online, it takes the shape of dialogue more so than dissemination. While online social movements, including but not limited to the previously mentioned AOC and This Is America challenges, run concurrent to deliberation happening in the physical world, their practices as well as their messaging uniquely serve the online-domain and, thus, digital sphere. Although these discourses run concurrent to discourses found through traditional deliberation, the expressed advocacies are rooted in debates of ideology and cultural disruptions of dominant hegemonic codes more so than hard-pressed policy driven debates.

Trends such as the AOC and This Is America challenge are not calling for direct civic engagement through the form of petitioning, voting, or calling for specific legislation—even though there's legislative debates in the public sphere that directly correlate with the deliberative rhetoric at hand. As the AOC challenge gained traction in the spring of 2021, there were various calls to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act that was years past its authorized expiration (Thomas, 2021). As strip-Tok addressed systemic barriers to women's sexuality, a Politico leak revealed that *Roe V. Wade*, the historic decision protecting women's abortion rights and privacy, was at risk of being overturned in the Supreme Court (Gerstein & Ward, 2022). As the This Is America challenge detailed individual experiences of racial discrimination, the George Floyd Justice In Policing Act of 2020 and various bills proposing the defunding of police forces

were heavily advocated for and contested against throughout Congress (Bass, 2020; Elliot, 2021).

Yet, the deliberative rhetoric that permeated throughout the digital spheres of user-generated content was rarely connected to the policy decisions directly connected to their advocacies. Instead, the mobilizing forces that fill the digital sphere and constitute the deliberative rhetoric present are ones that bluntly address ideological struggles that breed political injustices.

Public Consciousness Replacing Consensus

Through the emphasis placed on ideological concerns and individual experiences with oppression from participants in the digital sphere, consensus on particular policy changes and tangible decision making comes secondary to addressing the larger power structures that constitute social injustices. This insight can be illuminated through the pervasive, demonized “cancel culture” of the digital sphere. Traditional broadcast media directly engages with the deliberative rhetoric of cancel culture through tangible, visible outcomes. Norris (2021) points out that cancel culture, as exhibited through traditional broadcast media and academia, functions to silence individuals who believe that their opinions do not fall within the dominant, accepted hegemonic code.

Additionally, recent controversies in entertainment culture have pointed to the public’s expectation of *canceling* politically incorrect celebrities who display violence by calling on awards committees and producers to cut connections with offending celebrities such as Amber Heard, Johnny Depp, and Will Smith for various allegations of violence to other celebrities or their partners. While other forms of mass media engage in cancel culture (Ibrahim, 2022; Murrian, 2022; Davis, 2022), While other forms of mass media

engage in cancel culture these discussions often call for a tangible action. The canceling that is created through new media, and as I will focus on, YouTube, is unique in that interlocuters are primarily not asking for production companies to drop YouTube celebrities after problematic behavior. Instead, as the YouTube celebrities create, star, and distribute their own content through the platform, many discussions are aimed at the stars themselves to understand abuses of power. Through this section, I will look at the canceling”of two prominent, once widely embraced, YouTube creators and the deliberative rhetoric that constituted their cancellation.

James Charles

James Charles, YouTube creator and makeup artist, rose to internet stardom in 2016 as a high schooler. Now, Charles’ name is recognized alongside traditional celebrities and is frequently mentioned in publications and events that previously only focused on traditional celebrities. Despite Charles’s popularity on YouTube, he reached the peak of notoriety as he received attention from all corners of the internet, including national news agencies who traditionally did not report on internet drama (Sands, 2019). Throughout James Charles’ career, he has issued apologies for various scandals. Many apologies were given through Instagram stories, tweets, and in the introduction of other content for the use of racial slurs, insensitive comments to makeup brands, and refusing to adhere to health regulations during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Charles’s final offense in the public eye was predatory behavior towards young men over and under the legal consenting age who were usually vulnerable in contemplating their sexualities (Sands, 2019).

In response to allegations of sexual harassment and predatory behavior spanning the course of several years, Charles released 3 separate apologies (*No More Lies* (2019), *Holding Myself Accountable* (2021), *An Open Conversation* (2021) responding to public backlash to his behavior (Osifo, 2021). Charles was initially viewed as redeemed from his allegations in 2019 through his use of “receipts” or screenshots of private conversations corroborating his innocence regarding him manipulating a man (above the consenting age) who was struggling with his sexuality. However, comments extracted from both of his 2021 apologies regarding conversations with under-age boys (younger than the legal consenting age) were not as well embraced. Rather than pointing to specific policy resolutions through YouTube or the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the deliberative rhetoric invoked by users pointed to discussions of power between a prominent user and a fan, discussions of stereotypes of gay men as “predatory,” and the role of the misuse of power of an adult attempting to seduce an underage person. Comments from *Holding Myself Accountable* and *No More Lies* directly engaged with Charles addressing his misappropriation of power and how his actions and lack of sincerity when addressing backlash were more than mere misappropriations—instead, viewers argued that his words and actions maintained larger dominant ideological codes and were holding him personally responsible for doing so.

David Dobrick

David Dobrick rose to internet stardom on YouTube in 2015, making a name for himself by pulling pranks in the Los Angeles area, assimilating a cast of reoccurring characters in his videos known as “The Vlog Squad,” and generating short-form, high-energy videos that were always capped at the four-minute-and-20-second mark (you see,

it's a joke because of the numbers "420" and its association with marijuana and apparently that's funny for some reason. I guess here I'm supposed to say something like "420, haha, nice"). Dobrik was also praised for his "boy next door energy" paired with his routine "giveaways" of Teslas and large sums of cash to his fans (Haylock, 2022). David, his videos, and his entourage of "The Vlog Squad" were generally embraced and deemed unproblematic until 2020 and again in 2021.

In 2020, Insider released an article exposing a member of "The Vlog Squad" known as "Durte Dom" (pronounced "Dirty") sexually assaulting an anonymous guest at David's house as well as David and other members of the group encouraging the victim and her guests to become intoxicated (Tenbarge, 2021b). During a filming hiatus that Dobrik attributed to the pandemic, it was revealed that a member of "The Vlog Squad," Jeff Wittek, suffered severe skull injuries and blindness in one eye after David swung Wittek from an excavator while filming a video (Najib, 2022). Following both controversies, David took a "step back" from creating YouTube content and focused primarily on his podcast, *Views*, and briefly addressed both incidents with a brief apology (Haylock, 2022).

Similar to Charles, feedback (primarily through commentary videos, Tweets, and podcast comments) addressed Dobrik's disregard for how his position of power was used coercively to continue to create content for profit through his sponsorships. Further, comments were directly to holding David accountable directly and addressed to him in a way in which many users were engaging him as an interlocuter in a debate over hegemonic values. As discussions of power, deliberation over the acceptance and rejection of his return as a litmus testing the acceptance of power abuses, and seemingly

gendered pressuring of his entourage to perform sexually deviant students shaped the discourse, there was little semblance of deliberative rhetoric that pointed towards policy decisions directed towards YouTube, Dobrik's legal team, or disenfranchisement from corporate sponsors.

The Cost of Cancellation

While both creators faced back lash from sponsorships and brand deals dropping them, this process was largely informed by comments and parallel modes of discourse (other new media channels) having explicit conversations and deliberation of power imbalances present in both case studies (Tenbarge, 2021a; Wong, 2021). Rather than looking to a tangible, codified solution to problematic behavior, the deliberative rhetoric present in the digital spheres through comments, reaction videos, or other social media posts unpack hegemonic norms that are viewed as glorified through the YouTubers' content. Further, the deliberative rhetoric deems the actions as glorified as long as they are not ideologically addressed.

The deliberative rhetoric regarding Charles and Dobrik's actions are less concerned with decision making regarding watching their content, supporting their sponsors, or buying their products. Rather, the deliberation is based on having an informed, ideologically based conversation to accept or reject the creator's behavior by weighing their impact on the public's good. The focus on power imbalances and abuses suggests that what the users view as good for the public are relations that are just and calculated for the benefit of the marginalized. Thus, addressing the creators directly in their evaluations of disrupting dominant codes is viewed as the one true way to correct future injustices.

Conclusion

The present study has attempted to assess public deliberation in the digital sphere through new media technologies and, thus, answer Goodnight's call to assess and critique the state of deliberative rhetoric in light of its historical deterioration from Habermas's intended framework. In order to evaluate the state of deliberative rhetoric, I conclude this chapter i by returning to my first research question concerning the characteristics of internet controversies that invite public deliberation.

An analysis of commentary channels and their strategies in covering internet controversies provides a framework for how these controversies are mediated and deliberated upon through digital spheres. The video content produced by commentary channels points to several characteristics of online controversies that invite the new form of deliberative rhetoric. Coverage from these channels suggest that the initial conditions for online controversies are contextualized through receipts and other discursive formations and often hinge on a parasocial relationship between discourse participants and the content creator to mobilize larger structural arguments of power and power abuse. From there, the public is able to participate in public discourse of ideology rather than policy.

Through this understanding, I turn to my second research question, concerning the ways in which the dynamics of contemporary online controversy have reshaped deliberative rhetorical practice. Findings from the study suggest that Goodnight was correct in his judgment that the art of deliberative rhetoric has strayed from its intended course and function. However, its deviance from the proposed function and form should not be viewed entirely with pessimism for the public's ability to evaluate various subject

positions and reach a rational solution to an issue inflicting harm within the status quo. Rather, the accessibility to information and lack of gate-keeping the public sphere has opened up new avenues for public contestation of moral-practical issues and has clarified the connection between abstract ideological struggles and the normative grounding of illegitimate and harmful policies. Throughout the innovations in style, technology, form, and content, public deliberation and opinion formation has remained at least “*permeable* to the free-floating values, topics, topical contributions, and arguments of the surrounding political communication” (Habermas, 1992, p. 451, emphasis in original). This provides some hope for the overall project of the rationalization of the lifeworld, which can occur through vectors that proceed from modern society’s “new intimacy between culture and politics” (p. 439).

Through an evaluation of public deliberation in the digital sphere through new media channels, I argue that argumentation theorists and rhetoricians should consider the subject of the debate as an indicator for what form should follow. As this project exemplifies, many controversies constituted in the digital sphere are less about assessing future decisions on the subject as much as unpacking and understanding the hegemonic norms and grand narratives that impede marginalized groups and, thus, constitute the controversy in the first place. New media technologies have evolved how we debate, of course, but I also argue that understanding how new media creates new topics of deliberation should take precedence in evaluating the current state of deliberative rhetoric. Further, individualized accounts of oppression should not be neglected or seen as sensationalized. Instead, researchers should consider the merits of sharing anecdotes and arguments that are not subject to gate-keeping and allow participants to maintain

their agency. As such, deliberation within the digital sphere about matters constituted in the digital sphere should be seen as legitimate dialogue rather than a manipulation of the outside world. Finally, deliberative rhetoric in the digital sphere and through new media technology tasks the offending parties in power directly with instituting change rather than relying on outside forces to employ repercussions to offending actions.

Deliberative rhetoric as we have historically categorized it has, like reason itself, fragmented into its moments. However, I argue that there has been a large scale shift with new media that, recalling the Second Sophistic, blends deliberative rhetoric with epideictic rhetorics of praise and blame (Balot, 2013; Brunt, 1994). While decision making has become less tangible about what steps to make to address a particular exigency, there is still the underlying decision through digitally mediated networks and new media that ask: Should we accept “x” behavior for the public good? In negotiating what the public good is and how it can prevail, epideictic rhetoric is blended with deliberative rhetoric for the evaluation and digital codification of values. The present blending of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric in the digital sphere looks dubious for Goodnight’s hope that we can get back to the true form of deliberative rhetoric. Yet, it does yield some optimism for the state of public deliberation—public consciousness, education, and discussion of larger power struggles to address injustices at its core.

CHAPTER IV – Sounds and Challenges: The AOC TikTok Challenge and Mediated Social Movements

Through the previous chapter, I explored how new media discourses have transformed the activity of public deliberation and the definition of deliberative rhetoric. I argued that access to deliberation and immediate connection to controversies of power have transformed deliberative rhetoric from arguments of policy to negotiations of ideology. Through this section, I will present the case study of the AOC TikTok challenge to provide an initial analysis of online deliberations of power as the public responds to a controversy external to the digital sphere. While future chapters feature case studies that feature controversies that both occur and are deliberated upon online, the AOC TikTok challenge provides a unique opportunity to study how a controversy of a power abuse in the physical world is transformed and represented through online discourse. In short, the AOC TikTok challenge case study is representative of how online movements and deliberations take place through social media platforms in response to mainstream controversies.

In 2020, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) asked for a point of personal privilege during a congressional meeting. While the representative is known for her efforts to represent the public concerns of wage equality, environmentalism, and racial justice in the technical, congressional sphere, AOC addressed a topic all too pervasive to women: harassment from a male colleague. Through the speech, AOC challenged Representative Ted Yoho's comments that she was "crazy," "disgusting," and a "fucking bitch." AOC used her personal experience of harassment to connect to the larger exigency of verbal abuse that impedes working women's ability to fulfill their

career obligations. In accosting Yoho, AOC expressed that she experienced the same harassment as a bartender and riding the subway in New York City. As AOC recalls how her experience with the congressman is unlike her past harassment, she mentions that Yoho was not alone; rather, he was shoulder to shoulder with another male colleague who condoned his behavior. AOC states,

Mr. Yoho was not alone. He was walking shoulder to shoulder with Representative Roger Williams, and that's when we start to see that this issue is not about one incident. It is cultural. It is a culture of lack of impunity, of accepting of violence and violent language against women, and an entire structure of power that supports that (Sanford, 2020, para. 3).

AOC's call to understanding the cultural significance of violent language against women was perhaps most embraced through young women on TikTok. Through the trend, young women lip-synch a version of AOC's speech imposed over Kendrick Lamar's *humble* while doing their makeup—most of the videos ending with the congresswoman's signature red lipstick and the iconic phrase from AOC's point of personal privilege "I am here because I have to show my parents that I am *their* daughter and that they did not raise me to accept abuse from men" (Nesvig, 2020, para. 2). While these young women are performing a traditionally embraced aspect of feminine gender performance, they utilize their social media use to disrupt culturally accepted derogatory language against women. The juxtaposition of violent language against the everyday practice of women adhering to culturally accepted beauty standards points to a question

asked by Judith Butler (2004, p. 53): “What departures from the norm disrupt the regulatory process itself?”

This chapter aims to investigate what departures from the norm are present in the renditions of AOC’s point of personal privilege found in the AOC TikTok challenge through performance, persona, and networking. As I will argue through this chapter, the AOC TikTok challenge serves as an exemplar case study to understand how individuals mobilize through socially mediate content creation in or to react to and partake in discourse about controversies of power that happen in the physical world. As such, this chapter aims to answer:

RQ 3: In what ways are individual reactions to controversial content used to exemplify larger societal unrest regarding controversies of power?

Further, this study aims to identify how users of the AOC TikTok challenge constructed a mass-mediated persona through a social media network to address the cultural exigency of violent language against women. This study prospects to complicate how performance, activism, and persona are complicated through social media based movements and how these attributes affect the status of power conscious discourses. Through this study, I will provide a contextual analysis to inform readers of the conventions of the Tiktok Challenge in order to explain the “AOC Tiktok Challenge.” From there, I will code for emergent themes through the movement and discuss implications from the critical analyses from the emergent themes.

Contextual Analysis of the TikTok Platform and “AOC TikTok” Trend

The “AOC TikTok Challenge” (used interchangeably with “AOC TikTok Trend”) began shortly after the representative’s point of personal privilege regarding her harassment from Representative Yoho in July 2020. Although videos of users partaking in the challenge were reproduced on a number of social media and content sharing networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.), the trend originated on TikTok by the platform’s ability to create “sounds” that are first produced in an original creator’s video then later used through other users’ subsequent videos. The app, which specializes in the creation and sharing of short-form videos, allows users to search sounds. When users search for the sounds, they are confronted with a corpus of previous users that have used the sound in previous videos. These sounds are described as “the backbone of TikTok” as they not only set the tone of an individual video, but can be “used strategically to grow a TikTok account (Marvellous, 2022). As such, utilizing a popularized sound not only situates a user in popular trends on the platform, but integrates them into a community of others that also use the sound.

Thus, when users search “AOC TikTok Challenge” or “AOC TikTok trend” or click on the sound that is featured on the bottom left-hand corner of the video, they are directed to a corpus of videos of other like-minded users that have used the sound in their videos. Additionally, the app is known for its curated “For You Page” that algorithmically provides content to users based on their previous searches, views of, or interactions with previous videos. The platform’s enabling of the reproduction of sounds and content lends itself to users disseminating

videos that are referential and imitative of other users' content; therefore, trends in videos and sounds can go "viral" easily.

Most videos of the "AOC TikTok Challenge" feature young women lip-synching a remixed, annotated version of the speech quoting "Representative Yoho put his finger in my face, he called me disgusting, he called me crazy, he called me out of my mind, and he called me dangerous... Representative Yoho called me, and I quote, 'a fucking bitch' I am here because I have to show my parents that I am their daughter and that they did not raise me to accept abuse from men." AOC's speech on the senate floor was executed as a point of personal privilege featuring the congresswoman alone, as typical of a public address.

However, the version of AOC's point of personal privilege that is circulated on TikTok is transformed by the recontextualizing popular song lyrics and focuses on different rhetors that adopt AOC's voice. Videos in the trend feature the opening to Kendrick Lamar's song, "Humble" in the background of the speech's audio. Before AOC's words are formed, viewers of the video are met with the opening lines to Lamar's critically acclaimed song chanting, "Nobody pray for me. It's been that day for me. Waaaaay (yeah, yeah!)" as the beat continues throughout the audio. The words "hold up" from Lamar's song interrupt the audio just before the AOC's quote from Yoho calling her a "fucking bitch." From there, the sound of AOC's speech continues with Lamar's "hold up, sit down, be humble" playing in the background.

Most videos only last approximately 35 seconds. With AOC's point of personal privilege delivered at the capitol lasting over 10 minutes, all users deliver a condensed

version of her speech that focus specifically on the violent language propelled by Representative Yoho and AOC's rejection of the words used against her by the representative or any man who partakes in gendered, slanderous vocabulary. While most videos feature a young woman performing individually lip-synching the point of personal privilege while doing her makeup, ending in AOC's signature red lipstick, there are departures from the norm to be discussed in the analysis of the artifacts.

Analysis

Analysis of how mediated public deliberation of violent language is used against women and how it is articulated performatively through the AOC TikTok challenge points to three areas that are unique to the realm of online social media movements. First, the AOC TikTok Challenge exhibits individual users performing and producing content. However each individual visual and aural performance is considered to be exemplifying a shared, collective experience rather than operating as an individual retelling. Second, the shared network of the AOC TikTok Challenge addresses two personas: the exigence of gender equality as well as the shared cultural persona of a victim of gendered, violent language. Finally, the form and function of the TikTok platform, as well as its confines, suggest that users that partake in online social media movements do not remix materials to change the intent of a message as much as generalize the meaning of an event to communicate a widespread exigency of violent language used against women.

Collective Experience Rather Than Individual Performances.

The videos circulated through the AOC TikTok trend feature a variety of different users performing their renditions of AOC's point of personal privilege. Most women, approximately aged from anywhere in their late teens to late twenties, will lip-synch the

speech while showcasing their makeup routine and end with AOC's signature red lipstick made famous when she was sworn into the senate in 2019 (Robin, 2019). While almost every video features one individual user performing by herself, all express the same disdain for the degradation based on gender through their performances.

Through the widespread trend and general *techne* of applying makeup, the sentiment that this is a shared experience that is expressed individually is conveyed. Ehrenfield (2020) argues that a critical assessment of social media movements draws an emphasis upon the historical context of the ecological structure of the online movement, how rhetorical imaginaries function within these movements, and the role of the rhetor in these mediated movements. Further, Fotopoulou furthers that in examining (particular feminist) socially mediated movements, public discourse fixates on the individual rather than the group. Findings from the AOC TikTok challenge suggest that while the movement is rhetor-centered, the collective experience focuses on connectivity by contributing individual experiences to the larger conglomerate feminist movement. This comradery is found by sharing the same movement—but figuratively through the shared pursuit of gender equality and literally by adopting a scripted form for their actions in the short-form video.

Most users partaking in the trend show display a common performance that has general rules. First, it is a solo rhetor that is performing a lip-synched rendition of the point of personal privilege that features AOC's voice rather than her own. The omission of the individual voice displaces viewers away from the individual experience from each user that partakes in trend and redirects to the fact that each woman can find common ground with AOC's account to let her story speak for them rather than including their

own individualized accounts in being accosted with violent language by men. Second, most viewers follow “rules” of the trend; that is, there is a particular structure that forms each video with most women starting bare-faced and proceeding with a recording of their makeup routine while they mouth the words of the speech. The rules of the trend, or *techne*, law a framework for a collective experience that allows it to reproduce through the network. In this, the *techne* is invitational through its simple design and accessibility.

While each individual experience serves as users contributing to a communal ritual to disrupt regulatory norms, there are departures from another norm that frames the AOC TikTok Challenge—the norm of uniformity in a TikTok trend. While each user marks themselves as part of the movement through the use of the same sound in the video, technicalities of delivery, and embodiment of an emancipatory thesis, users still engage in methods to denote how their individual experiences contribute to the larger need for gender equality. These departures feature users dressing as the congresswoman herself, doing bartending tutorials as a nod to AOC’s previous profession, and dressing in traditional native American clothing as they mouth the words. Additionally, some videos feature screenshots of derogatory texts from men after refusing their advances and comments from previous videos commenting on the user’s weight, appearance, or perceived sexual activity based on their content.

These differentiations in user experience do not serve to contradict a shared understanding of power’s pervasiveness and efforts to mobilize against the subjugation of women; rather, they provide distinctions of individuality for others to relate to. These distinctions lead to others with a shared background to identify with that rendition of the AOC challenge, engage with their own distinction of identity, and continue pursuits of

mobilization. As subsequent chapters will explain, discourse participants partaking in deliberations in internet-based controversies of power will use their parasocial relationships to articulate individual narratives in efforts of sense-making and empathy with content creators. However, in online social movements reacting to mainstream controversies, users will utilize individual experiences and narratives as invitational rhetoric to continue mobilization.

While these departures from the norms of the trend showcase individualized narratives involving specific violent languages or contexts in which violent languages have been used, viewers of the TikTok's and users alike become a part of a singular rhetorical imaginary through their use of the sound and performance in the video. Additionally, although the norm is violated through these departures, the change in the techne of the performance is still embraced as it propels the common experience by still being rooted in the common rhetorical imaginary of the network. In the next section, I argue that the AOC TikTok challenge addresses two personas within the common rhetorical imaginary: the singular first persona of a traditionally feminized rhetor as well as the third persona of the cultural context of AOC's advocacy made in her point of personal privilege. As the senator used a point of personal privilege on the Capitol floor, participants in the AOC TikTok challenge exhibited their own personal privilege by adopting the AOC persona to provide their own personal testimonies and contribute to feminist movements.

The Two Personas of the AOC TikTok Challenge

Through the online movement, participants in the AOC TikTok trend addressed two versions of rhetorical persona. First, they utilized the singular common first persona

of a feminized rhetor through AOC's narrative and then the cultural context of the acceptance of violent language used against women, or the rhetorical third persona. Wander (1984) evolves the discussion of persona by accounting for a third version being the audiences that are intentionally neglected and the cultural exigency that is addressed. Wander advocates that the study of rhetoric should take an ideological turn and pay close attention to how we talk about what we talk about. By considering how the third persona is constructed within the AOC TikTok challenge, this theoretical framework contributes to the present study in 1) considering what audiences are ignored through a movement that is isolated in a particular network (TikTok, algorithms, hashtags, etc.) and 2) how the cultural awareness of sexual harassment and derogatory language is conveyed through this discourse. While the rhetors utilized two proponents of the concept of rhetorical persona, neither existed without the other. Rather, they were both invoked to convey their message.

Users embrace a singular persona of a traditionally feminized rhetor that is starkly juxtaposed with the assertive speech and violent quotes from AOC and her remarks on Yoho. Ware and Linkugel (1982) have argued that the use of rhetorical persona in performance serve to reckon audiences with the "persuasive power" of a shared identity. Through the script, common characterization, and utilization of a feminist thesis, participants in the AOC TikTok challenge simultaneously witness the shared persona while adopting the persona themselves. As such, I argue that participants in the challenge engage in a "cultural masking," similar to Ware and Linkugel's (1982) analysis of how Greek chorus members engaged in anonymous uniformity as an invitation for identification with audiences. However, participants in the AOC TikTok challenge utilize

distinctions in how femininity is portrayed and squandered through a patriarchal system. Intersectional feminism, as hooks (1989) describes, views women's liberation as one that is nuanced through different power structures dictated by race, class, sexual orientation, and other factors deviant from hegemonic norms.

In the videos that feature the women performing the normative gender performance of applying makeup, they also apply a common cultural mask of a shared identity with AOC as some adopt her overall persona, but portray intersectionality with their individual testimonies and, sometimes, testimonies. This shared identity not only conveys that they identify and can share an experience like AOC faced on the senate steps in her accosting by Yoho, but the similar performances point to a networked identity that is shared with other women. Their unity is shown in the numbers of young women portraying nearly identical acts.

This trend can be seen as young women adopting the common mask of AOC, through make-up, dressing up like her, or portraying other common identities, wearing a rhetorical mask of AOC. Although each user is an individual with varying experiences and degrees of gendered violence, violent language, or discrimination, this trend points to a "cultural masking" not only to share their experience but convey intolerance of future violence. Further, the cultural "masking" happening through the online network can be paralleled with the notion of "solidarity" and "unity" found through in-person movements. As Goodnight (2014) notes that actors in discursive formations adopt forms, or *techne*, to propel argumentation. He states, "architectonics identifies rhetoric with a *techné*, a way of making in which lessons learned in making discourse can be extended productively to building human spaces" (Goodnight, 2014, p. 3). As such, the adoption of

persona, inherent with masking and normative behaviors, suggests that TikTok discourse hinges on *techné* utilized by participants in order to engage in and legitimize discourses of power.

While each video exists individually, the 1000's of videos featuring a shared persona adopted through the online-movement function as wide-spread ritual and practice in addressing a cultural crisis. As the traditional social movement aspects of solidarity and unity are conveyed through a movement displaced to the digital realm, the next area of analysis argues that shared, common interests are also maintained through individual, remixed performances of the AOC TikTok trend.

Form and Function of TikTok and the AOC Challenge

Most videos featuring AOC's speech are about 35 seconds omitting most of AOC's detailed accounts within her point of personal privilege. AOC's full point of personal privilege runs about 10 minutes and 30 seconds and provides a detailed account of her life, her role as a congresswoman, and of the ridicule imposed by Representative Yoho and Governor Desantis who passively witnessed, and in her view, condoned the event. The point of personal privilege provides an opportunity for self-reflection of AOC to her colleagues to grant legitimacy and ethos to her advocacy.

While TikTok has a limit of 60 seconds for their short form videos, videos of the AOC TikTok challenge fall under the 60-second mark, running about 35 seconds each. While the thesis of AOC's argument is underscored in the TikTok rendition of her speech, the annotation of her message to include a generalized experience rather than one that points to the specifics of the congresswoman's life can be read as an intentional compilation that reflects the public's own experience and interpretation of their

experiences with violent language used against them. Thus, the omission of the personalized accounts of AOC's suggests that while each user recognizes their own individualized experiences with derogatory language, it is still necessary to propel an easily distinguished and relatable narrative within a network to maintain unity and solidarity. This points to two insights into the form and function of movements that occur on social media. First, a generalized, common retelling of a cultural event is necessary to perpetuate cultural masking and a shared persona in a movement. Second, for the movement to go "viral" and gain traction, there must be room for a general understanding of an event that can be related to the masses.

As Sadler (2022) notes, TikTok sounds and manipulation of visuals through green screen technology has proved useful to permeate spheres to expose new viewers to a movement's advocacy. Further, TikTok has proved to be a useful avenue to pursue association and persistence in garnering identification of participants and mobility of a movement (Abbas et al., 2022) This is especially important for videos circulating through a network to permeate a specific network. However, these quantitative insights propose a gap in the "how" TikTok functions as a viable avenue for mobilization and "why" the platform can garner a diverse array of support.

Although previous studies regarding "remix culture" point to users' abilities to change the intended meaning to a different implied meaning through remixing, users participating in the AOC TikTok challenge still preserve the integrity of the congresswoman's message. Though (2013) argues that remixing of socially mediated content leads to participants adopting an individualistic value system to underscore the content, I argue that a critical analysis of online movements perpetuated through TikTok

remixing suggest that individuals nuance larger trends with individual experience to show multifacidity and pervasiveness of power structures; more importantly, content is remixed. The annotation they provide makes it more accessible to perform and engage in activism. As such, the annotated form of the 10-minute point of personal privilege allows for wider accessibility to viewers to watch the video and, in turn, resonate with their message and accept the call to share their own experiences with the sound. Although there is a short time frame for discourse participants to utilize, participants in the AOC TikTok challenge were keen on utilizing functions of the platform that would garner mobilization but perfected their form to underscore individual experiences that form the base of intersectional feminism.

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I interrogated the case study of the AOC TikTok challenge as a representation of how online movements respond to external controversies of power. Further, this chapter aimed to answer

RQ 3: In what ways are individual reactions to controversial content used to exemplify larger societal unrest regarding controversies of power?

The AOC TikTok challenge showcases individualized faces and performances expressing a common feminine identity through cultural masking but also through the experience of violent language used against them. Further, AOC challenged bridged a gap between a situation in the public sphere (AOC's encounter) with discourses in the mediated/virtual sphere (TikTok). While the challenge can be seen as an overlap between the spheres, it's important to note that it's not AOC's individual experience that can be seen as the point of contact; rather, it is the widespread experience of gendered

degradation that is evident through the “cultural masking” with the rhetorical persona, but the pieces of the speech that are chosen and seen as adaptable for different individualized experiences.

As the performances in the AOC TikTok challenge are meant to disrupt the acceptance of violent language against women, the challenge still follows specific rules of form, or *techne*, to achieve its purpose. This insight can point to 1) how unification occurs through online movements but also 2) that even in disrupting cultural attitudes, there is still a sort of scripting that occurs in achieving the goal. While many TikTok trends, sounds, challenges are intended for comedic relief, it is important to note that the same functions of TikTok are used to address cultural crises and various forms of discrimination in and through the virtual sphere.

This project points to particular insights in how online movements are networked and circulated through the use of performance and accessibility. Further, the present study advocates that while individual performances are used to convey a corpus that expresses a strong advocacy, a common persona—both first and third—is necessary for a movement to gain traction. While these movements do not have a tangible solution (legislative proposals, mutual aid, etc.), they aim to gain cultural awareness and thus, ideological changes to the status quo through their illumination of power struggles that have been normalized in the public sphere. The framing of the events as everyday occurrences that are sensationalized through an annotative and repetitive form posits that the “virality” of social media networks provides ample room to facilitate avenues for cultural awareness and, hopefully, change.

While this chapter focuses on responses to power-oriented controversies that occur in the physical world through mobilization efforts, the next chapter aims to understand how the public deliberates on ideology internal to the digital sphere. Chapter 5 will aim to contextualize online controversies that necessitated an apology or response from online content creators and the strategies used to integrate their responses within larger mediated discourses of power.

CHAPTER V – Responding to Mediated Controversy

As Chapter 4 focused on how the public utilized Internet mediated forms to mobilize and deliberate on discourses of power in the physical world, Chapter 4 aims to shift focus towards controversies of power local to the digital sphere. As such, this chapter aims to provide a contextual and critical analysis of an example of an accepted and rejected apology through Colleen Ballinger’s “hi” and The Try Guys’ “what happened” in order to answer:

RQ 4: How can the use of traditional apologia theory explain what apologies are accepted or rejected in an online forum?

Colleen Ballinger and “hi”

Ballinger’s “hi” serves as an example of characteristics that result in a response to an online controversy that is widely rejected by the public. This section aims to describe Ballinger and the conditions enabling her controversy through a contextual analysis, conduct a thorough reading of her “hi” response through a descriptive analysis, and conclude with a critical analysis to identify emergent themes that contribute to a response to a controversy of power that is widely rejected by the online public.

Context of Controversy

Beginning in 2008, Colleen Ballinger adopted the online persona of “Miranda” or, better known as, “Miranda Sings” to upload quirky, offbeat comedy sketch videos on YouTube. Ballinger, professionally trained in vocal performance and musical theater, created the character of Miranda who is an “untalented woman who believes she’s destined for fame” (Greenspan & Mendez II, 2021). Ballinger’s transformation into Miranda is characterized by the character’s off-kilter style of eccentric and often non-

matching clothing, wildly styled hair, and her signature smeared, bright red lipstick. In addition to her off key singing and monumental ego, Ballinger's transition into the character of Miranda is also marked by a boisterous personality with her catch phrase being, "Haters, back off!" whenever the character is confronted with criticism (Eggar, 2010). Ballinger's parody driven character study through Miranda endeared her to fans. Ballinger's Miranda content ranged from poorly executed covers of popular pop songs, Miranda reacting to fan feedback, or other outlandish content that only the overly confident but poorly executing Miranda could perform.

The Miranda Sings YouTube channel amassed over 10 million subscribers while the TikTok channel surpassed 8 million followers (Jones, 2023). Interest in Miranda Sings permeated the online sphere and entered mainstream media as Netflix picked up "Haters, Back Off," a show written and directed by Ballinger that chronicled the everyday life and adventures of Miranda Sings. Ultimately, fan demand pushed Ballinger to bring Miranda Sings from the screen to the stage beginning in 2014 with a live tour. Through the shows, Miranda would perform songs, dances, and skits. Most notably, though, was the emphasis on fan interaction during the performances. Often, Miranda would bring fans to the stage to compete in games such as a gymnastics challenge or accost them as "whores" or "sluts" from the audience if they wore semi-revealing clothing (Swerczek, 2018).

As the Miranda Sings character became more popular, so did the public's interest in Ballinger. Overtime, the content creator began to interact with fans as Colleen as much as she did as Miranda. This led to Ballinger more personal YouTube channels so she could interact with viewers aside from the Miranda Sings character. These channels

included a main channel that featured her friends, family, and everyday channel, a vlog channel, and a podcast with her second husband. Though these channels were not as popular as the initial Miranda Sings channel, her alternative platforms amassed a little over 8 million followers each (Mendez II, 2023). Ballinger's portrayal of Miranda on television and for live audiences revealed her true talent as a performer and, beginning in 2019, Ballinger began performing in the Broadway musical, *Waitress* (Selleck, 2019). The combined online and mainstream media presence of Ballinger revealed that she was a prevailing force in popular culture.

Despite Ballinger's growing celebrity, she still capitalized on YouTube and other social media's capacity for fan interactivity to transform parasocial relationships into more traditional interaction. Through her personal channel and live streams, Ballinger engages with fans alongside her first/second husbands and friend, Kory DeSoto. Through live video streams, Ballinger and company would respond to live chats to provide immediate interaction with fans. As Ballinger incorporated her "real life" friends into more content, they became regular cast members on her channels and on Miranda Sings tours. For the most dedicated of fans—those who moderated fan forums, accounts, and channels—Ballinger created a group chat so her "top" fans could have constant access to her and each other. Her friend, DeSoto, would soon follow suit. Ballinger would name her chat "Colleney's Weenies" while DeSoto would tastefully name his chat after a specific part of female genitalia.

Though in her 20's when she began the Miranda Sings channel in 2008, Ballinger cultivated a young fan base through a flashy characterization of Miranda's catchy phrases and boisterous humor (Koul, 2023). Ballinger, however, would argue that it was the

creator's intended audience that should be taken into account, though, as she argues "Miranda Sings is Not For Kids" (Colleen Vlogs, 2021). Regardless of the dissonance between Ballinger's intended audience paradigm and the reality of her fans' ages—including those in group chats—she, DeSoto, and her family and friends continued interacting with fans interpersonally. Thus began the impetus for many of Ballinger's controversies and the catalyst for her "hi" video response (excluding those rooted in racism, see: Mohammed, 2023). Regarding her relationships with fans, Ballinger first came under fire in 2020 upon Adam McIntyre releasing a video titled, "colleen ballinger, stop lying." Through this video, McIntyre explained that he had been one of Ballinger's youngest superfans as he started a fan forum at the age of ten. McIntyre continued by stating that he became close with Ballinger, frequenting her live streams, joining both her and DeSoto's group chats, and briefly running her social media account as he grew into a teenager. With the relationship between Ballinger and McIntyre established, he argues that Ballinger abused her power as a well known creator that the young McIntyre looked up to by asking him to run her social media account for free. After publishing a tweet that her followers found controversial, Ballinger swiftly dissociated from McIntyre. McIntyre charges Ballinger with using her influence to pit the rest of the Weenies and DeSoto group chat against the teen (Adam McIntyre, 2020).

The first round of allegations McIntyre make against Ballinger in his video are charged with assertions that Ballinger, as a grown woman, was using her status of celebrity and trust-laden position as an adult among teenagers to dictate his peers' behavior towards them. The next, and the primary call she is responding to in her "hi" video, serve as the first round of accusations that charge Ballinger with grooming young

fans (Adam McIntyre, 2020). According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, “grooming occurs when someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them” (2024). McIntyre explains that by selecting a group of young fans and gaining their trust through private group chats, Ballinger gained the group’s trust and, thus, their judgement between inappropriate behavior from an adult and acceptable behavior was muddled. McIntyre details Ballinger’s inappropriate interactions with fans by recalling an instance when Ballinger, who was in her early 30’s, mailed a set of women’s lingerie to a then-13 year old McIntyre. Through the video, McIntyre provided screenshots of interactions with Ballinger, including her asking him to unofficially run her social media account, and of the lingerie when he received the garment in the mail (Adam McIntyre, 2020).

Controversy surrounding enlisting McIntyre’s help in ghost-writing tweets for no pay and Ballinger’s gift of women’s lingerie to a 13 year old boy was countered in her “addressing everything” video response (Colleen Vlogs, 2020). In the video, Ballinger denies befuddling a power-conscious relationship with (particularly young) fans and one that is interpersonally and structurally inappropriate. Regarding enlisting McIntyre’s unpaid labor for social media content, Ballinger argues that the situation is non-unique in how she generally workshops jokes that go online. Ballinger states that she usually asks her close-knit fans for feedback on content or ideas to boost her social media presence (Colleen Vlogs, 2020)—although McIntyre’s role involved Ballinger giving him her Twitter (now X) log-in credentials to post as an unofficial social media manager. Regarding Ballinger sending a young fan her undergarments, she attempts to justify her

actions by providing context. Ballinger contextualizes the exchange by arguing that it was a Miranda Sings tradition that she sends fans clothing. Further, Ballinger states that the idea to gift Adam the lingerie came up when she and her husband streamed an “unboxing video” of clothing she received as PR from the brand Forever 21. Ballinger continued to justify her actions by arguing that she was commenting on how unflattering she found the lingerie, which set it up to be a prank gift, and that the item was unused with the tags still attached. Additionally, Ballinger posits that McIntyre initiated the exchange, stating he was the one who requested the lingerie. In addressing accusations of inappropriate conduct with a minor, Ballinger laments,

In my mind at the time, this was no different than the other stuff I send to my fans as a joke. Now in hindsight, I realize how completely stupid of me... I should have realized and recognized how dumb that was and never sent it to him...But it was never a creepy, gross thing that I was doing in secret. It was a silly, stupid mistake, that now is being blown way out of proportion (Colleen Vlogs, 2020).

Ballinger’s “addressing everything” response to allegations of violating an appropriate creator-fan relationship and other racially underpinned misdeeds seemed to largely absolve her video defense. For almost three years, Ballinger was able to veer away from the spotlight of controversy and found success in her Broadway career. In this same time, though, McIntyre claims that he was bullied and ridiculed for speaking out against Ballinger’s abuse of power over the young creator (Adam McIntyre, 2023a).

However, in early June of 2023, another former member of the “Weenies” group chat released their own YouTube expose confirming McIntyre’s 2020 accusations and providing additional context. Kodee Tyler, also known as kodeerants, posted a since-deleted video confessional titled “why I left the colleen fandom...” (upon deletion, all subsequent references to this video are accessed through archived footage). Kodee verified McIntyre’s claims that he was bullied not only by members of the public discounting his story, but members of the coveted fan group chat and by Ballinger herself. Further, Kodee provided additional “receipts” exposing Ballinger for having discussions about sex, the fans sexual experience, and other inappropriate talking points to share with a group chat with multiple minors (kodeerants, 2024). Qualified by Kodee’s verification and the public’s feelings resting with him, McIntyre posted more details of other instances of Colleen’s abuse of power as an adult and as a fan-idol. Some instances that McIntyre explained were that Colleen shared pornographic OnlyFans footage of Trisha Paytas with the group of young fans as well as commented on their physical appearance (Adam McIntyre, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c).

The resurgence in the Ballinger controversy mobilized other fans to share their experiences of power abuse with Ballinger. Most notably and referenced in Ballinger’s “hi” video, a Twitter thread emerged further exposing Ballinger’s abuse of power as a popular celebrity. The user known as Becky posted a photo of herself on stage at a Miranda Sings live show. Becky is shown to be laying on the stage with Ballinger, as Miranda sings, holding her legs and spreading them for a bit known as “The Yoga Challenge.” In the caption Becky writes,

i've been debating posting this picture, but this was me on stage. she encouraged her fans to wear revealing clothing so we would get called on stage. and then she exploited us and our bodies for her own gain. so yeah, i'm okay with calling her a predator (@noitsbecks, 2023).

Becky continues to explain in the thread that, as a teenager, she was embarrassed to be placed in a suggestive position, while wearing a dress, on stage. To make the situation more uncomfortable for the teen, Becky states that she became the receiving end of a “fart joke” in front of the entire audience as flatulence sounds played during her portion (@noitsbecks, 2023). Becky becomes more pointed in her accusations against Ballinger by arguing,

i'm so sick of people being okay with calling colleen out, but then stopping when it comes to using certain terminology. it's okay to call her a groomer and a predator because that's what she IS. normal people don't do what she does to children (@noitsbecks, 2023).

Paired with previous accounts shared back to three years prior, the outright labeling Ballinger as a predator served as an invitation for other fans to share their off-putting interactions with the creator.

Ballinger's Response

Ballinger published her response to the resurgence in the controversy titled “hi,” or colloquially known as “Toxic Gossip Train” on June 28th, 2023. The video opens silently with a solemn, tight-lipped expression as Ballinger takes a deep breath and grabs her ukulele. As she strums her instrument, she sing-speaks the opening that explains to her audience that she has taken a break from the

internet because of the public's dialogue surrounding her. Rather than acknowledging any validity in the claims made against her, she presents her underlying thesis to her response video by declaring, "lot of people are saying some things about me that aren't quite true. It doesn't matter if it's true though just as long as it's entertaining to you...All aboard the toxic gossip train chugging down the tracks of misinformation" (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). The first few opening lines set the tone for what Ballinger's response will entail. This is by no means an apology video, but an attempt of self-defense.

As she jumps into singing the first round of the refrain, referring to the public deliberation of her power abuse as "the toxic gossip train," Ballinger refers to the allegations as "misinformation" (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). Through her lyrics she argues, "Tie me to the tracks and harass me for my past. Rumors look like facts if you don't mind the gaps and I won't survive the crash. But, hey, at least you are having fun" (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). From there, Ballinger takes a brief pause from the song. She assumes the role of narrator, providing context for why she is singing for fans rather than giving a more traditional address by stating,

Uh, hi everyone. I've been wanting to come online and talk to you about a few things...even though my team has strongly advised me to not say what I want to say. I recently realized that they never said that I couldn't sing what I want to say. So... here I am and, um, today I only want to talk about the facts. So, I hope that you'll be willing to listen (Colleen Vlogs, 2023)

She concludes her opening with a self-satisfied smile and continues the song.

The first allegation that Ballinger addresses focuses on her messaging her fans. Though she does not acknowledge the “Weenies” group chat or the age of the fans in the chat, Ballinger concedes that she did engage in direct messages with fans. However, without mentioning the content of the messages, she contends her intentions were to never exert power over a young fan. Rather, she maintains that her unseemly fan interactions are a manifestation of a personality defect on her end. Ballinger states, “I used to message my fans...not in a creepy way like a lot of you are trying to suggest it was more of a loser kind of way but I was just trying to be besties with everybody” (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). Like the quality that initially endeared her character of Miranda Sings to audiences, Ballinger insists that inappropriate fan interactions were a result of her own awkwardness and looking for a connection. She likens the manner in which she communicated with fans to that of how children interact with extended family members. Ballinger explains,

It's kind of like when you go to like a family gathering...and there's a weird aunt there keeps coming up to you and going like ‘hey girl, what's the tea?’ And you're like, ‘that’s weird’...that was me but in group chats with my fans. It was weird (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

Ballinger suggesting that her misdeeds are caused by her personality and social ineptitude becomes a prevalent theme throughout her response. Later, she contends that her fifteen year stint of sharing her personal life through YouTube caused her to confuse the constraints of appropriateness as to what she shares with

her audiences as opposed to her real-life friends. Ballinger attempts to rationalize with her audience by adding, “I’ve been sharing my life online for over 15 years...I feel like I’m talking to my friends, but in the beginning of my career, I didn’t really understand that maybe there should be some boundaries there” (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). Thus, Ballinger initiates another theme in her response as she places chronic distance between herself and allegations of misconduct as well.

In addition to displacing the accusations to a past context, Ballinger assists her claim in arguing that the controversy has been overstated by pleading that she already took accountability for her previous misdeeds. As such, she should be absolved of her guilt and freed from another controversy. Ballinger claims, “There were times the DM’s when I would share details of my life, which was really weird of me. I haven’t done for in years...because I changed my behavior and I took accountability” (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). At this point, Ballinger is referencing her previous, more traditional apology videos.

Ballinger’s assertion that she should remain immune from accusations of power abuse by her previous responses indicates a tone shift in the video. From here, Ballinger declares that those who accost her are not interested in rectifying wrongs from alleged power abuse. Rather, Ballinger declares that the public revels from engaging in a “mob mentality” and were set to attack her as a person rather than hold her accountable as a public figure. She argues that the more popular, enjoyable narrative of her actions was one that continued to accost her rather than accepting her previous apologies. Her attempt to subvert structural accusations of her power and displace them as one set to ruin her career was laden

in suggestions that the audience found joy in her personal pain. Through the video, Ballinger sings lyrics such as, "...the person you despise maybe didn't deserve to die, but hey at least you're having fun" and "I thought you wanted me to take accountability but that's not the point of your mob mentality...No, your goal is to ruin the life of the person you despise while you dramatize your lies and monetize their demise" (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

Regarding Ballinger confronting the allegations of power abuse, she acknowledges two narratives: claims of Ballinger grooming her young fans and her on-stage interaction with Becky. First, Ballinger declares that labels of "abuse" and "grooming" are "the most vile, horrendous, disgusting, life-ruining words that a person can be called" (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). She revisits her previous defense of inappropriate conduct with fans as Miranda Sings by defaulting to her previous defense of the YouTube and on-stage content arguing it should left to parental discretion to allow young fans to view her content. Further, Miranda makes light of grooming allegations as well as her on-stage conduct with Becky by quipping,

I just wanted to say that [the only] thing I've ever groomed is my two Persian cats. I'm not a groomer I'm just a loser who didn't understand I shouldn't respond to fans. And I'm not a predator, even though a lot of you think so, because five years ago I made a fart joke (Colleen Vlogs, 2023)

If Ballinger's feelings on how the controversy affected her were not clear enough for her audience, she articulates her feelings as crescendos into the song's

closing. Ballinger bluntly tells her fans as she begins violently strumming her ukulele,

Sometimes, people can make a mistake and they're still a good person...you don't have to take a mistake and twist it up and grind it and add some lies to it and pulverize it and stab it with knives and ruin a life...Sometimes, people can make a mistake and you can kindly let them know and help them to grow. (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

Ballinger's response, devoid of much apology, is underwritten with attempts to salvage her personhood from the controversy. Distinct from her previous videos seeking to rectify her past actions, Ballinger utilized a novel form of a song rather than prepared statement, in her words, to circumvent the advice from her public relations team. Through this song, Ballinger speaks less to acknowledge victim's and the public's accusations or to integrate herself into the public dialogue. Instead, her intent was to provide an alternative narrative to recontextualize the allegations. The next section will analyze the use of denial and alternative narratives to understand how Ballinger's strategies impact public controversies of power abuse.

Analysis

The "Toxic Gossip Train" song became popular through social media and music streaming sites as creators made parody videos, fans circulated memes on the "hi" video, and as a vigilante user uploaded the song onto Apple Music and Spotify (Brasil, 2023). Yet, as the next chapter will discuss through an analysis of comment feedback to the response, Ballinger's virality is a result of rejection of

her self-defense rather than the public's acceptance. As the previous section served to provide a descriptive analysis of Ballinger's controversy and subsequent response, the next section will analyze the functionality of the emergent themes of denial, engagement with public deliberation of power, and Ballinger's focus on the personal in her "hi" response,

Denial

Ballinger clearly articulates that she will not be taking responsibility for allegations of power abuse through her conduct with fans or accusations of grooming young individuals in the opening of her video. She does not grant legitimacy to the claims by labeling them as "misinformation" in the opening and reinforces the notion of deceit by her accosters through the repeated mentioning of "misinformation" through the song's refrain. Ballinger outright refers to the public's deliberation as "a train track of lies" that enable the "toxic gossip train" of deliberation to persist (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). Further, Ballinger holds no space for questioning the intent of their audience in her belief that the discourse is rooted in misinformation. Ballinger insists that the audience does not make allegations out of ignorance of the truth; rather, she charges the audience with the assumption that they knew that the allegations against her were unsubstantiated. Ballinger sings, "rumors look like facts when you don't mind the gaps" in order to illustrate how the public is complicit in her public trial of, in her view, fabricated charge. This labeling does not only communicate Ballinger's plea for innocence; it also indicates a blame shift to the public for, according to Ballinger, willingly misreporting her actions.

Like a criminal court's assumption that the defense must suggest the viability of other culprits to maintain their client's innocence, Ballinger contends that the public should be held at fault for the charges of power abuse brought against her. Ballinger pairs her deniability with the strategy of reducing offensiveness but suggesting, in isolation, her actions were not ones rooted in misuse of her power as a public figure to her young fan base. In attempts to clarify who is at fault by simultaneously denying power abuse and reducing the offensiveness of the claims made against her, Ballinger counterproductively disorients herself within the controversy. This disorientation is largely due to the emphasis of intention by Ballinger and the intentions of those who partake in the public discourse.

First, Ballinger argues that the public cannot assign blame to her for abusing her power because she claims never had ill-intent towards her fans. As I will discuss in the final section of the analysis, Ballinger contends that her off-putting interactions with fans are a consequence of social ineptitude as she orients the response towards her own feelings. Yet, Ballinger's argument of intent is also a strategy to deny any wrongdoing. The "hi" response illustrates how an actor's motive can be used to muddle discursive formations around controversies of power by implying that for there to be an abuse of one's influence, they must make the choice to do so. Ballinger's line of "I'm not a groomer I'm just a loser who didn't understand I shouldn't respond to fans" exemplifies her assumption that exertion of influence must be one made consciously (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). Although Ballinger cannot outright deny the receipts provided by those who claim

to have been subjected to her power abuse, she can deny the surrounding context that transforms the meaning of the interaction through her argument of her true intentions. Through an assignment of context to the embroilments, Ballinger denies the severity of the larger ramifications of power abuse—transforming the allegations of injustice into one of misunderstanding by the public at her own expense. As a result, her denial of ill intention diminishes the implication of fan exploitation and the context of misunderstanding minimizes the offensiveness of actions in which others have evidence.

Second, as Ballinger attempts to vindicate her character by clarifying intent, she suggests participants in the discourse are the ones who are ill-motivated. Ballinger advocates that the egregiousness of the public ruction rests with those who attempt to nuance discourse surrounding her abuse of power. Through the song, Ballinger alludes to her belief that her actions were not offensive, but YouTube commentators, trending TikTokers, and Twitter users were seeking to “monetize [her] demise” and share narratives that they “made up for clout” (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). Dispersed through the entire songs, segments like these serve to dissuade viewers from processing arguments made through public discourse by discrediting them based on participant-driven interests. Ballinger suggests that those who allege abuse from her are not true devotees of deconstructing power structures that enable Ballinger to exploit a young fan base; rather, they have motivations driven by self-interest and financial gain. As such, Ballinger shifts the blame to demonize her detractors for trying to dissuade her devoted audience and others who find her interactions with fans acceptable.

Ballinger's blame shift scrutinizes her controversy through a rearrangement of the protagonist and antagonist. The revisiting of "intention" through the response underscores what values Ballinger wants to communicate to her audience to consider as they evaluate how they will respond, or choose to remain exempt from, public discourse while heralding caution to current detractors. By recontextualizing the allegations made against her with the intention behind the actions, Ballinger reassigns herself as the role of the protagonist within the narrative. As the protagonist, Ballinger communicates that she was a victim in multiple ways. Foremost, Ballinger suggests she was a victim to her perceived social ineptitude by engaging in candid, personal intercommunications with her young fan base. According to Ballinger's statement, she was as naïve as Adam McIntyre or Becky due to her awkwardness and ignorance in boundary setting with those of subaltern status.

Further, Ballinger's response indicates that she is positioning herself in the public trial as a defendant who was ignorant to the specifics of the laws of influence. As such, she questions how she could be held culpable to the indictment of abusing her power in the first place. This victimization as one that was unaware of her misconduct signals to her viewers that she is also a victim to the nuances of her power, Lastly, and most candidly in the "hi" response, Ballinger provides a narrative of victimization for the public's enjoyment. Ballinger categorizes the allegations made against her as misinformation and commentary by the public as willfully spreading the misinformation. Thus, consequences of accountability, to Ballinger, are largely unfounded. This

maneuver from onus of accountability on Ballinger's behalf towards participants in the public discourse denotes the assignment the antagonist in "hi."

By assigning the role of the antagonist to the very public that confronted her for her own misdeeds, Ballinger reinforces her role as the true victim. Throughout her video, Ballinger argues that she has become the scapegoat as the public fetishizes power imbalance and manufactures contention for entertainment. Ballinger brands public outcry for her to rectify her wrong doings as hedonistic pleasure at her expense. The juxtaposition of the narratives of victims articulated through public discourse compared to her own discredits those who attempt to hold her accountable. Thus, Ballinger denies her own wrong doings and assigns blame to the very public who confronted her with claims of power abuse.

Engagement with Public Deliberation

As articulated in the previous section, the arching strategies utilized by Ballinger in the "hi" response were that of denial of ill-intent when interacting with her young fans and shifting the offensiveness from herself to the public for misconstruing her interpretation of events that lead to the accusations made against her. In doing so, Ballinger interacts with the state of discourse current to her response. Ballinger's reflection of her own culpability in the controversy is one rooted in defense. However, her engagement in public discourse is underscored by agitation. This aggression is directed towards the public by providing an alternative narrative of events, responses to enunciations of power, and her answers to public pleas of accountability.

Described in the previous section, Ballinger provided an alternative narrative that focused on the conditions that surrounded the interactions rather than her interplay with fans themselves; thus, Ballinger denies that her misdeeds were offenses of power abuse and rather of awkward, interpersonal circumstance. However, this surrogate retelling by Ballinger serves to introduce a new discursive formation into the public deliberation of her controversy. This introduction of a new narrative into a long standing, convoluted deliberation further fragments the discourse of power surrounding Ballinger. Ballinger's introduction of self-victimization requires the public to form additional responses that must both acknowledge Ballinger's feelings, even if they do not validate them, as well as discussing her power abuse.

Ballinger's contribution and interaction with discourses of power abuse permeate beyond the scope of denying the intent of indiscretion; the engagement with discourses of power works to discredit the public's call for accountability. The main way that Ballinger subverts the legitimacy of the public discourse is by making light of the allegations through plays on words and flippant responses. As such, Ballinger indicates to audiences that she does not take their accusations of power abuse seriously enough to provide a response crafted to adequately refute the claims; rather, Ballinger makes light of the offensiveness of her actions by stating "the only thing I have ever groomed [is] my two Persian cats" and reducing the offensiveness of her on stage interaction with Becky labeling it as only "a fart joke" rather than developing a substantiated counterargument (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). Ballinger's reductionism of involved discourses of power

into a farce communicate to her audiences that allegations like the ones brought against her are undeserving of proper acknowledgement. Therefore, Ballinger delegitimizes the severity of abuses of power in public discourse. Making light of the allegations also communicates permission to her audience to delegitimize concerns of power abuse by modeling another avenue of delegitimization: satirizing victim narratives. Discounting the nuances of power abuse to the punchline of a lyric allows discourses of marginalization to persist as the very entertainment of the public she condemned earlier.

Similar to the strategy Ballinger uses to squander allegations of power abuse, she also argues that discourses surrounding her controversies should have been halted by her first apology video she posted in 2020 titled, “addressing everything” (Colleen Vlogs, 2020). Ballinger sings,

There were times the DM’s when I would share details of my life, which was really weird of me. I haven't done for in years, you see, because I changed my behavior, and I took accountability. But, that's not very interesting is it? So, let's go on the toxic gossip train (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

As such, Ballinger argues that those who abuse their power should only be obligated to confront their misdeeds to the public once. Accountability for misusing their influence, according to Ballinger, is a notion that is not agreed upon by the public; rather, accountability is rectified by a victimizer. Once the accused accepts responsibility for their behavior, further discourses are considered frivolous attacks for the sake of entertainment.

Ballinger signals to her audiences that discourses about the implications of power through the public cannot be further nuanced by deliberation after an offender's response. Past this point, they become addled with personal attacks and are devoid of educational value. As the next section will explain, Ballinger suggests that the public is personally attacking her instead of deliberating over her use of power. However, this turn to the personal also has implications on engagement with public discourse in that it further delegitimizes public contribution. The content creator takes a turn towards the personal as she sings,

I'm sorry I didn't realize that all of you are perfect. So, please criticize me. Bring out the daggers made from your perfect past and stab me repeatedly in my bony little back. I'm sure you're disappointed in my shitty, little song. I know you wanted me to say that I was one hundred percent in the wrong (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

Through these lyrics, Ballinger argues that public discourse surrounding her controversy has devolved into ad hominem attacks on her personhood. Further, she resituates blame to the public for exasperating discourse for an extended period of time. This exasperation lends itself further to Ballinger's argument that public discourse is running out of steam and is forced to stoop to her perception of attacking her personally. Thus, discourses of power are further delegitimized by Ballinger as she reduces them to charges of individual character rather than allegations that are representative of larger power structures.

Personal Focus

Ballinger's "hi" is largely oriented to her personal feeling and perceptions surrounding her controversies of power abuse. While her responses are largely informed by the allegations made from the public, her video focuses on how the controversy has affected her well-being rather than that of her victims. This personal focus can be viewed as a way to frame her response as authentic and as a way to let audiences in on the lesser-known reality of how public controversy affects victimizers. As the previous section indicates, Ballinger's focus on the personal suggests a desire for public discourse to subsist. However, a self-centric approach in responding to controversy also illustrates Ballinger's goal of presenting authenticity to her audience.

The first attempt to maintain a sense of authenticity with her viewers was the opening to the "hi" video. Ballinger's medium of song rather than statement is a violation of the expected form from a public figure defending themselves from public allegations. Before she speaks, Ballinger is intentional with her motion of grabbing the ukulele and bringing it into frame rather than holding it as she begins recording. Ballinger reinforces her physical cue of authenticity by verbalizing how the following statement was from her as an individual and not one constructed by her team. After the singing the opening verse of the song she states,

...I've been wanting to come online and talk to you about a few things um even though my team has strongly advised me to not say what I want to

say I recently realized that they never said that I couldn't sing what I want to say (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

Despite Ballinger's quip of arguing she is circumventing the advice of professionals by singing a song instead of uttering a statement, it remains evident that her primary goal is revealing her personal feels about the controversy and subsequent discourse. This strategy enables Ballinger to prime her audience for her underlying thesis of the "hi" response: the deliberation of her power abuse is not one indicative of the public's larger thoughts on power structures; rather, it is a personal attack on her character that enables her to respond with her personal feelings on the matter. Ballinger attempts to make an appeal of her humanity and how, as an individual rather than a celebrity, discourses affect her. After introducing her Miranda Sings character, Ballinger was able to solidify the dedication of her fan base by allowing them to interact with her everyday life through fan engagement and vlogs. Through "hi," Ballinger presents herself as being equally as candid as she was in her celebrate content, if not more; from there, Ballinger has found an entry point to insert herself into contentious discourse.

Further, Ballinger's preface to the song/response is an attempt of establishing trust through authenticity. Ballinger frames her response as one that was ill-advised by professionals, but one she felt she was obligated to give to her audiences regardless. In doing so, Ballinger assumes the role as martyr and states she is ridiculed through public speculation. She articulates allegations of grooming and power abuse as "the most vile, horrendous, disgusting, life-ruining

words that a person can be called” (Colleen Vlogs, 2023). In turn, she frames public discourses of power as personal harassment toward her. Ballinger further delegitimizes her victims as she frames herself as the latest victim who has not had the privilege of sharing her trauma until the creation of this video.

Ballinger’s self-imposed victimization lends itself to the final method in which her focus on the personal is used to delegitimize discourses of power. As Ballinger articulates herself as a victim, she transforms her controversy from one of power abuse to one of personal indiscretion. Through her song, Ballinger advocates that intentionality as the distinction between one benefiting from power structures and one exercising a mere indiscretion. She argues that the attacks seem personal to her because she views her mistakes as personality defects rooted in social ineptitude. As such, Ballinger further delegitimizes discourses of power by displacing herself as the true victim. Ballinger suggests that the only offense that she has committed is one in being awkward and unknowing of the boundaries necessary for fan interaction—an argument that dismissing larger power structures that could have formed her wrongdoings.

The conflation of intentionality and displacing herself as the victim allows Ballinger to emerge from her response as the actor with the elevated moral standing as compared to her detractors. Through the video, Ballinger vindicates her offenses by suggesting the severity of the controversy is inflated by the public’s want amusement. This acknowledgement further lends itself to depict Ballinger as a martyr as much as it delegitimizes discourse. Ballinger’s penchant for martyrdom provides her another opportunity to circumvent responsibility for

abusing her power towards her young fans. Further, it provides her an escape from controversy in the name of personal growth. She pleads with her viewers that her offenses do not define her wholly as she pleads,

Sometimes, people make a mistake and it does and make them a horrible person... Sometimes, people can make a mistake and you don't have to... ruin a life... Sometimes, people can make a mistake and you can kindly let them know and help them to grow (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

Once again, Ballinger victimizes herself as an attempt to restore her character. Further, she, again, reinforces to their the public that they are just as, if not more, guilty than Ballinger for exasperating the controversy for their own bemusement. However, she does give the public an opportunity to absolve themselves from the consequences of her own actions—they can abandon the discourses of power and trust that she can hold herself accountable.

Try Guys and “what happened”

While Ballinger’s “hi” is an example of a response to controversy that was poorly received, The Try Guys’ “what happened” serves as a precis for a widely accepted statement. The following section aims to locate the controversy through a contextual analysis, describe the “what happened” response through a descriptive analysis, and end with a critical analysis of strategies used in a successful response to an online controversy of power.

Context of Controversy

Beginning in 2014, Keith Habersberger, Zach Kornfield, Eugene Lee Yang, and Ned Fulmer, known as the *Try Guys* were launched to internet fame through their group-

titled BuzzFeed series. True to their name, the quad would upload video content under the BuzzFeed umbrella of them trying something new. While audiences relished in witnessing the four men embarking on new-to-them endeavors, it was their individual personalities that endeared them enough to their audiences that they were able to out-grow the need for BuzzFeed productions and become the stand alone *Try Guys LLC* in four years. Keith is known as the food lover, Eugene as the fashion expert, Zach is revered for his shyness and love for video games, and Ned was referred to as the “wife guy” due to constantly referencing his wife, Ariel, in videos.

Although the group’s video content still focused on the Guys’ perpetual endeavor of novel encounters, the *Try Guys* began divulging more information about their personal lives as their brand grew. The *Guys* strengthened parasocial relationships by divulging information from their personal lives that ranged from the monumental to the mundane. The quad unabashedly shared marriage announcements, information about family planning, health concerns, and personal anecdotes from their everyday experiences when they were off-camera. Audiences seemed to respond to their personal lives as much as their on-camera personas. Thus, the public and private lives of the Try Guys became blurred as spouses became cast members in videos, and eventually hosting their own podcast titled *You Can Sit With Us* produced under and distributed by the *Try Guys LLC*. The spouses of Keith, Zach, and Ned (Becky Habersberger, Maggie Bustamante, and Ariel Fulmer) hosted the weekly podcast talking about their everyday lives—often referencing their Try Guy husbands—and culturally relevant topics. Further, fans became more connected to the Try Guys as they began featuring producers, video editors, and production assistants in their videos—roles that are traditionally only verbally alluded to

and rarely physically featured in YouTube content creation. The most notable features of those employees of the LLC were Alexandria Herring and “YB” Chang Biste in the “Food Babies” series produced by the *Try Guys LLC*. Through the series, Herring and YB would accompany Keith and Ned in pursuits of trying and cooking unique, culturally diverse foods.

The Try Guys adopted a loyal base of subscribers who were actively interacting with them via social media and through the comment sections of their YouTube videos. While this interaction boosted their career from 2014, the interaction from fans began to shift in tone beginning in September of 2023 as many began to raise the same question: Why was Ned absent from recent videos? Although the content creators would often post individual videos of themselves or pairing up with another Try Guy, most videos featured all four of the members. Regardless, fans began to take notice of Ned and Ariel’s absence from the channel all together. Without any information from the Try Guys directly, fans began compiling their own information at an attempt in group-sensemaking through Twitter threads, Reddit posts, and TikToks attempting to compile a timeline of events that lead to the disappearance of Ned and Ariel Fulmer. Perhaps the most popular Twitter thread outlining the historical record of the couple’s disappearance from the Try Guys channel chronicles the predeceasing events most succinctly. The user compiles original insight and fan notes that Ned had not appeared in the last few videos, was absent from the official merch advertisement (although Ned had been present in sneak-peek footage, that the appears to be edited out of other recent videos, and references a post from the Try Guys Instagram that the group would only be posting videos once a week through the end of October, 2022 (@camitwomeyy, 2022).

Amidst the fan speculation, two separate Reddit became consistent reference posts into the fan inquiry of Ned and Ariel. The first was a fan encounter with Ned and Alex which would confirm the second post suggesting that a separate fan saw Alex and Ned at the same location. This since deleted post, however, did not entail a selfie with the YouTube stars—instead, it was a screenshot of a user engaging in Instagram messages with Alex’s fiancé showing the pair engaging in intimate behaviors (archived through Imgur album) (throwaway72017201, 2022). From there, fans gathered that Ned was engaging in extra-marital relations with his employee, leading to widespread speculation about the event, commentary regarding their feelings towards the creator, questions as to if The Try Guys were planning to withhold information from audiences, and who or whom was to blame for the demise of Ned’s reputation and strained marriage.

Two days after the damning Reddit posts were published, both The Try Guy’s official Instagram and Twitter account along with Ned’s respective accounts published brief, official statements as an attempt to subdue fan speculation. The August 27th statement from the Try Guy’s account read, “Ned Fulmer is no longer working with The Try Guys. As a result of a thorough internal review, we do not see a path forward together. We thank you for your support as we navigate this change” (@tryguys, 2022). The statement was brief, a mere three sentences typed in a Calibri-esque font on a simple white background. Further, the statement was uploaded as an image to both Instagram and Twitter (now known as X) to show consistency between formats. Albeit brief, the update from the Try Guys was a way to buy time until they could upload a more detailed, nuanced statement.

While a brief, generic remark could be expected from the LLC, the comment from Ned was unanticipated due to its form and less of its function. Nate’s comment, from both his individual official Twitter and Instagram accounts, read, “Family should have always been my priority, but I lost focus and had a consensual workplace relationship. I’m sorry for any pain that my actions may have caused to the guys and the fans but most of all to Ariel. The only thing that matters right now is my marriage and my children, and that’s where I am going to focus my attention” (@nedfulmer, 2022).. However, Fulmer used a format identical to that of the Try Guys LLC and posted only a couple hours after. A few weeks later on the Try Guys’ podcast, The Try Pod, Kornfield and Habersberger address fan speculation that the identical form of the two statements shows a coordinated effort of public reconciliation between Fulmer and The Try Guys. Kornfield states, “We...shared what our statement was going to be...we did not have insights into what his statement was. I also want to say that we did not coordinate fonts. I believe he saw ours and copied it...that’s just my opinion. And it is an opinion that I’m not happy about” (The Trypod, 2022).

“what happened”

On October 3rd 2023, the Try Guys Channel released a video statement on their official YouTube channel titled “what happened. Upon pressing the play buttons, users were confronted by a head-on camera angle of Yang, Kornfield, and Habersberger sitting stoically on the couch. Each member of the Try Guys expressed unique non-verbal indicators of their emotional states. Yang, on the far left of the couch, was tight-lipped and solemn, staring intently at the camera as their left arm gripped the arm rest of the couch. Kornfield, in the middle, appeared anxious as he immediately began rubbing his

hands together to prime his opening lines. Finally, Habersberger on the left side of the couch, slumped into the cushions with a distinctly weary disposition. Although the three signaled differentiating emotional reactions to their first verbal statement post-Ned Fulmer's scandal, it is clear to audiences that each member has adopted a tone contrary to their usually whimsical, upbeat YouTube content.

Kornfield, who opens the video, does not hedge by greeting their audience or attempt to provide context for the video by declaring, "Ned Fulmer is no longer working with The Try Guys. By now, we're assuming you've seen the Reddit threads, and TikToks, and tweets, and news articles. We want to give you a timeline of what's transpired and some transparency into our decision making" (The Try Guys, 2022). After the opening, the remaining members of The Try Guys alternate in giving a refined, clearly articulated account of the conditions surrounding Fulmer's departure from the company. This explanation included precautions—such as legal disclaimers on behalf of the corporation that require discretion in the information they could share as well as cooperation with employment and legal attorneys, human resource officers, and public relations professionals—the company took for equity. However, the trio acknowledged to their audience that, at least for the time being, that there were certain aspects of the company's HR investigation and mediations that they could not release to the public.

The Try Guy's acknowledgement at face value of the publicly portrayed events leading up to Ned's disassociation with the group paired with a, albeit brief, pointed explanation of what was happening beyond the scope of the camera and public speculation denotes an obligation to transparency to their audience. In recounting the public narrative of Fulmer's misgivings, Habersberger reveals to the audience that their

speculations of Fulmer being edited from videos as a correct assumption. However, he goes into more detail noting the overtime paid to the corporations editing team, videos that were “deemed as fully unreleaseable,” and money lost from unreleased content in which Fulmer could not be edited out (The Try Guys, 2022). This notion of creator-audience transparency is reinforced as Yang acknowledges a public argument against the Try Guys amidst the controversy—that the corporation was hoping that the public would never find out about Ned’s misgivings and, therefore, no corrective action would need to happen on behalf of The Try Guys LLC. However, Yang argues that the corporation is a valued centered company. With that, it seemed that the nuanced nature of being a value-based company could not keep base with the rate of public controversy as Yang states,

...And thus began a three-week process of engaging with employment lawyers, corporate lawyers, HR, PR, and more in order to make sure we were taking all necessary steps. From the jump, we were acutely aware of just how contrary this was to the values of the company we’ve built and everyone who works here. This [long pause, deep breath] is something we took very seriously. We *refused* to sweep things under the rug, that is not who we are, and is not what we stand for...: Now, we were always planning on a public statement. And were working towards that with our team, *but*, in light of rapidly accelerating speculation, we knew we couldn’t wait any longer (The Try Guys, 2022).

Yet, as the Try Guys provided pellucid insights into the structures employed by the corporation to ensure an amicable departure from Fulmer amidst public speculation, the trio were equally as transparent into what values ground

the company. First, the trio articulate that they, as superiors, engage in an employee-based value system. In Habersberger's opening lines, he states that upon learning of the employer-employee relationship between Fulmer and Herring, the three "reached out to check on that employee" (The Try Guys, 2022). The concern was not limited to the parties associated in the scandal, though. Giving audiences a more holistic view into how the controversy affected other members of the association, Habersberger gives "major props" to the company's editing team for finding "creative solutions" to edit Ned out of previous videos. The creator praises their staff of "twenty-something" and states that "they just don't deserve the negative attention our brand is now getting because they didn't do anything...here's just no world in which we could've navigated all of this without them" (The Try Guys, 2022). As the trio reflects on their appreciativeness of their staff as a response to the controversy, the Try Guys remind us that, at their core, they are a company; therefore, corporate obligations underlie subsequent strategies in how and what they share with their audience. Habersberger explains that though they wish to immediately sever ties with Fulmer, the company is contractually bound to release some footage featuring the ex-member due to branded content in the videos.

In a swift motion, the Try Guys forced their adoring audience to recognize that the lovable group of guys are, in fact, the faces of a million dollar company (Curry, 2022). This reckoning for audiences is fleeting, though, as the three consistently revisit the value of relationships in their statement. As mentioned before, the three (notably Habersberger) expressed their gratitude to their

employees for undertaking an excessive editing load to remove Fulmer from several videos he was originally featured in and were quick to contact Herring to consult her wellbeing. Regarding the employees, Habersberger applauds them by professing, “they’re our family and they’re some of the most talented, creative minds in the world and our primary focus right now is making sure they feel comfortable and proud coming to work” (The Try Guys, 2022).

The emphasis on relationships in the statement extends beyond current employees, though. The next type of relationship the trio honed-in on through their statement was with The Try Guys’ relationship with Ned and Ariel Fulmer. Although Kornfield pungently declared severed ties with Fulmer professionally, the group’s statement expressed concern for the well-being and privacy of Ned and Ariel Fulmer and the effects of negative public speculation on their family. The juxtaposition of corporate interests and relational values was best articulated in the reasoning of why the Try Guys chose to withhold information from their audiences in stating, “We chose not to rush into the announcement for a few reasons, namely there are real people who have been affected [deep breath] and while we consider this a company matter, I’m- just, there is also a family at the center of this” (The Try Guys, 2022).

This break in the rigid expression of corporate interests seemed to be the catalyst that enabled the group to mourn their own relationship with Fulmer and the era that his departure signals to a close. Yang, who notably speaks the least through the statement, reflects on the relationship with Fulmer. “This is someone who we’ve built a brand and a company with for eight years. We’ve - we feel

saddened, not just personally, but on behalf of our staff and our fans who believed in us” (The Try Guys, 2022). Kornfield continues mourning the relationship with Fulmer by adding, “It’s hard to watch old videos that we love and are proud of ... We’re losing a friend, we’re losing someone we...built a company with, we have countless memories with” (The Try Guys, 2022). As much as the statement was intended to interact with and curb public speculation, the trio utilized the opportunity to show the multi-faced effects of Fulmer’s departure to the company, to fans, and to themselves.

Finally, perhaps the most important element of the Try Guy’s statement was clear articulations of how the use of power was violated by Fulmer and, in turn, how internet speculation can largely take inspiration of narratives that de-facto holds women to fault in the wake of unbalanced power dynamics. Through the first part of the video, the trio used quasi coded language to relay to their audience that they considered Fulmer to be abusing his power as a manager to a subordinate employee. Phrases such as “conduct unbecoming to our team,” and references to human-resource auditing of the matter signaled to audiences that the group considered Fulmer’s actions to be an abuse of power. Yet, through the course of the video, signals indicating controversy is rooted in an unequal exchange of power begin to crystalize. Yang states in one of his last contributions in the statement, “We also want to remind you that the internet has a tendency to be a lot harsher towards women than men. So please, we ask that you exercise kindness” (The Try Guys, 2022). In a single line, Yang forced audiences to

understand how their speculation and commentary might also implicate them in marginalization.

Analysis

As the next chapter will discuss through a census and interrogation of comment data, The Try Guys' "what happened" video statement was widely regarded as a successful injunction regarding the Fulmer controversy and well-received by their audiences. Although Yang, Kornfield, and Habersberger were not active offending characters in the violation of an acceptable power-dynamic in a workplace relationship, their address on Fulmer's actions was a response to allegations that The Try Guys--both as individuals and a company—never intended on addressing Fulmer's misdeed until the situation was made public through social media (Listiza, 2022). Their response, though clearly prepared, reviewed, and practiced, provided a candid account that encompassed their corporate precautions, values of the company, and their own personal feelings in reckoning the untimely loss of a founding group member. This section will move away from the descriptive analysis of the "what happened" statement and context in order to analyze emergent themes in The Try Guy's response to public controversy rooted in a violation of power by evaluating the engagement with public dialogue, articulation of the power imbalance, and goals of creator-transparency.

Engagement with Public Dialogue

Second to announcing that Fulmer was no longer affiliated with the Try Guys LLC, Kornfield opens the group's video statement by signaling to the

present discourse surrounding the controversy through social media, videos and their respective comment threads, and forum posts. Kornfield gesturing to the status-quo of discourse begins the group's response with the assumption that the audience has already read about the controversy and discourse amongst fans and internet users. There are no attempts to deny many of the allegations made against Fulmer through the public's speculation; nor are there attempts to provide "insider knowledge" to the specifics in the events (outside of corporate policy) that lead to Fulmer's disaffiliation with The Try Guys. Rather, the acknowledgement of the surrounding discourse was used as launchpad for the trio to divulge into their own response to Fulmer's misgivings instead of a major stasis point in engage in an argument. The group allows for audiences to resonate with the information they already found out or research more in-depth the context surrounding the "what happened" statement. Choosing to engage at, and only at, a point in the deliberation timeline where they do not drudge up the "messiness" of Fulmer's affair sets a deliberate tone for the rest of The Try Guys' statement: The men are forming a response to controversy that will be purely sourced from the facts that they experienced first-hand.

Though fans could assume that there would be few closer to the details the controversy than the three men making the statement, the remaining Try Guys establish a tone of ambivalence by refusing to engage with the prior discourse. Instead, Yang, Kornfield, and Habersberger reserve their inside intel to divulge how the corporation responded to the controversy rather than the conditions leading to it. Paired the established ethos of refusing to engage with public

speculation from the beginning of the statement, The Try Guys establish that they are in control of the “official” narrative and allow the public’s assessment to exist as a secondary resource for any party interested in the controversy. Rather than indulging audience curiosity in the rumors spread online, The Try Guys provide a narrative beginning when they could take control—when they were made aware of Fulmer’s actions and details of the subsequent processes the corporation undertook to investigate and hold Fulmer accountable. This aspect of The Try Guys’ response serves as the pivot from a narrative of internal crisis to one where equity was preserved by the hand of the company.

The nearest link the Try Guys made to engaging with the status-quo of public discourse was through interacting with impacts on the fans’ parasocial relationships with the creators. Rather than focusing on the content of the public dialogue, the group chose to center their response to the feelings that derived from their audience’s dialogue. Yang points to the parasocial relationship between The Try Guys and their audiences and how the group’s mediated persona was one that was rooted in trust by acknowledging, “We’ve...we feel saddened, not just personally, but on behalf of our staff and our fans who believed in us” (The Try Guys, 2022). By acknowledging the collective feelings of the audience rather than engaging in the pre-existing discourse, the Try Guys articulate s emphasis on rekindling a relationship with their fans after their normal communication was disrupted by Fulmer.

The group’s decision to focus on the parasocial emotional relationship with audiences displays another function of the “what happened” statement—an

exercise in collective mourning over Fulmer. Kornfield’s emotional testimony is an invitation for audiences to partake in the trio’s mourning of the group’s previous dynamic.

I don’t know that we’ll ever be able to fully articulate the pain we feel at this moment. It’s hard to watch old videos that we love and are proud of... We’re losing a friend, we’re losing someone we- we built a company with, we have countless memories with. We- we just made a TV show together. It’s- I’m sure many of you feel the same way (The Try Guys, 2022).

Candid disclosure of the group’s dissonance in emotions—the conflict of feeling justified in reprimanding a coworker who abuses their power simultaneously with the sadness of disassociating from a friend—gives the audience permission to experience a complex form of grief. As the content creators, the variance in emotions serves as a model for acceptable ways for the audience to react to the news of Ned’s departure outside of public speculation and deliberation. The Try Guys communicate that there is a need for an emotional catharsis within and outside the company, and they are willing to emotionally journey through the conflicting feelings alongside their audience.

Compared to other YouTuber statements and apologies rooted in controversy, The Try Guy’s “what happened” video is devoid of “receipts” to justify their positioning. As we will discuss later in the analysis, the need for “receipts” is largely satisfied by the communication of insider knowledge regarding Fulmer’s departure that was previously unknown to the public. Yet,

regarding engagement with public discourse, the use of receipts would force The Try Guys to attempt to disentangle the past actions of Fulmer. Instead, the group focuses on the future of their channel without a founding cast member. Yang, Habersberger, and Kornfield's final statements take aim in focusing the audience's attention for the next stage of The Try Guy's production. Similar to the group's candidness about the emotional toll Fulmer's actions had on them, the remaining members do not shy away from discussing the discomfort of what they will face in the upcoming transitional period. Kornfield initiates the pivot for the audience by positing, "Things will change here, uh, what we hope is that within this there's also the opportunity for positive growth. And better videos ahead...but it's gonna be hard...this whole thing is gonna be really fucking hard" (The Try Guys, 2022).

While the group could have opted to look back on the situation by referencing or presenting receipts, the three reserve the fixation on retrospect to facilitate emotional healing with their audiences. This emotional, rather than analytical, fixation on the past forms an incipience to new creative directions ahead. Kornfield concludes the video in voicing gratitude for the audience in joining them on their upcoming journey. "Thank you for your support, we appreciate you, and...we look forward to introducing you to the next era of The Try Guys" (The Try Guys, 2022). The group's focus on the future rather than delving into the previous speculation offers an opportunity of renewal—to the remaining Try Guys, the company, and to fans. Further, the focus on the future and focusing on the emotions of the discourse rather than the gritty details allows

the group to end discussions of Fulmer and offer a new contribution to emergent discourse: a new discussion of the future directions of the channel amongst audiences that replaces the tainted history associated with Fulmer. In this, the Try Guys do not interact with present discourse. They move deliberation to a new stasis point.

Articulation of the Power Imbalance

From the beginning, the Kornfield, Yang, and Habersberger lucidly articulate that Fulmer's departure was caused by the company discovering that he was engaged in a romantic workplace relationship, as a manager, with a subordinate employee. Habersberger initiates discussion of power as he asserts, "From the jump, we were acutely aware of just how contrary this was to the values of the company we've built and everyone who works here. This...is something we took very seriously" (The Try Guys, 2022). Though the group does not explicitly state "abuse of power," the trio frame the controversy as one that is oriented in value. This articulation signals to audiences that power is a particular point of interest in the deliberation of Fulmer's actions and affiliation with the company.

As discussed in the descriptive analysis of the "what happened" video, the Try Guys emphasize relationships as a prevailing quality in the values that structure their response. Generalities such as "conduct unbecoming to our team" are consistently used throughout the response. Yet, consistent concerns on the relational plane spanning from current employees, former employees, and their loved ones serve as appositives for audiences to assign meanings to these

generalities. In turn, this signals to audiences that the video statement is underpinned by an expectation of how power should be handled. On face, Fulmer having extra-marital relationships is (as Habersberger notes) “unbecoming” to Fulmer as an individual and content creator. The added complexity of Fulmer’s affair involving a subordinate employee is what transforms Fulmer’s misdeeds from shameful actions into an abuse of power.

The condemnation of Fulmer’s abuse of power is a thematic element woven through the statement that forces audiences to contemplate the complexities of how power is communicated and negotiated internally in the Try Guys company and how the subsequent communications and negotiations are portrayed on screen. As consequence, these communications and negotiations are transposed into the public’s deliberation of the Fulmer controversy. Due to the aforementioned value of relationships serving as a prevailing theme through the Try Guys statement, referencing the abuse of power ambiguously enables the remaining members to assist in saving face for Fulmer’s family and Herring without excusing Fulmer’s misdeeds. Yet, in referencing status quo in discourse, the trio are more poignant in curtailing the repercussions of public controversies of power. Yang, particularly, explains the rigid expectations and subsequent calls for harsher punishments for women in light of sexually related abuses of power. He states, “We also want to remind you that the internet has a tendency to be a lot harsher towards women than men. So please, we ask that you exercise kindness” (The Try Guys, 2022). This statement serves two functions.

First, if audiences were uncertain if the remaining Try Guys were unaware of how dominant narratives disproportionality disadvantage victims—particularly victims that are women—they are now aware. This direct statement helps assign meaning to the previous generalities regarding conduct. Further, Yang’s observation of how women can be vilified in these circumstances reinforces the blame of the power abuse to be at Fulmer’s fault alone. The lack of blame placed on Herring in the video paired with a statement that aims to protect women in public speculation reinforces that the Try Guys are implying that Ned’s conduct with an abuse of power. Fulmer, through his own statement, was keen in mentioning his belief that the relationship between he and Herring was “consensual” (@nedfulmer, 2022). Yet, the remaining cast members signal to their viewers that the lines of consensuality are blurred in the inequity of power between the two. In turn, their response was one to rectify that power imbalance.

Second, Yang’s insight helps direct the future course of future discourse in a way that is power-conscious. Throughout the “what happened” statement, none of the group members interacted directly with the current discourse and, instead, provided information that would enable a new line of discourse to emerge—one that did not focus on the controversy but on the opportunity of creative growth for The Try Guys channel. Similarly, The Try Guys are attempting to form subsequent discourse in one that is inclusive and sensitive to how power structures can affect public deliberation of a controversy.

Goals of Creator Transparency

The Try Guy's video response to the Fulmer controversy was largely framed by the goals of transparency to audience members. Since the group's inception, fans were able to form perceptions of the cast and featured crew members based off of their chosen portrayals in previous videos. Though viewers may be shown footage of editors working behind the scenes in videos, references to sketching out storyboards for content in TikToks, or glimpses into Try Guys corporate headquarters on Instagram, the "what happened" video statement gave fans a new insight into how the company responds to crisis. The goal of creator transparency provides two major benefits to The Try Guys statement: perceived credibility and authenticity to viewers.

As discussed before, Habersberger, Kornfield, and Yang utilized offering novel "insider" insights to how the company handled Fulmer's departure as a method to avoid engaging in the status quo of the public discourse—a deliberation of to who to assign blame, the authenticity of events, or how the group should proceed. Instead, they contributed to the creation of emergent discourses related to how they handled Fulmer's misdeeds and their future directions. The group's candid approach in detailing the actions they took once they were made aware of Fulmer's affair, though, contributed to enhancing the remaining team's credibility with their audiences as well, though. In turn, the enhanced credibility aided in how well The Try Guy's statement resonated with audiences.

Habersberger laments, "We refused to sweep things under the rug, that is not who we are, and is not what we stand for" near the beginning of the video statement (The Try Guys, 2022). This acknowledgement can be applied to two

separate arenas in deliberation: first, in stating that the company always had intentions to execute an investigation into Fulmer's actions and, second, that The Try Guys always planned to share the information with their audiences. Both functions in addressing the controversy are qualified by the group's following narrative of events in how Yang, Herzberger, Kornfield and other company officials investigated and reprimanded Fulmer. By giving audiences an inside look into how the company handled controversy (to the best of their legal ability), the Try Guys leave little room for ambiguity for their fans to contemplate their trust in the creators. The Try Guys comprehensively outlined steps they took to ensure equity in Fulmer's investigation—to Fulmer, Fulmer's family, and Herring—as a proof to audiences that they handled Fulmer's misdeeds with due diligence.

Yang further instills a sense of trust with the audience as he laments, “Now, we were always planning on a public statement. And were working towards that with our team, but, in light of rapidly accelerating speculation, we knew we couldn't wait any longer” (The Try Guys, 2022). Through this explanation Yang reveals to audiences more than corporate policy and procedure; audiences can now comprehend how the group had to prioritize equally cumbersome values of exercising due diligence with the involved parties and maintaining open communication with the audiences as public dialogue progressed.

Keeping up with the demands of a public controversy was emotionally taxing to Kornfield, Yang, and Habersberger. Yet, though their statement was a

clearly coordinated effort, the three maintained transparency with the personal impact Ned's disassociation had on them. Throughout the video, viewers witness the trio attempt to maintain composure and take pauses to collect themselves. There are vocal breaks and variations that express the different stages of emotions the three endured through the whole process—particularly as the three collectively mourn a phase of The Try Guys that ended upon Ned's departure. Paired with their personal testimonies, these non-verbal cues indicate authenticity on behalf of the remaining Try Guys to their audience members. Signifiers of hurt, anger, and grief reinforce the underlying message of the company's goal to remain honest with their fans. This is largely achieved by expressing emotional vulnerability to their audiences. By expressing vulnerability as well as electing to maintain the footage of their emotional states post editing, the Try Guys communicate to audiences that they are being truthful on multiple fronts: about how the company was effected by the controversy and how the controversy effected them as individuals. The pairing of logistical and emotional articulations of transparency serves as an olive branch to their audiences. While Fulmer's abuse of power was offensive to many, the remaining members are willing to exchange informational and emotional truth to retain the trust of their viewers.

Implications

Through this chapter, I have provided a textual analysis as well as a critical reading for a popular publicly rejected apology video, "hi" by Colleen Ballinger, and a popular publicly accepted apology video, "what happened" by The Try Guys. While these approaches differ in their approaches in addressing the

public as well as who's actions they are referencing—Ballinger defending herself and the Try Guys mitigating grievances against their former castmate—they are intertwined by one substantial quality: engaging in the public's deliberation of power. Deliberations of power surrounding the respective controversies were rooted in the premise of how one that holds power in status (whether that is by age, wealth, or reputation) should be held responsible for exerting their force on those of subordinate status. Other than differing agents of power abuse, the two differed in their approach in engaging public discourse. This section will serve to answer:

RQ 5: How can the use of apologia theory explain what apologies are accepted or rejected in an online forum?

The following section will revisit the critical analyses conducted of Ballinger's "hi" and The Try Guys' "what happened" response in order to nuance existing knowledge of the intersection of apologia and image repair with YouTube and other socially mediated entertainment content. Further, the following section will explain how these strategies contribute to public deliberations of power by consulting the roles of corrective action and authentic narratives in the two video responses.

Corrective Action

Both "hi" and "what happened" set clear intentions of corrective action to the public. Benoit explains that when a speaker utilizes the strategy of corrective action, they are attempting to rectify wrongdoings through restoration of their image or prevention of repeating the offense. The form and function of social

media entertainment allows for content creators to assume that their audiences have the capacity to locate previous videos and online content in order to contextualize their controversies. As information sharing, archival of deleted footage, and accessibility to comment/view commentary of events spreads via the internet, content creators are dually tasked with providing a succinct response to controversies and account for multiple streams of argumentation as they are doing so. These publics, as Kane (2020) suggests, view themselves as arbitrators of morality that seek “restorative justice” that corrects wrong doings rather than “restorative accountability” that focuses on acknowledgement of transgressions. The distinction between justice and accountability between the two apologies is indicative of how the role of corrective action was used.

Further, controversies that are local to an online context and subsequent responses from offenders are interactive—meaning that the yielded meaning from an online apology or self-defense statement is malleable by the online public. As Khosravini and Unger (2015) note of the ramifications of public influence on online content, “one consequence of this shift is the separating lines between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ texts; hence, the traditional dichotomy of powerful/powerless voices is eroding as more content is produced and consumed socially” (p. 211). Arguably, the success of an apology is dependent not on the speaker’s concept of restorative justice, but of the articulations of corrective action expected through public discourse.

Ballinger’s response to her audience does very little to restore justice to victims or correct her actions of power abuse in the context current to her “hi” response. There were little, if any, strategies to involve her audience in restorative justice to her victims.

Rather, she argues that her misconduct had already been addressed in her previous video; thus, in already taking accountability, the current charges against her are considered frivolous. However, Ballinger's strategy of repurposing the corrective action from her previous video does little to engage with the active discourses that are holding her at fault. Despite Ballinger development as a content creator occurring alongside the development of rapidly interactive audiences, her response in "hi" ignores the online public's penchant for displacing context throughout different discursive formations. Ballinger's response categorizes online public's use of recontextuality in their discourse as illegitimate. Thus, ignoring how discourses of power continue to develop over time.

By pointing to how she has already taken accountability for her actions in a predated response, Ballinger's ignorance to how recontextuality functions in discourse indicates a shift from corrective action to reducing offensiveness. Ballinger's shift is meant to maintain her innocence from the public's grievances. However, as Sandlin and Gracyalny point out, YouTubers that use the strategy of reducing offensiveness come off as insincere. Further, apologizes that are perceived as insincere by the public are likely deemed as unacceptable (2018). Ballinger's controversy centered on her as an individual as well as a structure that allows for abuses of power to prevail. Similar to how her jokes of victim narratives serve to delegitimize the controversy, Ballinger's use of reducing offensiveness reduces the perceived implications of power to the public.

In contrast, The Try Guys utilize corrective action as a tool for restorative justice among the public. The "what happened" response clearly articulates that Fulmer's position was terminated by a clearly articulated procedure relating to his abuse of power. This verification of public speculation regarding the power imbalance was confirmed

before rational into the decision was explained to the audience. A lack of deniability from the Try Guys serves a purpose beyond that of confirming speculation, however; clearly labeling Fulmer's actions as an injustice shows The Try Guy's capacity for recognizing how existing power structures enabled Fulmer's wrongdoings and harbored the subsequent discourse. The Try Guys successfully indicated corrective action in their response concurrent to Benoit's (2005) guidelines: the group communicated both prevention and restoration. By engaging with the public's discourse of condemnation of Fulmer's actions by expressing they had terminated him from his position of power, The Try Guys show how they have prevented future power abuses from Fulmer within The Try Guys LLC and set a precedent for others within and adjacent to their organization. Further, The Try Guys communicate restoration of their image by adding a restorative quality to their statement. Like Ballinger, The Try Guys indicate that they are growing as a company post-Fulmer scandal, However, opposite of Ballinger, The Try Guys do this by legitimizing the public's concern for power. This notion of restoration is indicative of how creator-user transparency is a cornerstone of a successful YouTube statement. And, in turn, restorative justice is communicated to their audience as they dismiss Fulmer from their public platform as retribution for his actions.

As discussed in the textual and critical analysis of The Try Guy's "what happened" statement, the group intersects their response with public discourse by revealing information that was unknown to the public regarding how the company handled Fulmer's workplace relationship. Although the group chose not to engage with receipts or speculation, they still articulated legitimization of power-adjacent public discourse by showing how their company handles controversies of power abuse. This

engagement with the public discourse indicates that The Try Guys are aware of the (inter)contextuality of discursive formations. As such, they propose an emergent stream of discourse for their audience: the future of the company. Enabling their audience to continue to have discussions of Fulmer's controversy indicates to the public that The Try Guys recognizes discourses of power as legitimate. The final aspect of restoration this section will cover is how the Try Guys invigorate future power related discourse surrounding their controversy. Rather than utilizing Ballinger's approach of dismissal towards complex, intercontextual discourses, The Try Guys show sincerity to their audience by allowing them to continue their discourses in a power-conscious manner. While The Try Guys signify their awareness of how discourses continue to develop past their statement, they model to their audiences how these discourses of power can continue to occur in a way that does not further marginalize victims.

Use of Narrative and Authenticity

The statements from Ballinger and The Try Guys both feature a narrative to communicate their feelings towards, explanation of, and rationale in managing their respective power controversies. Cunningham and Craig (2017) explain to us that YouTube videos and content creators, as a form and distributors of Social Media Entertainment, are well perceived because of the heightened sense of authenticity associated with the content that is absent from their traditional-media counterpart. Further, the sense of community in the digital spheres through immediate commenting and real-time reacting is more preferable to new-age audiences (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). Keeness for authenticity among SME audiences lends itself to Sandlin and Gracyalny's insight that, when embroiled in controversy, sincerity is paramount to the

public's reception of an online apology (2018). Parasocial relationships that viewers form with YouTube content creators serve as the catalyst for the public's expectation of authenticity and sincerity (Chen, 2016). As well-known creators, both Ballinger, and the Try Guys attempt to capitalize on their parasocial relationships with viewers in order to respond to public discourse surrounding their controversies.

As pointed out in the critical analysis of Ballinger's "hi," Ballinger attempts to disrupt the normal form of a YouTube apology video by singing her response and stating that the video was against the advice of her professional team. Although contextualizing YouTube content as a direct delivery of a video from creator to consumer is a hallmark of SME's success as a media form, Ballinger's articulation of releasing her statement in spite of the warnings from her staff of public-relations professionals is indicative of her disregarding those aware of power-conscious discourses. Ballinger had intervening resources available to her statement—or lack there of—but chose to ignore them as she inserted herself into a public discourse contentious with her past actions; as such, her appeal to the public's want of authenticity depicts her true self as one that is okay with upholding the power structures that the public charges her with abusing.

Furthermore, Ballinger's attempt in relaying authenticity relies upon her narrative that introduces herself as the true victim in public discourse. Ballinger's alternative narrative, as discussed in the critical analysis of "hi," places blame on the audiences for reintroducing her controversial past into current discourse. In examining the role of parasocial relationships in this strategy, Ballinger alters the balance in the creator-viewer dichotomy by disrupting the expected flow of communication. In the parasocial relationship between Ballinger and her viewers, she is permitted to articulate her own

feelings. However, it cannot be at the expense of public concern. Ballinger's delegitimization of victim narratives and displacing herself as the victim of and within public discourse alienates her from the public. In turn, attempts at authenticity are in vain.

The Try Guys, however, provide a narrative that is invitational to their audiences. As discussed in the critical analysis of "what happened," The Try Guys articulate their emotions as an invitation for their audiences to grieve the loss of Fulmer as a cast member alongside them. The relation of emotions to the very ones their audiences are feeling—hurt, betrayal, grief—strengthens the parasocial bond between The Try Guys and their viewers. Although the Try Guys also mentioned they have worked with a professional staff in addressing Fulmer's abuse of power, communicating a narrative imbedded with authentic feelings enables the public to hold space for them in public discourse. Further, as The Try Guys convey authenticity with their feelings, they provide a narrative that is as transparent as legally allowable given the contract between the group and the departed Fulmer. The Try Guys articulate this narrative that exists parallel to public discourses of power, not against it. The group chronicles to their audiences the steps they took to ensure systems of power did not enable Fulmer to continue his transgressions. The Try Guys' "what happened" response appeals to narrative rationality, as Theye (2008) suggests. However, this rationality does not only enable The Try Guys to be reaccepted by their audiences, but the pragmatism instilled in the narrative dually fills the gaps of the unknown in public discourse while reassuring the public that they responded in a power-cognizant manner.

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I have introduced two controversial case studies invoking power abuse local to the online domain. Further, I have conducted a contextual and critical analysis of Ballinger's "hi" and The Try Guys' "what happened" to understand the tactics of rejected and accepted responses to controversies of power, respectively in order to answer:

RQ 4: How can the use of traditional apologia theory explain what apologies are accepted or rejected in an online forum?

Findings from this section placed emphasis on the use of narrative, victimization, and authenticity. The next chapter shifts focus from the responses towards the adjacent discourse in order to gain a critical understanding of how the public utilizes parasocial relationships to deliberate on discourses of power.

CHAPTER VI –Rejection, Acceptance, and (Re)Negotiation in the Mediated Sphere

In Chapter 5, I provided a textual, contextual, and critical analysis of Ballinger’s rejected response of “hi” and the accepted Try Guys’ response of “what happened” in order to discuss the strategies used by public figures in order to address controversies of power/ As both of these responses were introduced to public consciousness via YouTube, subsequent discourse largely occurred in the comments section of their respective YouTube videos. Therefore, Chapter 5 will turn to the discourses prevalent in the comment data of the respective apologies in order to answer

RQ 5: How do parasocial relationships/interactions formed with content creators affect the public deliberation of an online controversy?

Further, this section will introduce an overview of James Charles, his controversies, and his subsequent YouTube apologies in order to understand not only how the public utilizes accepted and rejected apologies in their discourses of power, but also how these responses/discourses are negotiated through time and context.

Comment Discourse from “hi”

Chapter 5 began by introducing the power abuse controversy of Colleen Ballinger, also known as Miranda Sings, and the strategies she used in her ill-received response titled, “hi.” Through the chapter, I argue that Ballinger’s self-victimization, reduction of offensiveness for her actions, and violation of expected norms of a public apology contributed negatively to the public deliberation of power structures and consequential injustices. The following section will expand upon conclusions drawn from the critical analysis of her response by explicating how her response contributed to discourses of power through its rejection by examining emergent themes found in

comment discourse of the “hi” response video. As the following section will discuss, comments from discourse participants were largely negative in evaluating Ballinger’s statement (or, as she would argue, sing-ment) as well as how her response contributes to larger discourses of power. Positive comments, however, are overwhelmingly reliant on the use of their existing parasocial relationship with Ballinger in attempts to absolve her guilt. The following section will conduct a critical analysis of comment data to analyze emergent themes of victimization, violation of norms, and the role of parasocial relationships in the public’s response to a perceived agitator of power abuse and subsequent deliberation of a power-conscious online controversy.

Victimization

Through the critical analysis of comment discourse of Ballinger’s “hi,” the first emergent theme apparent in comment data were responses that focused on the role of victimization in Ballinger’s video. As discussed in chapter 4, Ballinger utilizes the mechanism of narrative and the strategy of reducing offensiveness in order to recontextualize the controversy that victimizes herself rather than those who publicly chronicled her interactions with young fans. References to victimization in comment discourse function in two compartments. First, commenters reference the victims, as in the young fans who allege Ballinger of grooming. Second, commenters utilize recontextualization to categorize Ballinger’s victimization of herself as a faulty narrative.

Victim Oriented Discourses

As Ballinger utilized her platform to sing her way out of the embroilment of a controversy, the role of the legitimate victim became a major stasis point in her self-defense. As discussed in chapter 5, Ballinger categorizes herself as the true victim as she

claims she has become the target of online hate and bullying to satisfy the public's craving for entertainment. This reversal of roles is not lost upon her audiences as they reference victims through their discourse. Foremost, participants involved in the discourse of power abuse exhibit concern for those who provided narratives of how Ballinger's exertion of power negatively impacted them. As Ballinger attempts to renegotiate herself as the victim, discourse participants worry how the content creators' reversal of roles will affect them. One commentor provides no other contribution other than this concern as they posit, "This is so insulting to the victims..." (@katielee517, 2023). The lack of a response to Ballinger's arguments or to any one other than the publicly-agreed upon victims is indicative of the public's consciousness in redirecting power discourses to be more victim oriented.

This notion is further cemented as another commentor nuances a victim-oriented approach in deliberating power abuses by stating, "All I can think about is the victims watching this.... I can't believe this" (@Styxiex, 2023). This suspension of belief, and comments sharing a similar sentiment, in Ballinger's method of providing an alternate victim other than the individuals of which she exercised her power in age and status, is indicative of rejecting alternative narratives of alternative narratives in public discourse. In rejecting this alternative narrative, participants in deliberations of power do not only preserve victim-oriented discourses in assessing the pervasiveness of power structure and subsequent ramifications there of, but they shape expectations of others who chose to partake in discourse.

Additionally, instilling a value of victim-oriented discourse in deliberations of power abuse functions as measure to legitimize or discount contributions to the discursive

formation. Comments that focus on victim feelings rather than Ballinger's, such as the aforementioned ones, provide a value of prioritizing the marginalized voices in public discourse after Ballinger's contribution. These individuals, whose stories are already negotiated by the public, do not have the same privilege as Ballinger and her parasocial relationships that yield an automatic perception of trust in her from her viewers, platform to widely distribute their stories, or status as the content creator. Introducing the prioritization of the victims emotions into the discourse serves as a delegitimizing force to Ballinger's response in that they serve to remind other participants in the deliberation of Ballinger's actions of the consequences of those effected.

This (re)introduction of valuing victim voices as Ballinger provides an alternative narrative of victimization through her response serves as a value in which deliberation should be framed. This value of the "true victims" serves to redirect subsequent discourse in a manner that is not only aware of the abuse of power by Ballinger but is redirected to focus on how retribution can be achieved for the victimized. In continuing the discussion of the theme of victimization, the next portion will shift from analyzing themes of concern for the victims to the condemnation of Ballinger's own victimization.

False Victimization

As Ballinger prescribes herself as the true victim of the controversy, putting forth the pressure she has felt as evaluative judgements on her actions have circulated through public speculation, participants in comment discourse articulate disdain for Ballinger's self-characterization in addressing the controversies of power. An example of this disdain can be found in a comment that reads, "She only feels sorry for herself. What about the affected children?! Not an ounce of accountability in this ['apology'] video..."

(@masolie, 2023). This comment underscores Ballinger’s use of reducing offensiveness and blame shifting through her video while rejecting her victimization conflation strategy. Further, this comment reassigns the very blame back to Ballinger that she tried to circumvent through “hi.”

These types of comments aim to redirect discourses of false victimization into ones of acceptance of accountability for wrongdoing. As Ballinger notes through her reply, she refuses to admit to wrongdoing as she does not feel that she has committed any injustices. Further, she argues that she has already apologized for her actions once—the expectations that she rearticulates responsibility for the public’s grievances against her are unfounded. Yet, blatant calls for Ballinger to (re)take accountability for her actions show a dismissal of strategies like reducing offensiveness and blame shifting in discourses of power. One commenter outright rejects her reduction of offensiveness by analyzing her argument that she was not messaging fans in a predatory way, but in a way that was representative of her awkward personality by arguing, “idk if there’s a NOT creepy way to be messaging young fans lol...” (@frnk708, 2023). In expecting discourses to develop, participants demand some sort of acceptance of blame from the accused to further discuss the effects of power abuse in these discursive formations.

To substantiate claims of Ballinger falsely victimizing herself through “hi,” commenters turn to referencing alternate discourses and heavily reference the use of “receipts” or personal, shared, and often time-stamped evidence of Ballinger’s misconduct. As several commenters note, difficultly disputed traces of Ballinger’s abuse of power are widely available for public consumption in other online discursive formations. One commenter exemplifies the referential use of receipts in public

discourses of power by stating, “erm, there’s literally mounts of screenshots and evidence lol” (@jadeatoinetter, 2023). Another commenter reinforces the availability of evidence that contradicts Ballinger’s self-ascribed victimization by bluntly writing, “The allegations are on film girl” (@decadefacade, 2023).

As Ballinger focuses on her own feelings as the perceived instigator in the power abuse allegations, commenters quickly entrench the discourse in references to the receipts that initially indicted her. These references to parallel discursive formations that appropriate Ballinger as the abuser contextualize the discourse into, again, being victim focused while rejecting Ballinger assertion that she is, in fact, the true victim. Additionally, the recontextualization of receipts serves as a reminder for commenters to investigate alternate discourses that are blame-worthy of Ballinger in hopes that they, too, will reject her narrative of self-victimization. As this portion explored how the public manages the role of victim in order to form power-focused discourses and how the public will recontextualize alternate discursive formations when their expectations of victimization are violated, the next section will analyze how the violation of the video’s form shapes discourses of power.

Violation of Norms

Chapter 4 divulged into Ballinger’s unanticipated method of delivering her response of “hi” to viewers. Typically, when delivering an apology video, YouTubers adopt a more traditional approach of delivering an address to the audience and in either accepting accountability for their actions or providing an alternative retelling dependent on context and receipts (see descriptions of Try Guys “what happened” and any of the James Charles apology descriptions). Ballinger, however, did not only disrupt the

public's expectations of accountability in her video by displacing herself as the true victim within the narrative, she also disrupted expectations of form as she provided her response in the form of a song known as "Toxic Gossip Train." Through this section, I will analyze comments that focus their contributions towards deliberation towards noting this distinction, how the public offers Ballinger more appropriate methods in discussing abuses of power, and the perceived effects of inappropriateness from discourse participants in deliberations of power abuse.

Distinction

In the spoken opening of the video, Ballinger attempts to provide justification for her disruption of anticipated form in delivering a response. She posits, "...even though my team has strongly advised me to not say what I want to say. I recently realized that they never said that I couldn't sing what I want to say" (Colleen Vlogs, 2023).

Commenters quickly latched to this phrase as iterations of the quote, "they never said that I couldn't sing" were repeatedly posted through the comment forum. While Ballinger presents the perceived loophole in explaining her feelings on the allegations of power abuse against the advice of her professional staff, participants recontextualized her line through discourse to associate humor, disbelief, and disruption of expectations.

Participants underscoring this disruption suggests that, though perceived agitators of disruption may dissent from public opinion that holds them accountable for power abuse, they are still held liable to defend themselves in a distinct form of a statement rather than a song.

Exhibitions of disruption of expectations from discourse participants were largely visible by utterances of disbelief that Ballinger's song was to be a response to a nuanced

deliberation of power abuses. Although commenters articulate that they could not predict exactly, what Ballinger's official response to the controversy would be, her method of delivery served as a disruption to anticipated momentum of discourse. One commenter recounts this disruption in the form of disbelief by noting, "I didn't know what her response would be but I never could've imagined this" (@kendall329, 2023). Regarding expectations of discourses of power, Ballinger's response was not in the public's imaginary in planning arguments of dissent or acceptance of the power controversy. In fact, it appears that in planning their disputes of power, Ballinger articulating her argument through lyrics and quips served as the anthesis of public expectation and, thus, momentarily derailed predetermined discourse as one commenter notes, "Am I in a fever dream..... this can't really be your response" (@marinewifey1015, 2023). As such, reoccurrences of participants articulating not anticipating the form of Ballinger's response also communicate a barrier in comprehensively examining the role of power in their deliberations of the controversy.

This section was tasked with understanding that, in Ballinger's unconventional form of communicating her response to the public controversy, discourse participants communicated disruption of expectations and, subsequently deliberations, through utterances of disbelief. The next section will examine how the role of discourse participants offering retrospective alternative mechanisms of expression for Ballinger effect discourses of power in online controversies.

Alternative Methods

An emphasis on distinguishing acceptable and nonacceptable form directs discourse to not only reject Ballinger's attempt of a response to the controversy, but that a

disruption of anticipated method is more harmful than remaining silent in addressing allegations of power abuse. Through the comment discourse, themes of a preference of no statement as opposed to Ballinger's singing of "Toxic Gossip Train" were prevalent. Comments juxtapose this eccentric nature of the video with the gravity of the allegations against Ballinger as one suggests, "i think staying [quiet] would have been better than this honestly.. making it into a corny song when the allegations have to do with kids" (@drumaddict26atGmail, 2023). Discourse participants are clear that their violation of an acceptable form has been disrupted. However, the preference of silence to that of an inappropriate response indicate that those engaged in deliberations of power even expect dissenters to provide well-constructed arguments for discourse to progress; inarticulate replies are indicative of the interlocuter treating discourses of power with levity. As such, approaching a response to allegations of grooming young fans land as dismissive to discourse participants. In approaching a humorless controversy in jest, Ballinger further delegitimizes the narratives of those who have felt disenfranchised by her actions.

The discourse deviates away from invoking blame, accountability, or arguments against the content against Ballinger's response and focuses on retrospective ways in which Ballinger could have communicated an argument worthy of integration into public discourse. Commenters plead with her to "LISTEN TO THE PR TEAM GIRL" (@mackenzieanderdon-fb5we, 2023) or to "DELETE THIS WHILE YOU CANNNNN" (@juicyjasmyne, 2023) as immediate interventions to mitigate the personal and structural harm her response invoked. While these strategies would have communicated reconsideration in her inarticulate reply, other commenters asked for Ballinger to take time to reflect in order to reevaluate the content of her message. One commenter reflects

on Ballinger's noted absence in the midst of her controversy and posits, "You took time off and this is what you thought would be the appropriate response? Perhaps more time off is necessary because what is this?" (@MorphoBloo, 2023). In bringing up the role of appropriateness, discourse participants bring forth two implied arguments. First, Ballinger's chosen form of a song makes light of heavy discourses of power abuse. As such, the form of a response to controversies of power is as important as the content discussed. An anticipated form of a statement responding to the allegations of power abuse serves as a legitimizing mechanism to discourse. Second, online discourse participants articulate awareness of social media celebrities being equipped by professional staff, notably PR teams, as they are public figures. As such, they have the resources necessary to construct a response that, at least in form, is deemed appropriate by the public. A disregard for these resources is viewed as a tactic to delegitimize power-conscious discourses. In order to preserve momentum of discourses of power are they gain momentum, participants demand a respectable response to continue deliberations of power.

As the previous sections have focused on those who dissent from Ballinger's response in both form and content, the upcoming section will turn to analyze those who express support through their perceived parasocial relationship with the creator. Although emergent themes through the comment discourse of "hi" were largely comprised of disagreeability with the creator, the next section will explain how those with longstanding parasocial relationships with Ballinger contextualize their response through her previous content.

Reliance on Parasocial Relationship

Through this section, I have argued that emergent themes found in comment discourse of “hi” were largely negative as they rejected Ballinger’s reversal of the “true” victim and violated the expected form of a YouTuber apology in abuses of power. However, a critical analysis of Ballinger’s comment discourse would remain inaccurate without discussion of prevalent comments that indicated unwavering support for the creator. Unlike those who oppose Ballinger and hold her at fault in deliberations of power abuse and in the structure of her response, supportive discourse participants reinforce their support of the content creator in their experiences with their parasocial relationship with Ballinger.

Those who remained agreeable with Ballinger through the comment discourse rooted their support with the creator through recounting the emotional impacts of their perceivably strong parasocial relationship with Ballinger. Many provided their own narratives of how they came to know Ballinger and how her content had considerably positive impacts on their lives in times of hardship. One commenter reflects on the length and strength on their parasocial relationship with Ballinger by recounting,

I don’t understand these people or this world anymore. Colleen, you’ve been nothing but an amazing positive influence on my life. You got me through two horrible pregnancies and my babies NICU stay. My daughter and Flynn are months apart, Flynn in two months younger. My NICU girl was born on the same day, one year after your twins and I sat and rewatched your videos crying through the pain with you. You will always hold a special place in my heart and so many others. Thank you for being

you and bringing a light to my life for so many years (@Cristinamachina, 2023).

While there is a brief reference to the contextuality of the discourse that situates Ballinger's response, comments like the one above utilize the positive effects of their pre-existing parasocial relationship with Ballinger to make evaluative judgements on her character. These positive evaluative judgements of character lend to sympathies that rest with Ballinger. Though there is little emphasis on Ballinger's argumentation or the allegations of power abuse made against her, commenters like the one above provide their own narratives of hurt and Ballinger's parasocial remedying of their heartbreak in order to justify their response. Further, these types of discourse participants utilize a retrospective lens of the goodness associated with Ballinger in order to determine if she is capable of committing the abuses charged to her by the public. The replacement victim narratives with narratives associative with parasocial relationships with Ballinger grant her innocence and, subsequently, acceptance of her response.

References to commenters parasocial relationship with power and articulation of narratives in which their parasocial relationship with the content creator yielded a positive impact on their everyday lives do little to engage directly with the allegations of power abuse. Moreover, they rarely reference any of Ballinger's claims in "hi" other than that of support of Ballinger's assertion that she is being tried in the court of public opinion for crimes she has already answered to. Rather than contributing to deliberations of power, these comments read as reflective; commenters reflect on their parasocial relationship with

Ballinger in order to justify their continued support of her before, during, and in the wake of controversy. By articulating their own narratives of Ballinger's impact on them during times of hardship, they simultaneously attempt to bolster her claims of innocence in regards to ill-intent while defending themselves to other discourse participants in why they choose to remain a loyal fan of Ballinger.

Comment Discourse from "what happened."

In chapter 5, I argue that the Try Guys, sans Fulmer, articulate a compelling response to their former cast member's power abuse scandal in engaging in an intimate relationship with a subordinate employee. The Try Guys' "what happened" statement was largely accepted by their audiences and the larger public. I argue that this success was contingent for The Try Guys' capacity for transforming corrective action into restorative justice for their audiences and incorporating a narrative that invokes authenticity. The following section will expand upon the aforementioned Try Guys' "what happened" case study by nuancing how the response contributed to online discourses of power by examining emergent themes in the "what happened" comment thread on YouTube. As the upcoming section will discuss, the comment responses to the remaining Try Guys' statement to how they handled Fulmer's wrongdoings as a company is largely positive. Therefore, the primary goal of this section is synthesizing and rationalizing the elements of the video that the public articulates as an appropriate response to power-abuse. The following section will conduct a critical analysis of emergent themes in the comment section of the "what happened" video to discuss how parasocial relationships between The Try Guys and the public function in a well-received response to a power controversy as well as build off of the case study presented in the previous chapter. Specifically, the

following sections will explore themes of displacement of emotions, references to parallel discursive formations, and an emphasis of sincerity that derive from the public's response to a power-centric online controversy.

Displacement of Emotions

The foremost theme presented in a critical analysis of the comment data from The Try Guys "what happened" video was the use emotional references in commenter responses to the video. While there were little succinct declarations of commentors proclaiming agreeability or dissent of the video, discourses of emotional affirmation through The Try Guys' video were prevalent throughout the comment thread. However, the use of emotion in commenters' capacity to express their resonance with the video is dynamic in who's emotions they choose to focus on in processing the power abuse scandal. This leads to commenters not only articulating their own emotions to The Try Guys, but also displacing their own emotional state onto the speakers themselves. This section aims to categorize the emotional complexity of commenters' responses into two emergent genres: intrinsic emotions and extrinsic emotions.

Intrinsic Emotions

The first category of emotional discourses of power derived from the comment data are emotional responses that are intrinsic to the commentor themselves; that is, these comments focus on how the controversy and video have made them, as an individual feel. Although The Try Guys' video statement is rooted in Fulmer's controversy, updating their fans about how the company handled the departed employee's misgivings, and reinforcing their argument that they have maintained an ultimate goal of transparency with their audience, an initial read of comment responses indicated that of heartbreak and

subsequent empathy from their fans. The phrase “sending love” was commonly used in comment data where emotional intent prevailed. An example from one commenter notes, “I can’t even express how sorry I am. I can’t imagine how hard this is for each one of you. My heart goes to all 3 of you and the others who were hurt...I love you” (@brvttybat, 2022). The use of “love” adjacent language and transporting their feelings through the comments and digital sphere is not only indicative of the strength of the parasocial relationships between the Try Guys and their publics, but also points to emotions invoked throughout the reply. Though, as other commenters note, the response is clearly scripted, the line-by-line expectations of a legally constrained response does not impact the emotional authenticity the speakers create or invoke from their audiences.

In relation to the video’s subject matter—an abuse of power at the hands of Fulmer—expression of discourse participants’ personal emotions are indicative of how public misconduct can affect their personal psyche. Personal effects of the controversy are expressed through comments such as

I'm crying omg. I've been with the try guys since the very beginning and this is just so sad. It's beyond sad. And Ned of all people... It sucks man. you can never know how people really are no matter how long you've known them (@chanellaury89, 2022).

Comments like these indicate that viewers conflate the feelings of an abuse Fulmers’s power with an employee with their own feelings of betrayal by underscoring the strength of their perceived parasocial relationship with the creator. The participants use of a parasocial relationship developed over an extended period of time intends to be a distinction of trust association with the

creator. When that trust is violated through a controversy of power, participants indicate disappointment with the alleged rather than the power structure that enabled the actions itself. So, in the case of Fulmer's controversy, commenters articulate the hurt caused by an abuse of power through personal sadness in reconciling a violation of trust from the creator as well as expressed remorse for the remaining cast of The Try Guys as they attempt to mitigate Fulmer's harms.

Further, the parasocial relationship between audiences and The Try Guys is further substantiated as commentors directed discourse to convey a shared experience of grief with the content creators. In addressing Fulmer's power abuse controversy, commentors likened the loss of the cast member to their real-life feelings of grief. An example from one commentor notes and adds a linked time stamp to the segment of the video they emotionally resonate with the most by stating,

Watching Zach's part from [3:12-3:36](#), it's like he took the words out of my mouth. I'm going through a major life change myself, all because of betrayal and similar stuff to that...I've experienced Eugene's anger, Zach's sadness and disbelief, and Keith's disappointment, many, many times (@KIL-Drake, 2022).

Testimonial comments suggest that viewers are not merely unsettled by allegations of power abuse by their beloved creators; rather, they distantly experience emotional turmoil in likening their violation of the parasocial relationship to qualifiers of betrayal and resentment they felt towards others in their lives who might have misused their power. Similar to the aforementioned comment, participants in the "what happened" comment discourse begin

conflating their personal narratives of confronting power abuse with that of shared narrative in the Try Guys' response video. As such, participants in the Fulmer power abuse discursive formation do not only express that they find Fulmer's actions generally unsatisfactory as a public figure, but that the effects of such are personal against them.

The emphasis on the personal emotions evoked from commentators as well as finding personal likeness in the Try Guys' recount of events points to the necessity of a cohesive narrative in the public accepting an apology in a power-centric discourse. Commenters appear aware of the limitation on information that the cast members can give their audiences, but concentrate appreciation towards the pragmatic narrative that the trio provide. One commenter articulates the appreciation in the balance of standardization and emotional nuance by positing, "I think what gets me the most about this statement is that while the script had to be approved by the legal team, their emotions did not" (@marshhy11, 2022). These genres of comments that call attention to the form as well as the delivery indicate that, in discussing power, the speakers must appear as sensitive to the effects of power as the victims. Yang, Kornfield, and Habersberger face a uniquely poised challenge in apologizing for an abuse of power that they did not commit. Further, in discussing their own hurt as friends and co-workers of Fulmer, they must not victimize themselves in the process. Thus, a brief, cohesive narrative that focuses on the company's response in an objective manner paired with brief articulations with emotions serves to satisfy the public's response and

subsequent discursive requirements to further deliberate on the consequences of power abuse.

In consequence to discourses of power, the use of intrinsic, individualistic emotions are used to mobilize deliberation in how public figures should respond to allegations of misusing their influence. While the Try Guys are unique in that they are responding to a controversy on behalf of their former cast mate, emergent themes from a critical analysis of comments indicate that discursive participants utilize their own emotions and sympathies with a coherent narrative in acceptance of a public figures response. In regards to discourses of power, commenters communicate their own emotions constructed through perceptions of a strong parasocial relationship with content creators in order to discuss the rejections of abuses of power. More specifically, they utilize their own emotions of personal hurt by the victimizer and adoption of the emotional nuances in the narrative to associate the ramifications of power controversies in their personal life to maneuver their way through complex power-centric discourses. While the current section focuses on the intrinsic emotional associations by discourse participants, the next section aims to analyze how commentors shift to the extrinsic focus of emotions of The Try Guys themselves.

Extrinsic Emotions

The second type of emotional displacement emergent in comment discourse is that of extrinsic emotional displacement by the commentors onto the remaining Try Guys. That is, discourses rooted in the power abuse controversy are prescriptive in assessing how “what happened” responds to the adjacent

controversy and contributes to discourses of power. As discussed in the previous chapter, Habersberger, Kornfield, and Yang each expressed feelings of sadness and remorse in losing a core cast mate in the controversy but felt justified in their response and outcome of the company investigation. However, comment discourse prescribes more nuanced and different readings of the Try Guys' emotion states. An example of discourse prescribing emotional states onto the trio can be modeled by one commentors response of,

Keith having his arm there to subtly comfort Zach, who is on the verge of tears, while Eugene is radiating anger just shows how this has affected our Tri Guys. As fans the most we can do is be patient and give them and the partners hurt all the support we can (@minameane, 2022).

Although the Try Guys verbalized feelings of sadness through the video, comments like the above infer the emotional status of the Try Guys through their existing parasocial relationship and non-verbal cues. Combined with expressions of sympathy and goodwill towards the remaining members and their partners, displacement of emotions onto the speakers is indicative of an acceptable response to power-centric controversies.

Yet, another impact of the prevalence of displaced emotions in the “what happened” discourse focuses less on the receptiveness of the apology and more on the conventions expected from power-adjacent discourses. Comments such as, “The silent rage radiating from Eugene. The genuine heartbreak from Zach. And the maturity from Keith. You all are so strong. Proud of you guys for standing proud with your company” (@YZ-batek, 2023) prescribe emotions to the cast

members in a manner that affirms their overall thesis. This response grants legitimacy without allowing the remaining Try Guys to become the overall victim in the power abuse scandal. Instead, commenters' insight into from their parasocial relationships onto the Try Guys perceived nonverbal cues writes the cast into dual roles: a casualty of Fulmer's indiscretion of status in instigating an imbalanced workplace relationship and as heroes who intervened to rectify the abuse of power.

Further, the longstanding parasocial relationship between The Try Guys and commenters allows for discourse participants to integrate contextuality of relationships, timing, and other extraneous factors as they transport externalized emotions onto the speakers. One commenter laments,

[I] have thought about this since this video came out..... But the look that Eugene is giving is so heartbreaking. He's probably been there to hear about all of the kids' milestones.... maybe it's because I'm also a child of split parents, like Eugene. But he's probably thinking about when the poor boys are old enough to comprehend what happened, and how damaging it will be for them...(@seriecalvely1788, 2022)

This commentor example illustrates how participants transport context onto the perceived emotional states of the content creators by recounting shared information from creator to viewer throughout their parasocial relationship. In turn, discourses of power are directed towards how the ramifications of power controversies are internalized by the afflicted parties. Further, personifying the effects of power structures points to participant keenness into the pervasiveness of

power from the structural—how power flows hierarchically—to how it permeates the individual based on their own lived experiences. As such, the public concisely articulates the complexity of power into responses to their videos and are enabled to do so by the parasocial relationship between creator and viewer.

However, as externalization of emotions through parasocial relationships with content creators can be used to articulate an understanding of pervasive power and acceptance of a public figure’s response, displacement of emotions and context can further condemn those who are seen as abusing their power. Viewers of The Try Guys channel had formed a parasocial relationship with Fulmer as well. In turn, this allows viewers to evaluate his abuse of power based on displaced context and subsequent emotions. An articulation of this emergent theme appears as one viewer notes, “...how could he have done this to the mother of his children whom he claimed to LOVE for years and years. Ariel gave up everything for him. I’m so sad for Ariel and Will, too” (@prangprue, 2022). This genre of comments utilizes displacement of context and externalized emotions to further condemn the power abuse by Fulmer. Thus, directing public deliberation of the power centric controversy to not only be aware of the misappropriation of power, but personify its condemnation.

As commenters utilize their parasocial relationship with Fulmer to articulate contempt of power abuse in their comment discourse, they also displace emotions by transporting the context of videos when viewers had a positive parasocial relationship with Fulmer. For example, a commenter notes the irony in which Fulmer became “the wife guy” on the channel due to his constant

expression of adoration towards his partner, Ariel. The commenter uses Fulmer's expressions of love of his partner in reflecting on a video in which The Try Guys visit a sperm clinic together as they recount,

...I really do like the Try Guys, my favorite video from them is the sperm quality video (pretty ironic, as I remember Ned saying in that video "all I did was think about my wife", and now look at him, what a fall from grace). This video is fucking heavy. It's fucking heavy (@KIL-Drake, 2022).

Comments that utilize externalization of emotions and transformations of context against Fulmer become referential of the previous positive emotions they once felt towards him. This commenter in particular indicates the dissonance in confronting power abuses by a person they once trusted, further reinforcing complexities of reckoning with power into public discourse. Further, displacing emotions onto the Try Guys underscores public disdain towards the power abuse, though they once resonated with the alleged victimizer. Articulations of these emotions and subsequent displacement onto the public figures mobilizes discourse in a manner that is approachable to the public by providing references they can all look back to and process.

Through this section, I have argued that discourses in the comment data of the Try Guys' "what happened" response video indicate that participants in public discourse utilize emotions associated with the parasocial relationship with creators. Commenters articulated their own intrinsic emotions by stating how the power controversy and response made them feel while recounting the sentiments

associated with their personal narratives alongside the narrative provided by the remaining Try Guys. Further, this section explored how commenters prescribed emotions onto the Try Guys based off of insights into nonverbals and context granted through their longstanding parasocial relationships with The Try Guys. While externalization of emotions and recontextualization enforced acceptance of the “what happened” statement and was used as a mechanism to discuss the nuances of power structures in discourse, the same qualities were utilized to reinforce condemnation of Fulmer and abuse of the same power structures. The next section aims to further explicate the role of recontextualization by exploring the second emergent theme found in the comment discourse: references to parallel discursive formations.

References to Parallel Discursive Formations

The second emergent theme present in the comment discourse in the Try Guys “what happened” video are comments that are referencing parallel discursive formations. That is, these comments displace discourse about the controversy happening in other modes of discourse outside of the comment video and using the alternate discursive formations to recontextualize meaning. These references were used to articulate positions regarding the controversy of power and validity of the Try Guys statement. This section aims to consult the use references of non-intended audiences, alternative digital spheres, and commentary channels in order to conduct a critical analysis to understand the recontextualization of meaning in power-oriented discourses.

Non-Intended Audiences

Comment discourse throughout the “what happened” comment thread was inundated with remarks from viewers prefaced with the claim that they were not long-standing Try Guys fans. Rather, news of Fulmer’s power abuse and subsequent controversy articulated through other discursive formations directed them to the “what happened” video that invoked their action to leave a response. As such, the comment data indicated that the confines of the power controversy transcended that of the Try Guys core audience; in turn, the “what happened” video was transposed as an apology to fans to a larger public. An example of this occurrence can be found through a comment that reads,

I was never a huge fan of the try guys when they first started but recently came across a video of theirs and just wanted to say that you guys earned major respect and a subscriber just for how real an (@ameetis1289, 2022)d raw this video was. You all handled it maturely and made it clear what your label will not stand for I commend you for that (@mitchie3010, 2022).

Similar to the aforementioned comment, several commenters articulated awareness in knowing they were not the Try Guys’ intended audience and, in turn, would not classify themselves as a fan of their work. The self-expressed lack of viewership means that the parasocial relationship cannot be indicative of the receptiveness of the apology or if discussions of power will be well received in larger discourse.

In consequence, comments of those who are not self-ascribed fans of The Try Guys focus more on articulation of content and overall authenticity of the response rather

than distinctions in emotion. Further, there is a lack of emphasis on the shared grief as opposed to discourse of comments by devoted fans. The role of grief is replaced by that of deference in their prioritization of objectives in crisis management. In terms of power discourse, comments from non-viewers suggest that The Try Guys use of sincerity and a coherent narrative is an imperative tenant for public figures to partake in power-centric discourses. One commentor notes, “I’ll be honest, I was never a big fan of the channel, but you guys handled this so well that now I’m invested. sending love to the Try Family” (@ameetis1289, 2022). As this commentor articulated, a just response to a power abuse controversy in public discourse appeals to a power conscious public.

As the Try Guys response drew in viewers outside of their core audience, comment data indicated that their response was satisfactory enough to not only garner written support, but that their appeal was strong enough to gain new followers. As one commentor confirms their new follow by stating, Just subscribed to you three guys...take heart and do the right thing.. It’s better in the long run” (@simijoseph492, 2022). Commentors indicating that they subscribed to The Try Guys after viewing their response to a controversy of power go beyond articulating their immediate support for the cast and crew of the company, but they project their support in a future sense to indicate that their acceptance is strong enough to grant longevity in their support. When subscribing to a YouTube channel, the user is notified of new content and updates from the content creator. The action of following after the video indicates that they are ready to explore the possibility of adopting a parasocial relationship with the cast. Further, comments indicating a subscription to the channel carve an avenue in allowing for potential future updates of The Try Guys to 1) inform their decision making in how the commentor will

proceed in public discourses of power and/or 2) incorporate future responses from The Try Guys into subsequent discursive formations that involve Fulmer in deliberations of power.

Similar to the manner in which The Try Guys response invited unintended and new participants into the discourse of power, comment data indicated outside influence on the discourse formed in the comment thread. The next section will not turn to alternative digital spheres and their effects on discourses of power.

Alternative Digital Spheres

In articulating contributions to the Fulmer controversy, participants relied on content from other online domains to frame their response. Thus, the use of recontextualization is used to transform meaning of comments left under “what happened.” These commentators do not rely heavily on drawn-out emotional explanations or externalizations to convey their thoughts to mobilize discourses of power. Rather, they embed the associated theme of the discourse into their own comment to The Try Guys to underscore their arguments. Commentors utilize two separate digital domains to convey meaning: insights from commentary channels who reported coverage on Fulmer’s controversy and poorly constructed apology videos of other content creators embroiled in power-adjacent controversies.

Commenters utilize references to commentary channels in order to quickly reference meaning within their contribution to discourse without sacrificing nuances. Commentary channels feature a content creator who assumes the role of an internet citizen journalist in reporting socially mediated controversies and the public’s reaction. Further, YouTube commentators are often tasked with discussing complexes of power in

their reporting as viewers use them to synthesize long narratives of controversy and records of subsequent outrage from the public (Dodgson, 2021). Prior to The Try Guys' statement, news of Fulmer's power abuse scandal was leaked to social media. Subsequently, YouTube commentary channels compiled the events and reactions into a narrative for viewers. For many, commentary channels served as an introduction to Fulmer's misdeeds and, perhaps more importantly, why his actions were considered to be an abuse of power. One commenter models the role of commentary channels by stating, "I'm so glad that MatPat did a video on this explaining why what Ned did was so shitty... Ned was 100% in the wrong and the other try guys don't deserve the hate they're getting for this!" (@cat5220, 2022).

Comments like these remind of us public interest in dissecting power structures as they consume YouTube commentary content that explains how power abuses work. Further, referencing videos, like the ones of Mat Pat, allows for users to harbor the complexities of an in-depth analysis of power without fully articulating the argument in discourse. This recontextualization of alternative discourses serves two purposes. First, the recontextualization of commentary content reinforces the role of power as a stasis point in deliberation of online controversies. Second, this refashioning of content allows for power-adjacent discourses to develop in meaning as they are re-referenced through other discursive formations.

In addition to referencing other online discourses surrounding the controversy, commenters incorporate main stream media's coverage of Fulmers' actions, the Try Guys' response, and the impacts on larger deliberations. In particular, many comments

echo the concerns posted by one participant as they reference the Saturday Night Live skit parodying the “what happened response’ as they state,

Here you guys are, being thoughtful, sensible, strong and responsible like mature humans. I respect how you all handled all of this. On the other hand, the mainstream media and SNL to be exact just made me angry and disgusted with their content. They didn't even address how well you all did in acknowledging all of this (@patrickpoledances, 2022).

This user references a segment on Saturday Night Live that reenacted the “what happened” video as a sketchy comedy. The parody’s jokes were contingent on perceptions of the controversy being over exasperated and poking fun on the articulation of feelings of sadness and hurt from men. Upon airing, subsequent outrage ensued through several social media platforms as user argued that the sketch makes light of the harms invoked from power imbalances (Wicks, 2022). Comments in the same vein as the aforementioned response indicate that users are dissatisfied with power-centric discourses through mainstream measures. These users emphasize the necessity of authenticity and emotional nuance in discussing controversies of power and subsequent deliberations thereof. There is an emphasis on “maturity” from the YouTube content creators that is notably absent in mentions of more mainstream discourse while focus on the sense of responsibility invoked through The Try Guys’ response. As such, these themes indicate a prioritization in emphasizing the nuances of power in a way that is conscious of the impact to victims of the power abuse and those who sympathize with them.

This section investigated the role of recontextualizing parallel discourses found in alternate digital spheres in order to discuss receptiveness of “what happened” as well as

fans used recontextualization of associated meaning to nuance their deliberations of power abuse. Further, references to mainstream media indicated dissatisfaction in popular discourse and an appreciation of The Try Guys' response in its discussion of the nuances of power abuse. The next section will focus on how The Try Guys articulated these nuances through the final emergent theme of sincerity in comment discourse.

Emphasis on Sincerity

The final emergent theme found in the comment responses of the “what happened” video is that of harboring an emphasis on the role of sincerity. As discussed in chapter 4, the role of authenticity was a prevalent thematic element through the response. This section aims to focus on how commenter perceptions of sincerity affects their discourses rooted in controversies of power. Articulations of appreciation of sincerity stem from perceived transparency from the remaining Try Guy cast members. For example, one commentor states, “As a viewer, I really appreciate the transparency and...y'all were so open about this and didn't sweep it under the rug. I wish nothing but good things for your company and I hope success continues to find you well” (@zoelogan1841, 2022). Comments invoking the same focus of transparency articulate appreciation in The Try Guys explanation of corporate policy and procedure. This emphasis on transparency is indicative of a public expectation of affiliated parties embroiled in a power controversy to be forthcoming with their involvement, decision making, and response to the public. As another commentor notes,

The Try Guys took a stand in integrity and commitment in business and for the love of family. This is not just a brand, but a way to be. I hope you all are doing well, and that your choice in stoic goodness and the

adherence of true virtues has come with the reward of warmth and self-esteem. I'm here to sit on this video again to show my gratitude for your attitude because money doesn't hurt either. Keep looking boldly in that mirror guys! (@pretzelandmustard, 2022).

Articulations of individualistic characteristics such as “integrity” and “commitment,” commonly used to describe individuals, onto that of brand suggests that, though The Try Guys argue that Fulmer violated corporate policy, that abuses of power are personal and responses to these allegations are assessed based off of personable qualities. Further, comments like these reinforce the necessity of clarity and transparency to, first, absolve guilt associated in power controversies and, second, as an antecedent to proceed in deliberations of power.

Just as there are comments articulating appreciation in The Try Guys’ transparency in the process utilized in investigating Fulmer’s misconduct, commenters also prioritize the sincerity in the emotions communicated by the group. One comment underscores this emergent theme by stating,

There are very VERY few videos on this site that feel this genuine, I could feel the pain these guys were exhibiting and its been hard not to cry. You guys have been handling this situation to the best of your abilities and knowledge, and I have gained so much respect for you all as creators and people who deserve their platform and company they have built. These are 3 guys that love what they do and clearly show it. Best of luck for the future, it can only go up from here and as far as I can see, the sky is beautiful (@zoeunknown, 2022).

Comments like these pair both the transparency of process and sincerity of emotions as qualifiers as an acceptable response to contentious public discourse. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, participants of discourse articulated awareness in recognizing “what happened” as a scripted statement with little to no verbal deviation from the carefully crafted script. Yet, participants are keen on distinctions of emotions and nonverbal indicators of affection throughout the Try Guys’ video. The prominence of how forthcoming the group is juxtaposed with a concise, direct script enables discourse participants to trust the content enough to prescribe judgement on the video’s validity before integrating it as a trustworthy source in their subsequent discourse.

This section focused on the role of transparency and revisited the use of emotions as an indicator of sincerity within comment discourse of “what happened.” Commenters expressed appreciation of The Try Guys’ forthcoming chronology of the measures that the company took to investigate Fulmer’s misconduct. Further, notions evaluating the sincerity of their statement based off of qualifiers of emotional sincerity from commentors suggests that perceived authenticity serves as a check in using a statement to further discuss implications of power in public discourse. While this chapter focused on the discourse present in a widely accepted response to power abuse, the next section will turn to the James Charles apology series to assess how the public negotiates responses to allegations of injustice over time and progression of deliberation.

James Charles Apology Trilogy

While the previous two case studies aimed to provide a critical analysis of discourse of power-adjacent controversies that were perceived to be adequately and

inadequately addressed by online public figures, the next section is tasked in introducing James Charles and his respective controversies to understand how controversies of power are negotiated over time and context. While this section will provide an overview of controversies in an abbreviated form, this section will also synthesize discourse occurrent over an extended period of time.

Overview of Initial Controversy

James Dickinson, known online as James Charles, is best known for achieving internet and mainstream fame as a YouTube content creator, brand ambassador, and reality competition host. Though Charles began his YouTube career of curating makeup tutorials on the video sharing site in 2015, Charles became popular by the circulation of bringing his own ring light—a portable lighting fixture popularly used by YouTube makeup artists to best accentuate their work—to his school-sanctioned senior portraits in 2016 (Cardellino, 2017). As Charles’ online prescreens through circulation of the Twitter meme, creative makeup artistry, and popularization of Gen-Z colloquialisms such as “scandal,” “sister,” and “pinkity-drinkity,” he achieved mainstream fame as he became CoverGirl Cosmetics first male spokesman as a “CoverBoy” and celebrity guests became mainstays as guests on his YouTube Channel (Andrews, 2016). Prior to his 2019 scandal with fellow make-up influencer Tati Westbrook, Charles was the most-followed beauty influencer on YouTube (Flora, 2021). His combined internet and mainstream fame lead to him becoming the host of YouTube’s original reality show, *Instant Influencers* and the face of one of makeup brand Morphe’s most popular collaborations with the “James Charles Artistry Palette” (Tenbarger, 2021). Charles was further embraced by the public as

a queer icon as he came-out as gay to his parents at the age of 12 and popularizing an androgynous style index among his Gen-Z fanbase (Calfee, 2019).

Charles quickly became entrenched in YouTube culture and strengthened his ties to other YouTube content creators. Most notably, Charles became close friends with YouTuber Tati Westbrook, who became a mainstay of the YouTube makeup community starting in 2010 with her “drug store beauty” tutorials (Krause, 2021). In Tati’s (now deleted) YouTube video, “BYE SISTER,” that would initiate Charles’ slew of controversies, she would reflect on her closeness with Charles and how she thought of him as a son and that she invited him to be her makeup artist on her wedding day (Tati, 2019). Through his famous connections, Charles grew his fanbase and cemented his status as a top tier influencer. Yet, just as quickly as Charles achieved celebrity status, controversy would divide his fanbase and he would be intertwined in one of the largest internet controversies to date.

In May of 2019, Tati Westbrook released “BYE SISTER.” Similar to Westbrook’s usual uploads, she greets her audience in her pristine, modern make-up studio. However, her usual approach of introducing herself and the new makeup products she would review was replaced by how she would be using nearly forty-five minutes to air her grievances with Charles. Westbrook, who had recently ventured into developing her own vitamin and supplement business called “Halo Beauty,” claimed that her primary charge against her friend was that he promoted her brand’s largest competitor, Sugarbear Hair (Tati, 2019). The complaint articulated by Westbrook followed her ad-hoc, emotionally charged Instagram story posted by her upon seeing Charles’ promotion of her brand’s rival competitor. Westbrook contextualizes her post for viewers by

chronicling how she had asked Charles' to promote Halo Beauty in the past but had refused on account of not wanting to solicit supplements to his young audience. However, Westbrook argues, Charles swiftly advertised similar supplements from Sugarbear Hair to his social media upon the brand offering him last minute tickets to the Coachella music festival. Westbrook justified her initial emotional reaction that similarly condemned Charles by expressing her endearment in her relationship with him and the betrayal she felt as a mentor to the young creator (Tati, 2019). However, the following allegations from Westbrook would be what embroiled Charles into a controversy of power abuse.

Westbrook's allegations of power abuse against Charles would be what would ignite public outcry against the now disgraced content creator. Through the video, Westbrook stated that Charles would use his status to make unwelcome advances on straight men and to make hypersexual remarks to and about men he found attractive (Tati, 2019). Westbrook speaks generally as she reflects on instances when Charles was inappropriate to the point to where she felt that she had to apologize at a dinner party and then gets more specific in providing an anecdote of Charles "talking in detail about what [he] wanted to do to the waiter" (Tati, 2019). She explains that when she told Charles that the waiter was straight, he replied with "it doesn't matter, I'm a celebrity" (Tati, 2019). Upon the "BYE SISTER" upload, Charles lost nearly 3 million subscribers as fans articulated their outrage through YouTube comments and social media posts (Kaur, 2019). The public, in all of their angst towards Charles, appeared to celebrate his downfall as viewers watched channels that were dedicated to the real-time drop in Charles' subscribers and the exponential growth of Westbrook's (Wilson, 2020). The

“BYE SISTER” video was added with accusations made by Westbrook questioning the integrity of Charles’ character and commitments. However, Westbrook’s video was viewed as the introduction of Charles’ inappropriate behavior towards romantic interests to the public.

No More Lies

A week after Westbrook uploaded, “BYE SISTER,” Charles uploaded his official response titled, “no more lies” to his YouTube Channel. While this video would serve as an official response to Westbrook’s allegations, this would be Charles’ second attempt at reconciling his reputation. Only a few hours after Westbrook’s video, Charles uploaded a now-deleted video titled “tati.” In “tati,” a tired, bare-faced Charles weeps his apologies to Westbrook and her husband, lamenting his actions that led to her explosive response (James Charles, 2019).

Context of Controversy

James Dickinson, known online as James Charles, is best known for achieving internet and mainstream fame as a YouTube content creator, brand ambassador, and reality competition host. Though Charles began his YouTube career of curating makeup tutorials on the video sharing site in 2015, Charles became popular by the circulation of bringing his own ring light—a portable lighting fixture popularly used by YouTube makeup artists to best accentuate their work—to his school-sanctioned senior portraits in 2016 (Cardellino, 2017). As Charles’ online prescreens through circulation of the Twitter meme, creative makeup artistry, and popularization of Gen-Z colloquialisms such as “scandal,” “sister,” and “pinkity-drinkity,” he achieved mainstream fame as he became CoverGirl Cosmetics first male spokesman as a “CoverBoy” and celebrity guests became

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While this would be the precedent for the first apology video, more power-oriented controversies developed and he provided several apologies for various scandals developed through the course of Charles’ career. Many apologies were given through Instagram stories, tweets, and in the introduction of other content for the use of racial slurs, insensitive comments to makeup brands, and refusing to adhere to health regulations during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, James has made three defense and

apology YouTube videos to address predatory behavior towards young men over and under the legal consenting age. In order to fully understand commenters responses to Charles's videos and how they make sense of the rhetorical strategies, the following sections will conduct brief textual analyses of the apologies before delving into emergent themes to understand how discourse can be revisited through different contexts and responses to power abuses can be negotiated through chronological, referential, and spatial recontextualizations.

No More Lies Response

In Charles' video *No More Lies* (2019), James addresses a series of allegations made against him from his former friend, co-creator, and beauty vlogger Tati Westbrook in her video *Bye, Sister* (2021). The context of this video forebears much of the context for subsequent videos and allegations. Tati's video, the title mocking Charles' catchphrase "Hi, sisters!" used to greet his audiences, addresses her feelings of Charles' participating in a brand deal with Sugar Bear (Westbrook. 2019). Westbrook owns Halo Beauty, a beauty vitamin and supplement brand, who considers Sugar Bear her biggest corporate rival. Westbrook alleged that Charles would refuse to promote Tati's brand due to his discomfort with advertising vitamins to his young audience, but did a promotion for Sugar Bear on his Instagram story. In return, Charles received coveted V.I.P. tickets to Coachella (Westbrook, 2019) To further illustrate her hurt, Westbrook explained her long, personal history with Charles from featuring him on her channel as a young creator, to promoting his eyeshadow collaboration with Morphe, and inviting him to her wedding to do her bridal makeup (Westbrook 2019). In refreshing her audience of her personal history with Charles', she alleges that through this close relationship, she became privy to

Charles' predatory behavior to straight men or men questioning their sexuality. From there, most of her video lent itself to charging Charles in a number of sexual assault and harassment allegations. While Westbrook alluded to a history of Charles's predatory behavior, she allegorized this pattern through the narrative of one victim that viewers would later know as Gage (Westbrook, 2019).

Charles initially responded to Westbrook's video with a brief YouTube upload titled "TATI" (2019). Quickly deleted from Charles's channel, viewers watched him deliver an emotionally laden, incoherent apology to Tati and her husband while crying. In stark contrast, *No More Lies* featured Charles systematically addressing Westbrook's (and other's) allegations. Charles begins by addressing his original apology and states "I stand behind 100%" the sentiments of his apology (00:18). Then, Charles' proceeded to show evidence through in the form of screenshots and timestamps, known colloquially as "receipts" to prove Tati's allegations of Charles selfishly accepting Coachella tickets as misconstrued. Here, Charles shows denial in his intent by explaining that he needed the VIP tickets to the Coachella weekend he was already attending on account of 1) VIP tickets were already sold out and 2) he was being attacked by fans in the general admission segments. Later, Charles also provides receipts that his relationship with Gage was consensual and the maliciousness in the relationship was not on his part, but Gage's. Charles explains that Gage questioned his sexuality but used Charles after coming to the realization that he was not queer and, therefore, could not be romantically interested in Charles (Charles, 2019). Again, Charles uses the strategy of denial to shift blame to the real culprit of his offenses—Gage and the crowd control of Coachella.

Further, Charles reduces the offensiveness of the allegations through minimization and differentiation through his use of receipts by arguing not only did he let Gage go after coming to terms with his sexuality but showed his refusal to let Gage back into his life months later when Gage claimed he wanted to resume his relationship with Charles. Charles's use of denial and reducing offensiveness was paired with a constant b-roll of screenshots of text conversations and call logs made to Charles' phone at the time of the allegations. Additionally, Charles addresses also reduces the offensiveness of his comments he has made to straight men on social media by implying there is a double standard towards women who respond provocatively to males versus gay men who respond provocatively towards males. Charles then makes a transcendental appeal by stating that "for me as a gay man to [direct message] the same person in private with a simple compliment is 'predatory.'" These stereotypes on gay men had been and continue to be very harmful to the community and have been historically used to villainize gay men in society" (25:42). Charles concluded with corrective action—but mainly for him. Charles promised his audience that he would be more mindful of his social media interactions and romantic relationships to avoid allegations of predatory behavior, but primarily focused on promising his viewers he was going to prioritize his mental health to create a more positive channel (Charles, 2019).

Comments at the time of the video's publication primarily praised James for his bravery as well as organized manner of addressing the allegations praising his use of "receipts" where his accusers had none. One commentator praised Charles' video as a triumph over his accusers by stating, "this boy pulled the biggest uno reverse in [YouTube] history" (2019). However, there were a few commentators who questioned his

lack of sincerity from how professional his response seemed. Consequentially, Charles pinned his own comment to the thread stating, “Yes, this response is ‘planned’. I said in the first few minutes of the video that I had an outline of points I needed to hit and I practiced my speaking too. Not trying to hide anything, just had a lot of things to get into one video” (Charles, 2019). Additionally, Charles addressed disputes of timestamps and time zone differences as well as missing a couple of screenshots for his responses. Generally, at the time of publication and to several revisiting the video a year to two years later, the public seemed to deem Charles’ defense not only sufficient, but sincere.

References to Charles’ character were also a common theme found, often referencing the creator’s demeanor before and after the allegations were made. One viewer stated, “James is usually so fun, it’s horrible he was treated this way” (2019). Many commentators referenced their unwavering belief in Charles’ morality and intent and that the video only reaffirmed their faith and support of the creator. A year after the original publication, a commentator praises James Charles by adding, “Looking back on the way James handled this situation, I have a lot of respect for him. He was a teenager dealing with grown adults acting like children” (2020). Others called out Charles’ accusers hoping they rectify their harmful accusations for Charles’ mental wellbeing.

Since this study took place three years after Charles’ *No More Lies*, top comments were inundated with users rewatching the video as well as revisiting the channel to comment on contemporary allegations against Charles. Many commentators used the phrase “aged like milk” to show that, in hindsight, Charles’ response was not sincere as he was later involved in another scandal with allegations of predatory behavior. Many marked the timestamp of 12:33-12:35 of him promising that he would never use his

power as a wealthy, well known internet celebrity to solicit sexual favors from anyone to note a retroactive irony in his statement. Other commentators revisited the page to call for Charles' criminal arrest. However, it is important to note that a few recent comments still defend Charles.

Holding Myself Accountable

In March 2021, Charles was accused of contacting fans who below the age of consent on various social media platforms with suggestive content. Charles' victims posted various Tik Toks and Twitter threads giving their accounts of Charles' misconduct, the average age being 16 years old. As of 2024, Charles is 24 years old (Osifo, 2021). As an immediate response, Charles released a statement on Twitter claiming he found an individual on Instagram, contacted him, and was lied to about his age (@jamescharles, 2021). After he was dropped from several collaborations, Charles uploaded *Holding Myself Accountable* as a response. Prior to uploading his updated response to the allegations, *An Open Conversation*, Charles deleted *Holding Myself Accountable* from his channel. Thus, only fan transcripts of the video and a preliminary scraping of the top 100 comments were available for this study.

Charles sets the tone of *Holding Myself Accountable* by juxtaposing his current response to that of *No More Lies*. While Charles' former video was highly technical, overtly produced, and featured a B-roll edit of receipts and evidence, Charles notes that his current video should be considered the obverse. The beauty influencer known for his elaborate make-up looks points out that he is barefaced, he is going off-script, his team that usually fills his studio is not there, and that he is alone in his house filming in the early hours of the morning. In that first observation, Charles sets the general tone for his

apology—the image repair tactics of mortification and corrective action. Charles states that he knows he is wrong and that he takes these allegations very seriously. In turn, Charles apologizes to his victims. Then, he expresses that he recognizes the imbalance of power present between himself, an adult and a celebrity, and underage fans. He argues that he should have taken precautionary measures, such as asking for ID's and passports to verify the age of his victims before engaging in suggestive conversations that they legally cannot consent to as minors. And, from there, that he is reevaluating the ways he chooses to date and that he should not stalk potential partners on the internet. As a parting message to his viewers, he states that he will continue the corrective action of continuing to educate himself as he navigates his stardom and that he will be taking a break from the internet.

Most comments in the top 100 thread indicated a concern for Charles' well being. Their comments ask Charles where he is on his break, how he is doing, and if he plans on returning to the internet. These comments seem to serve as welfare checks on the creator while indicating that he will still have a fan base once he returns from his hiatus. The general tone of the thread was anxious for his return, one user reaching out to other viewers stating “I love how we come back every day to just check up in James. Who still loves him ? Or am I the only one” (2021). The top comments seemed responsive to his strategy of corrective action and mortification, but did not reference any content of the video—rather, they focused on the acceptance of Charles as a person.

Comments that were not supporting James Charles as a beloved creator seemed to point out the ratio of likes to dislikes. Many noted that he got “ratio'd,” or received equal to or more dislikes to likes on his video. This is perceived as an indicator of how well a

video does, regardless of the amounts or content of the comments. One user stated, “Ok so first, not trying to remind everyone.... but look at the like and dislike ratio.....” (2021). The comments regarding the ratio of the likes to dislikes aired a mocking tone and were typically paired with sentiments being suspicious of Charles’ for finding himself accused with predatory behavior for a second time and how their lack of belief in his sincerity since this is the second defense video he has made.

An Open Conversation

Charles returned from his two month hiatus with *An Open Conversation*. Charles opened his video apologizing for his ignorance of the age of his victims as well as the awareness he would need to address subsequent allegations before resuming his regular content. However, as the creator updated his viewers in how he has experienced “personal growth and self reflection” during his hiatus, Charles noted that he wanted to address the allegations how he felt the most comfortable—by doing a makeup tutorial while he spoke. Charles stated that his last video came under fire from viewers saying the previous video was “scripted” and tense. The beauty vlogger maintained his argument that he was lied to about the age of two victims, but that other accusations of grooming and inappropriate relationships with multiple other victims was overtly false. James notes that since his last video, that over 16 young men falsely reported being harassed by the creator.

Throughout the video, Charles used the strategies of denial by displacing blame of his tarnished reputations on false accusations that ran rampant during his hiatus. Charles continued to deny, but through his intent of the matter—he did not intent to prey on minors, he was just looking for a pure, romantic relationship and happened to be lied to

multiple times. In turn, Charles also reduced the offensiveness of his actions by claiming ignorance. Further, Charles reduced the offensiveness of his actions by arguing that his current situations should not be called a “scandal” as that implies a form of validity to false accusations. Finally, Charles makes cross references to his series of apologies in his final video. In doing so, he bolsters his reputation by claiming that he has made positive changes to his dating life and tactics since his 2019 video and that the false accusations belittle the growth that he has made.

Comments in the video were generally negative towards Charles’s final video. The first theme that was overwhelmingly prevalent were tweets mocking Charles’s last effort to explain how he was not guilty of the accusations made against him. Several comments followed the format of someone “trying to explain” something perceived as unrealistic or difficult to justify to another person. For example, one commentor joked, “Me trying to explain to my mom how my ‘whole class got a bad grade’ not just me” or “me trying to convince my math teacher to round up my 59% to a 99%” (2021). Other comments following this format were directly referencing other YouTube creators who have offended their audiences while likening the severity of Charles’s offenses to theirs. For example, one commentor posted “Nikita Dragun trying to explain why she changes races every 24 hours,” alluding to how Dragun, another creator and Charles’s friend, is accused of cultural appropriation through intentionally darkening and lightening her skin. Others pointed out confusion in how Charles was doing his makeup while addressing serious accusations by stating, “He’s definitely taking this seriously because he’s doing his eye makeup” (2021). Another commentor added the similarity of his use of apologetic

strategies by saying, “he’s had a conversation before and just repeats himself every single time. Do better” (2021).

Emergent Themes in Charles’ Collective Comment Discourse

Through the analysis of the apologetic strategies Charles used to defend his reputation and restore his image, a number of themes were prevalent within the comments. While the previous section elaborated on the context and content of Charles’ videos, the synthesis of comment data will elaborate on the themes found in comments threads.

Receipts and Authenticity

As Charles’ audience deliberated on the acceptance or rejection of the apology videos, the theme of “receipts” was a consistent highlight in the discourse. In *No More Lies*, Charles was praised for his use of receipts in his apology and commentors associated his use of screenshots and timestamps as a form of integrity of his argument and sincerity of his character. Thus, audiences were able to believe his denial of intent as well as shifting the blame to other actors. This raises the question, though: was Charles successful in his initial apology because he had receipts or because his accusers lacked them? Jon Ronson, author of “So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed” notes that receipts are typically private conversations and transactions between two parties that are later broadcasted on a public stage to further an agenda. He states, “We want to pretend that what happens on the Internet isn’t the real world, that it’s just a game...But of course, it’s not. This whole receipts culture is part of that cognitive dissonance” (Dodes, 2019, pp. 6).

The realization of the cognitive dissonance between viewers consuming the offenses as entertainment, the accuser, and the accused is further illuminated through the

progression of discourse as Charles uploads more responses to his offenses. As more allegations come forth about Charles, commentators notice that the creator has stopped using evidence in his videos and, in turn, the viewers bring their own evidence into the discussion. While the evidence may not be as personal as Charles' screenshots in *No More Lies*, viewers reference the evidence they know exists (Twitter threads, other YouTubers covering Charles' accusations, etc.) as a way to supplement the lack of evidence that Charles brings forth. In turn, it appears that viewers supplement evidence where they view it is lacking—often times, not supporting Charles' defense. As the next emergent theme reveals, users use Charles' previous apology videos against him as a form of evidence, yet again questioning his sincerity as time passes.

The use of receipts bears several important implications in the realm of new media and public deliberation. As communicative technologies evolve, so does the use and understanding of what counts as evidence. However, evidence is nonetheless consistently expected. Users have a hyperawareness that evidence exists on the internet more so than any other medium, evident through the constant questioning of receipts, the practice of embedding timestamps into comments to cross reference inconsistencies, as well as the awareness of what responses seem “planned” as opposed to “authentic.” As the internet grows and harbors more direct access for the public to deliberate on social as well as political conflict, it's important for scholars to evolve their technical understanding of what counts as evidence to match the public's colloquial use of receipts as a valid form of evidence.

Like Milk/Revisitation

Many comments to Charles' older apologies showed a trend in viewers revisiting an old apology to make a public statement about how his apology, in retrospect, seems insincere in light of new accusations. Compared to the most recent *An Open Conversation*, comments referencing Charles's repeated behavior were more interacted with and prevalent on *No More Lies* despite it being posted 3 years prior. This theme points to not only the aforementioned public fascination of receipt culture, but the audience's awareness that other members are revisiting older content and displacing the contemporary debate on an older forum. In turn, the public recontextualizes Charles' apology over time. Further, the awareness of the like to dislike ratio and noting that observation in a comment also points to the public's perceptiveness to sincerity. As previous scholars have noted, YouTube creators and viewers use click rating as an indicator of the status of their parasocial relationship. With commentators revisiting videos to point out the ratio, the argument is again recontextualized to reflect the amount of likes or dislikes a video has.

This recontextualization points to two observations. First, the recontextualization of current discourse is used to delegitimize *both* previous and current defenses simultaneously. By showing how an apology or defense has "aged like milk," commentators show that both defenses are invalid in a single comment through pointing out inconsistencies over time. Second, the digital sphere harbors a unique space for recontextualizing and remixing of deliberation—especially YouTube with the ability to literally use the words of a creator against them in times of dispute. Users are able to easily track information in less than a second and advance deliberation more effectively than ever before. Further, the digital sphere allows for users to engage in deliberation

directly rather than relying on organizations or state actors (Habermas, 1989). While the deliberation of YouTuber apologies and political agendas differ in many ways, the essence of recontextualizing arguments in the digital sphere largely remains the same.

Power Structures

While previous scholars have established that YouTube is unique in its ability to build personal, parasocial relationships between creators and viewers (Chen, 2016), the lack of responsiveness to Charles' attempts to deny his intent and reduce offensiveness shows a shift in the public's awareness of the power structures embedded in the platform. While many users' comments still remain testament to their positive parasocial relationship with Charles, the discourse also reveals the public's awareness that, despite how personal YouTube videos may appear, that many creators still have the status of celebrity and that there is a power imbalance in their interactions. In terms of receiving apologies, future research should be done on the similarities between traditional celebrities and internet celebrities as well as their receptiveness. The public became more aware of Charles' status in relation to his fans as time progressed. As YouTube grows as a platform, the use of apologetic strategies and insights the public gains are sure to evolve as well. I argue that the awareness of Charles' power imbalance with fans contributed the distrust over time of his apologies.

Implications from Discourses

Throughout this chapter, I have identified emergent themes within and conducted a critical analysis of comment discourse found in Colleen Ballinger's, *The Try Guys*, and James Charles' apology videos for their respective power abuse controversies. Each of these analyses aimed to analyze discourse representative of rejected, accepted, and

negotiated rejoinders from online public figures by their respective publics. In framing this chapter, I ask:

RQ 5: How do parasocial relationships/interactions formed with content creators affect the public deliberation of an online controversy?

To answer this question, I turn to the implication of contextualization, associative emotions with parasocial relationships with content creators, and the use of narrative as emergent themes in all three arenas of power abuse discourses.

Contextualization

Comment discourse of accepted, rejected, and negotiated response In reflecting on the form and function of general public discourse, Fairclough and Wodak (1996) argue that all discourse is mediated, but discourse participants articulate their arguments by repurposing meanings found in other discourses. As Wodak notes, “Embedded in larger socio-historical configurations and structures, discursive practices can operate with various types of media—oral, written, multimodal, allowing large or small numbers of participants to communicate over shorter or longer distances” (2020, p. xxiii). Results from this study confirm Wodak’s (2020) argument that participants embed meaning into their discourse to nuance their argument. As demonstrated in the discourses of rejection towards Ballinger and the public’s process of (re)negotiating Charles’ apologies, discourse participants rely heavily upon the use of receipts and their referencing them to strengthen their dissent against Ballinger and Charles. Further, as discussed in the Charles cases study, the use of receipts in discourse invokes an expectation of substantiation from discourse participants in deliberating the impacts of power abuse.

Discourse participants also utilize (re)contextualization in their deliberations by referencing mainstream discourses in order to articulate a response to the controversies of power. Through all three case studies, an awareness in the difference in nuance between locally mediated discourses and mainstream coverage suggests that online discourse participants feel that online argument is the best forum in articulating discourses of power. This action instills Fairclough's (1989) postulation that "discursive practices are cut off from their embeddedness in action and transformed into discourses which are articulated together in new ways according to the logic of the recontextualising practice; and transformed from real to imaginary, and brought into the space of ideology" (p. 399). In essence, participants utilize recontextualization of mainstream discourses in online deliberations of power to dually shame mainstream coverages of power-abuse events and strengthens their own "takes" as the inherently stronger position.

Further, as the Charles case study suggests, participants do not only recontextualize the arguments found in other discourses, but they will transplant their own arguments from current discourses into older discursive formations. Formed by contextualization of knowledge garnered through time of Charles' continued abuse of power, participants inserted themselves into the previous discourse of previous apology chapters in order to articulate disdain for Charles's actions. Further, comments such as "this aged like milk" show that contextualization is used as a negotiating force in how the public perceives responses from public figures. While some discourse are representative of Fairclough's argument that "social negotiation and renegotiation as wordings are repeated in shifting contexts," (2010, p. 174) collective adoption of topos such as "like milk" indicate public consciousness in understanding how perceptions of power transform over time. As such, their insertion into

previous discourses serve as a means for them to express a shift in public consensus as context reshapes their understanding of the power abuse.

Associative Emotions

Second, comment discourse from the three-case study underscores the public's use of associative feelings with their parasocial relationships with creators as tools to articulate their deliberations of the effects of power abuse from online public figures. Stronger parasocial relationships between the viewer and a YouTube apologizing for their transgressions are indicative of a higher acceptance from the viewer (Hu et al., 2019). However, this chapter seeks to explore how that parasocial relationship is represented through mentions of emotions and, subsequently, how the emotions associated with the parasocial relationship affect discourses of power. There were two emergent themes of associative emotions present in the three case study discourses: the role of emotions regarding sincerity and authenticity. As this section will explore, audiences utilized perceptions of sincerity in how the content creators intertwined their own emotions and authenticity in understanding how the power controversy effected victims in order to articulate their responses.

Commenters utilized perceptions of sincere emotions in order to formulate their responses in the three discourses from the respective case studies. Previous literature suggests that perceptions of sincerity in mediated apologies influence the likelihood of acceptance (Osterman & Hecmanczuk, 2020). In taking this assumption, this chapter aims to investigate how perceptions of sincerity are communicated through public discourses of power. All three discourses indicated that viewers utilized the context gained through their parasocial relationships to assign meaning and sincerity to the

indicated emotions from the content creators. For the Try Guys in particular, discourse participants utilized their parasocial emotions to displace emotions cultivated by the parasocial relationship onto the group rather than relying on the trio's own articulations in meaning; consequentially, the strength of the parasocial relationship was used to satisfy the need for sincerity by viewers. As Scherer, et al. (2022) notes, the higher capacities of empathy are associated with stronger parasocial relationships. Through this study, however, I argue that parasocial relationships can be used to provide emotional nuance to the content creators' apologies as a method to empathize to accept, reject, or negotiate power abuse controversies.

Yet, as shown through the Ballinger case study, too much focus on feelings of the public figure during an apology can be counterproductive; viewers are more likely to find the emotions of an apology sincere when they can experience them through the medium and bolstered through their parasocial relationship. Too much verbal emphasis in talking about the creator's emotions does not allow for participants to refocus discourse back to the original stasis point of the power controversy. In turn, they view emotions as a delegitimizing tool to subvert accusations of power abuse. The role of sincere emotions is further complicated by the Charles case study that looks at how parasocial interpretations of emotions can be negotiated over time and context. Viewers not only utilized Charles' current demeanor to assess emotional sincerity, but developed discourses as he released more statements regarding subsequent power abuse allegations. While this could be indicative of a change in parasocial relationship intensity as Charles' became embroiled in more controversies of power, references to the change of perceptions in sincerity were

resituated in previous discursive formations as viewers revisited Charles' older apology videos.

In assessing authenticity of the reply, a critical analysis of comment data from the three case studies pointed to positive feedback from viewers when they felt that the apology was authentic in the content creators' understanding of the power imbalance. As discussed in The Try Guys' response and James Charles' initial explanation, understandings how power is permeated from those of status to those subordinated was appreciated by discourse participants. However, through the data harvested through Ballinger's case study, discourse participants articulated rejection of the "hi" response when inherent power structures were not addressed or disavowed from the agitator. Further, although Charles initially communicated understanding of power-oriented misconduct, participants quickly articulated dissent towards the content creator as their parasocial relationship changed as allegations accrued. Therefore, I argue, that participants in discourse will not only change their levels of empathy as their parasocial relationship deteriorates but, they will articulate the shift in identification through recontextualizations of discourse regarding controversies of power.

Narrative

Finally, references to and articulations of narrative were prevalent themes throughout the three case studies provided in this chapter. As Theye (2008) specifies, a well-framed, coherent narrative is imperative for a successful apology. As such, a critical analysis of the Try Guys', Ballinger's, and James Charles' apologies points to methods in which those online personas accused of power abuse can adopt to portray an accepted or rejected apology video. Within the synthesis of data, the roles of victim or victimization

in combination with articulations of power structure were prevalent in understanding the consistent role of narrative in the three case studies. Throughout the three case studies, the roles of victimization and power were prevalent in the evoked emergent themes.

As discussed in the Ballinger apology case study and critical analysis of discourse, commenters indicated that when the perceived perpetrator attempted to assume the role of the victim, discourse participants rejected the apology of the public figure. Further, upon a deep reading of comment data, participants rejected tactics that shifted blame or reversed victimization within the narrative and made conscious efforts to return to more “true” victim oriented discourse. However, discourse both accepted and rejected apologies (Ballinger and The Try Guys) provided participant accounts that utilized narrative as a sense-making tactic to understand the controversy in order to articulate their contributions to public discourse. As such, in order to garner support, a narrative of events that is personal to the content creators is crucial to invoke the parasocial support from participants. Yet, as the Charles’ case study indicates, initially provided narratives can be renegotiated over time and context through mainstream coverage and receipts to renegotiate the meaning attached to narratives.

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I aimed to investigate how the public responds to and continues to engage in discourses of power in a mediated context. More specifically, I conducted a critical analyses in discourses local to the YouTube domain in order to analyze the tactics used by the public in order to expand upon Chapter 5 and in order to answer:

RQ 5: How do parasocial relationships/interactions formed with content creators affect the public deliberation of an online controversy?

Findings from this chapter focused on the discourses present in the accepted and rejected apology videos mentioned in Chapter 5. Further, an overview of the case study of the James Charles apology series served to provide an understanding of how power controversies and consensuses of their discourses can be negotiated over time and context. As such, the participants' perceptions of emotional sincerity, displaced sincerity, contextualization, and narrative coherence bore great impact in the formation of power-conscious discourses. In order to synthesize findings and situate the current findings into academic discourses, the next chapter will aim to address the larger research goal and discuss the synthesis of findings.

CHAPTER VII – Conclusion

The evolution of social media, accessibility to discourse, as well as instantaneous connection to public figures and other interlocutors has proved new media as a rejuvenation of the public sphere as a viable avenue for average participants aiming to contribute to public deliberation. This dissertation, though broken down into smaller research questions, aimed to answer the broader inquiry to critically assess how mediated participants utilize new media spheres to deliberate upon perceptions of power. Comprehensive findings from the study suggest that participants who engage in discourses related to online controversy incorporate critiques of power throughout their argumentation and routinely return to stasis points of ideological conflict in their deliberations.

However, the synthesis of findings from the five content chapters also suggests that interlocutors construct these ideological critiques of power abuse through their structural understanding of hegemony. In short, interlocutors do not generate discourses that reckon with ideological conflict within the context of an online controversy alone; rather, they utilize the accessibility to power-conscious discourses that social media and social media entertainment provide and utilize online controversies as a vehicle to deliberate on larger ideological structures. In order to generate this major premise on the status of how participants in ideological discourse utilize new media to engage in deliberations of power, I explored a different research question and case study through each of the content chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter 3 explored practical parameters for online controversy as well as theoretical constraints and unique offerings of new media's use of deliberative rhetoric.

In order to garner an understanding of what qualifies as an online controversy before delving into its discourse, I asked:

RQ 1: What are the publicly agreed upon characteristics that qualify an internet controversy that invites public deliberation?

To navigate these constraints, I turned to an assessment of the content produced by YouTube commentary channels and their methods of reporting on internet controversy. Findings from this section indicated that, in order for an online news event to be considered controversial, participants of discourse must prescribe labels of controversy rather than those who report on the events. Further, commentary channel form and reporting suggests that participants in these discourses decode distinctions of ideological conflict by portraying online controversies as abuses of power by Internet celebrities. In order to articulate ideological arguments of power abuse, participants utilized their parasocial relationships with content creators alleged of wrong doing as well as refashioning of alternate discourses laden with contextual nuance and “receipts” to substantiate their claims.

With this understanding of the classification of online controversies and the characteristics that invite the public’s deliberation, I turn to a theoretical assessment of how deliberative rhetoric is used in new media spheres of discourse by asking:

RQ 2: How does online argumentation restructure Habermas’s original notion deliberative rhetoric?

To answer this question, I turn to Goodnight’s (1982) argument that deliberative rhetoric has deteriorated in recent years. Goodnight posits that as discourse becomes more technical, the lay person cannot keep up with the necessary

verbiage or knowledge to meaningfully contribute to public deliberation. As a result, current public deliberation, according to Goodnight, has been diluted to appeal to the masses and can never yield a meaningful debate; thus, true policy matters are obscured from the public and the art of deliberative rhetoric is lost to the ordinary citizens. I argue that Goodnight's (1982) assertion about the quality of public deliberation of questions of policy is correct. However, in light of the plethora of available knowledge and points of entry to public discourse, the public has utilized mass and new media to debate upon ideological concerns of policy rather than the policies itself. Tandem with the popularity of deliberating upon online controversies, the public engages in argument about what is considered a power abuse and how the public should proceed in addressing the power abuse through contextualization of alternate and subsequent discourses and in using their parasocial relationship to articulate their claims.

In Chapter 4, I first exemplify this theoretical insight by examining how online social movements mobilize against ideological conflicts in the physical world by asking:

RQ 3: In what ways are individual reactions to controversial content used to exemplify larger societal unrest regarding controversies of power?

By examining the case study of an online movement known as the AOC TikTok challenge, I argue that rhetors mobilize in a network constituted by the recontextualization of sound and hashtags to engage in deliberation. Through a mediated network, participants were able to achieve collective goals in mobilization to perpetuate a feminist agenda decrying violent language against

women. This was achieved through a practice of cultural masking in lip-syncing AOC's point of personal privilege and by many costuming themselves in notable physical characteristics of the congresswoman throughout the video. Though they donned the cultural mask of AOC through her likeness of appearance and personal experience of enduring violent language against them as women, the online mobilization network was comprised of many sharing individualized experiences to further nuance the pervasiveness of power abuse rooted in misogyny. I argue that while Fotopoulo (2016a) suggests that feminist online movements have focused on individual testimonies rather than traditional movement goals of collectivism and mobilization, platforms such as TikTok allow for online participants to express their individual experiences with power abuse as a method in contributing to a larger movement.

While Chapter 4 focused on online responses to controversies external to the digital sphere, Chapter 5 shifted to examine controversies constituted within the online domain. Analysis of "true" online controversies through this dissertation began by examining a widely rejected and accepted response from YouTube content creators. As YouTube content creators reach the status of "celebrity" by both digital and mainstream standards, a response YouTube video is usually expected by fans and followed through on by these creators. To understand how these responses to controversies rooted in power abuse are articulated and integrated into public discourse, I asked:

RQ 4: How can the use of traditional apologia theory explain what apologies are accepted or rejected in an online forum?

To answer RQ 4, I provided a contextual and critical analysis of Colleen Ballinger's (also: Miranda Sings) response titled "hi"(2023) and The Try Guys' response video titled "what happened" (2022). In the analyses of Ballinger's "hi," I explored how rejected apologies were articulated as they were integrated into public discourse. Through this analysis, I argue that the use of traditional apologetic/image repair strategies of shifting blame and reducing authenticity were counterproductive. Primarily, Ballinger's goal of displacing victimization upon herself rather than the publicly agreed upon victims served as a failed attempt of shifting blame. Through this strategy, Ballinger did not achieve the goal of garnering public sympathy; rather, she manipulated the narrative of victimization in a way that not only alienated herself from primary stasis points of ideological conflict, but delegitimized viable discourses of power. Further, Ballinger's use of reducing offensiveness by claiming she has already taken accountability for her actions through a previous apology distributed years prior.

However, The Try Guys' "what happened" response video served as a precis in exploring how successful apologies and responses are communicated in online controversies of power abuse. A critical analysis of the Try Guys' case study points to the necessity of engaging with public discourse to move arguments forward rather than delegitimizing them. To contribute to the development of discourses of ideology, The Try Guys' response exhibits narrative cohesiveness, verbal and non-verbal emotional authenticity, and clear goals of corrective action. The comparison of Ballinger's' and The Try Guys' case studies suggests that in order for a response to be adopted into public discourse, it must legitimize victims

of the power abuse as well as the public's concerns. Due to receipt culture, outright denial is not a readily available apologetic strategy for content creators embroiled in controversy. Yet, reframing or recontextualization of the receipts can run a risk of the content creator shifting blame in recontextualizing the underlying narrative of the receipts—as exhibited through Ballinger's "hi." In contrast, The Try Guys' emphasis on corrective action enabled for the public to feel involved in "restorative justice" in light of Fulmer's power. Restorative justice further engages the Try Guys with discourse participants as they focus on involving the public in reconciliation of the ideological conflict rather than focusing on "restorative accountability" in simply acknowledging the wrong doing (Kane, 2020). In sum, Chapter 5 indicates the need for restorative justice as a way to legitimize and, subsequently, engage with public discourse in a productive manner. Restorative justice, however, cannot be dictated by the content creators—it must be derived from ideological deliberative rhetoric derived from public discourse.

Chapter 6 shifts focus to the public discourse of the accepted and rejected responses to power abuse and introduces the case study of The James Charles apologies series to investigate how deliberations of ideology are negotiated through time and context. To investigate these discourses, Chapter 5 asks:

RQ 5: How do parasocial relationships/interactions formed with content creators affect the public deliberation of an online controversy?

In conducting a critical discourse analysis of the comment data from the accepted, rejected, and negotiated response videos, I examined emergent themes

present in each discursive formation. Contextualization of alternate discourses was prevalent in all three types of discourses that reckon with ideological conflict. First, the role of contextualization is present through references to alternative discursive formations. In discourses of rejection, (re)contextualization is used in fact checking Ballinger and her narrative of displacing herself as the true victim. Further, (re)contextualization is through the Try Guys' discourse as participants express discontent with mainstream coverage of Fulmer's controversy. This juxtaposition of rejecting mainstream discourses of the controversy with praise of The Try Guys' response in "hi" points to insights into how the public utilizes non-mainstream narratives in their approach to deliberative rhetoric. When deliberating over controversies of power, The Try Guys' comment discourse indicates that power-conscious discourses will find alternative, subordinate discourses more reliable in their integration into ideological deliberative rhetoric. However, in negotiated discourses, (re)contextualization of time, context, and alternate discourses is used as participants revisit the comment section of the video months or years after the initial response. When discourses revisit previous responses from Charles' of abusing his power as an internet celebrity, phrases like, "this aged like milk" suggest that the public can initially accept a response to power abuse, but will revisit previous discourses to interject ideological evaluations based on new developments. As such, negotiated discourses suggest that new media allows for innovative ways to transform public argument through revisitation and (re)contextualization. In revisiting these comment forums after future power abuses, participants in the Charles case study further exemplified the

need for restorative justice rather than restorative accountability by emphasizing the need for perpetual corrective action post-apology.

Additionally, discourse participants in all three discursive formations placed value on emotional sincerity of the messages. Through their parasocial relationships with the creators, discourse participants nuance their interpretations of the response videos and, in turn, their ideological deliberations by the associative emotional sincerity that is either articulated directly by the content creators or that they infer based off of their past parasocial contextualizations. As such, discourse participants use associative feelings with their parasocial relationships with creators as tools to articulate their deliberations of the effects of power abuse from online public figures. Previous literature suggests that stronger parasocial relationships between the viewer and a YouTube apologizing for their transgressions are indicative of a higher acceptance from the viewer (Hu et al., 2019). In the context of power-oriented controversies, the critical analysis of the three case studies suggests that while sincerity in emotions (either described or prescribed) help the public discern appropriate responses of power abuse, content creators focusing too much on their emotions in their response run risk of sounding inauthentic to discourse participants.

The role of sincerity in emotions contributes to a larger participant focus on the necessity of narrative cohesion when addressing a power abuse. Participants from all three case studies underscored the necessity of narrative cohesion. However, participants also utilized narratives to substantiate their support or dissent in ideological deliberations. Through these narratives,

participants intermingled the role of parasocial relationships by focusing on feelings of positivity that they associate with the creator through personal testimonies embedded in their argument. Further, participants reference narrative cohesion in acceptance of responses into public discourse as well. However, as seen in the Ballinger case study, participants portray violation of narrative expectations as a marker of victim delegitimization and, thus, an unacceptable response to deliberations of power abuse. Finally, as the Charles' case study indicates, initially accepted narratives can be renegotiated over time and context through mainstream coverage and receipts to renegotiate the meaning attached to narratives.

Findings from the content chapters of the dissertation point to several larger theoretical insights in studying new media, ideological conflict, and new media. First, as theorized in the first chapter and exemplified through the subsequent case studies, deliberative rhetoric has shifted from questions of policy to questions of ideology. In turn, new media argument spheres propose an intersection in the shift of deliberative rhetoric and new social movements. As Felski (1991), mainstream public spheres of argument does not hold space for nuanced deliberations of power and ideology—therefore, counter spheres emerge to house these discourses. The shift of deliberative rhetoric in new media lends itself to not only providing counterpublics, but in making power-conscious discourses more prevalent. Further, as Touraine (1985) notes, societal struggles are displaced from the realm of economic tangibility to cultural exigencies by arguing that New Social Movements complicate “the production of symbolic

goods, that is, of information and images of culture itself” (p. 774). As social media movements and power conscious discourses become more prevalent on new media, arguments of ideology rather than policy suggest that the public is not only interested articulating ideological argument, but use touchstones of popular culture to negotiate the meaning behind symbolic goods rather than policies that restrict or facilitate their lives in the non-mediated sphere.

As publics utilizes popular culture—especially internet culture—to facilitate deliberations of ideological structure pervasive in their online and offline lives, they become networked in their advocacy through social media’s capacity to connect to others and go “viral.” Yet, a critical read of how new media participants utilize platforms for advocacy through argument or social movements point to individualistic distinctions within the arguments that constitute these networks. Although online spheres allow for multitudes to agree or dissent within their advocacies, the collective experience of new media argumentation is comprised of individualistic distinctions relative to the participant. While traditional social movements focus on gathering support from participants to mobilize behind a common cause, online advocacy allows for participants to unite behind a common front while also how articulating the structural effects of power abuse and ideological structure effect their everyday lives. In turn, the public is able to de-mystify complex theoretical debates of ideology by utilizing platforms that allow them to articulate their own experiences shaped by the pervasiveness of power.

Finally, in combination with articulations of individuality within a collective movement, online argument of ideological conflict is largely comprised of references to parasocial relationships between viewers and internet celebrities accused of abusing their power. However, a critical read of YouTube comment discourses indicates that the parasocial relationships are not an indicator of the severity of the power abuse to discourse participants. Rather, participants utilized their parasocial relationships as a vehicle to facilitate complex ideological deliberations as a common touchstone with other participants. Participants utilize their own parasocial relationships as case studies to make larger ideological concerns more tangible and accessible to public argument. Combined with expression of individualistic reckonings with hegemony, ideological deliberative rhetoric takes the form of interpersonal argumentation as a method of making sense, evaluations, and arguments pertaining to ideology.

Arguments within and perpetuated by new media have provided an accessible arena for the public to participate in public deliberation. Through this dissertation, I argue that the nature of deliberative rhetoric has made an ideological turn as sources of knowledge and methods of advocacy are consistently made more available for any who wish to participate. As public discourse becomes more conscious of the ideological structures that shape their everyday functioning, discourse participants utilize new media as a tool to express their advocacies with unprecedented lack of restrictions. In navigating how to structure ideological arguments, discourse participants in new media spheres present a novel opportunity for scholars to critically assess a rejuvenation in new

methods and strategies of public argument. Similar to the title of one of James Charles' apology videos, new media argumentation has become the foreground in the public's reckoning with ideological conflicts through "an open conversation."

Limitations and Future Research

This dissertation attempted to examine emergent argumentative trends in new media that relate to ideological conflict embedded in controversies both within and outside of internet spheres. As such, a limitation of this study is that it is a critical analysis that is largely explorative in nature. Suggestions for future research would entail a more nuanced exploration of online arguments that pertain to controversies in the "real world" and a separate more nuanced analysis of studies that would be considered "internet drama" by mainstream standards. Further, analyses of the use of (re)contextualization throughout this project referenced participant use of embedding evaluations of mainstream coverage of online news events to bolster their arguments. Future research would benefit in comparing how alternative news sources (i.e., YouTube commentary channels, social media reporting, etc.) and mainstream outlets cover online power controversies differently. Additionally, although this project largely focused on YouTube apologies/responses to power controversies, future research could further develop analysis into these ideological discourses by examining different modes of apologies used by content creators—primarily that of short form content including, but not limited to, Instagram and Snapchat stories, TikToks, as well as Instagram/TikTok live streams. And, of course, the final limitation is that of time and bandwidth of the researcher. Future research should turn towards further

developing the emotional and psychological capacity of the Ph.D. candidate as well as how to create more hours to write in a day.

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