

**The Commercialization of YouTube: Can Apology Videos as a  
Product ever be Authentic?**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, YouTube has evolved from a user-generated platform to a platform that thrives on professionalized and marketable content, otherwise known as the era of the social media influencer (Kim, 2012;). This thesis applies neutralization and Millsian theories to help unpack the widespread fraud and deceptive advertising on the platform within a neoliberal capitalist context. The focal points of this thesis are apology videos in the wake of deceptive/fraudulent advertising scandals, cancel culture, and the symbiotic relationship that influencers and corporations share in paid sponsorships on YouTube. The findings indicate that influencers function similarly to corporate entities during scandals and engage in neutralizations to protect their reputation, brand, and business relationships (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019; Whyte, 2016). This thesis also points to the legal challenges in holding influencers accountable at the level of domestic advertising agencies and on YouTube itself. Lastly, this thesis questions the invisibility of corporations in these scandals regarding how this may be indicative of larger manifestations of corporate power in society.

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## 1. Introduction



### 1.1 Situating Cancel Culture in the Realm of Influencers

In March 2021, videos of social media influencer David Dobrik<sup>2</sup> filming his friends sexually assault and provide alcohol to minors surfaced online (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). The backlash resulted in his fans demanding an apology, and after he issued a poorly worded apology on one of his secondary YouTube channels, subsequent backlash pushed him to issue a second apology on his main YouTube channel (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). The consequences of this scandal and fumbled apologies resulted in Dobrik losing millions of dollars in sponsorships (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). YouTube also demonetized<sup>3</sup> his channel as a formal penalty for the surfaced allegations and misconduct. As a result, Dobrik was effectively ‘cancelled’ (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). This event is just one example of what is more commonly known as cancel culture on social media. Cancelling is the “calling out” or “silencing or boycotting problematic behaviour”

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<sup>1</sup> All rights of the image reserved to YouTube channel Viral Vision.

<sup>2</sup> David Dobrik is an influencer known for his vlogs on YouTube.

<sup>3</sup> Demonetization occurs when YouTube removes income from advertisements on the influencer’s videos. Full demonetization includes all videos not having the ability to gain money from advertisements.

(Luu, 2019, n.p.). It is a process in which fans withdraw their support and boycott a public figure until either an apology or some form of amends is made to address the problematic behaviour (Luu, 2019).

At the forefront of this cancelling was that Dobrik's apology deflected blame and criticism (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). Fans criticized him for uploading the first apology video to his podcast channel (which has less subscribers) instead of his main channel where the video was likely to be seen by more viewers (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). The title 'Let's Talk' and the casual way Dobrik recounts the sexual assault allegations and other accusations of racism<sup>4</sup> was also criticized for failing to acknowledge the severity of the situation (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). For example, his wording, "I missed the mark on that one," upset many fans (Perelli & Bradley, 2021). Just a few months following Dobrik's apology, YouTube removed the demonetization on his channel (Brown, 2021).

The David Dobrik situation depicts a broader issue in the influencer community regarding accountability and cancel culture. It follows a trajectory wherein a problematic behaviour is boycotted, the influencer apologizes, suffers temporary damage to their reputation and sponsorships, and then continues to prosper financially after some time has passed. I argue that these deflections and attempts to minimize criticism in the apology video are intentional tactics to mitigate damage to an influencer's reputation and business relationships. As such, because influencers have a large financial stake and incentive to apologize (Makalintal, 2019), I raise questions about the authenticity of their apologies.

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<sup>4</sup> David Dobrik was accused of perpetuating racist stereotypes about his ex-friend Seth Francois, who is of African-American descent. Francois was also sexually assaulted twice in Dobrik's videos for gags.

In this thesis, I examine examples of cancel culture that occur from six prominent influencers who were accused of engaging in deceptive advertising practices on YouTube, which includes failing to disclose a conflict of interest, advertising faulty products, and omission of product details. I define influencer as “a new type of third-party endorser who shape audience[s] through blogs, tweets, and the use of social media,” (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011, p. 91). Within these scandals, despite partnering with the influencers who advertised their services or products, the majority of the corporations involved in the brand deals played a silent role, offered no apology, and instead delegated responsibility to the influencer. Subsequently, it was the influencers who suffered the most damage to their reputation as opposed to the corporations they partnered with. I argue that this speaks to larger levels of corporate impunity and privilege in society.

The advertising policies on YouTube stipulate that the individual influencer, as opposed to the company or brand offering the brand deal, are responsible for ensuring they adhere to the advertising laws of their country of origin (YouTube Ad Policies, 2018). Moreover, advertisement regulations from domestic advertising agencies poorly define the various types of advertising practices that can emerge on different social media platforms, otherwise known as native advertising (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Einstein, 2015). Native advertising is defined as advertisements that are unique to the platform that blend within their surrounding context or originate from places that do not signal advertising, making it difficult for an individual to distinguish it as an advertisement (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). For example, a native advertisement on YouTube would be an influencer speaking highly about a product in a video but failing to disclose this promotion as an advertisement. Because the majority of the influencers from the data set are from the United States, I operationalized deceptive advertising

as per the definition of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The Federal Trade Commission stipulates that an advertisement is deceptive if it is: “Likely to mislead consumers acting reasonably under the circumstances,” and is “material – that is, important to a consumer’s decision to buy or use the product” (Federal Trade Commission, 1983).

YouTube has done little to combat these marketing practices. Along with advertising regulations that are ill equipped to detect new forms of deceptive advertising on social media (Einstein, 2015; Campbell & Grimm, 2019), this legal inefficacy has resulted in cancel culture being relied on by viewers as a mechanism of accountability (Makalintal, 2019; Haylock, 2020). Influencers are public figures whose fame derives from the support of their fans, and once this support is lost via the cancelling process, the influencer has a lot to lose as shown with the David Dobrik scandal (Makalintal, 2019). On one hand, they suffer financially as brands and companies pull out of their sponsorships. On the other hand, their reputation suffers as they lose subscribers and experience large waves of dislikes and negative comments on their videos (Makalintal, 2019; Dodgson 2019). The apology video is therefore a form of damage control initiated by the influencer (Makalintal, 2019).

## **1.2 Research Questions**

My research questions are as follows: What techniques of neutralization do social media influencers caught for their deceptive and/or misleading advertising practices use in their apology videos? How do influencers employ these neutralizations? What role does neoliberalism play in the normalization of fraud and apology videos on YouTube? Lastly, how does cancel culture, as form of accountability, illustrate the legal impunity that corporations experience in society today?

### **1.3 Theoretical Framework**

The theories I use in this thesis include a combination of Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization and Mill's (1940) vocabulary and motives. Neutralization theory, otherwise known as Drift Theory, asserts that delinquents engage in neutralizations to justify and/or deny the immorality of their behaviour (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The theory has evolved beyond its original focus on delinquents to include crimes by organizations, States, and corporations (Cohen, 2009). These techniques not only help to reduce guilt, but they also serve to protect self-image after a crime has been committed (Sykes & Matza, 1957). I use Sykes and Matza (1957) to demonstrate how YouTube apology videos serve more as a justification and defense of problematic behaviour than as an apology. I also argue that these neutralizations ultimately serve to protect the influencer's self-image in the online community. Mills (1940) argues that an individual's motivations and how they rationalize their behaviour before, during, and after-the-fact can reveal details about the society they live in, which he conceptualizes as vocabularies of motives. I take up this concept to examine how the neutralizations that influencers use is reflective of neoliberal society. In other words, I examine why influencers use these neutralizations and why their use is acceptable in a neoliberal political economy.

### **1.4 Methods & Sources**

For my method, I use rhetorical analysis to de-construct not only the overall message of the apology video but also how it is constructed. Rhetorical analysis is a critical reading of a text or piece of media (Selzer, 2003, p. 280). The reader analyzes and breaks down the piece into several parts to understand the author's construction of their message (Selzer, 2003). I use Barthes (1972; 1977) in my rhetorical analysis to break down the construction of the apology videos in my data set. Barthes (1972; 1977) argues that both verbal and visual signifiers contain

semiological meaning and contribute to the ideological workings of the text itself. In turn, I use Barthes (1972; 1977) to argue that both the verbal and non-verbal cues throughout the apology video contribute to the influencer's overall message of mitigating damages to their reputation. Therefore, influencers use both non-verbal (gestural and embodied) and verbal neutralizations in their apology videos. The sources I use in my data include six apology videos uploaded onto the YouTube platform, all of which address a deceptive advertising scandal<sup>5</sup>. Other sources include mainstream media articles that cover each influencer's cancelling, the details of which are covered in more detail in Chapter 4.

### **1.5 Overall Objectives**

My first objective was to examine advertising standards on YouTube and among domestic advertising agencies. I discuss domestic advertising standards from the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) as these are where the six influencers from my data reside. From this, I work throughout the thesis to build the claim that cancel culture is a weak replacement for regulatory advertising standards, as time has shown that many influencers who have been 'cancelled' continue to engage in deceptive advertising practices after their scandals (Barnet, 2021; Jones, 2021).

My second objective was to explore the neoliberal mentality that has come to dominate the YouTube platform as a means of explaining how and why influencer fraud has become so commonplace. This includes examining the legal, moral, and institutional structures that promote self-interest and business friendly regulation (Wiegratz, 2012). Rather than the authentic and community-based values that dominated the platform before Google's purchase of it in 2006

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<sup>5</sup> Transcripts from each apology video are included in Appendices (D-I).

(Gerhards, 2017), values of profit-maximization and an overall commercialistic industry has now become the platform's norm (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). The platform saw a demarcated shift from user-generated content that revolved around 'ordinary' people filming their lives as a hobby to 'influencers' whose content became increasingly professionalized and money-driven (Kim, 2012). For example, influencer Pewdiepie, whose career started with him filming himself playing video games, is now a multi-millionaire who has accepted sponsorships from major companies such as Volvo, Razer, and LG (Peterson, 2018). Content, in turn, no longer solely revolves around an expectation of authenticity and everyday 'people like me' but rather focuses on being professionally edited and making oneself appealing to brands (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Further, it is also my intention to situate the apology video itself within neoliberalism. Some considerations I undertook include: How and why is it that these influencers are apologizing? Is it a means of repairing their reputation and brand? With so much money at risk, can the apology ever be authentic and sincere?

My third objective is to mobilize white-collar and corporate crime literature to better understand the context of YouTube apology videos. While my focus is the individual influencer, I intend to situate YouTube within the wider neoliberal capitalist context that drives influencers to prioritize profit maximization over the authenticity of the products and services they are promoting. I also intend to examine why corporations remain, for the most part, invisible in these scandals. My goal is to connect this to corporate crime literature that highlights the legal privileges that corporations enjoy (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). For example, laws of strict liability equate the corporation to an individual, which allows high-ranking individuals working in the corporation to avoid legal responsibility (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). Since legal systems are based on individual accountability, it is easier to deflect blame to middle managers and low-level

employees who are involved in the day-to-day operations of the corporation (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). Therefore, I consider the role that corporate privilege plays in why the individual influencer—as the middle person—receives the greatest focus of public attention as opposed to the corporation that is just as involved in the sponsorship process.

## **1.6 Overview**

This thesis is divided into five chapters, including this introduction. Chapter 2, the literature review, situates the rise of the influencer, YouTube's transformation into a largely capital driven platform, legal efforts to address deceptive and fraudulent advertising, and the high-saturation of advertisements in online content. Chapter 3 explores the applicability of Millsian and neutralization theory to the phenomenon of apology videos. Chapter 4 builds on neutralization theory to account for neutralizations that go beyond the verbal and include the visual, focusing on the work of Barthes (1972; 1977). I also map out how I conducted my rhetorical analysis of the apology videos. Chapter 5 summarizes key findings from the rhetorical analysis, which confirms my hypothesis that many of the narratives in the apology videos are endowed in a neoliberal, me-first mentality that prioritizes business and profit maximization beyond all else (Wiegratz, 2012). Chapter 6 helps bridge the connection I formed between influencers and corporations and provides more details on how influencers not only act and function as a corporation, but also the symbiotic relationship that they share with corporations when advertising on YouTube.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter seeks to situate how YouTube underwent a transformation from a user-generated platform to a professionalized and advertisement-friendly environment (Kim, 2012). I also review the corporate crime literature that details the legal impunity that corporations enjoy. I draw on the vast advertising power that influencers hold (Hill, 2011; Chung & Cho, 2017), while also calling into question the ethics of advertising anything for the sake of generating income. To do this, I examine the concept of a parasocial bond and its exploitation by influencers. The overall purpose is to build upon my objective of situating white-collar and corporate crime in the context of influencers on the YouTube platform. Lastly, in building this connection between white-collar and corporate crime, I touch on applicable advertising legislation on social media and its critiques.

### 2.1 Neoliberalism and the Commercialization of YouTube

Corporations have a major cultural impact in society, being omnipresent in just about every aspect of modern life. Their presence is so normalized that their existence is not often scrutinized or questioned (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). Corporate advertisements alike are so ubiquitous that they desensitize society to the pervasiveness of corporate power (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). This is what Tombs and Whyte (2015) refer to as the synopticon, the idea that “we are disciplined into thinking about power when we watch the powerful, as opposed to when we are being watched by the powerful,” (Tombs & Whyte, 2015, p. 3). This in turn skews how we think about corporations, mainly seeing them in a positive light (Tombs & Whyte, 2015).

Much of the naturalization of corporate power has resulted in reverting the criminological gaze away from crimes of the powerful, such as those committed by corporations who cause innumerable harms and suffering in society (Michalowski, 2009). The concept of crime is

associated with interpersonal crime (Michalowski, 2009). Meanwhile, corporations and the elite are privileged in that many of the harms they commit are not considered to be crimes in a traditional legal sense (Michalowski, 2009). This is further demonstrated in how crimes committed by the upper class, of which the majority is associated with business (e.g., tax fraud and the exploitation of third world countries), are not sanctioned under criminal law (i.e., typical crimes), but rather regulatory law.

Further, by reverting our gaze away from these harms, society reinforces the power of the powerful, with their crimes and social injuries remaining largely unnoticed (Michalowski, 2009). Governments reinforce this impunity, as historically they have been unwilling to interfere with the affairs of businesses. Instead, they choose to let businesses regulate themselves or, due to the resistance of corporations and the elite, impose laws that largely do not conflict with business interests (Snider, 1987; Tombs 2016). This resistance has resulted in the diversion of corporate harm away from criminal law and instead into the terrain of regulatory law and administrative codes, which have fewer legal and social consequences upon conviction (Snider, 1987; Croall, 2009).

For a long time, consumers have been recognized as victims of white-collar crime through a broad spectrum of offences including fraud, health and safety violations, and deceptive product advertising and sales (Croall, 2009). Many of the harms that elites commit are not only largely invisible, but they are also poorly defined in law (Croall, 2009). In fact, terms such as fraud, 'misleading', and 'deception' are all cast broadly, which makes these behaviours even more difficult to regulate due to uncertainty over their applicability (Croall, 2009). For example, Croall (2009) highlights how there are poor legal distinctions amongst something that constitutes

a misleading description, a con, and a fraud (p. 132), making it challenging to differentiate between many of these potential crimes.

Since most of these harms remain invisible and disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups (Croall, 2009), fraud and corruption has become increasingly normalized (Wiegratz, 2012). A key driving force of neoliberalism has been the normalization of self-interest, where an individual is encouraged to gain as much capital as possible at the expense of others (Wiegratz, 2012, p. 60). This has especially been the case since the early 2000s, as the neoliberal economy has seen a rise in economic trickery, fraud, and deception (Wiegratz, 2012, p. 56). For example, online shopping, imposter scams, and phone scams were the most common forms of fraud in 2020 (Vaca, 2021). In fact, Wiegratz (2012) argues that the ideological underpinnings of neoliberal societies have resulted in shifts in both political and moral economies, wherein astronomical levels of fraud and its normalization are a byproduct (Wiegratz, 2012, p. 60). While neoliberalism postulates that maximizing one's self-interest and wealth will act to the benefit of others via a trickle-down effect, what really happened was that individuals were encouraged to maximize their self-interest at the perilous costs of others (Wiegratz, 2012, p. 57).

Corruption and fraud, then, are not involuntary consequences and failures of the system but rather a deliberate attempt to strengthen the powers of corporations, governments, and public institutions (Beetham, 2015). Much of this acts as a backdrop to form a connection between corporate and white-collar crime on YouTube. The increased commercialization of YouTube has paved the way for corporations to advertise to niche audiences (Mas-Tur et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018). And it is this commercialization that has led to widespread fraud among influencers who accept deceptive and/or misleading advertising brand deals that offer large sums of money in return (Fletcher, 2020). The apology videos thus reflect not only the poor regulatory environment

and absence of criminal liability for the influencer, but also how the corporation remains largely invisible during the scandal. It fits with much of what Croall (2009) asserts regarding how corporate actors can escape the perception of being criminal due to deceptive advertising and marketing practices being regulated by a range of administrative codes and advertising standards (p. 129). Furthermore, the deregulated and business-friendly environment on YouTube is arguably connected to the synopticon (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). In other words, advertising and corporate power over the years has become so commonplace that deceptive advertising practices are subjected to little scrutiny.

The moral economy of fraud (Wiegratz, 2012) and neoliberal values gradually seeped into the YouTube platform; however, it did not begin this way. YouTube began as an amateur video sharing site in 2005. The first ever video uploaded was “Me at the zoo”, where founder Jawed Karim posted an 18 second clip to the platform (Leskin, 2021). The premise of the platform was that it was for anyone to share clips of their day-to-day lives. Videos posted onto the platform included recording children’s shenanigans to pet videos.

During its development phase, YouTube’s founders intended to find a way to monetize YouTube’s growing community (Raulino, 2017). The plan was to target user-generated video content, because at the time it was the fastest growing content on the internet (Raulino, 2017). This way, YouTube was able to set itself up as a strong presence in the internet market with large amount of traffic regularly visiting and using the website. In turn, the large numbers of traffic on the website would rival that of traditional media and cable networks (Raulino, 2017). With changes to the website in June of 2005, which included a ‘related videos’ algorithm feature (which kept users on the platform by watching more content), networking changes that stimulated more interaction among users, and external video players that allowed YouTube

videos to be shared onto other websites, YouTube became hugely popular and desirable to other investors in the tech industry (Raulino, 2017). The founders of YouTube were able to successfully sell their plan to Sequoia Capital in November of 2005, a firm that had previously backed companies such as Cisco, Apple, and Google in the tech industry. This multi-million-dollar investment from Sequoia reaffirmed YouTube's plans for future commercialization (Raulino, 2017).

It was in 2006, upon Google's purchase of the platform, that YouTube's commercialization path expanded (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Throughout the last decade, YouTube has experienced an exponential wave of commercialization, where video creators sought ad revenue, product placements, and sponsorships as a source of revenue (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018; YouTube Help, 2018). In 2007, banner advertisements and the partner program were launched, allowing popular content creators to generate income from advertisements on their videos (Leskin, 2021). In 2008, YouTube introduced sponsored advertisements and pre-roll ads<sup>6</sup> (Leskin, 2021). In 2009, otherwise known as the age of the YouTube stars, brands and product placements became the norm (Leskin, 2021). Before 2009, 30 amateur content creators were eligible for YouTube's ad program (Gerhards, 2017). Post 2009, brands started reaching out to influencers, interested in sending them free products in the hopes that they would promote them (Gerhards, 2017). Multi-channel networks soon followed, which, serving as television and modelling agencies, acted as a 'middleman' to help influencers acquire sponsorships and brand deals through commissioned work (Wu, 2016, p. 18). YouTube has also expanded beyond a video platform to include exclusive television shows and documentaries, a movie rental service, a music video service, a livestream service, and an advertisement-free subscription service

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<sup>6</sup> Advertisements, similar to commercials, play before the video content.

(Leskin, 2021). This commercialization developed over time, and content creators who were paid nothing were able to take advantage of the money flowing into the platform. As such, branding oneself with high-resolution cameras, a memorable background, microphones, lighting, and sophisticated editing formats became the chosen path of influencers (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Today, influencers can make upwards of six and seven figure incomes from an accumulation of advertisement revenues on videos, sponsorships, cameos, and paid appearances (Gerhards, 2017; Leskin, 2020).

One problem with this transformation is that it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate between commercialized and non-commercialized content (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018), as influencers are known not to disclose if they have been paid to promote a product (Döring, 2014). For example, an influencer can feature a product in their video, speak positively about it, but at no point do they disclose that they were paid to speak about the product. The lure of this fiscal potential likewise resulted in amateurs moving towards professionalizing their content so that it was more monetizable and attractive to businesses (Gerhards, 2017). This commercialization did not go without backlash, however (Gerhards, 2017). Users felt that commercialization would take away from the authenticity and creativity of content (Gerhards, 2017). Despite this criticism, monetizing and professionalizing content prevailed (Gerhards, 2017). The opportunity to market directly to target audiences was seized, as businesses noticed that traditional marketing to consumers was becoming less and less effective (Carter, 2016). Word of mouth, especially electronically, proved to be much more effective and efficient (Carter, 2016). Because influencers were ordinary people, or rather “amateurs”, they were seen by viewers as more credible and reliable (Gerhards, 2017, p. 4).

Nonetheless, users still developed a general skepticism of commercial content on the platform. For example, even if a product in a video was innocuous and not a paid sponsorship, many users remain vigilant and question the influencer's intentions, (Gerhards, 2017). This largely stems from the fact YouTube has failed to enforce its ad policies that require influencers to notify the platform if the content is a paid promotion (YouTube Ad Policies, 2018; Wu, 2016).

Lastly, it is important to recognize that deceptive advertising is not unique to neoliberal capitalism, even if it is baked into its day-to-day practices. The concept of a snake oil salesman helps encapsulate this idea that deceptive marketing has always been an inherent part of capitalism. It is generally defined as deceptive marketing, especially in the context of health care fraud (i.e., medicine) or as a scam (Graber, 2007; Gandhi, 2013). The term 'snake oil' bears root from how Chinese settlers in North America sold snake oil as a treatment for arthritis and joint pain. European entrepreneurs then took this idea of profiting off claims of medicinal benefits and sold mineral oil, which claimed to be derived from snake oil substances despite possessing none (Graber, 2007; Gandhi, 2013). The term has since loosely expanded to any salesperson who sells a product that claims to have a cure or remedy despite being fraudulent. For example, companies marketed tobacco cigarettes as good for one's health, a point that has since been debunked through decades of empirical studies. There are still individuals reinventing this scheme by selling cures for other health remedies, ranging from Kim Kardashian's weight loss pills to Gwyneth Paltrow's jade 'yoni eggs' that are alleged crystals meant to promote healing and hard work (Acuna, 2012; Wang, 2018). In its own way, deceptive advertising in part owes its existence to snake oil practices that depended upon deception to maximize profits.

## 2.2 The Institutionalization of YouTube & its Advertising Power

As YouTube became increasingly commercialized, a new norm was set. Influencers were the new way to market to youth more effectively. In turn, the YouTube platform itself set a new standard transforming what was before largely user-generated content to professionally generated content (Kim, 2012, p. 155). Consequently, children on the platform became more vulnerable and immersed in consumer culture (Hill, 2011). In turn, scholars concluded that children are becoming increasingly blind and deaf to brand messages on social media (Ha, 2011). Not limited to YouTube, children in North America are increasingly exposed to messages that encourage them to consume (Hill, 2011). The dangers fall with how this consumerism becomes embedded in their identity. Previous research has shown that because of consumerism and exposure to media, children are increasingly aware of brands (Kline, 2005). The concern is whether children can recognize how this consumerism impacts their socialization and identity (Hill, 2011). Studies demonstrate that children from an early age are socialized into adopting certain behaviours, style of dress, and music because they are associated with a particular brand (Hill, 2011).

This same phenomenon occurs on YouTube where influencers brand their personalities and market products, whether it is their own merchandise or that of a third party's. Children who idolize influencers want to become like them and wear the brands they promote as an expression of their identity (Hill, 2011). The notion of 'you are what you consume' is most pertinent to youth who buy influencer merchandise to grow closer to their idols (Hill, 2011). This raises additional concern as to whether this is an abuse of power. Influencers are seen as credible and reliable sources of information (Gerhards, 2017), but when they compromise their audience for monetary profit, it raises significant moral concerns, especially when there is a degree of

deception involved. Not only does the marketing of products encourage materialism, but it also results in the persistence of corporate culture (Jeffries, 2011). For example, beauty products prey on the insecurities of young women, and with influencers uncritically reinforcing these beauty standards to their young audiences, popular media will continue to support corporate culture (Jeffries, 2011). These are not simply amoral businesses marketing the product, but real people assumed to possess a moral calculus (Serafty, 2004). The degree to which influencers are trusted therefore results in a higher level of scrutiny as to what products they choose to and choose not to promote (Gerhards, 2017).

Similar to traditional marketing, creating a relationship with the consumer is imperative for successful sales; recent literature shows that the consumer relationship strengthens in peer-to-peer communities (Pera, 2016). Digital storytelling is “an encounter communication practice where consumers adopt the role of storytellers and story receivers” (Pera, 2016, p. 1142). Storytelling in social media has an especially pronounced role in effective relationship building, as it helps forge “rational, emotional, and relationship” experiences (Pera, 2016. P. 1142). Taking the example of a haul, an influencer promotes an array of products, and their followers, who believe them to be credible, spread awareness of these products. Relatability is also a key factor in this relationship building, which is a pertinent reality in the YouTube community as influencers continue to brand themselves as ordinary and authentic individuals (Pera, 2016).

It is not corporate presence but rather ‘people like me’ individuals that are likely to secure sales (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011, p. 319). For example, brand personalities, such as influencers known for their humour or emotions (e.g., quirks) are more likely to have higher levels of engagement than traditional advertising (Mas-Tur et al., 2016). Even though directly informing an audience of a deal or price lowers levels of engagement, these levels are still

heightened by the presence of brand personalities (Mas-Tur et al., 2016). Extant literature substantiates this further as online personalized advertising has proven to be more effective when the retailer, or in this case, the individual promoting their product, is trusted (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). Trustworthiness also encourages higher consumer participation (Lee et al., 2017). Brand personalities, in turn, become important in creating sustainable and long-term relationships with consumers (Lee et al., 2018).

Another benefit of online advertising for advertisers is that it is successful in creating a consumer's sense of belonging and relatedness, which is imperative in the purchasing experience (Kim & Mcmillan, 2008). Although this is no different from traditional media, social media amplifies this need for social relatedness as influencers create and/or promote brands directly to their followers. Material capitalism is engrained in identity, as those who do not purchase these brands are not seen as fitting in (Hill, 2011). So, it is not simply that online advertising has more impact on the buying behaviour of youth (Kumar & Mehrotra, 2018), but that this behaviour becomes a materialized pressure for viewers to conform via consumption (Hill, 2011). In turn, this pressure to consume is increased further by corporations looking to maximize their profits from influencers with niche audiences (Mas-Tur et al.2016; Lee et al.,2018).

### **2.3 From Content Creators to Influencers and from Viewers to Consumers: The Development of Parasocial Relationships**

Along with shifts in the content on YouTube, the post-Google era also sparked a demarcated shift in the roles of users on the platform (Kim, 2012). Popular content creators who documented their lives became influencers, a name self-evidently stemming from the wide influence that they had over their audiences. YouTube alone has more viewers between the ages of 18-49 than any cable network, which once again reiterates the advertising power that

influencers wield today (Luscombe, 2015). With this larger wave of commercialization, there was a new potential for influencers to build their personal brands as opposed to personal content alone (Kim, 2012). Factors such as an influencer's personality and the type of content that they created were marketable to advertisers who wished to promote their products to niche audiences (Kim, 2012). Thus, influencers were encouraged to make themselves 'marketable', or rather 'advertiser friendly' to further develop their relationships with brands (Kim, 2012). Some of the largest influencer personalities, in fact, become microcelebrities, a term which distinguishes people whose fame derived from the Internet (Urban dictionary, n.d.). Post-Google-purchase YouTube also marked the transition of the viewer into a consumer (Morreale, 2014). Viewers were no longer just consuming content; they instead became products whose watch time and engagement were used as an informational tool for marketers (Mas-Tur et al., 2016).

Several genres have emerged on the platform that market directly to children, such as toy reviews (Jaakola, 2019). The relationship that develops from this has in turn also become a popular topic. Parasocial relationships (PSR) are "the emotions, thoughts, and actions that a viewer experiences during media exposure that are geared toward a specific performer or character" (Cohen, 2009, p. 145). Through repeated exposure, a person can develop a one-sided relationship with a media character (Cohen, 2009). It is a phenomenon that can occur between both adults and children. Similarly, the concept of Wishful Identification (WI) is defined as the psychological desire to be like a media personality (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975).

Recent literature has found that viewers on YouTube have developed PSR and WI relationships with their favourite YouTubers (Folkyord et al., 2019). This was also the case amongst tweens, where the longer they spent watching their favourite influencer, the more they felt bonded to them (Folkyord et al., 2019). This raises several ethical concerns on the impact

that influencers have on their viewers' consumptive habits, especially when influencers are a trusted figure (Kim, 2012). For example, a recent study found that tween girls formed PSR relationships with YouTubers who were funny and popular and WI with those who were funny (Tolbert & Dragos, 2017). Meanwhile, tween boys were more likely to form PSR relationships with YouTubers who were funny, successful, and attractive, and formed wishful identification with those who were violent and funny (Tolbert & Dragos, 2017).

Chung and Cho (2017) found that PSRs with celebrities have a positive impact on celebrity endorsements, wherein "parasocial relationships mediated the relationships between social media interactions and source trustworthiness" (p. 47). Another important finding of the study was that source trustworthiness from parasocial relationships positively impacted brand personality, leading to purchase intentions (Chung & Cho, 2017). This has profound implications for influencers on YouTube, many of whom, even though they are dubbed micro-celebrities as a way of distinguishing how they rose to fame, have much larger followings than the conventional celebrity. In turn, the relationships that influencers share with their viewers cannot be underestimated. For example, Felix Kielberg, otherwise known as Pewdiepie, has accumulated over 100 million subscribers. Due to his popularity, Kielberg has advertised a wide range of companies including Razer, Volvo, and LG (Peterson, 2018).

Other studies, however, illustrate the role that microcelebrities have in the lives of children as they go on to become long-term viewers (Kim & Song, 2016). Similar to this notion of WI and wanting to become like the microcelebrity, the influencers that someone follows have been described as akin to one's identity. Who a viewer follows and distances themselves from is thus a construction of identity (Kim & Song, 2016). In fact, through this identification, it is argued that microcelebrities continue to play a role in the high and growing saturation of

commercialization in a child's everyday lives (Martinez, 2017). It is because of these close psychological bonds that microcelebrities have increasingly been used in market campaigns globally. What becomes dangerous, however, is when trusted influencers deliberately deceive their audiences for the sake of their own profit. Similarly, it can be the case where the company deceives the influencer, and this deception is then passed onto the consumer (see: case study Gabbie Hanna below; Sommer, 2019).

Furthermore, an influencer's branding of themselves as a credible character and therefore attractive business partner bears similarities with how corporations attempt to brand themselves as reputable via Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR is a term that corporations use to market and advertise themselves as socially, economically, and environmentally responsible (Glasbeek, 1988). It originates from Howard Bowen's (1953) book detailing the social responsibilities of businesses, where corporations in the 1920s and 1930s were expected to contribute positively to society. Despite the fact that many corporate operations cause great social and environmental harms, especially in third world countries, CSR has evolved in modern times to become a popular branding strategy that helps mitigate against damage to the corporation's reputation (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). For example, it is not unheard of for corporations to claim they helped bolster the economy of a third world country to minimize claims of their environmental and social harms in those jurisdictions (Schoultz & Flyghed 2016).

Put another way, while CSR is the corporations' responsibility to balance profit maximization and their social responsibilities in society, the strategic benefit of this to their reputation cannot be ignored (Agudelo et al., 2019). By helping provide social services, corporations were able to achieve their business objectives and reinforce their reputation based on strong values, thereby maximizing their profit (Agudelo et al., 2019). It also helps in

appearing as attractive to internal and external stakeholders (Cho et al., 2016). Communicating CSR also became increasingly important for business management (Bartlett, 2011; Moreno & Capriotti, 2009), and as technology evolved, it became important to do so on social media (Cho et al., 2016). However, scholars have also found that communicating CSR comes with its own risks, as it could generate stakeholder skepticism (Farooq et al., 2013). For example, a study by Cho et al. (2016) examined how corporations with good reputations communicate on Facebook and found that the public was more likely to engage with non-CSR messages than those specifically focused on CSR, in turn, suggesting that the public was wary and skeptical of the latent purpose behind CSR.

Overall, this link between corporations marketing themselves as responsible to stakeholders and the public and influencers marketing themselves as responsible to brands and their viewers (consumers) is one I make in this thesis. In particular, the apology video is a method in which the influencer can re-market themselves to investors (i.e., damage control) to help protect their reputation (Makalintal, 2019).

## **2.4 Regulatory Accountability Mechanisms & the Emergence of Native Advertising**

For this thesis, I will only discuss the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations (CPR), which regulate marketing practices in the US and UK respectively. This overview provides context on the legal gaps and challenges that have resulted in elevated levels of undetected fraud and misleading advertising practices on social media, including YouTube. The reason I only discuss these two jurisdictions is that the influencers in my data set (see: Chapter 4) are citizens of the US and UK.

In the US, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is responsible for ensuring that advertisers and companies follow the *FTC Act* (i.e., upholding anti-trust law and consumer

protection). Reports of scams on social media has increased over the last decade (Fletcher, 2020). For example, in 2019, the FTC reported \$134 million in losses to frauds on social media (Fletcher, 2020). In the first six months of 2020, these numbers skyrocketed to nearly \$117 million (Fletcher, 2020). In 94% of the reports, Facebook and Instagram were identified as the most common platforms where the scams originated (Fletcher, 2020). Many scammers use social media to hide and make use of advertisements as a way of marketing their scams (Small, 2020). In fact, social media has become tech strategists' most preferred method for marketing, as electronic word of mouth has proven to be successful (Dwivedi et al., n.d.).

Nonetheless, fraud has always been an issue on the internet (Wilbur & Zhu, 2009). Over time, due to the variety in online advertisement formats amongst platforms, new terminology emerged to account for this. The key idea behind native advertising is that because the advertisement blends in with the website/content, it can circumvent feelings of annoyance and inconvenience that occur during traditional advertisements (Wojdyski, 2015). On the other hand, despite its success, some scholars have proposed that native advertising is successful because it is deceptive in nature (Berry, 2014; Colhoun, 2015; Dumenco, 2014; Wasserman, 2013).

Efforts to crack down on fraudulent online advertising has been weak due to poor definitions and the continuous changes and evolutions in how native advertisements are able to blend into social media platforms (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Campbell and Grimm (2019) conduct an in-depth analysis of regulatory and enforcement challenges that native advertising poses to the FTC. Campbell and Grimm (2019) criticize the FTC's 1983 "Policy Statement on Deception," as the policy does not cover deception where the source of the advertisement (e.g., disclosure) is omitted. For example, it is common for influencers not to disclose a sponsorship

and instead mask the advertisement as regular content by not including any mention of the advertisement/sponsorship (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).

In 2017, the FTC reaffirmed these same principles of disclosure in cases where it is uncertain to consumers that the advertiser has something to gain or a material connection to the advertiser. More importantly, this was applied beyond celebrities to include influencers as microcelebrities (Federal Trade Commission, 2017). However, this guidance is ambiguous, as it left it open in the method in which advertisers could achieve this disclosure (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). The challenge with this is that as new social media applications and websites continue appear, the lack of a standardized method of disclosure poses difficulties in enforcement (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).

Because the method of disclosure was open-ended, this has also resulted in advertisements that disclose the advertisement, but in a covert way, which, in turn, deceives consumers and leaves them unprotected by the FTC's regulations (Einstein, 2015; Federal Trade Commission, 2021). For example, an influencer can write a misleading description that seems personal but hides the hashtag #ad near the bottom of the post after a large series of other hashtags (Sconyers, 2018). In this case, users are less likely to scroll past the large number of hashtags and see the #ad at the end, which is deceptive in nature since the disclosure of commercial content is not obvious and will not be seen by everyone. Due to the variety of possible native advertising formats, several authors have recommended that the FTC adjust their online advertising guidelines to account for native advertising across several platforms (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Sconyers, 2018).

Another inefficacy is that enforcement of the *FTC Act* requires a large deal of work if the FTC deems a practice to be unfair or deceptive. The FTC cannot enforce penalties or orders

without involvement of a court, which is time consuming and costly (Einstein, 2015; Federal Trade Commission, 2021). Instead, they are provided the authority to investigate and sue companies and individuals that partake in unfair, deceptive, or fraudulent business practices (Einstein, 2015; Federal Trade Commission, 2021). A similar challenge of investigating native advertising is the inability to detect it. Because native advertising can vary in format, they do not possess the same vetting process that traditional broadcast of print advertisements experience before being approved (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Instead, with social media, various algorithms and software approve advertisements, which are often posted to several different sources and platforms at once (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). It is therefore difficult to siphon through millions of advertisements to detect breaches of fair advertising practices. Campbell and Grimm (2019) recommend that more research is needed to assess the utility of machine learning to better identify these breaches.

In contrast to the US, the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations in the UK bears stricter penalties for violations (UK. Gov, n.d.). Unlike the US, there is no central agency for regulating advertising in the UK (UK.Gov, n.d.). Depending on where the owner of the business or company lives, complaints of sales activities can be filed with a local Trading Standards office (UK.Gov, n.d.). Depending on the severity of the business activity, the penalty can result in a fine, prosecution, or imprisonment (UK.Gov, n.d.). The Act also clearly states that when advertising to consumers, the advertiser cannot include false or deceptive messages, leave out important information, and/or use aggressive sales techniques (UK.Gov, n.d.). However, such punishments are rarely inflicted, and the UK largely relies on cooperation from advertisers (Advertising Standards Authority, n.d.)

Overall, the UK adopts a self-regulation model and this system of advertising regulation is led by three main organizations: The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP), the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), and the Advertising Standards Board of Finance ASBOF) (Auxtova et al., 2020)<sup>7</sup>. Like US advertising regulations, advertising standards in the UK are criticized for being ambiguous (Auxtova et al., 2020). For example, the Codes do not specify what a harmful or offensive advertisement is, instead only specifying that the advertisement “must not be harmful or offensive” (Committee of Advertising Practice, 2017). This poses problems for those who wish to refer an advertisement to the ASA, as it is unclear what constitutes a legitimate complaint of a harmful or offensive advertisement (Auxtova et al., 2020).

In the context of evaluating risks to the consumer, the advertising Codes also fail to identify the steps an advertiser can take to minimize harm (Auxtova et al., 2020). The Codes state that “advertisements must take account of generally accepted standards to minimize risk of causing harm or serious widespread offence” (Committee of Advertising Practice, 2017, n.p.). For example, if a fraud or deception were to occur, what constitutes a harm and risk to the consumer is not specified. These ‘generally accepted standards’ are left in the hands of advertisers themselves, which creates uncertainties and a conflict of interest, as advertising can easily prioritize business-friendly advertising standards over potential risks to the consumer

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<sup>7</sup> CAP is responsible for creating advertising codes, both for broadcast (e.g., television and radio) and non-broadcast commercial content (e.g., social media) (Auxtova, Brennan, & Dunne, 2020).

The ASA is responsible for ensuring that these advertising codes are adhered to, and in cases of breaches, contacts the company or business involved (Auxtova, Brennan, & Dunne, 2020). This includes ensuring that all advertisements are legal, decent, honest, and truthful (ASA, 2019).

ASBOF is responsible for collecting taxes related to upholding this regime of industry self-regulation. In cases of non-compliance, although the ASA states that this is not the norm, the ASA can refer breaches to relevant trading standard authorities and Ofcom (The UK’s Communication Regulator) (Advertising Standards Authority, n.d.)

(Auxtova et al.,2020). Moreover, this advertising standard does not codify what ‘serious’ or ‘widespread’ means, which leaves further ambiguities in its application (Auxtova et al., 2020). For example, how widespread does a deceptive advertisement have to be before it contravenes advertising standards? Lastly, the ASA has been criticized for not having enough power to crackdown on advertisements. This includes not having a fining system and the fact that most resolutions are not necessarily punishments; instead, the advertisement is simply ordered to be taken down. In turn, the ASA has had trouble grappling with repeat offenders, whose only loss is wasted money spent on the offending advertisement (Dacko & Hart, 2011). ). Moreover, asking an advertiser to remove their advertisement is a sanction that is rarely used (Dacko & Hart, 2011).

Overall, what is clear is that like the regulation of corporate and white-collar crime, the regulatory punishments for endorsers and their respective advertisers bear relatively weak punishments compared to the scale of harm and fraud they commit (Snider, 1987; Croall, 2009). Both the FTC and UK advertising agencies lack the power of criminal law, and instead base most of their power in recommendations or guidance. Especially in the case of online advertising, much of this lackluster punishment can be attributed to a neoliberal model of deregulation and privatization of the internet in the 1990s and 2000s (Starr, 2019). The State’s laissez-faire approach to internet regulation left more room for digital innovation and entrepreneurship; on the flip side, it also created more room for companies to commercially operate. In turn, this resulted in platform oligarchies such as Facebook, Google (which YouTube is owned by), and Amazon dominating online commerce and digital advertising (Starr, 2019).

This discussion of regulatory punishment is important for situating the lack of serious intervention and punishments for deceptive advertising practices in addition to its

underenforcement. It also helps situate why cancel culture has emerged in this regulatory vacuum as a means of holding advertisers/influencers accountable for their online scams and fraudulent behaviour.

## **2.4 Accountability Mechanisms continued... #Cancel Culture and YouTube's Distant Role in Enforcing Advertising Standards**

The YouTube community values the You in individuals and the ability to be authentic and real (Serfaty, 2004). Meanwhile, neoliberalism values moral codes of self-interest and the maximization of one's own profit (Wiegratz, 2012). So, what happens when an influencer violates community interests and subscribes to the neoliberal ideology that the world has acclimatized itself to? Moreover, how can accountability be reached in legal systems that privilege the power of the elite and their accrument of capital? The answer thus far appears to rest with cancel culture.

Historically speaking, only one influencer has received a notable punishment for deceptive and misleading advertising practices. TmarTn (Trevor Martin), a gaming channel, received criticism for promoting a skin-gambling website to fans<sup>8</sup> without disclosing that he owned the company (Federal Trade Commission, 2017a). This incident was significant, as it prompted the FTC to issue guidelines on the dos and don'ts of social media influencers as well as update their rules on endorsements (Federal Trade Commission, 2017a). It was also the first serious action that the FTC had taken against an influencer. While Trevor Martin faced no fine for the initial advertisement, the FTC's order stipulated that any subsequent advertisement that did not disclose material investment would result in a fine of \$40,654 (Federal Trade

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<sup>8</sup> Skins are different forms or avatars that a character can adopt in a video game. In terms of gambling, they can be used as a virtual currency.

Commission, 2017a). More on this specific case study and its apology video is covered in Chapter 4.

Due to the rarity of influencers receiving regulatory penalties for deceptive advertising, cancel culture has filled this void in attempting to hold influencers accountable for their advertising practices. By void, I am referencing that in many cases, the definition of deceptive advertising was applicable but not enforced. Hence, in some cases in the dataset, deceptive advertising occurred, but there was no legal intervention. In other cases, consumers themselves felt deceived, but in part due to the inefficacies of the legal definition or enforcement, it did not technically classify as an offence. Cancel culture in this thesis is therefore used to highlight both the problems with the definition and enforcement of deceptive advertising.

It is important to note that cancel culture evolved over time and has several notable influences that contributed to its development. Some scholars attribute influence from the #metoo movement in 2017, where women in Hollywood outed their abusers and shamed them on social media due to the failures of the legal system in taking sexual assault seriously (Holman, 2020; Luu, 2019). Some scholars also credit Black Twitter and call-out culture, which also shamed individuals on social media for problematic behaviour, including xenophobia and racism (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). For example, a notable social justice campaign from call-out culture on Black Twitter was the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2010s, pushback against Eric Garner's death via the #Icantbreathe<sup>9</sup> hashtag and calling out the appropriation of Black culture by major celebrities including Katy Perry, Kendall Jenner, and Miley Cyrus (Wheeler, 2019).

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<sup>9</sup> On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner, an African-American man, was killed by New York City Police. The event was widely criticized as being an abuse of force, as several police officers suffocated Garner despite him crying out that he was not able to breathe.

Since the original #metoo movement, cancel culture has evolved to include a wide range of problematic behaviours. Even corporations have fallen victim to cancel culture, where consumers engage in boycotting until appropriate changes are made (Luu, 2019). For example, brands like Victoria Secret were cancelled for promoting unattainable beauty standards before rebranding themselves and incorporating models with a more diverse range of body types (Krause, 2019).

However, some scholars argue that due to the large volume of traffic that cancel culture generates, call-outs have lost their value from grass-roots user-generated accountability and has instead become a commodity and form of entertainment (Clark, 2020). For example, social media platforms' algorithms heavily promote cancel culture and scandals, such as placing these scandals at the front of their newsfeeds because it generates traffic and keeps users on the platform (Clark, 2020). In this respect, cancel culture's grassroots origins have been turned into a commodity that social media platforms heavily rely on for relevance and user interaction. The value of the call-outs, in turn, become less focused on the contextual nuances of why an individual is cancelled, and, due to it being entertainment, is adopted in bad faith (Clark, 2020). Outcomes of cancelling people in bad faith has resulted in cancel culture hosting large waves of harassment and negative comments rather than a discussion of accountability (Clark, 2020). It is thus important to discuss this newer trend of cancel culture being a form of negative entertainment, which is essentially, a corporatized form of call-out culture (Clark, 2020).

Overall, YouTube's removal of their own responsibility in ensuring jurisdictional advertisement regulations are followed, along with placing no responsibility on corporations involved in deceptive endorsements, reflects larger structural neoliberal inequalities in societies that privilege corporations. The role of the corporations in this topic is not only their ability to

remain invisible in scandals and to engage in fraudulent behaviours without repercussions on YouTube, but also their invisibility in YouTube's own policies that places responsibility for the integrity and legality of sponsorships onto the individual influencer.

## **2.6 Why apology videos?**

I grew up in the age of influencers rising to stardom, and never once did I think the influencers that I idolized would be capable of taking advantage of their audience. I accepted their apologies because I trusted and believed in them, but it is only when I look back now do I realize the manipulation and covert financial motivations that took place. I can reasonably attribute most of this to the parasocial bond I held with them. As shown with repeat deceitful behaviour and scandals, many of these influencers do not appear to be sorry, but rather draw from scripts that make their apology appear credible (Makalintal, 2019).

In fact, many of these apologies are denials. This is where Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization, as well as Mill's (1940) vocabularies of motives—in the context of situating why certain neutralizations are drawn on in a neoliberal society—becomes useful. Mills (1940) allows me to situate the wider commercialization context of YouTube in explaining how influencers have a financial motive to neutralize (i.e., deny) accusations of fraud and/or deception that hurt their public reputation. Mills (1940) also allows me to situate how YouTube's commercialization resulted in a me-first neoliberal attitude on the platform, where money from sponsorships is often prioritized over authenticity. Additionally, the focus on the influencer apology video itself as the object of interest allows me to highlight the invisibility of corporations in these scandals and their ability to engage in deceitful activities behind the scenes.

In terms of the apology videos themselves, The YouTube community has become a much more critical space. A large volume of content revolves around analyzing the authenticity of apologies and public statements, most of which are produced by drama and commentary channels<sup>10</sup> (Haylock, 2021). In turn, just as there is skepticism over the authenticity of CSR related messages by corporations on social media (Cho et al., 2016), there is a similar level of skepticism for influencer apology videos. This brings me to the bridging point between corporate and white-collar crime and my theoretical framework. Much of the literature on corporate crime highlights the importance of CSR in appearing as reputable and attractive to stakeholders (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). As shown, apology videos, in a way, are also a form of CSR as the influencer seeks to protect their personal brand and reputation during the cancelling process (Makalintal, 2019). The difference is that CSR is a pre-emptive and pre-meditated way of contributing positively towards the corporation's reputation, whereas the apology video is after-the-fact. The next chapter teases out is the ways in which apology videos are neutralizations aimed at protecting the influencer's reputation. Further, I examine literature on common neutralizations that corporations use in scandals and the public relations strategies that they engage in to mitigate damage to their reputation.

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<sup>10</sup> Commentary and/or Drama (sometimes referred to as 'Tea') Channels' content revolves around critiques of the actions of other influencers, influencer scandals, and in general, covering major internet events.

### **3. Theory**

This chapter explores the applicability of neutralization and Millisian theory to influencer apology videos. The main purpose is to form the connection between white collar-crime and corporate crime. To accomplish this, I examine how the corporatization of the platform has resulted in corporate impunity. I also consider how the apology video itself is more about protecting business assets and reputation, similar to how corporations neutralize accusations that could negatively affect their business (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). I draw on Wiegratz (2012) to explain how neoliberal values and the moral economy of fraud has since normalized fraud amongst influencers and corporations alike on the platform. Lastly, I use Mills (1940) to help explain why certain neutralizations and narratives in apology videos are drawn on more than others by situating them within neoliberal values. Rather than simply focusing on verbal neutralizations, as per the original theory, I explore the empirical relevance of examining non-verbal neutralizations.

#### **3.1 Theoretical Framework a): Neutralization Theory**

The primary theory that I have chosen is Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization, more commonly known as neutralization and/or drift theory. Emerging from and building upon Sutherland's differential association theory, Sykes and Matza (1957) operate from the premise that criminal behaviour is learned. For them, deviancy is the product of deviant subculture and crime is learned through "techniques of committing crimes" and "motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes," (p. 664). Delinquents thus drift between normative social values and deviant subculture values, although Sykes and Matza (1957) stress that deviant acts are not as deviant as normative values make them out to be. In fact, deviancy is an "unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance..." (p. 667).

To prevent guilt and shame after committing a delinquent act, the theory proposes that delinquents engage in techniques of neutralization. These techniques are not only a way to neutralize guilt, but also to protect an individual's image (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The pressure imposed by dominant cultural norms thus makes the drifting between dominant cultural norms and deviant norms possible (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Thus, neutralizations are the result of delinquents attempting to avoid the power of dominant cultural values and the social control that they impose. In turn, the deployment of neutralizations and justifications allow delinquents to continue to engage in deviant behaviour without any threat to their image.

Sykes and Matza (1957) offer a typology of five neutralization techniques. The first technique, denial of responsibility, occurs where the offender claims that the situation was out of their control and/or that they were the victims in the situation (p. 667). The second technique, denial of injury, occurs when the offender minimizes the harm and damage that their actions have caused, equating it to a much smaller degree than what it is (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 667). The third technique, denial of the victim, occurs in instances where the offender believes that the victim is deserving of what happened to them (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668). The fourth technique, condemnation of the condemners, is a projection where the offender believes that the accuser is unfairly shifting the blame onto them (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668). It often involves the offender personally attacking the accuser. Lastly, the fifth technique, appeal to higher loyalties, occurs when the offender tries to justify their action(s) as being for the greater good despite diverging from conventional norms; it is a technique where the offender places themselves on a higher moral ground (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 669).

Overall, this theory holds four fundamental observations of human social relations. One, delinquents can feel guilt and shame (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 664). Two, delinquents hold a

great deal of respect for law-abiding citizens (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 665). Three, there is a shared recognition among delinquents about who they can victimize and who they cannot (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 665). Lastly, it is doubtful that delinquents are immune from the pressure to conform to the dominant social order (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 665). That said, despite being criticized for its inability to theoretically explain all crime, neutralization theory has been applied beyond conventional delinquents. The following section explores how neutralization theory has been used in corporate and white-collar crime literature.

### **3.2 Expansion of Neutralization Theory &**

#### **Use in Corporate Crime and White-Collar Crime Literature**

Perhaps the most widely known theoretical contribution to neutralization theory is Cohen's (2009) 'States of Denial' that encompasses gross human rights violations committed by state officials. Of note is that, unlike Sykes and Matza (1957), the psychological questions of the perpetrators are less important to Cohen. Instead, Cohen (2009) equates political denials as something closer to corporate denials given that these officials are part of a larger organization as well as being a public representative; it therefore acts as a useful bridging point for connecting organizational and individual denials (Whyte, 2016). Building on the original five neutralization techniques, Cohen (2009) conceptualized two additional techniques, denial of knowledge and moral indifference, which are specific to political officials (Cohen, 2009, p. 98). Denial of knowledge entails the offender denying that they possessed information about the suffering of the victim(s) (Cohen, 2009). Moral indifference is a technique used to deny the immorality of the crime committed (Cohen, 2009).

Another important departure is that Cohen (2009) examines neutralization techniques as being the direct and official response to allegations being made after a crime is committed,

whereas the original theory was predicated on how delinquents internally justify their behaviour to protect their image (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). What is important about Cohen's work (2009) is that it expands and applies what was originally a theory about individual denials to organizational denials, which enables consideration of corporate and white-collar crime. In linking individual and organizational denials, according to Whyte (2016), it is reasonable to assume that both corporate actors and corporations will rely on techniques of neutralization to remove themselves from any implication of contributing to illegal activities. For example, moral indifference and denial of knowledge have been especially relevant in transnational crimes committed by corporations in third-world countries.

Similarly, the three strategies used in denial discourse—what Cohen (2009) refers to as the 'spiral of denial'—also offers a useful framework for analyzing corporate activity (p. 103). This is not to be confused with Cohen's (2009) neutralization typology and is instead a conceptualization of the overall denial strategies that States accused of human rights abuses adopt. Within each strategy, various neutralizations from Cohen's (2009) typology may be applicable. The first strategy, literal denial, is self-explanatory and entails the state outright denying the occurrence of an event they are being accused of having a hand in generating (Cohen, 2009, p. 103). Secondly, there is interpretative denial, where the state defends its actions by reformulating the description of the event or problem in cases where human rights watchdogs and other NGOs present irrefutable evidence of its occurrence (Cohen, 2009, p. 103). Lastly, there is implicatory denial, which involves the state justifying the event, often through an appeal to higher loyalties, necessity, or through denial of the victim (Cohen, 2009, p. 103). Much of these parallel how corporations respond to human rights abuse allegations.

Schoultz and Flyghed (2016) use Cohen's theory to analyze the defensive strategies employed by two Swedish companies, TeliaSonera and Lundin Petroleum. TeliaSonera's incident took place in Uzbekistan in 2012, where senior officials of the company were under suspicion of bribing the President's daughter to obtain lucrative telecom contacts (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). Meanwhile, Lundin Petroleum's scandal involved accusations from several NGOs that the company was complicit in crimes against humanity in Sudan. An investigation alleged that Lundin Petroleum's operations incited a civil war in the country, and despite this, the company made no efforts to stop the mass killings, displacement, rape, and torture that occurred (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). Most pertinent to their findings was that both companies relied on the technique of appealing to higher loyalties to justify the allegations laid against them. Both companies did not deny the harm of their presence in the areas they operated in, but rather they claimed that the benefits outweighed the costs. For example, Lundin Petroleum framed their business operations as contributing to the improvement of the lives of the Sudanese people, and that their investment was responsibly aligned with a pro-social and environmental perspective (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). On the other hand, TeliaSonera claimed that their investments in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries aided in the growth of infrastructure, and, therefore, helped modernize countries who had been struggling in a post-Soviet era (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016).

This is not new to the corporate scene, as corporations have been known to minimize the risks and harms that they create, instead choosing to emphasize the benefits of their business activities (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). Huisman (2010) argues that the appeal of higher loyalties involves a moral absolutism, where corporations neutralize via justifying the economic development and/or promotion of democracy associated with their presence. Schoultz and

Flyghed (2016) unpack this further, linking how certain neutralization techniques emerge from a time where CSR and the emphasis of appearing ethically and environmentally friendly makes certain neutralization techniques, such as an appeal to higher loyalties, possible. Schoultz and Flyghed (2016) dubbed this “responsible capitalism” (p. 190). In framing and marketing themselves as socially responsible, corporations are in turn setting themselves up to draw on the excuse that the good intentions of their operations far outweighs any bad that comes from their activities. CSR is therefore a way for corporations to justify illegal or morally questionable behaviour in the future to protect their reputation (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019)

On the other hand, protecting the corporate reputation at all costs is another recurrent theme in corporate crime literature. For example, in Whyte’s (2016) study of the utility of both neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) and denial theory (Cohen, 2000), he found that corporations in the automobile industry used “systematic deception” when accused of wrongdoing and criminal behaviour (p. 165). It was further revealed that the corporation preferred refusing a recall and a damage to their reputation over the safety of their customers (Whyte, 2016). One case study that Whyte (2016) examines was the scandal in relation to the 1993-2004 Jeep Grand Cherokee and the 2002-2007 Jeep Liberty exploding vehicles. Fiat, the manufacturer, denied claims that the vehicles did not meet and exceed legal requirements, instead claiming that it was in full compliance with the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Regulations (Whyte, 2016). They also denied the number of incidents, arguing it was normal to expect the number of fuel tank explosions within certain time periods. For Whyte (2016), this equated to the neutralization of condemning the condemners, as Fiat routinely drew on the latter two arguments to deflect accusations and criticism made by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Moreover, Whyte (2016) claims these denials were a deliberate attempt to undermine

and discredit the data compiled by the NHTSA. Moreover, rather than simply focusing on how corporations routinely neutralized, denied, and minimized their actions, Whyte (2016) situates these actions within the social, economic, and political power that corporations hold globally. In fact, it is not enough to illuminate the chronic use of deception and denial that corporations engage in, it is, in fact, more important to challenge the source of this hegemony which privileges corporations and allows them to operate the way that they do (Whyte, 2016).

In a later study, Schoultz and Flyghed (2019) developed a 13-part typology with the intention of situating how and why certain corporate neutralizations are used more than others. They draw on Mills (1940) to conclude that while it is impossible to claim that neutralizations cause corporate crime, they do in fact enable it to happen (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). They use Mills (1940) to help account for how corporate accounts (i.e., corporate defences and apologia in the face of accusations such as environmental harm and human rights violations) influences other corporate actors. That is, these neutralizations not only impact the behaviour of the corporation using the neutralization but also other corporate actors in that they are more likely to draw on the same narratives (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). This application of Mills (1940) also accounts for why certain corporate accounts (vocabularies in Millsian terms) are more acceptable than others. For example, the corporate account of “we are a changed company” is frequently used, which then goes on to influence how other corporations may draw on this same narrative to justify and neutralize their actions (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, p. 753). In turn, because these accounts are used frequently, they become viewed as acceptable in corporate public culture (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).

Corporate self-defence has emerged from the recognition of how important and necessary it is to neutralize their actions to the public, the media, and their shareholders, and is a form of

denial (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). For example, in Whyte's (2016) study, the normalization of harm among automobile corporations led him to coin a new technique known as denial of deviance (p. 179). This technique argues that harm is a normal consequence of business operations (Coleman, 1987); deviance has essentially become the norm, and because of this, movements to hold corporations accountable for their actions are removed from their power to enforce accountability (Whyte, 2016). This goes back to the notion that corporations can continue to deny or rather ignore their deviance due to the profound social, economic, and political privilege that they possess in our current neoliberal world (Whyte, 2016).

Overall, since good public standing has become an important component of corporate activity, corporations have increasingly become vocal on their right to justify their business activities, with the primary function being to protect their business and its reputation (Fooks et al., 2013). With this increasing desire to save public face and to maximize one's market position (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019), it is no surprise that corporations have increasingly relied on neutralizations in the face of such allegations.

Further, since many of the harms associated with corporate crime occur over long periods of time, it has also been common for corporations to employ the denial of victim neutralization (Whyte, 2016). Slow violence is defined as a "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Thus, the harms do not materialize straight away, especially in cases of pollution and other environmental harms, makes it difficult to establish the burden of proof (Nixon, 2011). Further, since many of these harms occur in third world countries, they do not come to the immediate attention of the mainstream western media. In turn, much of the harms to the third world countries and their inhabitants are

seen as the unfortunate consequences of business (Nixon, 2011). Lastly, like denial of victim, denial of injury occurs in cases where corporations deny social responsibility (Evertsson, 2019). For example, a study found that CEOs from the corporations involved in the Panama Papers scandal justified their tax fraud on the basis that other international legislation “promoted economic incentives” (Evertsson, 2019, p. 1). In this case, most of the incentives were based on saving money and avoiding international sanctions that would have deducted income. There was no regard for the capital lost from their country of origin. The focus was instead on profit maximization.

As seen with the last example, there is an overlap between white-collar and corporate crime in how corporations and their executives similarly employ neutralizations. This once again emphasises the key link that Cohen (2009) made between individual denials and organizational denials, wherein individual representatives may form the denial, yet be part of a larger organization. In fact, several studies have found that individuals are able to neutralize their actions behind the corporation they work under, meaning that all responsibility is transferred to the corporation (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). This is commonly referred to in the literature as the corporate veil, where corporate CEOs and executives can avoid criminal culpability by transferring all accountability to the corporation (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). Another common diffusion of responsibility in the corporate context is scapegoating (Hearit, 2006; Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal, 2002). This occurs when the corporation transfers the responsibility to a select few individuals, usually middle ranking managers in the company (Tombs & Whyte, 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).

For example, in their analysis of three Swedish corporations (Lundin Petroleum, Stora Enso, and Telia company), Schoultz and Flyghed (2019) found that rather than addressing

accusations or responding to questions on their own, corporate actors often deferred to the corporation's legal counsel or department. This was especially the case for Telia, where the responsibility for decision-making was displaced to several points in the organization's hierarchical structure including the legal department, managers, or by referring to a larger group of actors involved (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). Telia's former CEO and two other senior officials faced criminal charges for cooperating with repressive regimes in Central Asia and for allowing their telecommunications equipment to be used to spy on political opponents (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). Due to the complexity involved with assigning responsibility in corporate offences, it can result in either the individual avoiding legal culpability through transference of responsibility to the organization, or corporate scapegoating and the transferring of responsibility to an individual or select group of individuals. In turn, the corporation can continue to operate with minimal scrutiny (Bachmann et al., 2015).

All in all, while neutralization theory originally began as a theory explaining how juvenile delinquents justify their deviant behaviour to protect their self-image (Sykes & Matza, 1957), it has since expanded to cover other topics including human rights violations, crimes of the state, crimes of the elite, and crimes by corporate actors. The theory, however, is not beyond critique, especially on matters pertaining to the temporality and functionality of neutralizations (Maruna & Copes, 2005). This examination of corporate crimes and neutralizations is necessary in that it helps build on the connection between the similarity of corporate neutralizations in protecting their brand and reputation and how influencer apologies function similarly to protect reputation and business relationships.

### 3.3 Limitations of Neutralization Theory

Maruna and Copes (2005) argue that academics have taken the neutralization typologies as “gospel” (p. 284), and that there is a need to move away from the techniques themselves and instead examine the function of the techniques (Maruna & Copes, 2005). For example, this could include expanding the typology to encompass other neutralizations, such as with Cohen’s (2000) work on organizational denials. They also argue that the theory needs to move beyond the view that all justifications are bad and that accepting total responsibility for one’s actions is not realistically achievable (Maruna & Copes, 2005). In this case, there is a moral greyness associated with justifications and that most people do not want to accept responsibility for their actions (Maruna & Copes, 2005). This is particularly relevant given that YouTube apologies on the surface claim to take accountability (Makalintal, 2019; Dodgson, 2019) despite the use of neutralizations.

A related critique is that the typology does not explain crime. For example, Agnew and Peters (1986) assert that little attention has been paid to how the person must not only accept the technique, but also believe that it is applicable to the situation they are in. Their study on the opinions of cheating and shoplifting among college students supports that both these factors are needed to explain the use of neutralizations (Agnew & Peters, 1986). For example, students who indicated they would feel very guilty for cheating or shoplifting exhibited less admittance of these behaviours than students who indicated that they would feel somewhat guilty (Agnew & Peters, 1986). In turn, by considering these two dimensions, Agnew and Peters (1986) argue that it lends the theory more explanatory power. However, acceptance and being in a situation where the neutralization is applicable does not always mean that the neutralization is used, especially if the risk of apprehension is high (Agnew & Peters, 1986). What the insight does suggest is that a

combination of the two aforementioned factors is a better predictor of deviancy (Agnew & Peters, 1986). In relation to my thesis, this critique is important, as it focuses not only on what neutralizations are applicable, but also how and why they are accepted by the influencers in their situation. Lack of empiricism is another critique based on poor explanatory power, as the original typology cannot measure reliable and predictable outcomes. Overlap amongst techniques is also an empirical issue, as the distinction between them has been criticized for not being refined enough (Copes, 2014). For my project, however, I am more interested in identifying the presence of neutralization techniques and their situatedness in society.

Maruna and Copes (2005) offer the most extensive review of Sykes and Matza (1957). Like Hirschi (1969), they take the position that neutralization techniques may be better reformulated as secondary deviance. Rather than looking at neutralizations retrospectively, they can be better understood as a window into understanding neutralizations as narratives where the individual helps make meaning of their lives (Maruna & Copes, 2005). This window can help shed light on why the individual decided to commit the crime. This moves away from the rigid categorical use of neutralizations and adds more nuance by implicating the individual offender's processing and rationalizing of the events. Taking up the chicken or the egg argument on whether neutralizations cause and occur prior to crime or if they occur after-the-fact, Hirschi (1969) addresses the gap in the initial theory by stating that neutralizations can occur as both depending on the situation. Hirschi (1969) conceptualizes neutralization techniques as a "hardening process" (p. 208), meaning that the repetitive use of rationalizations can become a cause of future crime.

All in all, academics have yet to agree on which comes first; however, they do agree that the original theory did not put enough consideration into the process of developing a

neutralization. In the context of this thesis, the temporality of the offences is not a significant aspect; however, whether and why the neutralizations are internalized as acceptable will be an important consideration. Additionally, the apology videos from the dataset are all after-the-fact rationalizations, so critiques of temporality and causality are less relevant, as I am not examining the motives and rationalizations that led to the fraudulent or deceptive advertising.

### **3.4 Theoretical Framework b) Mills Vocabularies of Motive**

While Sykes and Matza (1957) did not cite Mills (1940), it is widely recognized that Mills (1940) had a strong influence on the theory (Copes, 2014), especially since both emerged from symbolic interactionism. Mills (1940) argues that the words used to rationalize behaviours before, during, and after-the-fact are intimately linked with an individual's motivations (p. 907). This is what Mills (1940) refers to as vocabularies of motives. However, the theory goes beyond the individual to unpack how motives reveal details about society more than they do about the individual (p. 907). This would also include examining why certain motives are seen to be more acceptable than others by situating them within the given socio-historical period.

As mentioned above, neutralization theory has been criticized for its inability to situate neutralization techniques. I therefore plan to use Mills (1940) to unpack the acceptability of certain neutralizations, not just within the individual rationalizing process of the influencer, but also how norms from neoliberal society have made deceptive advertising so common on YouTube. In the case of temporality critiques, this is less important to my thesis, as I am more focused on how the backlash from cancel/call-out culture resulted in certain neutralizations being used in the apology videos. I avoid critiques of explanatory power, as it is not my intention to explain fraud or deceptive advertising on YouTube with full certainty. Instead, my intention is to

situate why it is possible that certain neutralizations are used more than others and are considered more acceptable in the mind of both the influencer and the neoliberal society they live in.

As for the neutralizations in the apology videos, Mills (1940) helped me explore and situate how neoliberal logics are embedded in them. As discussed in the previous chapter, I make the link between corporate social responsibility and the influencer apology video. Corporations use neutralizations to protect their brand and business relationships with stakeholders (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016; Whyte, 2016), and this is no different with influencers whose reputations are threatened via the cancelling process (Makalintal, 2019, Dodgson, 2019). If one's reputation and public image are not repaired, then the influencer risks losing business relationships (Makalintal, 2019). This notion of image protection fits well with both neutralization and corporate neutralization literature, as they share the assumption that neutralizations function to protect the deviant's ego. Further, much of neutralization theory in the corporate literature uses image repair theory or corporate repair strategies (Benoit, 1995, 2013) as an additional tool in understanding how and why corporations respond to allegations. Thus, just like how corporations in crisis communication situations attempt to avoid liability at all costs by minimizing and denying the gravity of their actions (Kramer & Lewicki, 2010), influencers have also been known to minimize and deny the harm they cause.

As for theoretical contributions, I expand Mill's (1940) theory to create a term specific to my research topic. While the use of Mill's theory is not novel in corporate neutralization literature (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016; 2019), my topic itself is a crossover between white-collar and corporate crime. Not only do I intend to draw attention to the unique corporate mindset that has pervaded the platform and its users, but also the widespread invisibility of the corporations in fraud or deceptive advertising scandals.

I coined the term *apology vocabularies* to describe the common neutralizations that influencers employ in their YouTube videos. A key difference, however, is that these apology video neutralizations expand beyond verbal justification to include non-verbal properties. To encompass this, the non-verbal neutralizations can be extended to production choices, such as background, appearance, and music. These production choices cannot stand on their own and instead must help advance the argument of the verbal neutralizations. This can include minimizing allegations of harm and downplaying the seriousness of the accusations. That said, the following chapter examines in more depth what the typology of verbal and non-verbal apology vocabularies can look like in an apology video, along with the method I adopt to conduct this examination.

## 4. Methods

This chapter reviews the methodological approach taken in this thesis. I make use of rhetorical analysis to help identify and situate common verbal and non-verbal neutralizations in apology videos. To go beyond verbal neutralizations, as per Sykes and Matza's (1957) typology, I draw on Barthes (1972; 1977) to examine how both verbal and non-verbal signifiers can be combined to produce complex messages. I also build on the connection between the lengths that corporations go to legitimize their reputation through visual, written, and verbal rhetoric, and the similar lengths that influencers go to legitimize their reputation after a scandal.

### 4.1 Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical analysis is best defined as a critical reading of a text or media (Selzer, 2003, p. 280). It consists of breaking down the item under analysis into several parts to better understand how and why the author constructs their message the way that they do, as opposed to simply focusing on content, in order to consider the persuasive intent behind the message (Selzer, 2003). In academia, there is no accepted definition or standardized approach to rhetorical analysis, as its meaning differs depending on the author's epistemological and ontological beliefs along with their topic of choice (Selzer, 2003). It is a multi-disciplinary method, encompassing several fields of study including literary criticism, philosophy, and sociology (Welch et al., 2013).

Rhetoric is often framed as a synonym for communicating and persuading; therefore, it is "the study of language and the study of how to use it," (Selzer, 2003, p. 280). Selzer (2003) defines persuasion as an "effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language" (p. 281). The overall purpose of a rhetorical analysis is to go beyond reading the message of the piece to analyze how the message-maker not only conveys their message, but also the intended audience of the message (Selzer, 2003). For

example, a rhetorical analysis would examine if the message was crafted for a particular audience and/or if the message was crafted to elicit a certain response in the audience (Selzer, 2003). How and what the rhetorical analyst decides to analyze differs based on individual preferences (Selzer, 2003).

Selzer (2003) conceptualizes two main forms of rhetorical analysis used in academia. The first is textual analysis, which is less focused on context and focuses on the production of text, including stylistic choices, syntax, and the overall structure of the piece (Selzer, 2003, p. 282). The second type emphasizes context, which entails reconstructing the moment in which the rhetorical event took place, describing the environment surrounding it, and examining persuasive tactics and appeals that the individual(s) delivering the message enacted on the audience (Selzer, 2003, p. 282). As such, a fundamental concept of rhetorical analysis is audience.

Overall, the contextual approach is best defined as “an attempt to understand communications through the lens of their environments,” (Selzer 2003, p. 283) while also recognizing that each communicative practice is often in response to the social practices, attitudes, and values of the communities the message-giver is a part of. Thus, the difference between the two is that the contextual approach goes beyond the content of specific piece or text to understand how the message-giver constructs their message in response to their socio-political situation and relationships that they may or may not hold with their audience (Selzer, 2003).

## **4.2 The Study of Verbal and Visual Rhetoric in Corporate Communications**

Several scholars have examined the rhetoric used in organizational communications, including corporate communications. Corporations put a great deal of effort into the way they structure their reports and public communications, with visual imagery possessing a significant function in how their message is delivered (Greenwood et al., 2019). Greenwood et al. (2019)

examine different approaches to studying visual rhetoric. For them, the procedural approach to visual rhetoric lacks acknowledgement and consideration of important epistemic questions. Meanwhile, a more theoretical approach is generally viewed to possess less structured guidance in that it lacks rigor and concrete steps (Greenwood et al., 2019). In turn, they propose a new method for analyzing visual rhetoric that combines a theoretical approach with a standardized (procedural) approach to analyze organized communications (Greenwood et al., 2019). To do this, they borrow from French cultural theorist Roland Barthes, whose semiological and structuralist work contributed to the creation of a philosophy of communication (Greenwood et al., 2019). Their methodology mirrors Barthes (1972, 1977) perspective, “where the interpretation of visual imagery is a function of both the structural and ideological workings of the text itself and the viewer’s subjective relation to that image,” (Greenwood et al., 2019, p. 802). For Barthes’ (De Burgh Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2008), both words or written text are signs, embedded in discourse that can produce several meanings. Signs are defined as something that conveys meaning, and signifiers are the form in which this sign takes (Barthes, 1972, 1977). For example, a dove can be used as a sign meant to signify feelings of peace and tranquility. However, in other cultural and religious contexts aside from Judaism and Christianity, the dove may not signify peace and other signs and signifiers would be used instead to convey this message.

Barthes’ (1972, 1977) work on language and communication in picture advertisements has two main implications. First, language can have more than one intended meaning, and this meaning is interpreted by the viewer within their subcultural context, meaning the world around them influences how they interpret the advertisement. Second, with this understanding of how language can contain several meanings, they can better adjust their language to improve the

accuracy of their message for consumers (De Burgh Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2008). What is particularly important about Barthes' (1972, 1977) work is that it intends to map out several cultural systems of meaning as opposed to focusing on the subjectivity of the text. Through this, scholars can examine the wider ideological and sociological context in which pieces of texts (in this case advertisements) are interpreted by viewers. Essentially, Barthes' work (1972, 1977) aims to study the ideological aspect of visual signs, and Greenwood et al. (2019) apply this theoretical framework to visual rhetoric in corporate reports. The methodology they created has three premises; first, that linguistic theories developed for written and verbal language that can be applied to the study of the visual (p. 802). Second, that "images are both reflective and constitutive of social realities, yet the historically and socially conditioned nature of images is vulnerable to being erased through the ways that cultural myth works in communication artifacts" (Greenwood et al., 2019, p. 802). For example, the use of visual stereotypes of various cultures do not necessarily depict accurate portrayals of life. Lastly, that the text or visual under study is not the sole sight of meaning making; instead, the image's sites of production and consumption are also important to examine (Greenwood et al., 2019; Rose, 2012). For example, the creator of the message may not receive the intended interpretation from their audience, just the same as different audiences may interpret differently.

Often overlooked is the use of repetitive rhetoric on the planes of the visual, verbal, and written. Davidson (2008) conducted a study examining the rhetoric of narratives and pictures in the Annual Reviews of British Telecommunications (BT). The study adopted an analytical framework of repetition, and draws strongly on the concept of signifiers, to understand how messages were consciously repeated in the visual and written forms (Davidson, 2008). Findings indicated that the annual reports played a key role in the construction of the BT's corporate

identity (i.e., branding), especially in the context of the dot.com era, where repetition and excitement over high technology stocks was a significant message. Davidson (2008) concludes that this excitement and repetition was the result of BT wanting to reinforce a message that they were heavily involved in the communication industry, as well as attempting to reaffirm their longstanding reputation of being a significant player in the industry. Both verbal and pictorial representation were used to convey this general enthusiasm. Repetition was deliberately used as a rhetorical device to create emphasis and memorability in the messages being conveyed (Davidson, 2008). The author concluded that the repetition of both words and images to convey a message was a prominent trend of the dot.com era (Davidson, 2008). This is important given how many online advertisements make use of combined written and verbal rhetoric. Similar to how this study examines the use of words and images to convey a specific message to an audience, especially in the case of reaffirming one's reputation, I explore whether repetition is present in YouTube apology videos (Davidson, 2008).

Corporations also increasingly rely on combined visual and verbal rhetoric to reinforce their legitimacy, and this is often done through the lens of CSR (Hollerer et al., 2013). Hollerer et al. (2013) analyzed 1600 images of CSR reports from publicly traded Austrian corporations. They argue that visuals are just as important to communication sense-making as verbal messages (Hollerer et al., 2013). For example, images of happy children in front of a power plant, or an oilrig portrayed behind a sunset with warm tones were used to communicate less threatening messages that framed the corporate presence as beneficial for the community (Hollerer et al., 2013). Additionally, images can invoke complex messages such as metaphysical and spiritual ideas much easier than the writing included in a corporate report (Hollerer et al., 2013). Overall, images can paint a complex message more efficiently than the use of verbal or written text in that

they are able to convey several messages and themes at once. Because of this, images are often paired with verbal or written forms to enhance the strength of the message. For example, simply the use of color and shapes can set the tone of a message and frame something in a much more positive light, and this is further complemented by written rhetoric (Hollerer et al., 2013).

A similar study by Preston and Young (2006) analyzed images used to construct the global corporation, as well as how corporations construct the global world. Their analysis went beyond analyzing images, to analyze how images were combined with text, especially in the context of corporate reports where images were often overlaid with text (Preston & Young, 2006).

Otherwise referred to as mixed media, the viewer is encouraged to interpret and analyze the image in tandem to the way the message is presented; however, the meanings and interpretations of the image are not always the same for the viewer (Preston & Young, 2006). They found that corporations constructed a more gentle and romantic representation of the world, which encouraged an overall message of the ubiquitous presence of corporations (Preston & Young, 2006). Key recognizable monuments like the Eiffel tower and cities such as Tokyo were used to invoke feelings of familiarity to the foreign, suggesting that the world has become smaller due to the multinational operations of corporations (Preston & Young, 2006). They also found that in many of the images, the landscapes were framed from an outsider's position, suggesting that the corporation is viewing it as something to be rendered malleable and useful to their business operations (Preston & Young, 2006). Similarly, many of the landscape images were depicted at night, also suggesting that business operations do not stop. This message was especially prevalent in images using a Tokyo landscape, as it draws upon ethnic cultural stereotypes that propagate this idea that "the Orient [sic] does not sleep," (Preston & Young, 2006, p. 446).

Another popular field in the study of visual rhetoric is the study of visual semiotics in picture ads. While influencer advertisements on YouTube are in video format, they are still very much rooted in the visual where the influencer's narrative works alongside visuals (e.g., editing in images, the use of music and/or sound effects) they use in the video to advertise. Like the use of imagery in corporate reports, picture advertisements contain several signs that are used to communicate cultural messages (Noth, 2011). As stated previously, the semiotics between verbal text and imagery is different, with both being able to communicate their own types of meaning and communicative efficiency (Noth, 2011).

Even something as simple as a milk advertisement is embedded with complex cultural meaning that makes use of both verbal and visual rhetoric tactics. A study examining the visual and verbal semiotics (i.e., multi-level semiotics) of the UHT ultra milk commercials used Barthes (1972;1977) to help draw out the implicit connotative meanings behind the signs used in the advertisements. The analysis found that the semiotics of the ads aimed to convince consumers to preserve the culture of drinking milk from both parents to children, and that milk enabled a healthy and balanced lifestyle where one does not give up on their dreams (Ardhianto & Son, 2019). Since the messages embedded in the advertisements were not explicit but rather implicit, they possessed the power to influence several groups, leaving the individual viewer to decipher the meaning from both the verbal text and the visual imagery (Ardhianto & Son, 2019). Furthermore, the analysis did not simply consider verbal use in the various scenes of the advertisements, but also the contextual imagery used to promote the aforementioned messages (Ardhianto & Son, 2019). This is most notable, since it lends more power to the idea that advertisements can contain different meanings for several groups. For example, this ties back to the parasocial bond that a child can hold with a social media influencer. A child is much more

likely to believe that supporting/purchasing a product that an influencer advertises is a means of acceptance by a figure they look up to (Hill, 2011; Kim & Song, 2016), whereas older demographic groups may remain more skeptical of the product being advertised.

Overall, much of the literature examining visuals from a rhetorical perspective examine illustrations and photographs as opposed to other visual media forms such as film (King & McCarthy, 2018). I hope to expand this methodology to study the construction of YouTube videos (which, arguably, is a mini film), and more specifically, apology videos. I believe that apology videos are rich with both visual and verbal semiotics that are unique to the platform, its online community, and their norms, values, and social practices. Moreover, since apology videos are performative and attempt to appeal to the viewer (Makalintal, 2019), they are rich with cultural signs indicative of the values of the online YouTube community and the wider neoliberal logics of global capitalism.

### **4.3 A Rhetorical Analysis of Apology Videos**

For this project, I employ what Selzer (2003) refers to as a contextual rhetorical analysis. I am interested in examining the socio-political and economic context in which apology videos take place, which includes how fraud is widespread on the platform among influencers. Since this is a contextual rhetorical analysis, I intend to go beyond the verbal to look at other details of the apology video, which revolve around production and stylistic choices. With Barthes (1972,1977), I am able to examine how the apology video as a text can produce several subcultural meanings and interpretations from the viewer. In turn, this can be used to situate why apology videos have mixed reactions. On one hand, influencers draw from apology scripts that are seen as acceptable and are accepted by viewers. On the other hand, some viewers remain skeptical of the why these apology scripts are used by the influencers and question the integrity

and authenticity of the apology. In turn, the skepticism revolves around whether the influencers apologize for the sake of apologizing and protecting their reputation or whether they are truly sorry. This thesis does not attempt to answer whether these apologies are truly genuine, but rather contextualizes why in a commercial and underregulated environment that thrives on parasocial bonds to advertise that there are different interpretations and reactions to apology videos (i.e. user skepticism versus acceptance).

For example, extant literature has shown that in criminal justice, any apology from offenders contributes to a more positive perception of them and less serious recommended punishments as opposed to those who did not apologize (Jehly et al., 2012). Apologies in criminal justice court proceedings are used to restore relationships between offenders and victims. When offenders apologize, they are more likely to be seen more favourably on a variety of characteristics, including blameworthiness, likeability, being perceived as a good person (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Whether the apology is coerced or offered voluntarily has a considerable impact on the perception of the apology. For example, one study found that victims are more likely to forgive offenders who are truly sorry for their transgression, illustrating that internally motivated apologies are more likely to be received better than external apologies that are coerced and not voluntary (Allan et al., 2006).

This can also potentially be applied to influencer apologies, where any apology, regardless if it was forced by cancel culture or not, contributes positively to an influencer's reputation post-scandal. However, one advantage that influencers have over traditional offenders in criminal justice proceedings is the parasocial bond they hold with their audience. For example, one study found that participants with a stronger parasocial bond with the media figure

apologizing were more likely to forgive the figure's transgression (Hu et al., 2019). In turn, stronger parasocial relationships were associated with a more positive perception of the apology.

That said, to conduct my contextual rhetorical analysis, given little empirical attention, I borrowed from Makalintal (2019) and Haylock's (2020) mainstream depiction and categorization of influencer apology videos as a genre. Both media articles summarize common tactics that influencers use not only to downplay the seriousness of their scandal and apology, but to gain sympathy from their viewers (Makalintal, 2019; Haylock, 2020). Makalintal's (2019) notes that influencer apology videos often contain dramatic sighs at the end or beginning of the video; a high frequency of zoom ins on the influencer's face to illustrate sadness; either a wordy and long apology or a brief apology; vague titles that do not provide enough context on what the apology is about; fake tears; and a lack of make-up for female influencers to demonstrate that they are showing their raw and authentic selves. Similarly Haylock's (2020) identifies the following tactics as common to the influencer apology video genre: some kind of hiatus prior to apologizing; tears, using the phrase 'taking accountability'; being dressed casually or in white to portray innocence; and the video either being overedited (i.e. precise to be careful with wording) or underedited so that the influencer's apology is seen as genuine and free-flowing in order to avoid claims that the apology is scripted and inauthentic.

The aforementioned themes from Makalintal (2019) and Haylock (2020) were used as a source of inspiration and a sensitizing scheme that I used when forming the questions used in my rhetorical analysis. It is important to note that my study conceptualizes these apology videos tropes as non-verbal neutralization techniques, whereas Makalintal (2019) and Haylock (2020) do not. The following questions were included in my rhetorical analysis:

- What is the main idea (thesis) that the influencer is trying to convey;

- What is the influencer's purpose in making this video? To defend? To apologize? To criticize the critics?;
- What is the influencer's tone? Is it consistent throughout the video?;
- Are there any non-verbal neutralizing and minimizing behaviours?;
- Are there any verbal neutralization techniques being employed? What are the most prevalent ones?;
- Is the background of the video significant in how the influencer conveys their message?;
- Is the style and degree of editing in the video important to how the influencer conveys their message?;
- What is the influencer wearing? Is this significant in how the influencer conveys their message?;
- Is there music or sound effects present in the video? If so, does this have an impact on how the influencer conveys their message?;
- Is the influencer collecting money from this apology video (i.e. is ad roll on?);
- and What is the chronology of the story that the influencer presents? E.g. do they begin with their perspective or do they start with the reason why they are apologizing? What is the intended purpose of this chronology?

Overall, the goal of this project is not only to provide a semiological analysis of YouTube apology videos, but also to relate and understand why they emerged in the current neoliberal epoch of society. This is where I intend to bridge Barthes' (1972; 1974) and Mills' (1940) works. Where Mills (1940) can help provide context as to why certain neutralizations are drawn on more than others in a neoliberal economy, it does not help me explain how images and words can

be combined to reiterate the overall message being conveyed. Barthes' (1972; 1977) semiological framework also allows me to unpack how these rationalities are conveyed using both the visual and verbal in apology videos. This is especially the case in the dot.com era, where influencers can create professionally edited content that strategically draws on visuals and pre-written scripts that in most cases, goes through several rounds of scrutiny between management and other hired consultants. Just like how corporations build and curate their identity to convey a certain message and uphold their good-standing reputation among stakeholders (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016; Hollerer et al., 2013), the same logic can reasonably be applied to influencers who resort to making apology videos as a means of repairing their public image and market appeal to sponsors.

That said, one limitation of this methodological and theoretical approach is that I cannot account for internal justifications, as I have no empirical grounds to conclude exactly what the influencer was thinking both prior to and during the construction of the apology video. Therefore, in my rhetorical analysis, I can only write on my interpretation as the viewer regarding what I think was the influencer's intended message. I thus intend to situate apology vocabularies, both verbal and non-verbal, within a neoliberal capitalist context. Since I cannot confirm the influencer's thoughts and intentions, any verbal and non-verbal neutralization that I identify is therefore not set in stone as the influencer purposefully deploying them. I overcome this by stating that if the justification can reasonably be attributed to contributing to the influencer's overall argument of minimizing damages to their reputation, then it reaches my threshold for being a neutralization. Other factors, such as the timing of the neutralization and how the visual and verbal are paired together, are considered in the findings chapter.

#### 4.4 Sample Criteria

The dataset consists of six apology videos. I utilized a purposive sampling technique that constructed six criteria to meet the threshold for inclusion in the dataset. First, the apology video must have received enough backlash to reach the attention of mainstream news media. This threshold was made in consideration of showing the power that cancel culture holds, as the cancelling process is often a significant ordeal on social media (Luu, 2019). I define mainstream media as any news outlet (online or offline) that does not specifically or singularly cover digital news and events.<sup>11</sup> The second criterion is that the influencer had to have a minimum of one million followers at the time of the scandal as it is unlikely for smaller influencers to reach mainstream media attention. Third, the scandal had to be based on deceptive and/or fraudulent advertising. For a case study to meet the deceptive advertising threshold, it was not important whether or not there was a legal intervention. Instead, it was more important that viewers felt that they had been deceived, which fueled the demand for an apology. As mentioned, deceptive advertising is vague and underenforced. In many cases in the dataset, consumers felt deceived, but the legal definition was not applicable, which highlights the inefficacy of the current regulatory regime in how it defines deceptive advertising. For example, it would be difficult to prove in court how the parasocial bond that an influencer holds with an audience, which cannot be quantified on an individual basis, is ‘material’ and affects the consumer’s decision to buy and use the product (FTC, 1983). Furthermore, it would also be difficult to prove how this parasocial bond would otherwise cause consumers to not act reasonably. By this, I mean that viewers are more likely to trust the influencer, and, because of this trust, may not be as critical or pay attention to what the influencer is advertising.

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<sup>11</sup> For evidence that all apologies in the dataset involved cancel culture (i.e., public shaming) please refer to Appendix A.

Moreover, regardless of where the advertisement occurred, the apology videos addressed the scandals on the YouTube platform. For example, Gabbie Hanna's misleading Kenza Cosmetics advertisement occurred on Snapchat; however, she is primarily an influencer on YouTube and uploaded the apology onto YouTube accordingly. The fourth criterion was that the video addressed the scandal in some way, even if the apology was not the only topic addressed in the video. For example, Zoella (Zoe Sugg) put her apology at the end of a vlog video<sup>12</sup> instead of having the apology as its own separate video. The fifth criterion revolves around length of the video. For this thesis, I accepted apology videos without consideration of a time limit. Thus, the apology videos range from two minutes to over an hour in length. For example, TmarTn and his CGSO lotto scandal apology totals two minutes, whereas Tana Mongeau's apology is one hour and four minutes. The reason I selected this criterion is because I needed a variety of deceptive advertising scandals from different industries and YouTube genres. If I had a time limit, some of the cases would not be included in my data set. The reason I need this variety was to demonstrate how deceptive advertising is a systemic problem in all corners of YouTube. In turn, all six apology videos come from a range of industries including beauty, fashion, entertainment, gaming, and news. Lastly, the sixth criterion that is common throughout all cases is that regardless of the attention of mainstream media, call-out and cancel culture was involved. By this, I mean that the influencers received negative backlash and engagement on social media for their problematic behaviour. The quantity of negative reactions was not as important; the threshold was that the negative reaction had to be so large that it warranted a public apology and reached the attention of mainstream media. In sum, there were two commonalities across the

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<sup>12</sup> A vlog is a video blog, where a creator documents their day-to-day life (Serfaty, 2004)

videos: first, there was some sort of deceptive and/or misleading advertising; and second, the backlash was so negative that it warranted a public apology video.

#### 4.5 Data Collection & Analysis

Each apology video was subjected to a rhetorical analysis. I created a rhetorical scheme<sup>13</sup> where all potential verbal and visual persuasive tactics used in the videos were plotted in two separate tables. As stated, because I cannot confirm the true intentions of the influencers, any non-verbal or verbal tactic that I identify must reasonably contribute to the influencer's overall argument (e.g., minimization of damage). Therefore, the tactics I identify cannot simply be present in the video, they must contribute to an overall argument and neutralization.

First, I transcribed each video and from these transcriptions, I coded each neutralization technique that was present. Sometimes, the neutralization changed from sentence to sentence, and to encompass this, I labelled the neutralization technique in brackets, similar to a paper reference<sup>14</sup>. I re-read the transcripts five separate times to ensure that my coding was reliable and did not change upon each reading before I transferred all neutralizations used in the apology video into my neutralization chart. As stated before, the original typology from Sykes and Matza (1957) does not have rigorous empirical distinctions for each neutralization (Maruna & Copes, 2005). Therefore, I proofread the codes five times to ensure consistency with how I coded. Each apology video was designated a verbal neutralization chart, where all the verbal neutralizations were organized according to Sykes and Matza's (1957) typology. Lastly, I compared each verbal

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<sup>13</sup> Please refer to Appendices D-I.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed description of how I distinguished between neutralization techniques and standardized my codification process, please refer to Appendix B.

neutralization chart to analyze commonalities among the verbal techniques used across the apology videos.

The next step included watching the videos for any visuals that may have enhanced the verbal neutralization while it was being said, and vice versa with the visuals being used and the verbal neutralization techniques that complemented them. I used screenshots to help plot out the visual neutralization techniques used. All videos were watched a minimum of 5 times at a speed of 0.5 to ensure that they were examined thoroughly. All visuals were plotted on a rhetorical scheme, which includes non-verbal stylistic choices that both Haylock (2020) and Makalintal (2019) summarized as being common in the YouTube apology video genre. The next step included comparing the visual and verbal neutralization techniques in each video to examine the similarities between them, including if they were used to emphasize the same overall message or neutralization. From there, I examined three visual aesthetics (to be discussed in the next chapter) that were common across the data. I selected these commonalities based on the frequency that they appeared in the neutralization charts and rhetorical schemes. These aesthetic commonalities were assessed through several visual screenshots that I took while analyzing the videos.

The next chapter summarizes the most common verbal and visual neutralization techniques that I found during my analysis as well as their mutually reinforcing relationships. While I cannot attest to the overall sincerity of the apology, I argue that the verbal and non-verbal neutralization techniques used in the videos raise questions about their authenticity. The discussion also examines legal implications and the invisibility of the corporations whose products the influencers were advertising in the scandals.

## 4.6 Case Studies

“On YouTube, apologies – like lipsticks – have become just another product. With high-profile stars always selling something, the apology video is a necessary step of damage control.”  
(Makalintal, 2019).

The apology video serves as a point of defence for influencers (Makalintal, 2019) and functions, for the most part, to paint them in a more positive light. One of the most well-known examples of the influencer apology video in pop culture is the Logan Paul suicide forest scandal. To spark interest in his initial vlog video, Logan filmed a dead body on his trip to Japan’s suicide forest (BBC, 2018b). What sparked additional outrage is that he included a photo of a deceased person in the video’s thumbnail (BBC, 2018b). The backlash he received was so overwhelming that his cancelling resulted in the loss of several thousand subscribers, sponsorships, and his removal from YouTube Red (BBC, 2018b)<sup>15</sup>. In turn, not only did his reputation suffer, but his market appeal to sponsors also suffered greatly. However, the consequences of being cancelled were not long-term. After issuing an apology video, his subscriber counts stabilized and he now continues to enjoy success in the millions of followers, along with a successful podcast and a steady pool of sponsorships (Dodgson, 2021). The following case studies all include the influence of cancel and call-out culture and a resulting apology video. As with Logan Paul and David Dobrik (see introduction), later sections demonstrate that cancel culture’s effects are not long-term, as many of these influencers continue to engage in misleading and deceptive advertising practices today.

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<sup>15</sup> A premium subscription service belonging to YouTube.

## Apology Video #1 RiceGum<sup>16</sup>



In early 2019<sup>17</sup>, several YouTube influencers came under fire for promoting the gambling website Mysterybrand.net. The website allowed users to gamble between \$2 and \$1,300 for the chance of winning prizes such as a Rolls Royce, an iPhone, and an iPad (Alexander, 2019). RiceGum (Bryan Quang Le), among other influencers, advertised this website by showing himself gambling and winning large prizes. RiceGum was largely criticized for deceiving and misleading his audience (Alexander, 2019). Contrary to his initial advertisement, winning large prizes on the website were extremely unlikely (Alexander, 2019). He was also criticized for a conflict of interest, as he was offered more than one hundred thousand dollars to accept and promote this brand deal (Alexander, 2019). RiceGum knowingly accepted this deal and advertised Mystery Brand to his audience, which was mostly comprised of children. Due to the ethics of promoting gambling services to minors, which is illegal, this scandal reached the attention of mainstream media<sup>18</sup>:

<sup>16</sup> To watch the whole video please refer to this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4E8qmF10Mts>

<sup>17</sup> Screenshot captures RiceGum offering Amazon gift cards to ask for forgiveness to his fans for accepting the Mystery Brand Sponsorship.

<sup>18</sup> Mainstream news sources included Independent Co.UK, Vox, The Verge, Insider, and NewsWeek.

Popular YouTubers like Jake Paul and Bryan ‘Rice Gum’ Le promoted a shady gambling website to their millions of subscribers, many of whom are children. And now they’re in the middle of a debate about the ethics and the responsibility that comes with legions of young, highly impressionable superfans (Jennings, 2019).

In relation to the corporation’s role in the scandal, Mystery Brand received minimal criticism in discussions of accountability. When confronted about how some of the prizes that were advertised on the website, including an \$188-million mansion, were not owned by the company, a representative commented that they would either help the winner obtain the prize or give them a prize of the same financial equivalent (Alexander, 2019). YouTube was also able to distance themselves from the situation, claiming that their company’s policies only regulate the disclosure of the paid advertisement, which RiceGum and other influencers who advertised the service followed (Alexander, 2019). They also claimed, as per their advertisement policy, that the influencers are to be held responsible by their domestic regulators (Alexander, 2019).

### **Apology Video #2 Gabbie Hanna<sup>19</sup>**



In 2018 and early 2019, YouTube influencer Gabbie Hanna was widely criticized for her endorsement of make-up brushes produced by Kenza Cosmetics. The product was misleadingly

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<sup>19</sup> Please note that this video has since been deleted from Gabbie Hanna’s YouTube channel. This video cut the majority of the original apology video to only cover the point from which Gabbie Hanna starts talking about the scandal. Corresponding time stamps will refer to this video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4-2pwi-IMI>

advertised as she had stated that they were of high quality (Sommer, 2019). The make-up brushes on the website were stated to be \$80 in value (Sommer, 2019). Viewers were told that all they had to do was pay \$10 shipping to receive these brushes, which therefore made them “free”, and they were marketed as such (Sommer, 2019). This brand deal was later revealed to be a scam, as viewers realized that these same brushes could be found online for no more than \$2 a piece on Chinese websites (MacDonald, 2019). Many fans also did not receive their brushes, and those who did, complained of their low quality.

In discussions of accountability, Kenza Cosmetics’ involvement in the scandal was minimal. In an interview with fellow influencer iNabber, Gabbie Hanna reveals screenshots of email exchanges with Kenza Cosmetics where they deny that they were a scam company and claim that the shipping times were disclosed properly (MacDonald, 2019). When Gabbie Hanna provided the company with screenshots of fans who had claimed to have bought the product but never received it, Kenza Cosmetics denied that these fans had bought the product in the first place, insinuating they were lying (MacDonald, 2019).

### Apology video # 3 TmarTn<sup>20</sup>

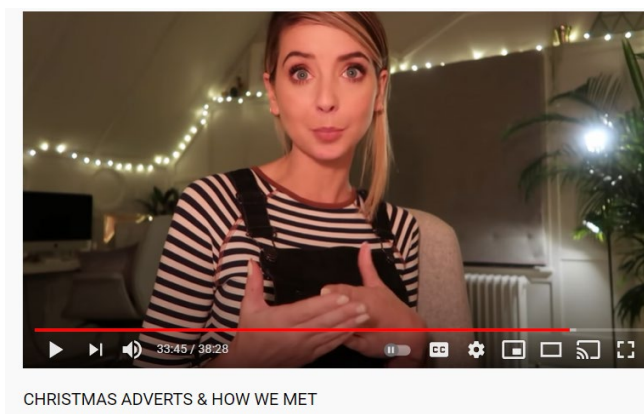


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<sup>20</sup> Please note that TmarTn has since deleted the YouTube channel on which this apology video was uploaded. Corresponding time stamps will refer to this video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSk87Rj1Q34>

In 2015, YouTube influencers TmarTn (Trevor Martin) and Syndicate created the company CSGO lotto, an online skin-gambling website<sup>21</sup>. Skins on the website could be bought, sold, and traded online for money (Wolf, 2017). Both TmarTn and Syndicate advertised the website without disclosing that they owned the company, a conflict of interest that misled many viewers. In addition to issues related to the website being promoted to minors, both TmarTn and Syndicate were accused of misleading their audiences by showing themselves gambling skins and amassing large sums of money (Wolf, 2017). For example, TmarTn advertised the website, using the video title “How to win \$13,000 in 5 minutes (CS-GO betting)” (Federal Trade Commission, 2017a). Despite the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) action in 2017 that ordered TmarTn to disclose his affiliations in future advertisements, where each subsequent violation of this settlement would result in a \$40,000 fine (Federal Trade Commission, 2017a), the apology video was what received the most public attention.

#### **Apology Video #4 Zoella (Zoe Sugg)<sup>22</sup>**



In 2017, popular vlog-style influencer Zoella was criticized for an advent calendar she created and sold through the company Boots, a large beauty and pharmacy retailer in the United

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<sup>21</sup> Skins are different avatar forms that an online character, usually in video games, can take.

<sup>22</sup> To watch the whole video please refer to this link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5TPOKoE1\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5TPOKoE1_M)

Kingdom (Oppenheim, 2017). She advertised the calendar as something she had worked hard on and had put a lot of thought into. Meanwhile, the calendar was priced at 50 euros, which, according to fans, was grossly overpriced and crossed the line of taking advantage of them (Oppenheim, 2017). The reason for this claim was that the calendar consisted of 12 advent doors, which included a packet of seven stickers, a cookie cutter, a small bag, a cookie-scented candle, a 30ml room spray, a key ring, a gingerbread man shaped cookie, a mini note pad, and a ‘cosy’ Christmas candle (Oppenheim, 2017). In total, the products in the advent calendar were worth 20 euros (Oppenheim, 2017). To fans, it was clear that Zoella misled her audience into thinking the product was high quality (Oppenheim, 2017). Instead, it was poorly designed and of inexpensive value. In turn, she was criticized for taking advantage of her largely young audience with the expensive pricing (Oppenheim, 2017). Boots later issued a statement apologizing for consumer disappointment in the product and cut the price in half (Oppenheim, 2017).

### Apology Video #5 Philip DeFranco<sup>23</sup>



In 2018, several YouTube influencers engaged in a sponsorship with BetterHelp, an online counselling platform that marketed itself as a service with quality licensed professionals and mental health experts (Alexander, 2018). Many of the influencers promoting this service claimed to have used it themselves, including those with large platforms such as Shane Dawson,

<sup>23</sup> To watch the whole video please refer to this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzRqPFtKiYU>

Gabbie Hanna, H3H3 productions, and Philip DeFranco (Alexander, 2018). Promotion of this service became a scandal in late 2018 when it was revealed that the company's terms of service revealed that the company could not 100% guarantee a professional or even licensed professional would provide counselling services (Alexander, 2018). Instead, the terms and conditions placed the onus on the consumer to independently verify the credentials of the counsellor with whom they were matched (Alexander, 2018). Influencers promoting this website received backlash from users once this was revealed and were accused of deceptive advertising and profiting from the poor mental health of their viewers. These influencers were also accused of having a conflict of interest, as they made commission from the number of their viewers who subscribed to the service via an affiliate link (Alexander, 2018). Other faults in the service included reports that counsellors did not show up to appointments and the company taking hundreds of dollars in payments before a seven-day trial period was over (Alexander, 2018). Philip DeFranco was an influencer that arguably received the most flack for this scandal, as he was responsible for connecting many influencers with BetterHelp as a third-party agency (Alexander, 2018).

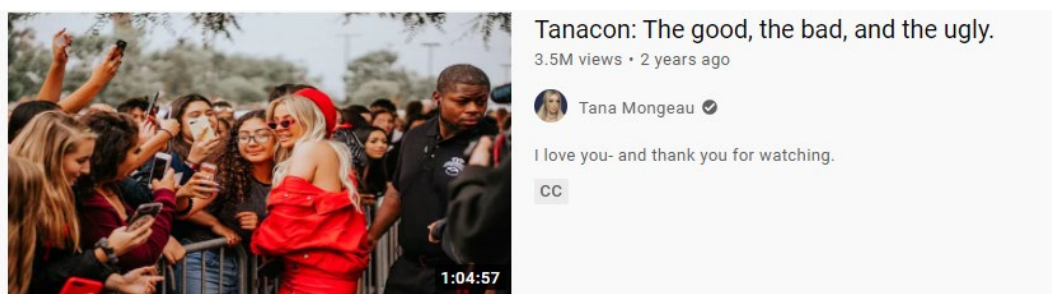
Despite the terrible reviews and backlash from the conditions in terms and services, the CEO of BetterHelp, Alon Mattas, initially took to responding to the situation on Reddit, defending the company and encouraging individuals to view the counsellor directory and report any individuals who were not licensed (Alexander, 2018). In a later statement, Mattas claimed that counsellors go through rigorous background checks and that the terms of services were updated to account for this (Alexander, 2018). Nonetheless, the original terms and services were concerning, which was the biggest issue that was fronted in the scandal:

While we may try to do so from time to time, in our sole discretion, you acknowledge that we do not represent to verify, and do not guarantee verification of, the skills, degrees,

qualifications, licensure, certification, credentials, competence or background of any Counselor,” (in<sup>24</sup>Alexander, 2018)

It is your responsibility to conduct independent verification regarding any Counsellor that provides you with Counsellor services (whether through the platform or not) and we strongly recommend that you will conduct this verification prior to communicating with any Counsellor through the platform and on a continuous basis as you use the platform,” (in Alexander, 2018).

### Apology Video #6 Tana Mongeau<sup>25</sup>



In summer 2018, influencer Tana Mongeau attempted to host her own conference where fans could meet their favourite influencers. After several bad experiences with Vidcon, an event where influencers gather in Anaheim to meet fans in a weekend long conference, including being banned<sup>26</sup> from the annual event, Tana. Mongeau decided to create TanaCon. TanaCon was marketed as a cheaper alternative where several of the same big-name influencers who had previously attended VidCon would be attending (Farokjmanesh, 2018). Given that TanaCon was planned at the last minute (in a span of two months), it was a recipe for disaster. After the first day, the conference was cancelled for safety issues, as thousands of fans were unable to enter the venue and were stuck in dangerously hot weather. In fact, the venue’s capacity was listed as 1,000 despite 5,108 fans purchasing tickets, including up to 200-300 virtually ‘free’ tickets that were purchased at \$1 each (Farokjmanesh, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> These terms of services are no longer available for viewing.

<sup>25</sup> To watch the whole video please refer to this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOR8c2z3sSk>

<sup>26</sup> Tana Mongeau was banned from the conference due to concerns over safety. She attended Vidcon for several years, and because she was not a featured creator despite having a million subscribers at the time, her presence caused large groups of people to swarm her.

Unlike the other cases, the company that Tana Mongeau hired for the event, Good Times, shared a great deal of public criticism for TanaCon's failure. The CEO, Michael Weist, soon filed for bankruptcy after the event (Glaze, 2018). Good Times later released a documentary where more footage of the planning of the event was released, which depicted Tana Mongeau not being as involved in the planning as she claimed in her apology video. In fact, clips in the documentary depicted Tana Mongeau being aware and even bragging that the venue did not have the capacity to host all the attendees: "I love that for us. It would be really, really cool, too, to have people, like outside waiting to get in," (Farokjmanesh, 2018). The documentary did not receive anywhere near the same amount of attention as Tana's apology video (Farokjmanesh, 2018).

## 5. Findings

This chapter summarizes the common verbal and non-verbal neutralization techniques in the data set. I then situate how many of these apology narratives were made justifiable through neoliberal norms and laws that privilege business operations (Tombs, 2016). I also draw conclusions between the similarity of corporate and influencer neutralizations. I later discuss corporate invisibility in the scandals and examine how this speaks to the larger issue of corporate impunity in society. Lastly, I examine the impact of cancel culture as a tool of accountability.

### 5.1 The Use of Verbal Neutralization Techniques

#### a) Denial of Responsibility

The dominant neutralization technique from the data was denial of responsibility. Denial of responsibility occurs when the offender claims that the situation was beyond their control and often that they were a victim of circumstance (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The predominant use of this neutralization technique was to displace blame onto the viewers or outside sources, including the retailer and the company involved.

In his apology video, RiceGum states that he accepted the brand deal because it was an easy way to make money. However, he minimizes the damage by stating it is normal protocol amongst influencers to accept such deals. He then proceeds to deny any responsibility for misleading his audience to think they would win large prizes, despite having shown himself winning such prizes in the initial advertisement:

I would spend \$100 and at times I would get a fidget spinner, and then I would spend \$100, and at times, I got a good item. It was basically you win some, you lose some, and that's like the definition of gambling (3:37 in video).

While this may be the definition of gambling, RiceGum's justification removes himself from responsibility for advertising this service to his young audience. From his point of view, it was beyond his control that viewers did not understand the definition of gambling. This justification can also be connected to the denial of the victim neutralization technique—where the offender implies that the person deserved what happened to them (Sykes & Matza, 1957)—as RiceGum also implies that the victims (viewers) deserved what happened to them since they did not know what gambling was. The two neutralizations go hand-in-hand as it was not his responsibility to convey the meaning of gambling, and it was the fans' own fault for not doing their due diligence to learn the definition.

In Gabbie Hanna's apology video, she denies advertising the make-up brushes to be of high quality. Gabbie Hanna begins her apology by stating she was clear about the long shipping times in her advertisement and that she did not scam her fans, therefore denying responsibility. This is also a reflection of denial of the victim, as Gabbie Hanna implies that victims deserved what happened to them (i.e., their disappointment in the brushes) because they 'misunderstood' the advertisement. She also does not address fans who never received the product:

Mostly confusing is that my followers were calling it a scam days after they ordered and the website was pretty clear about you know the shipping times are long. I believe it said between 10 and 21 business days and then at one point it said you wouldn't be getting your brushes till after Christmas...since you know they're free brushes and you're ordering free brushes so there's gonna be a high order volume. So I was very confused by everybody who was making such a big deal on not getting their brushes yet when the website was pretty clear about not getting your brushes for a while (0:26 in video).

Gabbie Hanna then goes on to say that she followed up with Kenza cosmetics, implying that she had done her due diligence. It was Gabbie Hanna's responsibility to do her due diligence to ensure that the product she was advertising was legitimate and truthful. Instead, her apology

video similarly followed the route of RiceGum, where she claims that her fans not reading the website properly and misreading her advertisement was beyond her control and not her fault.

TmarTn, whose apology is short, also relies on the neutralization technique of denial of responsibility. He shifts blame onto the viewers for not taking it upon themselves to access public records where his affiliation with CSGO lottery was disclosed. This is despite FTC guidelines that require that material connections are disclosed in advertisements (Federal Trade Commission, 2009).

Now my connection to CSGO lotto has been a matter of public record since the company was first organized in December of 2015. However, I do feel like I owe you guys an apology. I'm sorry to each and every one of you who felt like that was not made clear enough to you, and I truly honestly hope that you guys give me an opportunity to earn your trust back. Please also know that I am committed to making sure that my YouTube channel as well as all my other business are in compliance with the law. This is why I do not condone minors under the age of 18 to use CSGO lotto. This is and always has been a clearly stated policy available both in the Terms and Service as well as the initial signup page on the website (0:43 in video).

Nowhere does TmarTn acknowledge that he had not made this clear in his initial advertisement of the service. Similarly, TmarTn addresses the issue of minors gambling on the website by stating they do not condone minors using the website and that their mention of 13-year-olds in the privacy policy only refers to not collecting information on children in compliance with the law. Overall, TmarTn fails to acknowledge the harm he caused by allowing minors to illegally gamble their money on his website. Instead, he chooses to deny this illegitimate practice and positively reinforce his company's reputation: "I believe that every game offered on CSGO lotto has been legitimate," (1:54 in video).

In Mrs. Sugg's case, she denies responsibility several times in her apology video by explaining she had no control over the pricing of the advent calendar once she gave it to the retailer for production. A spokesperson for Zoella also reaffirmed this statement during the time

of the scandal (Oppenheim, 2017). She proceeds to equate the calendar to a baby, that, once created, is passed over to the company for care. This is similar to corporate rhetoric where senior executives use the complexity of the production process and hierarchy within the organization to avoid responsibility (Tombs & Whyte, 2015; Bachmann et al., 2015).

As an influencer with a largely youth audience at the time, Zoella had responsibility to be truthful in her advertisement of the advent calendar, and instead, she took advantage of fans that admired her. There is a power-dynamic that cannot be ignored, and this was exacerbated by the deceptive advertising that marketed this calendar as something of high quality as opposed to a cheap money grab (Oppenheim, 2017).

I don't have the right to make those decisions, so it makes me so sad that a product that I loved and worked hard on and that loads of you liked that product it is just having that product at the price that was out of my decision has left so many people so upset (34:12 in video).

I don't want people to think that I'm like sat at home like counting 50 pounds every time someone buys this calendar thinking that was a conscious decision that I made to rip people off because if you know me you know that that there is not a bone in my body that would think that way. And it makes me so sad that anyone would think that that was my intention because that is 100 percent not my intention (34:29 in video).

Philip DeFranco also uses his apology video to diffuse responsibility in the BetterHelp scandal. Mr. DeFranco's company played a large role in connecting other influencers to the BetterHelp sponsorship as a third-party advertisement agency. Therefore, he had more responsibility for ensuring the service advertised was adequate, legitimate, and safe to use for users. This would involve, at a minimum, more legal scrutiny, which would include a review of the terms of services. Instead, Philip DeFranco ignores criticisms that he was capitalizing on the mental ill health of his followers and deflects blame by showing positive reviews that BetterHelp received in the past via screenshots:

And actually also while we're on this note, a popular narrative that is moved forward is that just everyone from the get go they were like ahhh BetterHelp is a scam you look online just people complaining. And of course with any service there are going to be bad reviews and some pockets of the internet that are going to just be overwhelmingly bad reviews. But, if you search and I searched again this morning, if you search BetterHelp reviews the first one that pops up has 287 reviews, 4.2 rating, e counselling.com 90 reviews 3.9, trust pilot, 7.3... (3:50 in video).

Lastly, despite claiming to apologize and claim responsibility, Tana Mongeau's apology denies responsibility at several points in the video. Tana Mongeau places blame entirely on Good Times, the convention company she hired to organize the event. She claims to have voiced concerns to Michael Weist about ensuring that the venue capacity was safe, that there was an adequate number of qualified security guards, and that sponsorships with other companies were followed through properly. By framing it this way, Tana Mongeau was able to claim that the failures of the event were beyond her control:

And then he's [Michael Weist] going to have the audacity to say it was like that because I could have done more but I told you every item and I told you I'd reach out to the companies. But you told me not that's not my job as the talent that all I have to do is put my face on it and you'd handle it but did you? No, but it's still all my fault at the end of the day. I still attached my face and my name to it and I was down for it and I was ready because I wanted to win and I wanted things to be different. As much as I want to paint the picture to you guys that I believed in Michael because I wanted to believe in someone regardless of what everyone said I still believed in someone that gave me bad vibes (26:53 in video).

As Tana Mongeau mentions in this quote, she did in fact choose to do the conference and attach her brand and reputation to it. It was preliminarily her responsibility to ensure that the company she hired was equipped to organize the conference. Despite this conference having less than two months of planning involved, if Tana Mongeau's claims of seeing several warning signs in the planning phase of the conference are true, then the event should have either been cancelled, delayed, or a new company could have been hired.

## **b) Condemnation of the Condemner**

Another neutralization technique found in the data was condemnation of the condemner. This technique involves the individual arguing that blame is unfairly being placed onto them (Sykes & Matza, 1957). In his apology video, RiceGum is spiteful that his audience is criticizing him for accepting the Mystery Brand sponsorship, as other influencers such as Morgue, David Dobrik, and Guava Juice advertised the service months before him. He suggests that he is being unjustly criticized and the audience is being too tough on him.

I'm not going to sit here and bring up everyone that did the same deal as me. I'm just trying to say this Mystery Box thing has been on the internet for 3-4 months from other creators, but as soon as I do it it's a problem (2:40 in video).

Gabbie Hanna also suggests that her fans were unfairly attacking her and only bringing up negative information about Kenza Cosmetics on social media. She claims those who had accused Kenza Cosmetics of being a scam but later received the brushes were purposefully omitting this information. This is deceitful, as many fans did not receive their brushes.

And now I've talked to several people who have all said that they have got their brushes, and I guess my question is where is all that energy that everybody had whenever people were accusing me of scamming their audience then people started getting their brushes and then nobody publicly was saying that they were getting their brushes (1:40 in video).

Philip DeFranco claims the accusations against him were ridiculous and that the people criticizing him were not doing so on reasonable grounds. He demeans his critics further by equating them to barking dogs as if he is the one being inconvenienced:

But unfortunately, I've been on the receiving end of just ridiculous accusation after ridiculous accusation regarding BetterHelp. People saying I'm this this master mind scammer who is running a ponzi scheme. I just need to address this bull\*\*\*\* before moving forward. I usually do not stop for every barking dog, but this is just this is has gotten to a situation that is just ridiculous. Also, in addition to the people that regularly watch this show the people that are coming to this video just to shout that I'm a scammer that I should go kill myself and all the lovely things that I've received over the weekend. To you all I ask for you to put your hate in a little box for a second listen to me talk and then and then feel how you feel afterwards (0:00 in video).

### c) Denial of Injury

The final neutralization technique found in the data was denial of injury. This denial occurs when the individual either downplays or dismisses any harm that they may have caused (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

RiceGum downplays the seriousness of the harm he caused by equating the sponsorship and monetary gain as something normal in the influencer world. And while sponsorships may be a normal business transaction for the everyday influencer, misleading one's viewers and profiting off this deception is not in fact normal.

So, the other day I posted a video where I was promoting this website basically just my management just came 'Yo here Rice here's the app'. You get paid, right, and on YouTube it's like a common thing where YouTubers work with brands and sponsored videos like I've seen Shane Dawson, just I've seen so many YouTubers do it (0:30 in video).

Gabbie Hanna also downplays the harm she caused by claiming that fans should have 'managed their expectations' and knew that the make-up brushes were not of high quality despite her misleading advertisement that claimed otherwise. This deflection, in turn, minimizes the deception that occurred:

I think that they're worth about a dollar a brush and that's why I felt okay advertising that to my followers because unlike these (make up brushes) and so many others like these are plastic, hard, shitty brushes, these are actually very soft movable fluffy brushes that in my opinion blend very well. Now are these amazing, high-quality, can't even believe it great brushes, no. I also never said they were. What I said they were was free brushes and all you had to pay for was shipping so I'm not sure what quality people were expecting when they paid ten dollars for ten brushes (2:12 in video).

Lastly, Philip DeFranco downplays the harm he caused by mentioning the high ratings and reviews that BetterHelp received in the past. He further defends himself by stating that it was unfair for fans to say nothing but bad things about the service, which was not the problem

surrounding the controversy. In reality, fans were angry about him not vetting the company properly and then capitalizing on their mental health (Alexander, 2018).

Additionally, on the Better Business Bureau website it [BetterHelp] has a customer rating of 4.4 and it actually has a Better Business Bureau rating of A+. Once again understand that I'm not defending what was in their terms and conditions. That is also concerning to me as a person that used the service. And so to create this narrative that there was nothing but bad things being said about this company it's just it's just very transparent of what a f\*cking hit job some of these pieces are (5:36 in video).

#### **d) The Neoliberal takeover of YouTube: (Non) Denial of Money**

Another objective of this thesis was to explore how the presence of fraud or deception on YouTube is linked to the moral economy of neoliberalism. As outlined above, many of the justifications drawn on by the influencers directly mirror that of minimizations used by corporations when addressing their misconduct. In fact, they are almost the same, which demonstrates that influencers draw from cultural norms and narratives they have already been exposed to (Mills 1940; Wiegratz, 2012). The justification of wanting money, and the temptation of accruing such profit is highly reflective of the neoliberal moral economy which promotes an individualistic me-centered mentality and profit maximization at all costs (Wiegratz, 2012).

Many of the justifications and overall rhetoric used in the apologies video drew on norms that were representative of neoliberalism. To account for this inclusion of money in the justification, I created a new neutralization technique that was specifically unique to influencer apology videos on YouTube titled '(Non)-Denial of Money'. This new neutralization technique accounts for how many influencers justified their actions either through some mention of money or business.

This was especially the case for influencer RiceGum, who unashamedly referred to himself as "money hungry" and openly discussed how the Mystery Brand endorsement was an

easy way to make \$100,000. Perhaps even more shameful, is that an ad roll was on the apology video, meaning that he gained and still gains advertisement revenue from it. The denial is that many of the influencers claim that wanting more money is not morally wrong.

You guys have already seen the money-hungry side of me, and it is what it is, and there is nothing that I can do but say sorry and give you these amazon gift cards. So, I'm sorry it just wouldn't happen again... Amazon codes... \$10-20 just a little giveaway (4:11 in video).

Zoella also draws on neoliberal norms in her justification by claiming that she had no control over the pricing. Instead, she uses the complex production process and the many people involved as a way of denying responsibility for the pricing of the advent calendar. Put another way, this is just a consequence of business. This is akin to how corporations evade criminal culpability because it is difficult to assign liability to one or more individuals (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). This is also representative of the neoliberal moral economy, as corporations, and now, seemingly influencers, experience impunity in their business operations (Whyte, 2016).

I really hope that this has made sense to you. It's really difficult process to explain, like there's not just me and like three people that like do these. There are teams and teams of people, teams that are not my people. The licensing and the retailer and the production... there's a lot of people um you... you know I don't sit at home like packing it all myself and sending it out and the money comes straight into my PayPal. That's not what happens. That's not how it works (36:52 in video).

Both Gabbie Hanna's and Trevor Martin's actions attest to how pervasive fraud is in a neoliberal society. Gabbie Hanna later admitted in an interview that she did not do research on the company, and it was only when word of the scam arose that she emailed the company for more information (MacDonald, 2019). In an interview with fellow influencer iNabber, she openly admits that she took the sponsorship because it was an easy way to make money.

And I've seen other YouTubers doing it, and I've never done it, and I finally decided to do it because somebody said to me like 'oh why don't you do it' and I was like I don't know. I was just like I didn't know if people like cared about it or whatever. They were

just like yeah, but it's easy money and like the product's fine so why not? (48:46 in video)<sup>27</sup>.

Similarly, in the case of Trevor Martin, he intentionally advertised his company without properly disclosing his affiliation in the advertisement. His business activities were deceitful, and his fans were easy to mislead and accrue money from.

Tana Mongeau on the other hand draws on similar corporate rhetoric that claims to be doing a better good, a rhetoric that is often used with businesses operating in third world countries (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016). In her case, she implies that she was doing the industry a favour by finding a cheaper and alternative method to VidCon. Of course, this is notwithstanding the obvious profit she had at stake for this event. This is also arguably the neutralization of appealing to higher loyalties—that the offense was done for the greater good (Sykes & Matza, 1957)—as she implies that she is doing this conference for the good of her fans. However, what this technique does not specifically capture is the latent capitalist motivation for the event.

Every person on the f\*\*\*ing platform was telling me to do it. The creators wanted a cool place for their voices to be heard and the fans wanted something cheaper, and that's what sucks too. It's just like now because it went so poorly obviously all of that attention has flip flopped and the negative attention is insane, but it's also like with that much attention and people gassing you up and telling you can do it you start to believe it (19:11 in video).

Lastly, Philip DeFranco runs a similar narrative of a sponsorship being easy money, claiming that the BetterHelp sponsorship was a win-win for his business model. It helped influencers who were struggling to acquire sponsorships, and it helped fans who were struggling with their mental health. Like Tana Mongeau's situation, this is also the neutralization of appealing to higher loyalties, as Mr. DeFranco is claiming to have worked with BetterHelp for

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<sup>27</sup> Please refer to this link to access interview: [The Truth Behind Gabbie Hanna's Alleged Scam - YouTube](#)

the good of his fans and content creators. What this new neutralization technique does capture is the additional financial motivation that made this justification acceptable to Mr. DeFranco.

So, the beginning of this I had my original sponsorship with Betterhelp, and it was just a win on all fronts for us. It was a sponsor that I personally used, the sponsor I personally trusted. It also brought in of course as a sponsor brought in money and unlike pretty much any sponsorship before after I would do those sponsorship I would actually get messages from people thanking me for doing the sponsorship (3:31 in video).

And so it just seemed like a no brainer that we would take this win on all fronts, connect those people, we handle everything for them and then like an agency does, we take a small percentage for the connection and the upkeep. And this part dives even deeper into our long-term business model. It's been a side goal of mine to have an in-house sales team as essentially a small agency (6:44 in video).

Overall, much of the data indicates that the influencer functions similarly to a corporate entity when addressing problematic behaviour. Each influencer markets their personality, or rather online persona, as a brand, and that brand is linked to whatever company they partner with. Reputation and damage control is just as important financially to them as not only do they risk future sponsorships (Makalintal, 2019), but they are also responsible for managing the reputation of the sponsorships they partner with (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). However, despite their similarities, it is important to recognize that influencers are still individuals, and unlike corporations, their image being intimately connected to their business reputation bears a lot more consequences during scandals as opposed to corporations who are typically not headed by well-known public figures.

Nonetheless, the shift from a user-generated platform to something that is more corporate and financially driven does not erase traces of the platform's origin (Kim, 2012). Influencers in the data set drew on their authentic selves in their apologies as a means of pleading for sympathy and forgiveness. In other words, they drew on their 'real', 'true' and 'authentic' characters that originally built their platform and brand. This relates to the parasocial bond and power dynamic

that influencers wield over their audience (Chung & Cho, 2017; Tolbert & Dragos, 2017) as the viewer believes that the persona the influencer is projecting is their true and genuine self (Serfaty, 2004).

I'm really sorry that so many of you felt so let down by this product I really hope that this kind of clears that up for you because there's a lot of people that think I chose that price and that I don't care and that I'm doing it for the money. And that makes me so sad because that's not who I am. That's not why I do this and if you know me you know that so there's no point in me rattling on about that. I'm not going to justify myself as a person because you either know me or you don't (37:30 in video). – Zoella

I love you guys you guys seriously mean the world to me. You have for the past six years that I have been on YouTube and you honestly have changed my life. Like every single day I get to wake up and chase my dreams and follow my passions, and that's all been made possible by you guys, so thank you guys for everything that you've done for me and all the opportunities and memories that you've allowed me to create (0:19 in video). – TmarTn.

## **5.2 The Use of Non-Verbal Neutralization Techniques**

Another goal of this project was to move beyond neutralization theory's focus on verbal communications to include their aesthetic aspects. The rhetorical analysis revealed that in several apologies, non-verbal visual neutralizations helped frame the influencers' overall argument and the verbal neutralizations they employed. In fact, the visuals not only helped to displace blame, as with denial of responsibility, but also helped avoid acknowledging blame altogether. In turn, several visual signs (signifiers) were drawn in the video to help the influencer frame their neutralizations. The following were the most common non-verbal visual neutralizations, which I have dubbed 'aesthetic visual commonalities'. All these non-verbal neutralizations were inspired from Makalintal's (2019) and Haylock's (2020) media analyses, where they summarize common tropes in the YouTube apology video genre.

### a) Titles and Thumbnails

First on the list of aesthetic commonalities was the title and thumbnails chosen for the video. Except for TmarTn’s “I’m sorry”, none of the other apologies include any mention of the words apology or sorry. Thus, when a viewer clicks on the video and reads the title, the visual of the thumbnail and title already sets the tone by not indicating an apology. Makalintal (2019) identifies this as a general vagueness in which the viewer gets a general sense of what the video will entail, but must click on the video to get the full picture. For example, it is common for influencers to use titles with exaggerated use of caps lock, such as “RACISM” and “MY RESPONSE” as a way of gravitating the viewer to the video without detailing the exact purpose of the video (Makalintal, 2019).

RiceGum’s<sup>28</sup> title of “Dude calls me out for mystery unboxing” is dismissive, as there is no mention of an apology or being sorry. He also dismisses those criticizing him as ‘dude’, which raises questions on how seriously he takes the situation. This lackluster title is further complemented with a thumbnail that makes the scandal appear to be humorous.



In this thumbnail, RiceGum includes unflattering images of fellow influencers Pewdiepie (left) and H3H3 (middle), who criticized him for accepting the sponsorship. The choice to

<sup>28</sup> The influencers’ identities are as followed, directions as shown and not mirrored: PewdiePie (Left), H3H3 (Middle), and RiceGum (right).

include these unflattering images, whether purposely or not, frames RiceGum’s critics as individuals who should not be taken seriously or be seen as credible sources. This visual framing, in turn, complements RiceGum’s denial of injury and condemnation of the condemner denials, as he trivializes those criticizing him and downplays the seriousness of the harms he caused with a joke.

Similarly, Zoella makes no mention of an apology in the title of her apology video: “Christmas Adverts and How We Met.” Instead, the title paints a softer, gentler tone, as if it is a story that one reads before bed. This message is accentuated with the thumbnail, which contains a highly curated collection of images depicting Zoella appearing happy.



In one image, she is shown planning or working on her computer, which was more than likely used as a visual to convey the hard work she put into the advent calendar. Similarly, the image of her being content with a backdrop of leaves in the fall also conveys a gentler and happier tone. Another image depicts Zoella being emotional and happy with her spouse. Lastly, there is an image of Zoella smiling with a crafted fake spider web behind her. All images compiled on the thumbnail convey a happy and nonchalant mood, something that one would not expect to see on an apology video where millions of fans were disappointed in her. Instead, the

visual diverts attention away from the seriousness of the apology and instead focuses on how beautiful and serene the fall season is. This in turn, helps deflect responsibility and trivializes the harm caused by creating an initial tone of serenity and calmness for viewers who decide to click on the video.

Philip DeFranco also makes no mention of an apology in the title of his video, “So let’s talk about this better help situation.” While nothing about his thumbnail is different to his regular genre of news reporting<sup>29</sup>, simply referring to the scandal as a situation raises questions on his motives. The title detracts from the seriousness of the possible career-ending allegations he received. Further, the thumbnail’s similarity to his regular content videos also helps to dismiss the severity of the situation, as neither the thumbnail nor title conveys anything out of the ordinary. Interestingly, his thumbnail also closely resembles images from the Bell Let’s Talk campaign, which revolves around removing stigma around discussing mental health. In turn, this could be an effort on his part to align himself with Bell’s corporate strategy of discussing mental health which has garnered considerable acclaim.



Last, Tana Mongeau’s title, “TanaCon, the good, the bad, and the ugly,” contains no mention of an apology. Instead, it conveys the message that there are several sides to the story. However,

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<sup>29</sup> Philip DeFranco’s news content focuses on popular news and world events. Sometimes, he also covers internet news, but for the most part it mimics that of mainstream news outlets.

the thumbnail of the video depicts Tana Mongeau dressed up and enjoying herself at the conference, surrounded by fans who are looking at her in admiration. This choice of image is telling, as it does not depict remorse but rather the idealistic and altruistic intention that Tana Mongeau had for the conference that never came to be. This sets a more sorrowful tone of what the event could have been rather than focusing on the failures of the event. In turn, this helps deflect attention away from the harm this conference caused (denial of injury) and her liability (denial of responsibility) in this failed event.



### **b) Style and Genre of the Video**

Another common visual aesthetic was the style and genre of the videos. All of the apology videos drew on a casual vlog style approach to draw attention away from the seriousness of their actions. This casual vlog style ultimately aids in the deflection of responsibility, as the nature of the video itself does not warrant a serious tone as would be expected of an apology. Haylock (2020) mentions the apology trope of the ‘floor set’, where the influencer sits down and casually speaks to their audience in a one-on-one format. Many of the influencers in the data sat down for their apologies, but the way they vlogged their apology differed.

Previous literature has found that viewers who consume blog content expect a sort of authenticity and honesty from the content creator (Serfaty, 2004). Vlogs similarly strive to document the real and authentic lives of individuals in video format. This is especially important to the YouTube community as demonstrating authenticity and being genuine through vlogs was engrained in the early years of the platform's culture (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011). The documentation of everyday life also works to strengthen the parasocial bond between the content creator and the viewer (Serfaty, 2004). In turn, by appearing as authentic, the influencer can present themselves as an ordinary 'just like me' individual (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011). The vlog has since evolved to include several sub genres such as "get ready with me's" (GRWM<sup>30</sup>), where the influencer speaks with their audience as they dress themselves or do their make-up, filming one's life or critical milestone events as if it were a documentary (influencer weddings<sup>31</sup>), and family life (family vlogger genre<sup>32</sup>) to name a few examples. In the data, many influencers drew upon a vlogging approach, as if it were just any other day to document. Other cases made no effort to formalize the apology and situated the apology within their regular content.

Tana Mongeau similarly adopts a casual approach, despite the apology video being like a documentary piece. Before the official apology begins in the video, Tana Mongeau sits on her kitchen floor, in sweats, and explains the purpose of the video. Tana Mongeau then narrates the events leading up to the failures of the event and embeds several video clips of the planning of the conference. However, in between these clips, Tana Mongeau is completing the narration on a couch wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt. On one hand, her casual appearance downplays the

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<sup>30</sup> See: Jeffree Star, Jacquelin Hill, and Tati Westbrook for examples of a Get Ready with Me style vlog.

<sup>31</sup> See: Tana Mongeau and Jake Paul's fake wedding or PewdiePie and Marzia's actual wedding as an example of a documentary type/ mile-stone vlog.

<sup>32</sup> See: Ace Family as an example of a family vlog sub-genre.

seriousness of the allegations she narrates. On the other hand, making her apology video like a documentary for entertainment and theatrical value also downplays the seriousness of the scandal. Sitting on the couch, in contrast, helps emphasize a message of ‘I’m just like you’ to humanize Tana Mongeau in the situation.



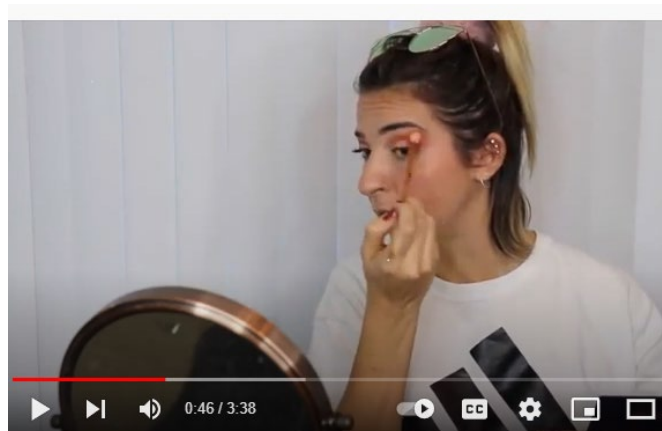
TmarTn also takes a more casual approach to his apology video with a visual of him sitting down in his mansion, revealing a large staircase behind him. Despite having misled fans in a scandal he likely profited millions of dollars from, his apology video for his actions was completed in a casual sit-down video. The video is also rather short, totaling just over two minutes. Of these two minutes, nearly half of the apology is thanking fans for their support.



RiceGum adopts a similar approach to TmarTn in that he gives a sit-down explanation of the scandal on his computer chair. Overall, it is clear from both the use of visuals to downplay his criticsizers, the sit-down style he uses to address the situation, and the use of gift codes, that this apology is not serious, but rather an informal vlog-style apology.



Gabbie Hanna, on the other hand, draws on the get-ready-with-me sub-genre of vlogs as a way of downplaying the seriousness of the scandal. In turn, as she verbally denies responsibility, her casual set up of the video of putting on makeup<sup>33</sup> detracts from something that should otherwise been a serious and formal apology.



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<sup>33</sup> In this video, it is important to note that Gabbie Hanna is not using Kenza Cosmetics' brushes to do her makeup.

Lastly, Zoella's use of a vlog-style video also acts as a visual distractor from the seriousness of her scandal. The apology video is not a separate video but is instead placed at the end of a vlog. Moreover, that the apology video comes at the end of the vlog, helps minimize scrutiny, as most viewers do not watch entire videos.

### **c) The presence of editing, a professional product**

Another common visual aesthetic among the apology videos is the use of editing, including jump cuts<sup>34</sup>, the use of sound effects, screenshots, and embedded video clips. The apology video, like any other content that an influencer generates and places on the platform, is a highly curated and professional product (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). In turn, a large degree of editing was used to help reiterate the verbal claims that the influencers were making in denying their responsibility. Haylock (2020) identifies this apology video trope as either the video being overly edited or under edited. Makalintal (2019) also speaks to the formulaic and high amount of production that goes into an apology video by claiming that many apology videos have a narrative arc that builds upon the influencer's redemption, thus repairing damages to their reputation.

Tana Mongeau used several video clips showing her being involved in the planning process of the TanaCon conference to counter claims that she was not involved at all, thus denying full responsibility in the event's failures. She also uses footage that shows her confirming the venue capacity with Michael Weist to show viewers that she was concerned for the safety of her fans. In turn, she shifts blame onto Mr. Weist for selling too many tickets. Overall, the entire apology video is a professional visual product. It is edited like a documentary and many visual clips are

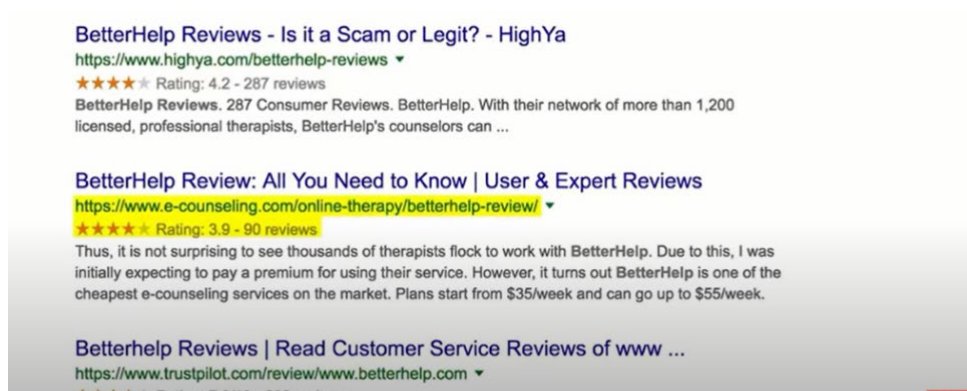
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<sup>34</sup> Sharp cuts (i.e., removal of the footage) where there are pauses. These are usually done to cut down on time, but can also make a video appear more polished.

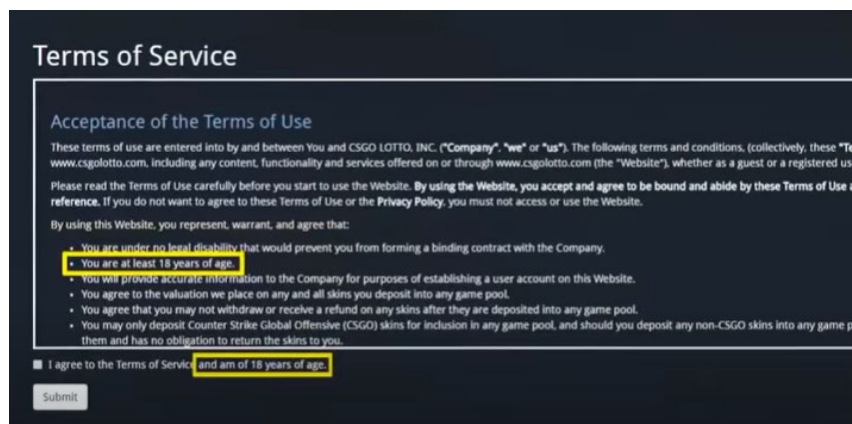
paired with verbal narration<sup>35</sup> to help enhance her argument that while she played some role in the event's failure, Mr. Weist was mostly to blame.

Philip DeFranco also uses screenshots to reiterate his argument that he had no way of knowing that BetterHelp was a bad apple company. Instead, he deflects by showing screenshots depicting positive reviews of the company and even goes so far as to highlight them.

36



Similarly, TmarTn shows a screenshot of his terms and conditions which prohibits those under 18 from gambling on his website. This was done to deny any responsibility for minors who gambled on the website. Nonetheless, this ignores that he advertised the service to a largely youth audience.



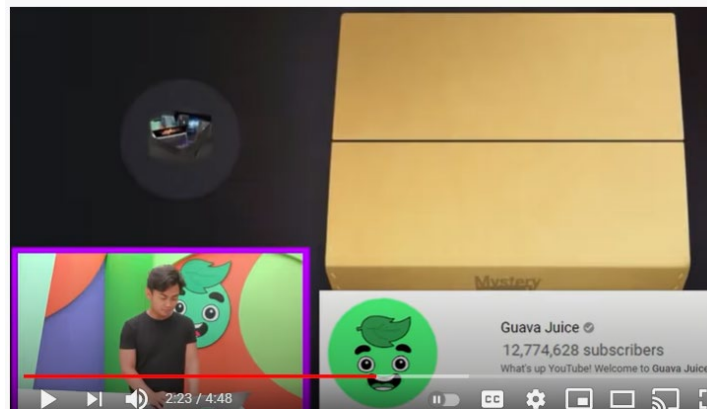
37

<sup>35</sup> Narration is where the individual speaks over pictures or videos.

<sup>36</sup> Screenshot taken from Philp DeFranco's apology video.

<sup>37</sup> Image taken from TmarTn's apology video.

To illustrate how viewers were unfairly criticizing him, RiceGum provides screenshots of other influencers who had accepted the sponsorship in the past without scrutiny<sup>38</sup>.



In the case of both Gabbie Hanna and Zoella, several jump cuts are used in their apology videos. What is particularly interesting about Zoella's apology video is the vlog footage that occurs before the apology is raw and not full of many jump cuts. Meanwhile, at the end of the video where the apology is placed, Zoella uses several jump cuts. This once again shows how professionalized an apology video must be, as it requires a large degree of editing. Meanwhile, for Gabbie Hanna, her apology video was casual, but nonetheless full of jump cuts to keep things concise when addressing the Kenza Cosmetics situation. The apology video is therefore a product of a robust editing, which as mentioned before, raises questions about the authenticity of the apology (Makalintal, 2019).

### 5.3 Discussion

This chapter demonstrates that the most common verbal apology vocabularies were denial of responsibility, condemnation of the condemner, and denial of injury. Additionally, I

<sup>38</sup> Image taken from RiceGum's video.

identified three non-verbal aesthetic commonalities (use of vague titles and thumbnails, use of a casual style to address scandal, and a varying degree of editing) across the data, which reinforced the verbal neutralizations. Many of the neutralizations revolved around some mention of money, business, and greed. In fact, many of the influencers were bold enough to boast about the money they made from the fraudulent and misleading sponsorships they undertook, which warranted the identification of a new neutralization technique, (non)-denial of money, which helps to explain why it is acceptable for influencers to talk so openly about the money they make. This is highly reflective of a neoliberal moral economy of fraud, which promotes values of self-interest and profit maximization above all else (Wiegratz, 2012). This illustrates further how the repetition of both images and words in the dot.com era is a powerful and effective way to convey messages (Davidson, 2008), or, in the case of the apology videos, denials. Much of the neutralizations in turn, raise questions about the authenticity of the apology.

The commonalities across the verbal and non-verbal neutralizations also cements how apology videos have become a genre that draws on similar tropes (e.g., avoid mentioning the word apology) (Makalintal, 2019; Haylock, 2020). This is similar to the phenomenon of corporate neutralizations in scandals, which are part of the public culture of corporations (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). Corporations learn from one another in terms of how to address scandals and frame their neutralizations accordingly. In turn, this can account for why influencers draw on similar narratives in their apologies. The influencer apology video has therefore become a part of the public culture of influencers. This bridging between white-collar and corporate crime is further substantiated by how influencers act similarly to e corporations.. Their brand and internet personality attracts stakeholders and sponsorships (Gerhards, 2017). Therefore, any attack to their brand is met with neutralizations to mitigate damage (Makalintal,

2019). Put another way, this is no different to how corporations engage in denials to protect their reputation and relationships with stakeholders (Whyte, 2016). However, again, it is important to note that despite acting similarly to corporations (i.e. profit maximization), influencers are still individuals. This similar behaviour, in turn, can be situated within the commercialized environment within YouTube that promotes profit-maximization with little oversight, , and minimal consequences for those who are found guilty of violating domestic advertising regulatory codes.

Similarly, just like how corporations expend a great deal of effort in how they construct the visuals of their reports or communications (Greenwood et al.,2019), the findings indicate that influencers also put a large degree of thought into the visuals of their apology videos. As Hollerer et al. (2013) argue, the visual is just as important in the verbal in corporate communications, and the same follows for influencer apology videos. Apology videos are a polished and professionalized product with a great deal of editing and thought put into the visual and verbal rhetoric. Parallel to how corporations draw on warm and calm tones in their communications (Hollerer et al., 2013), the titles chosen by the influencers omitted words such as ‘accountability’, ‘sorry’ and ‘apology’. Since these words could evoke feelings of anger and disappointment as per the associated wrongdoing, this suggests that the titles may have been a deliberate choice on the part of the influencer to minimize damage.

Another objective of this thesis was to examine whether cancel culture is an effective tool of accountability considering domestic advertising legislation inadequately detects native advertising on social media. When it comes to analyzing the impacts that cancel and call-out culture had on these influencers, the effects were short-term. In fact, many of these same influencers continue to engage in deceptive advertising practices. The ‘cancel’ in cancel culture

is therefore an oxymoron as the influencers' career is not damaged permanently. This once again highlights how cancel culture has lost value from its origins of call-out culture and digital accountability, as cancel culture has become more akin to a form of entertainment and commodity (Clark, 2020). In some cases, cancel culture actually helps bolster an influencer's career, as the attention, albeit negative, generates popularity (Hall & Tenbarge, 2020). The most important takeaway is that influencers apologize, suffer temporary blows to their reputation and business relationships, and then continue to prosper. In some cases, some influencers went on to become repeat offenders and found themselves cancelled again for other deceptive advertising practices. For instance, just this year, RiceGum fell into hot water again for promoting a rigged crypto currency (Jones, 2021), and Tana Mongeau was accused of stealing designs from cheap Chinese retailers and selling her bikini line for a much higher price (Barnet, 2021)<sup>39</sup>.

Moreover, there also needs to be more consideration of the symbiotic relationship between influencer and corporations. The influencer takes the fall for the deceptive and misleading advertising, meanwhile the corporation is not only able to hide behind the scenes, but behind YouTube's advertising policy which displaces legal accountability onto the influencer (YouTube Ad policies, 2018). The influencer, as opposed to the corporation they partnered with, is responsabilized to manage the scandal; this is similar to situations where senior executives hide behind middle-level managers within their organizations who end up taking the blame for the corporation's scandalous actions (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). The corporate veil (shield) in this case (Tombs & Whyte, 2015), is how the influencer is held responsible for publicly managing the scandal. The only instance where a corporation shouldered a similar amount of blame to the influencer was when the corporate entity was small itself. In the Tana Mongeau scandal, the

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<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed depiction of the post-cancellation outcomes for the influencers from the dataset, please refer to Appendix J.

CEO of GoodTimes, Michael Weist, suffered heavy damage to his reputation and finances, eventually leading him to go bankrupt. The damage was so prevalent that he even went on to star in a Dr. Phil episode years later where he defended his actions (Dr. Phil.com, n.d.). This suggests that power factors into whether a company can avoid blame, as CEOs in large corporations with resources can typically avoid liability by hiding behind the corporation (Tombs & Whyte, 2015; Snider, 1987).

The corporation's distant role in the scandal additionally speaks to the synoptic power in society, as their role is not seriously questioned or scrutinized (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). Until legislation and platform policy account for the symbiotic relationship shared between a corporation and influencer in a sponsorship, the legal accountability and public scrutiny will likely continue to be directed toward the influencer involved.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary

The objectives of this thesis were to examine and situate YouTube apology videos within a neoliberal political economy of fraud. By so doing, I drew connections between the widespread occurrence of deceptive advertising on YouTube and its commercialization into a corporate-friendly environment (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). I situated this with literature that describes YouTube's transformation from a user-generated platform to that of an increasingly professionalized and institutionalized platform run by commercial content and profit maximization (Kim, 2012; Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018).

A second goal of this thesis was to identify legal inefficacies where domestic advertising agencies are ill-equipped in their ability to address native advertising on social media (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Einstein, 2015). Considering this, I examined the impact of cancel culture in holding influencers accountable for their actions. I then analyzed the influencer's public apology that addressed the scandal. The findings indicated that the influencer's use of both verbal and visual neutralizations raised questions regarding the authenticity of their apologies. Given the larger contextual conditions of minimal legal consequences and underenforcement of deceptive advertising, the financial incentive to accept any sponsorships regardless of its integrity, and the risk to business relationships that influencers face if they do not apologize all contribute as factors that undermine the value of their apologies.

Through this, I was able to draw connections across the similar ways in which influencers and corporations neutralize accusations to protect their business relationships and assets (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016; 2019). In fact, just like corporate self-defence, where corporations have come to recognize how important it is to neutralize their actions to the public, the media,

and shareholders (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019), influencers have also come to recognize how important damage control is in their public apologies (Makalintal, 2019). On the topic of examining the impact of cancel culture as a tool of accountability, the findings were mixed. Cancel culture was present in all apologies, as the influencers were publicly shamed for their problematic advertising practices (Luu, 2019; Hall & Tenbarga, 2020). However, the negative media attention and engagement on social media was short-term. Perhaps more significant is that for some influencers in the data set, cancel culture did not deter them from engaging in deceptive advertising practices again in the future.

The third research objective was to examine and situate why influencers receive the most negative attention in advertising scandals. Additionally, I questioned why influencers were the ones responsabilized to make the public apology on YouTube as opposed to the corporation or company they partnered with. In turn, my question entailed examining why is it that corporations can enjoy impunity when advertising on YouTube? On one hand, YouTube's policies have acted as a shield that allows corporations to distance themselves from responsibility for their misleading practices on the platform (YouTube Ad Policies, 2018). YouTube has been able to do this by placing the responsibility on domestic advertising agencies to regulate their citizens, as well as holding the influencer responsible for ensuring that they are adhering to domestic advertising standards (YouTube Ad Policies, 2018). YouTube has also been able to excuse themselves from scandals where native advertising is of concern, as their policies only go so far as to cover whether the advertisement or affiliation was disclosed (YouTube Ad Policies, 2018). On the other hand, domestic advertising legislation, such as the Federal Trade Commission, loosely defines native advertising and because of this generality, cannot properly account for the

various ways in which advertisements on social media can mislead consumers (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Einstein, 2015).

Both domestic advertising legislation and YouTube's ad policies fail to account for the symbiotic relationship between influencers and advertisers, and instead places responsibility onto the influencer who engages in the advertisement (Federal Trade Commission, 2015; YouTube Ad Policies, 2018; Advertising Standards Authority, n.d.). I concluded that this reflects the neoliberal tendency to focus on the individual (Wiegratz; 2012; Snider; 1987). In so doing, I drew attention to the hegemony that privileges corporations in advertising spaces on YouTube. As Whyte (2016) argues, it is not enough to draw attention to the deception and denials that corporations engage in, but rather to challenge the source of this hegemony and privilege.

## **6.2 Key Findings & Empirical Significance**

This project combined neutralization theory with rhetorical analysis. Through Barthes (1972; 1977), I illustrated that the combined use of visuals and the verbal in apology videos helped to reinforce the influencers' overall message of mitigating damages to their reputation. The use of strategic titles, editing, and adopting a casual vlog-style approach to the videos were embedded with semiotics that downplayed the seriousness of the situation. These visuals were reinforced via the verbal neutralizations of denial of responsibility, denial of injury, and condemnation of the condemner. Repetition, in turn, was found to be a key rhetorical device, as the visual and verbal often conveyed the same message simultaneously (Davidson, 2008). This supports the notion that images (i.e., visuals) are very much underpinned by the overall ideological message that is being conveyed to the viewer in a piece of text, or in this case the apology video as a product (Barthes, 1972;1977).

Meanwhile, by incorporating Mills (1940), I was able to work beyond simply examining the presence of the neutralization techniques that were employed in the video, and instead, situate the neutralizations within the specific socio-economic epoch of neoliberal capitalism. To do this, I drew on Wiegratz (2012) to examine whether neoliberal values were present in the apology videos. From my findings, I identified a new verbal neutralization technique that specifically included neoliberal values of profit maximization and self-interest, which I dubbed as (non)-denial of money. Therefore, another contribution of this project was creating a new neutralization technique that specifically accounted for neoliberal influence in apology videos.

Another theoretical contribution is my creation of the concept of apology vocabularies. This concept encapsulates the common verbal and non-verbal neutralizations that influencers deployed in their apology videos as well as their situation within neoliberalism. As I demonstrated, the apology videos were comprised of neutralizations, which speaks to the lengths that influencers will go to defend their reputation and business relationships (Makalintal, 2019). In turn, by using Makalintal's (2019) and Haylock's (2020) common apology video themes as sensitizing concepts, I was able to create a neutralization typology that is specific to YouTube apology videos.

### **6.3 Practical Implications**

My hope is that this thesis draws attention to the need for a greater recognition of the symbiotic relationship between influencers and corporate advertisers on YouTube and social media in general. The parasocial bond that an influencer wields over their audience is not to be written off so easily, especially those with younger audiences who are not yet developed enough to understand that they are being influenced into consuming (Kim & Song, 2016; Chung & Cho, 2017). Advertisers, in turn, have taken advantage of this and have turned to influencers as a

source of targeted advertising (Mas-Tur et al.,2016). With algorithms and new platforms emerging, the number of native advertising formats, and, consequently, deception and fraud, continues to grow on social media (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).

In the case of YouTube itself, more pressure needs to be placed on their role in combatting deceptive advertising practices on their platform. Only two influencers were met with sanctions from advertising agencies, which in themselves did not bear many legal consequences. Aside from TmarTn, Zoella received warning letters from the ASA (BBC News, 2020). Since YouTube is a main source of income for many influencers, turning off monetization temporarily could be a possible solution in gaining compliance to advertising standards. For example, while it is not related to misleading advertising, YouTube has temporarily demonetized influencers for problematic behaviours, ranging from James Charles' sexting minors' scandal to Logan Paul's suicide forest scandal (Lorenzand & Safronova, 2021; BBC 2018b). Given that many influencers in the data set were repeat offenders, this may act as a stronger deterrent.

#### **6.4 Directions for Future Research**

I think it would be fruitful to explore the apology video as a genre on other social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram. As such, the YouTube apology video could be compared to how this same genre manifests on other platforms, if different at all. In turn, one could examine the public culture of apology narratives on other platforms and compare how influencers neutralize via platforms and their different features. For example, research could examine apologies in the form of Snapchat stories or feed posts on Instagram. This does not necessarily have to be limited to deceptive advertising, however. This could easily entail a sociological examination of how influencers deflect and minimize harm to their reputation when confronted with a problematic social behaviour.

Lastly, and perhaps something I may wish to pursue in the future, is examining the impact of the synopticon (Tombs & Whyte, 2015) in how youth consume YouTube and other social media platform content. Since corporate presence and advertising has become so normalized for youth (Ha, 2011; Kim & Song, 2016; Chung & Cho, 2017; Martinez, 2017), a proposed study could explore how youth have become increasingly desensitized to their favourite influencers selling and promoting products. Another facet could examine how, via a parasocial bond, youth are still able to support these influencers after multiple scandals and without withdrawing their support.

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## Appendix A

As per my methods section, the following images are proof highlighting the negative criticism that the influencers received during their scandals. In other words, the negative backlash was enough for the influencer to issue a public apology. These headlines successfully meet my threshold requirement of the scandal involving cancel culture/call-out culture. I define cancel culture as the involvement of public shaming for a problematic social behaviour (Luu, 2019; Hall & Tenbarge, 2020).

### Zoella

**'MY BABY HAS BEEN RUINED'** Zoella hits back over criticism of her £50 'rip-off' advent calendar... and claims the price was 'not her decision'

YouTube Zoe Sugg has blamed retailer Boots for 'ruining' her product and apologised to her fans

Source: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/4917731/zoella-responds-criticism-50-rip-off-advent-calendar-claims-price-not-her-decision/>

**Zoella hits back after advent calendar outrage: I had no involvement in £50 price tag**

Source: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/zoella-i-had-no-involvement-in-pricing-of-ps50-advent-calendar-a3691826.html>

### RiceGum

YouTube stars Jake Paul and RiceGum expose 'mystery box' scandal

[www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk) › Lifestyle › Tech › News

Jan. 4, 2019 · YouTube stars are facing a backlash after using their channels to advertise controversial 'mystery boxes' to their millions of followers.

Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/youtube-mystery-box-scandal-jake-paul-ricegum-loot-controversy-sponsor-a8710861.html>

D
DIGITAL  
INFORMATION  
WORLD
ADVERTISE

## Jake Paul and Ricegum Under Fire After Mystery Box Sponsorship

Source: <https://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2019/01/youtube-mystery-box-scandal-loot-controversy.html>

**Gabbie Hanna**

TECH

## **Instagram Influencers Dupe Their Fans With ‘Free’ Products**

**| SWIPE UP TO GET ICED UP |**

Social media stars like Supreme Patty offer their fans a deal that’s too good to be true. It is!

Wallace isn’t the first social media personality to be embroiled in a “free-plus-shipping” controversy. Last fall, social media stars Tana Mongeau and Gabbie Hanna were slammed by their fans for Instagram posts endorsing Kenza Cosmetics, another Shopify storefront that claimed to be offering high-quality, \$80 make-up brushes for free.

Source: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/instagram-influencers-dupe-their-fans-with-free-products>

**TmarTn**

**CS:GO**

**TmarTn responds to claims that his CSGO skins website was “rigged”**

Published: 20/Dec/2020 12:21

by Joe Craven

**Popular YouTuber Trevor 'TmarTn' Martin has hit back at claims that his infamous CS:GO sweepstake website – abandoned back in 2016 over transparency issues – was “rigged” against its users.**

Source: <https://www.dexerto.com/csgo/tmartn-responds-to-claims-that-his-csgo-skins-website-was-rigged-1483137/?nowprocket=1>

**Philip DeFranco**

## YouTube Stars Are Being Accused of Profiting Off Fans' Depression

Viewers are outraged that some of the site's biggest celebrities have partnered with a controversial online counseling service.

Source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/youtube-stars-accused-of-profiting-off-depression-betterhelp-shane-dawson-philip-defranco-elle-mills/572803/>

**Tana Mongeau**

**Tana Mongeau's TanaCon was such a disaster YouTube fans**

[www.theverge.com](http://www.theverge.com) › [tanacon-disaster-fyre-fest-tana-mongeau-youtuber](#)

Jun. 26, 2018 · Over the weekend, while VidCon — a massive, yearly gathering for creators and fans — unfolded in Anaheim, California, YouTuber Tana Mongeau ...

Source: <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/26/17500590/tanacon-disaster-fyre-fest-tana-mongeau-youtuber>

## YouTube Tana Mongeau forced to apologise for "unsafe" conference

© 25 June 2018

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-44600079>

## **Appendix B Denial Codification Process**

The following is the process I used to distinguish between different neutralization techniques. By asking myself these questions, I was able to achieve consistency in how I coded the neutralization techniques in the apology video transcripts.

### **Denial of Responsibility**

- Is there some outside force or situation onto which the influencer is displacing blame?
- Does the influencer feel helpless or that the situation was beyond their control?
- Is the narrative along the lines of “it’s not my fault”?

### **Denial of Injury**

- Does the influencer deny harm to the victim?
- Do they claim there was no harm caused at all?
- Do they equate what they did as harmless?

### **Denial of Victim**

- Does the influencer believe that the victim(s) deserves what happened to them?
- Does the influencer insinuate the above?

### **Condemnation of the Condemners**

- Does the influencer think that the criticism is out of spite?
- Do they believe that they are unfairly being attacked?

### **Appeal to Higher Loyalties**

- Does the influencer believe that what they were doing was for the greater good?
- Were they able to justify the long-term consequences of this event because of this?

## Appendix C Rhetorical Analysis Inspiration

Author	YouTube apology video techniques identified
Makalintal (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dramatic sigh at the end or beginning of the video</li> <li>• High frequency of zoom in's on the influencers face to illustrate sadness</li> <li>• Either a wordy (one hour plus video) or short.</li> <li>• Vague titles</li> <li>• Fake tears</li> <li>• Lack of make-up</li> </ul>
Haylock (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some kind of hiatus prior to apologizing</li> <li>• Tears</li> <li>• Using the phrase “taking accountability”</li> <li>• Dressed casually, or in white</li> <li>• Over edited or unedited</li> </ul>

## Appendix D RiceGum Apology Video Transcript

### Dude calls me out for mystery unboxing...

Yesterday I was doing really good great vibes great energy and then today man not so much. I woke up to this man (shows news headline of him and Jake Paul) the front page of twitter Jake Paul and Rice Gum under fire for promoting gambling site to kids. Like, I don't even want to be associated with this guy and it just doesn't look good and there's no way to start the year like what do you need to clear this up because I don't even think it's a big deal.

So, the other day I posted a video where I was promoting this website basically just my management just came "Yo here Rice here's the app" you get paid right and on YouTube it's like a common thing where YouTubers work with brands and sponsored videos like I've seen Shane Dawson, just I've seen so many Youtubers do it. (CODE: Denial of Injury: equating it to something that is normal on YouTube i.e. brand deals)

So, apparently they only offered Keem Star a 100 K, so my numbers are higher so imagine how much they offer me, right. So the money was on the table, and if I wanted the money I just had to open up a few supreme boxes and shoe boxes and then bam, yo that sounds easy enough, so I dropped the video really thinking nothing much about it and then out of nowhere these random a\*\* YouTubers out of nowhere start dropping exposed videos calling me out for doing this doing that about the whole gambling thing. (CODE: Condemnation of the Condemners: feels like this is out of spite, more context follows)

But I just find it so funny I think it's hilarious that this like gambling thing is a current topic of discussion right now it's like a big deal it's just like there's a big YouTuber named Reaction Time he actually has more subscribers than me. I don't know how because he's not cooler than me but anyways he made the same type of video like the same type of video! Like three months ago. No one said anything it wasn't a problem back then. Look look all these guys right here they're in David Dobrik's vlogs. They're influential, got kid fans, same thing open up boxes this was three weeks way before I was doing it why did no one bring it in up three weeks ago or even talk about it? (CODE: Condemnation of the Condemners: again feels like he is being spited unfairly in comparison to other YouTube influencers)

This guy Morgue same exact thing literally same thing 4 months ago. He's not even promoting gambling to kids. He is a kid. This kid is 17 gambling, it's not even a problem though right? Ouhhhhhh don't even get me started on this last guy Guava Juice got more subscribers than me why is no one talking about this guy and he makes slime videos he makes slime videos do you know what that means? No one over the age of ten is watching slime videos. I'm sorry man I be cursing in my videos so I got older kids younger kids, this guys got all kid fans promoted the apps two months ago I'm not going to sit here and bring up everyone that did the same deal as me I'm just trying to say this mystery box thing has been on the internet for 3-4 months from other creators, but as soon as I do it's a problem. (CODE: Condemnation of the Condemners: repeat of above)

I actually saw some people compare what I did to the CSGO gambling thing and I'm just like woah what it's not even close. I don't know if you guys heard about that but the CSGO gambling thing there was these two YouTubers TmarTn and Syndicate and they were like promoting this gambling app and in the video they were unboxing all these crazy things that cost a lot of money come to find out those two guys own like the gambling site like they were owners of it which means they could have easily just went into the back and higher [sic] their chances of winning.

And so, they got exposed and that was like a whole big thing because they were like scamming their fans I don't know this in particular I don't own mystery brand. Like I don't know what they have going on (CODE: Denial of responsibility).

Like people keep saying that the website is sketch and all this stuff is like...you guys can form your own opinion do your research but in my experience on it you know I would spend \$100 and at like times I would get a fidget spinner and then I would spend \$100 and at times I got a good item. It was basically you win something you lose some. And that's like the definition of gambling. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility)

I do feel bad, you know I'm like kinda defending myself and stuff, but I do know I'm somewhat in the wrong. I think just H3 said it best. (cuts to clip of YouTuber influencer H3H3) "There's a reason you need to be 21 one years old to gamble because you need to know what you're doing it's dangerous it's addicting it's a very it's a vice, it's it's it's a real vice. Many lives have been ruined due to gambling addiction quite literally gambling to an eight to twelve year old especially on YouTube where you're supposed to be a reputable source."

*\*Cuts back to RiceGum\**

It's true, it's true. I'm an a\*\*hole. Like what was I thinking like I can't really do much because I already did it the damage has been done. You guys have already seen the money-hungry side of me and it is what it is and there is nothing that I can do but say sorry (*raises hand and puts amazon gift code on screen*) and give you these amazon gift cards so I'm sorry it just wouldn't happen again Amazon codes \$10-20 just a little giveaway (*\*continues to point at screen and put up amazon giftcodes*) It's the least I can do after what you know this you know okay. Um okay have a good day guys I'm sorry again. I hope you guys can forgive me. Let's have a good year, yeah no...okay. Alright, alright (*sad music starts playing as RiceGum backs out of the view of the camera. Video ends*).

## RiceGum Rhetorical Scheme

<p>What is the main idea (thesis) that the influencer is trying to convey?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That he is unfairly being targeted when other YouTubers accepted this brand deal without any criticism</li> <li>• That viewers should have known the definition of gambling and that it's common sense that you win and you lose.</li> <li>• That he was wrong to accept the brand deal and that he feels bad (although this is debatable and seems insincere given that he continually points out other YouTubers who accepted the brand deal, so why can't he? logic)</li> <li>• That he does not want to be seen on the same level as Jake Paul, who also accepted this brand deal. Important contextual details are that Jake Paul had a bad reputation at the time, so for RiceGum this is reputation and brand management. He does not want to be associated with Jake Paul.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's purpose in making this video? To defend? To apologize? To criticize the critics?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the most part it is to defend his acceptance of the brand deal...because other YouTuber's have done it in the past, so why can't he?</li> <li>• He also criticizes the viewers that they should have known the possibility of losing in gambling.</li> <li>• This places blame on both kid and adult viewers, but more importantly kid viewers who paid for the mystery box challenge. Blaming minors when they see him as a role model and want to participate in the mystery box challenge just like RiceGum, Misleading advertising, since RiceGum shows himself winning rare big items that are highly unlikely.</li> </ul>

<p>What is the influencer's tone? Is it consistent throughout the video?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The tone of the YouTuber is snarky and condescending as he brings up other YouTubers who have accepted the brand deal without receiving criticism.</li> <li>• He also trivializes the sincerity of the apology by making a joke out of giving the viewers Amazon giftcards with a sarcastic tone: a joke made in poor taste given how the estimated 100k + he made from this brand deal due to the money spent by his viewers.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any non-verbal neutralizing and minimizing behaviours?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sad music playing at the beginning of the video to show his disgust with being associated with Jake Paul + towards the end of the video as he gives out gift codes</li> <li>• When mentioning H3H3's critique of his actions, he puts up a funny/goofy face of H3H3 – this could be done to make H3H3 seem like a less credible and reputable source subliminally. i.e. making H3H3 to seem like a joke in comparison.</li> <li>• Each time he mentions an influencer that has also accepted the brand deal, a screenshot of their channel shows up. This is likely to deflect attention and blame away. RiceGum also verbally says how they have more subscribers than him, as if that makes them worse for accepting the brand deal.</li> <li>• Similarly, when he shows these screenshots, he highlights the time stamp to reiterate that these occurred before him and didn't receive criticism, further reiterating his point that he is being unfairly targeted.</li> <li>• Video shows RiceGum playing the mystery box where he wins both small prizes and big prizes – misleading again since these big prizes are rare.</li> <li>• Giving out amazon gift codes as a joke to make 'amends'</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thumbnail of the video: Again shows H3H3 with a funny and unflattering expression.</li> </ul>
Are there any verbal neutralization techniques being employed? What are the most prevalent ones?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes. The most common one is condemnation of the condemner.</li> </ul>
Is the background of the video significant in how the influencer conveys their message?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No. It is a normal set-up where RiceGum usually films his videos.</li> </ul>
Is the style and degree of editing in the video important to how the influencer conveys their message?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes. As mentioned before, he includes several screenshots deflecting attention to other YouTubers and their videos with the time stamp highlighted.</li> </ul>
What is the influencer wearing? Is this significant in how the influencer conveys their message?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Normal clothes, nothing significant.</li> </ul>
Is there music or sound effects present in the video? If so, does this have an impact on how the influencer conveys their message?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes, sad music is present in the beginning of the video when he mentions how he was compared to Jake Paul.</li> <li>Scary music was also played when he mentions how expose videos were made about him.</li> <li>A money sound effect is present when RiceGum talks about how much money was made from the owners of the mystery box – this is interesting in the context of how he said accepting</li> </ul>

	<p>the brand deal was an easy way for him to make money.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sad music also plays near the end when he gives out amazon gift cards.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the influencer collecting money from this apology video (i.e. is ad roll on?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, Ad roll was still on.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the chronology of the story that the influencer presents? E.g. do they begin with their perspective or do they start with the reason why they are apologizing? What is the intended purpose of this chronology?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He begins with how much money he was offered *lucrative* to explain why he accepted the brand deal, as it was an easy way to make money. He then switches to demonizing all the influencers who criticized him for accepting the deal, calling them “Random a*ss YouTubers”. He then proceeds to point out other YouTubers who accepted the brand deal prior to him and how it was “funny” how they did not receive any criticism. He then switches up and says he understands how he was wrong and insincerely offers amazon gift cards to his viewers.</li> </ul>

### Neutralization Techniques Chart RiceGum

NEUTRALIZATION TECHNIQUE:	RELEVANT QUOTES FROM VIDEO:
Denial of Responsibility	<p>“And so, they got exposed and that was like a whole big thing because they were like scamming their fans I don’t know this in particular I don’t own mystery brand. Like I don’t know what they have going on”</p> <p>“Like people keep saying that the website is sketch and all this stuff is like...you guys can form your own opinion do your research but in my experience on it you know I would spend \$100 and at like times I would get a fidget spinner and then I would spend \$100 and at times I got a good item. It was basically you win something you lose some. And that’s like the definition of gambling.”</p>
Condemnation of the Condemner	<p>“So, apparently they only offered Keem Star a 100 K, so my numbers are higher so imagine how much they offer me, right. So the money was on the table, and if I wanted the money I just had to open up a few supreme boxes and shoe boxes and then bam, yo that sounds easy enough, so I dropped the video really thinking nothing much about it and then out of nowhere these random a** YouTubers out of nowhere start dropping exposed videos calling me out for doing this doing that about the whole gambling thing.”</p> <p>“...Like three months ago. No one said anything it wasn’t a problem back then. Look look all these guys right here they’re in David Dobrik’s vlogs. They’re influential, got kid fans, same thing open up boxes this was three weeks way before I was doing it why did no one bring it in up three weeks ago or even talk about it?”</p>

	<p>“This guy Morgue same exact thing literally same thing 4 months ago. He’s not even promoting gambling to kids. He is a kid. This kid is 17 gambling, it’s not even a problem though right?”</p> <p>“Ouhhhhh don’t even get me started on this last guy Guava Juice got more subscribers than me why is no one talking about this guy and he makes slime videos he makes slime videos do you know what that means? No one over the age of ten is watching slime videos. I’m sorry man I be cursing in my videos so I got older kids younger kids, this guys got all kid fans promoted the apps two months ago I’m not going to sit here and bring up everyone that did the same deal as me I’m just trying to say this mystery box thing has been on the internet for 3-4 months from other creators, but as soon as I do it’s a problem”</p>
Denial of Injury	<p>“So, the other day I posted a video where I was promoting this website basically just my management just came “Yo here Rice here’s the app” you get paid right and on YouTube it’s like a common thing where YouTubers work with brands and sponsored videos like I’ve seen Shane Dawson, just I’ve seen so many youtubers do it”</p>
Appeal to Higher Loyalties	
Denial of the Victim	

## Appendix E Zoella Apology Transcript

### Christmas Adverts and How We Met

So, I was editing this vlog you have just watched (33:06) and I thought I would put this little bit in at the end because there has been um some upset disappointed people in the Zoella lifestyle advent calendar, more specifically the price of the calendar. And I didn't want to not address it because I want you guys to know I do care about how you feel about things and the last thing I want to do is anger upset or disappoint anyone because that is not my intention in the slightest.

So, I thought it would be weird for me to kind of end this vlog like this whilst there are people that are upset with the calendar price. The calendar is something I've worked on for a year, I love the product I am all about the creativity I am all about getting it from a design to a product where my input ends is there. (CODE: Denial of responsibility)

Once that product is done and I am happy with it, the retailer can decide how much they sell that for. That's completely out of my decision making. I don't have the right to make those decisions, so it makes me so sad that a product that I loved and worked hard on and that loads of you liked that product it is just having that product at the price that was out of my decision has left so many people so upset. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility) And I feel just as let down by this also and the price of any product is up to a retailer and I know there are some of you that might not have known that and I wanted to come in here and like explain that to you because even my Mom didn't realize that.

I don't want people to think that I'm like sat at home like counting 50 pounds every time someone buys this calendar thinking that was a conscious decision that I made to rip people off because if you know me you know that that there is not a bone in my body that would think that way and it makes me so sad that anyone would think that that was my intention because that is 100 percent not my intention my intention was to make a product that I thought you guys would love which I still think is a product that you would love it's just been completely ruined by a decision that I didn't make and it's so frustrating. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility)

My input in this is creative it's coming up with new ideas it's new ideas like new packaging concepts, new scents it's new things we can do and it's like testing formulations and its all those things that's where I get involved in this and I'm very heavily involved in that and I love it like I'm currently on my desk in front of me and I have two three four five six seven about eight products that I am currently testing and making sure are right for you guys and I don't get to talk about these things that much because I don't know I don't know how much you'd be interested in the process of these things but also if some of these don't go ahead then I don't want to like talk about them in case they don't happen and these things take years to get right and that's that's all I can do and past that point its handed over, it's like a baby that's handed over to somebody else and then they get to choose what they do with that and I think after seeing some people's feedback on this it's quite obvious that the decision that was made by the retailer was the wrong

decision and I'm sure they will take that information and they will take this on board. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility)

I really hope that this has made sense to you it's really difficult process to explain like there's not just me and like three people that like do these there are teams and teams of people teams that are not my people the licensing and the retailer and the production there's a lot of people um you you know I don't sit at home like packing it all myself and sending it out and the money comes straight into my PayPal that's not what happens that's not how it works. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility).

It's really complex and there's a lot of people and there's a lot of decisions and not all those decision are mine to make and the price is one of them. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility) So I'm really sorry that so many of you felt so let down by this product I really hope that this kind of clears that up for you because there's a lot of people that think I chose that price and that I don't care and that I'm doing it for the money and that makes me so sad because that's not who I am that's not why I do this and if you know me you know that so there's no point in me rattling on about that I'm not going to justify myself as a person because you either know me or you don't and this is just a rubbish situation that hopefully a lot of people can learn from so that's that.

I hope I cleared that up for you thank you so much to all of you who support the brands and have voiced your concern in a more common manner. I have really really appreciated it so yeah that's it for now. Thank you for listening and I will see you again very soon.

### Rhetorical Scheme Zoella

<p>What is the main idea (thesis) that the influencer is trying to convey?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is not at fault for the pricing of the product. It was out of her control.</li> <li>• That she is a good person, and her viewers know who she is, and that the advert calendar price is not reflective of that.</li> <li>• That she is disappointed that the product was priced so highly.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the influencer's purpose in making this video? To defend? To apologize? To criticize the critics?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To defend her involvement in the pricing of the advert calendar and absolve herself of all responsibility.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's tone? Is it consistent throughout the video?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calm tone. Nothing too significant to note.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any non-verbal neutralizing and minimizing behaviours?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The fact that this apology is not in its own separate video but rather part of a blog. If the apology was its own video, it would have gotten more attention and by default criticism. (Very deflective)</li> <li>• The presence of LED lights in the background of her video to brighten up her face in an otherwise dark room. May not be intentional and hard to prove, but others have criticized her for trying to appear more innocent, halo effect.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any verbal neutralization techniques being employed? What are the most prevalent ones?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Denial of responsibility is the core of the apology.</li> </ul>

<p>Is the background of the video significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As mentioned, the LED lights in the background to brighten her face/ the mood may be significant, but it is hard to prove. It does, however, create a pleasant mood in the room.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the style and degree of editing in the video important to how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The fact that the apology is at the end of the vlog is important. She likely wanted people to watch the content of her vlog for ad roll before the apology.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer wearing? Is this significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Normal clothing. Not significant.</li> </ul>
<p>Is there music or sound effects present in the video? If so, does this have an impact on how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the influencer collecting money from this apology video (i.e. is ad roll on?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the chronology of the story that the influencer presents? E.g. do they begin with their perspective or do they start with the reason why they are apologizing? What is the intended purpose of this chronology?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>N/A She is straight forward and to the point. Says how the product was planned and that she had no control over the pricing (not likely since her name is on it) and then spends the rest of the apology repeating this same point.</li> </ul>

### Neutralization Techniques Chart Zoella

NEUTRALIZATION TECHNIQUE:	RELEVANT QUOTES FROM VIDEO:
Denial of Responsibility	<p>“So, I thought it would be weird for me to kind of end this vlog like this whilst there are people that are upset with the calendar price. The calendar is something I’ve worked on for a year, I love the product I am all about the creativity I am all about getting it from a design to a product where my input ends is there.”</p> <p>“Once that product is done and I am happy with it, the retailer can decide how much they sell that for. That’s completely out of my decision making. I don’t have the right to make those decisions, so it makes me so sad that a product that I loved and worked hard on and that loads of you liked that product it is just having that product at the price that was out of my decision has left so many people so upset.”</p> <p>“It’s really complex and there’s a lot of people and there’s a lot of decisions and not all those decision are mine to make and the price is one of them.”</p> <p>*more instances coded but repetitive and marked above*</p>
Condemnation of the Condemner	
Denial of Injury	

Appeal to Higher Loyalties	
Denial of the Victim	

## Appendix F TmarTn Deleted Apology Video Transcript

\*Holding his dog\*

Cooper, I have no idea how I'm going to record this video dude. \*deep breath\* Alright guys so what I'm going to try to make this as short and sweet as possible. I don't want to take up too much of your time but first and foremost I do want to say that I love you guys you guys seriously mean the world to me you have for the past six years that I have been on YouTube and you honestly have changed my life like every single day I get to wake up and chase my dreams and follow my passions and that's all been made possible by you guys so thank you guys for everything that you've done for me and all the opportunities and memories that you've allowed me to create.

Now my connection to CSGO lotto has been a matter of public record since the company was first organized in December of 2015 however I do feel like I owe you guys an apology I'm sorry to each and every one of you who felt like that was not made clear enough to you and I truly honestly hope that you guys give me an opportunity to earn your trust back. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility).

Please also know that I am committed to making sure that my YouTube channel as well as all my other business are in compliance with the law this is why I do not condone minors under the age of 18 to use CSGO lotto this is and always has been a clearly stated policy available both in the Terms and Service as well as the initial signup page on the website. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility).

I've seen a lot of people focusing on the under the age of 13 section of our privacy policy all this section states it that we do not knowingly record information of children under the age of 13 years old in compliance with the COPPA act this has nothing to do with and does not mean that we condone minors under the age of 18 to play on the site also and this is very important to me. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility/ Denial of Injury)

I believe that every game offered on CSGO lotto has been legitimate and I am committed to making sure that that remains true again. (CODE: Denial of Injury).

You guys seriously mean the world to me like you've changed my life in so many ways I will never be able to thank you for what you've all done thank you guys so much for all the support over the years and I'm just so grateful for each and every one of you from the bottom of my heart. So, thank you guys for watching I truly do appreciate it I look forward to getting back to my regularly scheduled content and I hope to see you guys there. Thanks guys.

### Rhetorical Scheme TmarTn

<p>What is the main idea (thesis) that the influencer is trying to convey?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That his ties with CSGO lotto was public knowledge, despite never stating so while advertising the service.</li> <li>• That the company's policy condoned minors using the service in their terms and conditions.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the influencer's purpose in making this video? To defend? To apologize? To criticize the critics?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not really an apology despite him saying he owes his viewers one. He is simply clarifying information and placing the fault on viewers for not looking up his affiliation with the company.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's tone? Is it consistent throughout the video?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not relevant.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any non-verbal neutralizing and minimizing behaviours?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The presence of his dog in the video</li> <li>• The deep sigh he takes before beginning his apology to show the viewer he is nervous (performance).</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any verbal neutralization techniques being employed? What are the most prevalent ones?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, predominantly Denial of Responsibility.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the background of the video significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was to viewers at the time. It aggravated many viewers since the background of the video was a panned view of a spiral staircase in his mansion. Reactions to this largely</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<p>stated that this came across as insincere and that he was not sorry but simply showing off his money.</p>
<p>Is the style and degree of editing in the video important to how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not relevant.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer wearing? Is this significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not relevant.</li> </ul>
<p>Is there music or sound effects present in the video? If so, does this have an impact on how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the influencer collecting money from this apology video (i.e. is ad roll on?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot tell now as the video has been deleted from his channel, which does say a lot about lack of accountability. If he was truly holding himself accountable, it would still be up.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the chronology of the story that the influencer presents? E.g. do they begin with their perspective or do they start with the reason why they are apologizing? What is the intended purpose of this chronology?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not relevant.</li> </ul>

### Neutralization Techniques Chart TmarTn

NEUTRALIZATION TECHNIQUE:	RELEVANT QUOTES FROM VIDEO:
Denial of Responsibility	<p>“Now, my connection to CSGO lotto has been a matter of public record since the company was first organized in December of 2015 however I do feel like I owe you guys an apology I’m sorry to each and every one of you who felt like that was not made clear enough to you and I truly honestly hope that you guys give me an opportunity to earn your trust back.”</p> <p>“Please also know that I am committed to making sure that my YouTube channel as well as all my other business are in compliance with the law this is why I do not condone minors under the age of 18 to use CSGO lotto this is and always has been a clearly stated policy available both in the Terms and Service as well as the initial signup page on the website.”</p>
Condemnation of the Condemner	
Denial of Injury	<p>“I believe that every game offered on CSGO lotto has been legitimate and I am committed to making sure that that remains true again.”</p>
Appeal to Higher Loyalties	

Denial of the Victim	
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## Appendix G Gabbie Hanna Deleted Apology Video Transcript (GRWM)

Alright, let's talk about Kenza cosmetics. For \$10 shipping it's a dollar a brush. So, when I got the samples I liked them they're soft I said this is something that I wouldn't mind showing my followers. Mostly confusing is that my followers were calling it a scam days after they ordered and the website was pretty clear about you know the shipping times are long I believe it said between 10 and 21 business days and then at one point it said you wouldn't be getting your brushes till after Christmas since you know they're free brushes and you're ordering free brushes so there's gonna be a high order volume so I was very confused by everybody who was making such a big deal on not getting their brushes yet when the website was pretty clear about not getting your brushes for a while. (CODE: Denial of Responsibility)

So I emailed Kenza cosmetics literally immediately and I sent them the screenshots of the followers that I was talking to and I said are you are aware of this and they said we don't know why people are saying that we were very clear on the website about it being a long delivery time and then I pushed further I've been in conversation with them for a couple weeks ever since this all started happening I've been on their ass on what's going on and then all these videos start popping up about me not caring about my fans and just trying to make a quick buck and never having even held the brushes before. I am NOT hating this make up look actually (referring to the makeup she is putting on while speaking (CODE: Denial of Responsibility)

And now, I've talked to several people who have all said that they have got their brushes and I guess my question is where is all that energy that everybody had whenever people were accusing people of scamming their audience but then people started getting their brushes and then nobody publicly was saying that they were getting their brushes. So now that we've established that it's not a scam because it's not the website offers a product you pay for the product and then you get the product that is not a scam um we can talk about the quality of the brushes which I've already covered. (CODE: Condemnation of the Condemners)

I think that they're worth about a dollar a brush and that's why I felt okay advertising that to my followers because unlike these (make up brushes) and so many others like these are plastic hard shitty brushes, these are actually very soft movable fluffy brushes that in my opinion blend very well. Now are these amazing high quality can't even believe it great brushes no. I also never said they were. What I said they were was free brushes and all you had to pay for was shipping so I'm not sure what quality people were expecting when they paid ten dollars for ten brushes and I'm genuinely sorry if anybody got their product and was disappointed in the product but I would also add manage your expectations a little bit because if you want really high quality brushes then going to pay a really high price (CODE: Denial of Injury) If you want to pay ten dollars for brushes then expect to get some pretty useful run of the mill brushes.

### Rhetorical Scheme Gabbie Hanna

<p>What is the main idea (thesis) that the influencer is trying to convey?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She made it clear that the quality of the brushes were not high quality and that the long shipping time was made explicit on the website</li> <li>• Fans should have done their research on these facts.</li> <li>• Ignores the fact that both she and Kenza advertised them at an \$80 + value instead of what they really were, \$1 per brush.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the influencer's purpose in making this video? To defend? To apologize? To criticize the criticizers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not to apologize, clearly. Instead, she blames fans for not doing they research on something she falsely advertised.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's tone? Is it consistent throughout the video?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very dismissive and unapologetic. Clearly annoyed at having to address the "scam" in her eyes.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any non-verbal neutralizing and minimizing behaviours?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The style of the video is dismissive. It is a "Get Ready With Me" style video, where she dresses herself and puts on a face of make-up. Takes away from the seriousness and formality of an apology. It essentially represents how she does not take this scandal seriously. I believe this was a deliberate tactic, since if she would have made a traditional apology video, she would have received more attention instead of including the apology as part of a video.</li> </ul>

<p>Are there any verbal neutralization techniques being employed? What are the most prevalent ones?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Denial of responsibility is the dominant one.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the background of the video significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As mentioned before, the style of the video takes away from the seriousness of the allegations. It is not a formal apology, if it can even be classified as one.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the style and degree of editing in the video important to how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The GRWM (get ready with me) style is significant, as mentioned.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer wearing? Is this significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not significant.</li> </ul>
<p>Is there music or sound effects present in the video? If so, does this have an impact on how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
<p>Is the influencer collecting money from this apology video (i.e. is ad roll on?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot prove. Video was deleted.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the chronology of the story that the influencer presents? E.g. do they begin with their perspective or do they start with the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>

reason why they are apologizing? What is the intended purpose of this chronology?	
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### Neutralization Techniques Chart Gabbie Hanna

NEUTRALIZATION TECHNIQUE:	RELEVANT QUOTES FROM VIDEO:
Denial of Responsibility	<p>“Alright, let’s talk about Kenza cosmetics. For \$10 shipping it’s a dollar a brush. So, when I got the samples I liked them they’re soft I said this is something that I wouldn’t mind showing my followers. Mostly confusing is that my followers were calling it a scam days after they ordered and the website was pretty clear about you know the shipping times are long I believe it said between 10 and 21 business days and then at one point it said you wouldn’t be getting your brushes till after Christmas since you know they’re free brushes and you’re ordering free brushes so there’s gonna be a high order volume so I was very confused by everybody who was making such a big deal on not getting their brushes yet when the website was pretty clear about not getting your brushes for a while.”</p>
Condemnation of the Condemner	<p>“And now I’ve talked to several people who have all said that they have got their brushes and I guess my question is where is all that energy that everybody had whenever people were accusing people of scamming their audience but then people started getting their brushes and then nobody publicly was saying that they were getting their brushes. So now that we’ve established that it’s not a scam because it’s not the website offers a product you pay for the product and then you get the product that is not a scam um we can talk about the quality of the brushes which I’ve already covered.”</p>

Denial of Injury	“What I said they were was free brushes and all you had to pay for was shipping so I’m not sure what quality people were expecting when they paid ten dollars for ten brushes and I’m genuinely sorry if anybody got their product and was disappointed in the product but I would also add manage your expectations a little bit because if you want really high quality brushes then going to pay a really high price.”
Appeal to Higher Loyalties	
Denial of the Victim	

## Appendix H Philip DeFranco Apology

### So, let's talk about this BetterHelp Situation...

Sup you beautiful bastards hope you're having a fantastic Monday if you are here for your regularly scheduled Philip DeFranco show I apologize so much there are so many things happening both in this country and just the world in general that I want to talk about that I think we need to talk about, but unfortunately I've been on the receiving end of just ridiculous accusation after ridiculous accusation regarding better help.

People saying I'm this this master mind scammer who's running a ponzi scheme. I just need to address this bullshit before moving forward. I usually do not stop for every barking dog but this is just this is has gotten to a situation that is just ridiculous. Also, in addition to the people that regularly watch this show the people that are coming to this video just to shout that I'm a scammer that I should go kill myself and all the lovely things that I've received over the weekend. To you all I ask for you to put your hate in a little box for a second listen to me talk and then and then feel how you feel afterwards.

And also to everyone in general I apologize if I end up repeating things, I know I talked about this last Thursday but I think that just in one dedicated setting it's important that I hit on all the notes and for some reason depending on who is talking about this story certain parts are excluded or glossed over or exaggerated or misconstrued and so with all that said let's talk about better help.

They're an online counselling service I've used it I've loved it I've made no secret whatsoever that they've sponsored my videos in the past *\*Cuts to clips of him advertising it on his channel with the brand link\**

And I hit that note because certain versions of this story involve me sneaking in some sort of sponsorship which is just not accurate and how did that even make sense and I... my name's literally in the URL. Also an important part that has been excluded and glossed over by some telling this story is I immediately suspended my sponsorships with them moving forward. And I announced that last week when I first learned the concerning language in their terms and conditions. I immediately suspended new sponsorships and I immediately reached out to them for comment (**CODE**: Denial of responsibility).

And if you want to see their full response and what the concern for many was you can watch once again the full Thursday video, but essentially the TDLR of the response is that BetterHelp has a team that is dedicated to rigorously vetting the counsellors that use the service. And as far as the concerning words in their terms and conditions they said that this was essentially legalese legal language that was meant to limit legal liability and also adding that they would modify moving forward.

And while I believe them and I'm aware that could just be my own personal bias I still suspended new sponsorships moving forward. And as I mentioned Thursday they will not be

returning unless one, they change those terms and conditions to a place that makes me feel overwhelmingly comfortable, and two I go to their offices in person speak with their team in person see their policies and procedures in action.

Additionally, I want to talk them and get responses in regard to a variety of complaints and accusations against them. Also on top of this, a thing that has been excluded or glossed over by several of the people telling this story, I've involved a third party journalist, and the goal is either for them to go with me to the better help offices or independently. Obviously, a lot of that depends on that availability, scheduling but the main point is getting the access and checking the whole situation out and the reason this was such an important part for me is that I'm aware that if I was on the outside looking in on this situation, I would question my objectivity.

Also, I want to address some fantastic new accusations that that have come up from what has been deemed a gotcha moment for Thursday's video. I've seen accusations ranging from Philip DeFranco actually runs better help or he owns part of it. Or he's invested in it or he's the master mind behind everything. NO. None of that is true. As I mentioned last week and this has been used as a gotcha moment, here I'll play it (*\*Cuts to a clip of him mentioning that he has helped other influencers gain a sponsorship with BetterHelp*)

And so that clip has been misconstrued as aha that's the smoking gun that is the evidence that Philip DeFranco he is invested and he is part of the he is the mastermind. NO. And I'll explain this situation a little deeper. So, the beginning of this I had my original sponsorship with BetterHelp and it was just a win on all fronts for us. It was a sponsor that I personally used, the sponsor I personally trusted it also brought in of course as a sponsor brought in money and unlike pretty much any sponsorship before after I would do those sponsorship I would actually get messages from people thanking me for doing the spons.

Some because they either personally enjoyed this service or they recommended it to a friend or family member and it was working out for them, and some others just seeing us on boarding a brand like BetterHelp as just taking away the stigma from talking to someone about what you're going through. And actually also while we're on this note, a popular narrative that is moved forward is that just everyone from the get go they were like ahhh BetterHelp is a scam you look online just people complaining and of course with any service there are going to be bad reviews and some pockets of the internet that are going to just be overwhelmingly bad reviews. But if you search and I searched again this morning, if you search BetterHelp reviews the first one that pops up has 287 reviews, 4.2 rating, e counselling.com 90 reviews 3.9, trust pilot, 7.3 (*Uses visual screenshots to show these numbers with the voice over*). (CODE: Denial of responsibility/ injury)

Additionally on the better business bureau website it has a customer rating of 4.4 and it actually has a better business bureau rating of A+ (*Another visual screenshot*). Once again understand that I'm not defending what was in their terms and conditions that is also concerning to me as a person that used the service. And so to create this narrative that there was nothing but bad things being said about this company it's just it's just very transparent of what a fucking hit job some of these pieces are (CODE: Denial of responsibility/ injury)

Also there have been people claiming that I'm preying on the mentally ill. NO, and in fact if you scrub through the bad reviews, while there's a variety of reason, as far as the two main complaints the first one was people being charged and it was being connected to a free trial to better help. Which on the note our sponsorships are integrations with better help they are not free trial memberships it is a purchase when you go through the process you get a page like this. Then they also still had some people leaving bad reviews because they were being turned away service. And this is an important note to hit on because it's not just that BetterHelp turned them away.

If you look at better help's response to individuals like this they recommend and even link to help you find face to face therapists and they also link to incredibly important resources like crisis hotlines suicide hotlines. And in fact to read an email that someone received they were complaining about this. (Cut to visual screenshot with the email highlighted yellow) BetterHelp said to them "we determined that online counselling with BetterHelp may not be the best option for you online counselling is still and is not the most effective form of therapy for everybody. However, you deserve to get the best help possible and seeking for helping is certainly a step in the right direction. We recommend considering traditional face to face therapy and you can find many available therapists in your area by clicking here. If you are in crisis or if you need immediate help, please look at these resources."

And so what you see with the situation like that is that BetterHelp could make money off of that person if they wanted but instead the company opted to give that person the resources to deal with their specific situation. A situation that is more serious may recall for more serious measures we all do not have the same issues that we're working through. But the main point through our experience is that it was a good product and sponsor with a good purpose and it was well received and so following the success the positive reaction I negotiated a deal with BetterHelp to make it so that I could also connect them with other YouTubers like an ad agency would (CODE: Appealing to higher loyalties).

And then some content creators we set them up we handled their daily numbers we make sure they get paid if they have any questions or need any help we can get here for them and then on the other end better help if they have any questions regarding do you think this person would be good or something along those lines we can advise and for all of this like an ad agency would we take a percentage of the sponsorship. And as far as why we would want to operate as a kinda of a small third party ad agency is that's been a small goal of our company.

As I mentioned before, we had the sponsor that was just seen as a winner on all fronts. And at this same time I knew of several creators that were having a hard time finding sponsors for their fantastic content and so it just seemed like a no brainer that we would take this win on all fronts connect those people we handle everything for them and then like an agency does we take a small percentage for the connection and the upkeep. And this part dives even deeper into our long-term business model. It's been a side goal of mine to have an in-house sales team have essentially a small agency.

Everything we do is crowd funded through DeFranco elite. It is self funded we go out there and we make deals with brands. And so part of our business model moving forward was that you know we've done so much leg work to have direct connections to brands rather than working through other agencies. So what if a new part of the company expanded what we're already doing with our existing sponsors and brought to other fantastic YouTubers (7:30).

For example, and I think this is something that started the whole snowball effect, we negotiated Shane Dawson's deal with and for him and his team. That's why our company's name shows up when you go to Shane's link. It allows us to be able to provide him with daily conversion numbers you know how many people are signing up. Also and this because there's been a point of confusion with there also been users like boogie2988, he was unsure why my name was in his company referral URL. And the reason for that is instead of going to him and several other creators directly, which can take a lot of time you don't want that agency to feel like you stepped on their toes because this whole business is all about relationships.

And so we just went through an agency we already knew that they had been working with and so just like we do with the creators we work with directly we provide that agency all those numbers for him. And so part of our company here operates as a third party ad agency and they're providing a service for all of these people. And actually on that note I want to mention because once again there are people saying that I'm the mastermind I'm the one behind everything. NO.

I, we are just one of several that are going out there and connecting people. For example, even the people that have been attaching me to the integrations I didn't connect David Dobrik's crew like Jason Nash or others like H3H3 and Ellie Mills. Now with all of that said as far as what is next what is upcoming. One, this morning the founder of BetterHelp wrote a really long medium post about everything that has transpired. In it he addresses the terms and condition problem as well as other accusations that have been made. And as far as what is next for me, I currently have our team just scrubbing through accusations and complaints. And the reason for that is my goal is to try and get to the BetterHelp offices and speak with the team as I mentioned this week.

And also on that note if you have personally used BetterHelp, you had a bad experience, you've not been completely refunded. If you can provide any sort of evidence that what you're saying is accurate I would love to bring those specific situations up to them. And so I'll include this email right here in addition to everything else we're doing my team and I we'll go through those as we prepare. That's because I want to make sure your valid concerns are heard that we get answers this is an extremely important thing to me. But, with all of that said, that that's where I'm leaving this situation once again if you're one of the people that came specifically to dislike this video and say horrible things to and or about me, that's fine.

If anything I just appreciate you for giving me the time, because it's just very easy to hear something and then hate. And also I'm sorry that this is taking the spot of a regular Philip DeFranco show. My goal is that Tuesday Wednesday Thursday will have a regular show Friday it is incredibly unlikely that we will have a piece. And that's because even without this situation, my personal schedule is an absolute nightmare this week. But also now that there's this better help situation is a priority I am going to try to get to their office this week. But with that said, of

course as always my name is Philip DeFranco, you've just been filled in and I'll see you tomorrow.

### Rhetorical Scheme Philip DeFranco

<p>What is the main idea (thesis) that the influencer is trying to convey?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The accusations laid against him are ridiculous and that he is not a scamming mastermind.</li> <li>• BetterHelp seemed like a win-win situation for him to help viewers who could not afford traditional therapists, that it would help his business, and that it would help other influencers gain income.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's purpose in making this video? To defend? To apologize? To criticize the critics?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not to apologize, clearly.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's tone? Is it consistent throughout the video?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not consistent. Tone shifts to defensive and angry when addressing accusations to cool and collected as he explains his business operations. Very performative, strategic, and calculated when it comes to explaining his advertisement agency.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any non-verbal neutralizing and minimizing behaviours?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several screenshots are used to try to convey the legitimacy of BetterHelp.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any verbal neutralization techniques being employed? What are the most prevalent ones?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Denial of responsibility is the dominant one.</li> </ul>

<p>Is the background of the video significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular set up of his videos. Not significant</li> </ul>
<p>Is the style and degree of editing in the video important to how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not a raw video. It is an edited video with several jump cuts. High production value the same as his other news broadcasting videos.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer wearing? Is this significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not significant.</li> </ul>
<p>Is there music or sound effects present in the video? If so, does this have an impact on how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
<p>Is the influencer collecting money from this apology video (i.e. is ad roll on?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Advertisement revenue is on.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the chronology of the story that the influencer presents? E.g. do they begin with their perspective or do they start with the reason why they are apologizing? What is the intended purpose of this chronology?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The video comes across as very defensive. The influencer begins with how ridiculous the situation is and how ridiculous the accusations are (e.g. “a hit job”). Then he sets up an explanation of his business model and how the service had more benefits than harms. No acknowledgement at all of how he did not do adequate research of the terms and conditions.</li> </ul>

## Neutralization Techniques Chart Philip DeFranco

NEUTRALIZATION TECHNIQUE:	RELEVANT QUOTES FROM VIDEO:
Denial of Responsibility	<p>“And I hit that note because certain versions of this story involve me sneaking in some sort of sponsorship which is just not accurate and how did that even make sense and I... my name’s literally in the URL. Also an important part that has been excluded and glossed over by some telling this story is I immediately suspended my sponsorships with them moving forward. And I announced that last week when I first learned the concerning language in their terms and conditions. I immediately suspended new sponsorships and I immediately reached out to them for comment.”</p> <p>“Some because they either personally enjoyed this service or they recommended it to a friend or family member and it was working out for them, and some others just seeing us on boarding a brand like BetterHelp as just taking away the stigma from talking to someone about what you’re going through. And actually also while we’re on this note, a popular narrative that is moved forward is that just everyone from the get go they were like ahhh BetterHelp is a scam you look online just people complaining and of course with any service there are going to be bad reviews and some pockets of the internet that are going to just be overwhelmingly bad reviews. But if you search and I searched again this morning, if you search BetterHelp reviews the first one that pops up has 287 reviews, 4.2 rating, e counselling.com 90 reviews 3.9, trust pilot, 7.3 <i>(Uses visual screenshots to show these numbers with the voice over).</i>”</p> <p>“Additionally on the better business bureau website it has a customer rating of 4.4 and it actually has a better business bureau rating of A+ <i>(Another visual screenshot)</i>. Once again understand that I’m not defending what was</p>

	<p>in their terms and conditions that is also concerning to me as a person that used the service. And so to create this narrative that there was nothing but bad things being said about this company it's just it's just very transparent of what a fucking hit job some of these pieces are."</p>
Condemnation of the Condemner	
Denial of Injury	
Appeal to Higher Loyalties	<p>"And so what you see with the situation like that is that BetterHelp could make money off of that person if they wanted but instead the company opted to give that person the resources to deal with their specific situation. A situation that is more serious may recall for more serious measures we all do not have the same issues that we're working through. But the main point through our experience is that it was a good product and sponsor with a good purpose and it was well received and so following the success the positive reaction I negotiated a deal with BetterHelp to make it so that I could also connect them with other YouTubers like an ad agency would."</p>
Denial of the Victim	

## Appendix I Tana Mongeau Apology

### TanaCon, the good, the bad, and the ugly<sup>40</sup>...

A few weeks ago TanaCon was something I was excited about it was a dream of mine that was finally coming true or so it felt like. It was a dream originated in spite. (*Clips of the documentary that influencer Shane Dawson made of TanaCon*). But it was something I was so fucking proud of and I wanted you to be proud of it too. For the first time in my entire life, career it felt like the whole world was on my side (*More clips showing people supporting VidCon: news headlines, clips, social media screenshots*)

It was finally going my way and now fast forward to today. I don't even know where to begin honestly. I'm sitting at my computer looking at videos of people with sunburns, crying, paramedics (*Clips of said things at TanaCon*), I'm reading the stories and DMing you guys talking to people who came from Australia and Singapore and China and the UK and New York and travelled just to be turned away and sadly it's horrible it's so fucking horrible. I'm disgusted I'm going to walk you through it all. The good the bad, the ugly I want to apologize everyone I've wrong and so now I want explain all of my failures to you I could have been so much better how I will be better I want to spend all so let's do that with as little jump cuts as possible but I can't stop pausing and breathing. I'm fucking terrified it all started with spite.

So much fucking spite I was angry I was hurt I was spiteful at VidCon. I was banned or kicked out or however you want to say it I felt left out I was seeing all my friends featured and I was embarrassed I felt like I should have been a part of it. I felt everyone was a part of it. I should have been a part of it. And I know that sounds egotistical to say it was something I looked up to in this industry. The biggest event for years I wanted to be a part of it so badly. And I waited and I waited and I waited and I thought I was doing everything right in my power and it still wasn't good enough and I was fucking angry, livid to find out for the third year it wasn't going to happen (*clips of her being kicked out of VidCon*) and so I made a video about it and that's where everything should have stopped after that video.

It started to snowball and (*black screen visual effect*) and spiral out of control I uploaded that video thinking that that would be it all one hour and 19 minutes of me repeating myself over and over and fucking over again. But then the response was fucking crazy I've never done anything and had a response like that. It felt like the whole world was talking about me. And I felt that before, but not in a good way like this. Someone like me that a lot of people don't like doesn't always get to feel like the whole world is on their side. After uploading that video, seeing every single one of my favourite fucking creators Philip DeFranco (*clip of Philip DeFranco covering TanaCon on his news channel*).

Lisa Shwartz, Ricky Dillon you name them talking about what I had said in a positive light and all of these creators coming forward telling they had the same things happen to them or sharing

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<sup>40</sup> The actual apology begins at 13:04.

their stories and not only feeling like I started all of this and this movement but having all these people on my side and having every press talking about you so positively feeling like for once I did something (*clips of positive media headlines 18:03*) right and that it was a good thing to speak out and tell the truth the response after posting that video was so much better than I anticipated and after releasing the VidCon video I didn't plan on doing anything but everything kept growing and growing and people started tweeting TanaCon TanaCon TanaCon everywhere comments everywhere whatever and I started to believe that if I had the right personality that I could actually pull it off.

Which looking back is so fucking stupid like in two months it's so stupid and as the concept of TanaCon became more real and it started picking up steam I decided to release merch to kind of test the waters and see if people really fucked with it (*Showing screenshots from social media and clips of people giving their support to her and TanaCon*) I've never seen numbers like that I've never seen that many people wanting to wear a fucking neon orange hoodies that says something dumb and spiteful that I created this was still all a part of my spiteful joke but I was loving every fucking second of it. Soon the idea of creating an actual TanaCon wasn't a joke anymore. I couldn't back down at that point. I had to do it.

Every person on the fucking platform was telling me to do it. The creators wanted a cool place for their voices to be heard and the fans wanted something cheaper and that's what sucks too it's just like now because it went so poorly obviously all of that attention has flip flopped and the negative attention is insane but it's also like with that much attention and people gassing you up and telling you can do it you start to believe it. You really start to believe it. But the problem that it was two months away and that's by far one of the biggest way I fucked up. You don't plan a convention in two months. You don't put that many people's lives at risk to do something spiteful you don't do it the same day as VidCon you don't do it down the street. I didn't have to be spiteful and its where I fucked up and Jordan knew that and he wasn't going to do it.

He really really wasn't. I really fucking should have listened to him. I was seeing how much success this was all having and I was on an ego trip and I was so excited to make a change in the fucking industry and I was so excited to finally feel welcomed some more. But I needed to find someone else would help me and then Michael Weist texted me (*scary cinematic music as it shows a clip of him 20:23, heart pounding sound effects*) and suddenly I had a real way to make it happen or so I thought. Good times I'd been to a previous event with good times. And I think that if that had never happened TanaCon would have never happened.

A few months prior I went to Chicago with good times for (*Clip showing this*) a small event that they were doing and they flew me out and Michael was so good to me you know black cars and paparazzi and giant hotel suites and videographers following me everywhere and anything I wanted the best security everything it was Mike he put on a show for me he made me feel like royalty he did everything (*Clips 21:14*) in his power to make me feel like royalty and looking back now it was all lights and a show and none of it was real and I didn't know that yet and when Michael texted me about TanaCon and I... all I knew of him was this amazing experience in Chicago where I was wined and dined and it was so incredible and whatever of course I was

down if he could make a small convention like that go off so seamlessly he obviously knows something about the industry. (CODE: Denial of responsibility).

He obviously wouldn't do anything that couldn't do that he didn't think could be possible. This was the guy that was going to make TanaCon a real thing and even though every single person in my life who I introduced him to or who knew him people were coming out of the fucking wood works to tell me how much they didn't like him and I shouldn't work with him. Upon meeting him for the first time I remember Hunter telling me he's so struck up he's so egotistical Bella got the worst vibes and was begging me every day to do TanaCon with her team and god I should listened to her. I remember months before TanaCon right when everything started happening I went to James Charles house and had a meeting with him about TanaCon and I remember James sitting there being like do not fucking work with good times you're a fucking idiot if you do it and me being but I believed in him but I believed I believe in him. I didn't care I wanted to prove everyone wrong. I want to stray away from emption in this video and pandering and all that fucking bullshit but I've always been the type of person where I never want to judge someone based off of everyone else's opinions because I'm always the girl that everyone judges based off of what everyone else has to say and I never want to be that person so if anything everyone fucking telling me not to made me dig my heels in ten times deeper (23:04)

And the combination of that and the way that Michael is was a cocktail for disaster but I didn't know it yet. There was no backing now for TanaCon was a real thing we were a team and we were gonna make it happen there were so many weird things and so many red flags looking back but I was so blinded by the idea of making my ultimate dream a reality and not even just that but getting back at vidcon showing the industry there is a repercussions if the big dogs treat little dogs like shit (CODE: Appeal to higher loyalties).

That eventually one day someone's gonna bite back and wanting to create a place for creators to never be treated the way I was you know and I let all of that cloud the red flags and the weird shit why was he filming himself doing every single thing why were people secretly recording me and I was catching them why was all of this for a documentary that I wasn't gonna make and I wasn't ever get any part of or anything like that that I didn't even know about it until the first TanaCon meeting he just showed up with cameras and why is he segwaying everywhere why is he dripped in Gucci and channel and all that stuff when everyone who knows him says its his parents money but then he says its investors but where are the investors and oh wait they're your parents but they're not I thought you live in a mansion but oh wait you live in your mom's guest house sir why are running around Anaheim after TanaCon was cancelled crying and having someone film you on a Segway. So many whys.

Why are you going around telling everyone that I fired Jordan and you're my manager now. Why are you speaking down to everyone but me why are you telling me that if TanaCon goes well you're going to buy me a Rolex? Why are you taking me and all my friends to dinner after dinner at catch la and essex and nobu and all that bullshit you know why are you bullshitting me so hard and that's what's sad is that I knew in the back of my mind that something was so fishy but I let my fucking ego and spite drive me to continue to make TanaCon I let the dream of the fantasy of what it could be drive me to continue to do it I let everyone doubting me and telling

me not to work with him motivate me 10 times harder to do it because I wanted to prove them wrong. I wanted to be the little dog. To Michael it seemed like it'd be the easiest thing he'd ever done that he could plan TanaCon in two weeks with his eyes closed. All I had to do was be the face and the name and maybe invite some creators and he would do everything seamlessly because all he's ever done is plan conventions but I wanted to be hands on and I wanted to work on it I wanted to do everything too and that's one thing that's infuriating seeing Michael go around and say that TanaCon failed because I could have done more (*Showing clips of her planning the event with Michael Weist*)

And then he's going to have the audacity to say it was like that because I could have done more but I told you every item and I told you I'd reach out to the companies but you told me not that's not my job as the talent that all I have to do is put my face on it and you'd handle it but did you no, but it's still all my fault at the end of the day. I still attached my face and my name to it and I was down for it and I was ready because I wanted to win and I wanted things to be different as much as I want to paint the picture to you guys that I believed in Michael because I wanted to believe in someone regardless of what everyone said I still believed in someone that gave me bad vibes I wanted to believe the fantasy over the reality I let someone wine and dine me and smooze and lie to me and tell me everything was going to be fucking flawless and that he can do this convention ten times over with his hands behind his back while everyone is fucking telling me that he was the worst and I should have listened and I'm a fucking idiot. (CODE: Denial of responsibility)

Seeing Michael go around and say oh you were in Hawaii a few weeks before. Yeah Michael and you were in Nashville so even if I was in LA we still would have met over the phone just like we did every fucking day. That I could have done more about the gift bags when I sat in my living room with hunter Elijah, Mario, Amari, Ashley, Isabella, telling you that I wanted merch in the gift bags that I wanted a mini clip in hair extensions in the gift bags and I wanted jewelry in the gift bags and what kind of jewelry that I wanted glitter from London Head LA or go get glitter and glitter tear packages that I wanted makeup packages from colour pop and that I wanted to reach out and he told me no he would do it and he'll take care of it and sitting there and asking him in front of all those people okay so you're gonna have every single one of those items in the gift bag and then getting to Tanacon and it being a condom (CODE: Denial of responsibility)

I want to talk about planning, planning it all seems ridiculous now with all of this footage but this is something that I worked harder on that I've ever worked on anything in my entire life. I became living breathing TanaCon on (*more clips of her planning*). TanaCon robots I sat up every single night going over every goddamned thing with Michael Weist whether it was security whether it was lines outside whether it was merchandise which YouTuber's merchandise we wanted which exclusive merchandise we wanted to make how we were gonna design every single fucking item that was guaranteed to be in those gift bags the capacities the room the safety the security the 91 security guards that ended up being 25. How many paramedics we wanted which YouTubers got which hotel rooms and I wanted to put them in and OH my god and which sponsors I wanted and which companies I wanted there and I wanted my birthday party to look like and what songs I wanted the fans to hear first and what panels I wanted in every single

person on each and everyone one of those panels and what panel came after which one and what went before the other one and making sure that nothing conflicted with anyone's VidCon experience and asking over and over and over and over and over again that the security and the capacity would be fine (CODE: Denial of responsibility).

I asked Michael Weist if the security and the capacity would be fine five hundred thousand fucking times and every single time I was told yes it will be perfect don't even worry about that. You're the YouTuber, you're the talent focus on who you want on what panel. Are you kidding me of course everything is going to be fine Tana why would it be but to go even further in what I was responsible for planning it was the concept and foundation of TanaCon but I want to be a little more clear than that the concept and foundation of TanaCon was planned by me and I was going to kick and fucking scream until it got done. And I honestly think that this is the most important message I want convey in this video and the reason why I explained how I was wined and dined and how Michael was and everything that happened is so that I can convey this message. I believed that I could place the task of creating a perfect safe happy awesome TanaCon in the of Michael Weist and good times. Did I want to be a pivotal part of creating the event did I want to choose every little thing down to the color of the gift bags and what person was on what panel and every little fucking thing hell yes I did and I did that (CODE: Denial of responsibility) (33:07).

I was on my phone every second of the every day with that man but the responsibilities of the logistics and the production and the security and the safety and the lines and the water and the food and the paramedics I placed in the hands of the production company good times because at the end of the day and I'm not falling back on this on a crutch because like I said I'm a fucking idiot for ever doing it out of spite and ever doing it in two months and ever doing it on the same day but I still at the time was a 19 year old girl who makes YouTube videos. I don't run a convention company and Michael Weist made me believe that he ran the best convention company and he was going to make me the best convention he possibly could he did everything in his power to make me believe that we had plenty of time and the security was going to be fucking on lock and that everyone was going to be inside with plenty of space the gift bags would be full and that all I had to do was tell him what I wanted and he would make it happen (CODE: Denial of responsibility).

And so TanaCon came up further and further and further I began to realize that Michael was a little dumber then he was a lot dumber than he was putting of to be that the ego was to cover up a lot there were a lot a lot a lot of lies I think I was beginning to realize that I didn't make the right choice but we're a week away with 4,000 tickets sold. I didn't know what to do so I enlist the help of Jordan and we do everything we can to make sure things are great as possible but again Jordan doesn't run a convention company he's a talent manager. So we locked every influencer for every panel and we locked down every sponsor and we lock down everything we could but Michael was allegedly handling all of the things we knew nothing about. Security venue, capacity safety it was scary but I was so excited I went and toured the venue asked about security and another 100 000 times asked about the capacity another 100,00 times (*Clips of her asking about registration booths*)

I was beginning to realize that when I spoke to Michael he was telling me something different you know that the capacity is three thousand two hundred and 98 oh no wait that's the capacity of the main ballroom oh no wait we now have the lobby so that's another 700-1000 people we can hold. Oh no every hallway holds a thousand people. Here tana come back to Anaheim let's tour all of the offset rooms this room can hold a panel and it can hold 300 people. This room can hold this many people. Outside people will not be in line for that long. Look we set that up meet the security team meet the security guards (**CODE: Denial of responsibility**) (*shows clip of security guard at the con saying how they would bodycheck a teen if they got on their nerves, 36:20*)

Meet the security guards there's gonna be 91 that's double more than we need everyone is going to be so safe. TanaCon I remember laying in bed the night before with Hunter watching Philip DeFranco's first video on it (*Clip again showing Philip DeFranco covering Tanacon on his channel*) And bawling my eyes out happy tears because I felt like I finally made a positive footprint in the community. I remember walking into TanaCon out of a party bus with all my friends running into the arms of the fans outside bawling and then right after that Michael and his videographer Phil told me and hunter that we could never fucking have that footage because it was for a documentary that they were filming but that's beside the point but even that was weird you know.

Why was Michael's entire video team threatening me and my videographer because they own all the rights to the footage. Why was Michael calling himself the CEO of TanaCon and my manager that night when he wasn't and now at TanaCon had started it was the morning of and where was Michael he was cheering champagne on a segway running around while Jordan and I were actually planning everything he was making sure the good times posters were hung up while not giving a fuck about the 1000 fans that were already lined up outside. And what's crazy is even the first three or four hours of TanaCon there was already so many horrible things happening so many people were stuck outside and the giftbags were atrocious.

His team shed wool over my eyes and told me that everything was fine. (*Clip showing a couple getting married at TanaCon 38:57*) I was doing panels and I was singing, q& a with Lenna and Adam and hosting a q & a with Emma and hosting the wedding and I was crying every twenty minutes because I thought everything was fucking perfect. I thought my dreams had finally come true. I thought I was in my literal heaven (*clip of her vlogging the morning of the first day of TanaCon*)

But little did I know ever time I walked out of a room everyone was freaking the fuck out because everything was going wrong because Michael didn't do shit and Michael didn't know shit and after a few hours I'm about to do a q & a on stage with Gabbie. I find out its doomsday. (*clip of her finding out day off, manager telling her it's a doomsday scenario and that they need to end the con*)

TanaCon is cancelled and there are thousands of people outside and that everything is going horribly and of course I'm a selfish asshole and I go upstairs to change my clothes and make Gabbie wait and just suck and while I'm up there I'm getting texts and I'm being told that there

are 20,000 people outside. Michael is going around to everyone bragging telling everyone there's 20,000 people outside Tana congratulations. He's making it seem like the best thing ever look out the window everything's fine no one's even mad at you it's 20,000 people outside they love you so much everything's gonna be fine its 20, 000 20,0000 we count and I can't even tell you how many times Michael came to tell me it was 20.000 people and he was so excited.

And that's what's the most fucked up to me. An honest decent person in that moment would have said I fucked up and there's 5000 people outside maybe and they all have sunburns and they're all sobbing and bawling their eyes out and TanaCon went horribly and I fucked you over and I'm sorry. But no he's riding around on a Segway telling me to go on Instagram live and thank everyone for the 20000 people and go outside with Bella and hand out some waters and everything's gonna be fine and we'll do TanaCon day 2 and that's pretty much the last I saw of Michael. Literally he segwayed away had his camera guy film him crying running around Anaheim while Jordan and I sat in a board room trying to figure out what the fuck to do (**CODE: Denial of Responsibility**).

That's what's crazy to me too that after all of this Michael had the audacity to say that I just went out and partied that night well no I sat in a boardroom for five hours and your entire team who is terrified of you and I still don't know why you have an entire team of goodtime staff who is terrified of you finally spoke up to me and told me all of the lies you told me and now there's no way we can actually do a day 2 and even though Michael is saying that we can fix everything that he didn't do anything right. I found out in that boardroom that the morning of he cancelled the paramedics because he didn't want to spend the money on it. That he cut the security guards in half that he was on Instagram dming always again us asking them to print him black shirts that says security (*Clips showing more incompetent clips of security guards hired for the event 44:22*)

I thought there were more security guards. That if I were to do a day 2 that someone would probably die and that I was lucky that no one died today. That the way the first time in that boardroom that I got to hear the truth about TanaCon. That his team finally broke down and stopped lying to me stopped being afraid of him it was all a façade. And that the smartest thing to do was to be to cancel it for the safety and happiness of my fans. That was one of the most devastating moments of my life. Everything was like this you know everyone was talking about it, it was gonna be so amazing it was gonna be so perfect the security is fine everything is going to be great the hotel's capacity is fine. Well you finally made a change whatever, just kidding it's all a lie. You're lucky your fans didn't die today the security isn't real security. And the paramedics were cancelled. Michael Weist would rather spend that money on channel earrings (**CODE: Denial of Responsibility**).

Your gift bags were a condom I didn't know what to do I was in shock mode. I thought it would be the best thing to do to leave the Marriott and to go to my networks party and to talk to you guys outside. There were like a hundred fans outside so I went and talked to them to talk to people in the industry inside of the party and I started to apologize to creators to try to start mopping up the mess and for him to go in an interview and say that I was just out partying while all I was trying to do is damage control the thousands of fucking lies he told to me and figure something out any truth is the most angering thing and to be so goddamn angry at VidCon for

three years and now to sit back and be 100000 times more angry at the one person I thought I could trust to help me pull this off is devastating. To want nothing more than for Tana con to go well and to see videos of third fucking degree sunburns and people on stretchers hear the stories of the fans who were still there that travelled all the way from Australia and London and wherever else is soul shattering and so infuriating because I would have never done TanaCon if I knew it was going to happen like that.

But now that left Jordan and I to mop up the mess and then we come to find out all the numbers there weren't 20000 people outside and now I look like a fucking idiot. The venue could never have held 5000 people and it was oversold the security was a fucking joke. But at the end of the day I put my name on it. My idea originated in spite and I made a huge fucking mess and I have to clean it up. The past two weeks I've been radio silent. Everyone wanted to know immediately why I wasn't addressing it and all of that kind of stuff this is why I wasn't addressing it and all of that of kind of stuff this is why I didn't know what the fuck to say. I didn't know what the fuck was the truth. I didn't know what the fuck was a lie. I didn't know what the fuck was going on and I didn't want to sit down and talk about until I knew every damn thing and what's crazy is that everyone thinks that after Shane's video came out that I knew everything I'm still being silent for no reason or whatever I'm still finding out so much stuff to this day.

Refunds, like I told you earlier Michael hid, showed up to my birthday party to tell me that he loved me and wished me a happy birthday I said I don't know what to say because even I almost understood why everyone was so afraid of him and then he left Anaheim back to Nashville on a plane stranded all of the creators that were still in Anaheim. I started hitting him up about refunds and I heard no response. I started calling him and calling him and then I see that he went outside and told people that Jordan wasn't responding during all of TanaCon when in reality Jordan was the only person trying to hold anything together so that was what he did before he left and I became very aware that the only people who actually cared about the fans and their refunds were Shane James the other creators. I started hearing rumours from everyone Michael knows that he's telling everyone he's just fine and that he made four hundred and fifty grand from TanaCon and then Bryce starts showing me all the fake bake statements that Michael used to make to show him how much money he had before he stole his and then Michael sees that Shane is gonna make a TanaCon video and then starts becoming so responsive and he's upset and he's gonna lose his house and he's going bankrupt but the bank statements he sent me were fake and I don't believe any of that for a damn second and now suddenly he's so upset and he cares so much and so we all start discussing refunds and it's very prevalent that Michael doesn't know what the fuck to do.

I might have to write a check and issues refunds myself and then after I think Shane realized all of this he was nice enough to help the situation and I appreciate Shane so much more than you'll ever know I know that that's not what this is about but no one knew all of this for the last two weeks. Shane was the only person to listen and understand that I'm a fucking idiot and call me out on my bullshit but still give me a platform to transparently tell this story on. I care about the refunds and care about the fans and talk to Michael and I don't think Michael would have ever talked to me if it wasn't for Shane so I'm so grateful for his position in that sense and Shane's

my fucking dad we all know I would be dead if it wasn't for him so I'm not even gonna get into that but I don't (50:03)

I don't know what I would do without Shane fucking Dawson he could have walked away so easily all he was was a creator that reluctantly agreed to show up at my event and to take on this responsibility is the greatest someone could ever do for me and I will never be able to repay him but you all know that. But for him to forgive me and still talk to me everyday and listen to me means the world. Now here we are present day coming back to the world facing this head-on sitting in the same spot that I was so spitefully screamed at VidCon and so now I've been spending every single day trying to work on a perfect solution but the truth is nothing will ever make this fully right and it will be one of the biggest regrets of my life for the rest of my life I'm gonna do everything I can to make it right and as much as I want be radio silent and continue to hide the good parts of my intentions the parts of me that wanted to be the voice for the creators and make a change in this industry and make a change in the way that creators are treated and be the voice for people that are treated like shit and give the fans what they deserve that voice in me doesn't want to back down because if I were to back down and give up on the right things that I believed in that would be losing in my eyes but to everyone that's out here calling me a con artist tanaconned tana you're an evil mastermind you're a piece of shit whatever.

I didn't make a fucking dime on TanaCon and now I will be losing my money. If anyone thinks that I went into TanaCon for anything other than a wild fucking dream fueled by a fuck ton of spite you were wrong. My tickets were 65 dollars and Michael spent every dime that was earned but I didn't do it for the money I did it because I wanted to create a better different event was it fueled by spite was it fueled by ego would I have been so persistent if I wasn't getting the attention and the press and all of the crazy shit that was happening probably not but I knew from day 1 that I wasn't making a dime that it was for the greater good of the industry that it was for making a footprint in this world that it was for something dope and cheap for once for the fans.

I wanted something free I wanted free tickets that's another fucking conversation I remember texting Michael every four or five days all the way up until TanaCon okay being like drop 200 free tickets. And he'd be like okay two hundred tickets are live on the site. I did this probably like ten times but then coming to see every single person outside waiting in line and paid for a ticket so you were lying to me about to me about how many free tickets were given away so you could profit more. (CODE: Denial of responsibility). I wanted all free tickets such a fucking mess now I'm spending my time working on free meet ups in as many of the most popular cities no matter where they are of people who bought tickets and stuff for charity with Shane starting from the ground up again with the same morals of what I believe in when I made those videos but with a whole lot of less spite and giant slap in the face from reality and aw whole fuck tone of trust issues a long time ago someone said to me if you want something done right do it yourself and that's where I am with all of this I will never blindly trust anyone again I will never let ego and spite fuel the decisions I make with someone if everyone tells me not to fuck with a person in the business industry I'm not going to do it. As much as that sucks that's the truth.

I'm not going to do things without months of planning, I'm not going to do things like TanaCon. A lot of change has to be made I'm gonna stick to what I know I'm gonna research everything I

can I'm gonna look at everything I can everything that went wrong so I know how things can go right I'm going to work with Jordan David, Worana, and that's about it because he's the only fucking person in this industry who isn't a snake I' he's I'm gonna be more guarded people if people are filming me and telling me if I sell this many tickets they're gonna buy me a Rolex I'm gonna tell them to get the fuck out of my house.

If James Charles smartest sister in this fucking industry tells me not trust someone I'm going to listen to him I'm working on everything I can to figure out who to accommodate all of the travel funds of people who traveled but in the meantime I am so sorry I'm sorry if you came to TanaCon I'm sorry if you had a sunburn I'm sorry if you waited in line I'm sorry you didn't get to meet your favourite creators I'm sorry that you ever even had to look at that sorry excuse for a gift bag and I'm sorry if you believed in me if I let you down and I'm sorry for fucking this up sorry for being dumb, egotistical, spiteful, selfish, stupid, irresponsible. I'm gonna do everything in my power to make it right and I'm not going to give up for the voice of the fucking creators and the voice of the fucking fans.

I'm not gonna stop trying because I would be a sorry excuse of I don't want to say role model but you know what I mean. If I came on here weeks ago preaching never to give up on your dreams and then because one thing went wrong I'm going to give up forever that's not who I am and that's not who I want you guys to be and that's not the goddamned message I'm going to spread on this channel. But thank you for listening thank you for watching this thank you for being on this journey with me thank you for letting me tell you what happened.

I was lied to so much never been and I probably never will be more lied to in my entire life by anyone I trusted a horrible person and a horrible company. Michael Weist and his entire staff of people who were terrified of him fucked me over brutally but I'm still a fucking idiot for attaching myself to it and letting it happen I knew better and I'm fucking stupid. And I'm sorry if you think I let you down just know I let me down so much harder I just want to say thank you to Shane and thank you to you guys It's time to pick up the pieces and figure this shit out.

### Rhetorical Scheme Tana Mongeau

<p>What is the main idea (thesis) that the influencer is trying to convey?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is responsible as she put her name on the conference.</li> <li>• But she is also not responsible because Michael Weist told her he would take care of everything.</li> <li>• She did everything in her power to fix the conference but it was too late.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's purpose in making this video? To defend? To apologize? To criticize the critics?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To apologize, but displace blame as much as possible away from her.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer's tone? Is it consistent throughout the video?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not consistent. The tone is very angry and frustrated especially when addressing Michael Weist and shifts to a feebler and smaller tone when addressing her failures and disappointment in herself.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any non-verbal neutralizing and minimizing behaviours?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Several screenshots and footage of the event/ planning of the event were used to help support the claims of Michael Weist's responsibility for the failure of the conference. This is in spite of her earlier claiming in the video that it was mostly her fault. Very contradictory. She apologizes, but displaces blame just as much.</li> </ul>
<p>Are there any verbal neutralization techniques being employed? What are the most prevalent ones?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Denial of responsibility is the dominant one.</li> </ul>

<p>Is the background of the video significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
<p>Is the style and degree of editing in the video important to how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is a highly produced piece that is similar to a documentary (1 hour length). While many of the footage used was to show proof of their claims, the sound effects, fading effects, screenshots, and overall highly edited style of the video is more for entertainment than it is a serious acknowledgment. This is likely the case as advertisement revenue is on, and it was likely given how large this scandal was, millions of people would be watching this video.</li> </ul>
<p>What is the influencer wearing? Is this significant in how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not significant.</li> </ul>
<p>Is there music or sound effects present in the video? If so, does this have an impact on how the influencer conveys their message?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. There was music effects to create Michael Weist as the villain. Other sound effects were used to create drama such as a pounding heartbeat, fading audio, and voice overs of media clippings covering TanaCon.</li> </ul>
<p>Is the influencer collecting money from this apology video (i.e. is ad roll on?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. Advertisement revenue is on.</li> </ul>

<p>What is the chronology of the story that the influencer presents? E.g. do they begin with their perspective or do they start with the reason why they are apologizing? What is the intended purpose of this chronology?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The influencer begins with their perspective, saying how sorry and disappointed in themselves they are. They then proceed to paint Michael Weist as the person most responsible for the conference's failure.</li></ul>
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### Neutralization Techniques Chart Tana Mongeau

NEUTRALIZATION TECHNIQUE:	RELEVANT QUOTES FROM VIDEO:
Denial of Responsibility	<p>“A few months prior I went to Chicago with good times for (<i>Clip showing this</i>) a small event that they were doing and they flew me out and Michael was so good to me you know black cars and paparazzi and giant hotel suites and videographers following me everywhere and anything I wanted the best security everything it was Mike he put on a show for me he made me feel like royalty he did everything (Clips 21:14) in his power to make me feel like royalty and looking back now it was all lights and a show and none of it was real and I didn’t know that yet and when Michael texted me about TanaCon and I... all I knew of him was this amazing experience in Chicago where I was wined and dined and it was so incredible and whatever of course I was down if he could make a small convention like that go off so seamlessly he obviously knows something about the industry”</p> <p>“And then he’s going to have the audacity to say it was like that because I could have done more but I told you every item and I told you I’d reach out to the companies but you told me not hat’s not my job as the talent that all I have to do is put my face on it and you’d handle it but did you no, but it’s still all my fault at the end of the day. I still attached my face and my name to it and I was down for it and I was ready because I wanted to win and I wanted things to be different as much as I want to paint the picture to you guys that I believed in Michael because I wanted to believe in someone regardless of what everyone said I still believed in someone that gave me bad vibes I wanted to believe the fantasy over the reality I let someone wine and dine me and smooze and lie to me and tell me everything was going to be fucking</p>

flawless and that he can do this convention ten times over with his hands behind his back while everyone is fucking telling me that he was the worst and I should have listened and I'm a fucking idiot.”

“Seeing Michael go around and say oh you were in Hawaii a few weeks before. Yeah Michael and you were in Nashville so even if I was in LA we still would have met over the phone just like we did every fucking day. That I could have done more about the gift bags when I sat in my living room with hunter Elijah, Mario, Amari, Ashley, Isabella, telling you that I wanted merch in the gift bags that I wanted a mini clip in hair extensions in the gift bags and I wanted jewelry in the gift bags and what kind of jewelry that I wanted glitter from London Head LA or go get glitter and glitter tear packages that I wanted makeup packages from colour pop and that I wanted to reach out and he told me no he would do it and he'll take care of it and sitting there and asking him in front of all those people okay so you're gonna have every single one of those items in the gift bag and then getting to TanaCon and it being a condom.”

“I want to talk about planning, planning it all seems ridiculous now with all of this footage but this is something that I worked harder on that I've ever worked on anything in my entire life. I became living breathing TanaCon (*more clips of her planning*). TanaCon robots I sat up every single night going over every goddamned thing with Michael Weist whether it was security whether it was lines outside whether it was merchandise which YouTuber's merchandise we wanted which exclusive merchandise we wanted to make how we were gonna design every single fucking item that was guaranteed to be in those gift bags the capacities the room the safety the security the 91 security guards that ended up being 25.”

“I asked Michael Weist if the security and the capacity would be fine five hundred thousand fucking times and every single time I was told yes it will be perfect don’t even worry about that. You’re the YouTuber, you’re the talent focus on who you want on what panel. Are you kidding me of course everything is going to be fine Tana why would it be but to go even further in what I was responsible for planning it was the concept and foundation of TanaCon but I want to be a little more clear than that the concept and foundation of TanaCon was planned by me and I was going to kick and fucking scream until it got done. And I honestly think that this is the most important message I want convey in this video and the reason why I explained how I was wined and dined and how Michael was and everything that happened is so that I can convey this message. I believed that I could place the task of creating a perfect safe happy awesome TanaCon in the of Michael Weist and good times. Did I want to be a pivotal part of creating the event did I want to choose every little thing down to the color of the gift bags and what person was on what panel and every little fucking thing hell yes I did and I did that.”

I was on my phone every second of the every day with that man but the responsibilities of the logistics and the production and the security and the safety and the lines and the water and the food and the paramedics I placed in the hands of the production company good times because at the end of the day and I’m not falling back on this on a crutch because like I said I’m a fucking idiot for ever doing it out of spite and ever doing it in two months and ever doing it on the same day but I still at the time was a 19 year old girl who makes YouTube videos. I don’t run a convention company and Michael Weist made me believe that he ran the best convention company and he was going to make me the best convention he possibly could he did

everything in his power to make me believe that we had plenty of time and the security was going to be fucking on lock and that everyone was going to be inside with plenty of space the gift bags would be full and that all I had to do was tell him what I wanted and he would make it happen.”

“I was beginning to realize that when I spoke to Michael he was telling me something different you know that the capacity is three thousand two hundred and 98 oh no wait that’s the capacity of the main ballroom oh no wait we now have the lobby so that’s another 700-1000 people we can hold. Oh no every hallway holds a thousand people. Here Tana come back to Anaheim let’s tour all of the offset rooms this room can hold a panel and it can hold 300 people. This room can hold this many people. Outside people will not be in line for that long. Look we set that up meet the security team meet the security guards.”

“And that’s what’s the most fucked up to me. An honest decent person in that moment would have said I fucked up and there’s 5000 people outside maybe and they all have sunburns and they’re all sobbing and bawling their eyes out and TanaCon went horribly and I fucked you over and I’m sorry. But no he’s riding around on a Segway telling me to go on Instagram live and thank everyone for the 20000 people and go outside with Bella and hand out some waters and everything’s gonna be fine and we’ll do TanaCon day 2 and that’s pretty much the last I saw of Michael. Literally he segwayed away had his camera guy film him crying running around Anaheim while Jordan and I sat in a board room trying to figure out what the fuck to do.”

“I thought there were more security guards. That if I were to do a day 2 that someone would probably die and that I was lucky that no one died today. That the way the first time in that boardroom that I got to hear the truth

	<p>about TanaCon. That his team finally broke down and stopped lying to me stopped being afraid of him it was all a façade. And that the smartest thing to do was to be to cancel it for the safety and happiness of my fans. That was one of the most devastating moments of my life. Everything was like this you know everyone was talking about it it was gonna be so amazing it was gonna be so perfect the security is fine everything is going to be great the hotel's capacity is fine. Well you finally made a change whatever, just kidding it's all a lie. You're lucky your fans didn't die today the security isn't real security. And the paramedics were cancelled. Michael Weist would rather spend that money on channel earrings.”</p> <p>“I wanted something free I wanted free tickets that's another fucking conversation I remember texting Michael every four or five days all the way up until TanaCon okay being like drop 200 free tickets. And he'd be like okay two hundred tickets are live on the site. I did this probably like ten times but then coming to see every single person outside waiting in line and paid for a ticket so you were lying to me about to me about how many free tickets were given away so you could profit more.”</p>
<p>Condemnation of the Condemner</p>	
<p>Denial of Injury</p>	

Appeal to Higher Loyalties	“And the combination of that and the way that Michael is was a cocktail for disaster but I didn’t know it yet. There was no backing now for TanaCon was a real thing we were a team and we were gonna make it happen there were so many weird things and so many red flags looking back but I was so blinded by the idea of making my ultimate dream a reality and not even just that but getting back at VidCon showing the industry there is a repercussions if the big dogs treat little dogs like shit”
Denial of the Victim	

## Appendix J Cancellation Outcomes

Influencer	Outcome After Scandal
Zoella	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has been on the receiving end of numerous warnings from the ASA (BBC News 2020).</li> <li>• Most common complains include failing to disclose social media posts as advertisements (BBC News, 2020).</li> <li>• Today enjoys a net worth of \$8 million and has a total of 11 million subscribers (Bass, 2021).</li> </ul>
Tana Mongeau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Also sponsored Kenza Cosmetics with Gabbie Hanna (Sommer, 2019).</li> <li>• Enjoys YouTube Fame and had a MTV reality TV show (Jovic, 2021).</li> <li>• In 2021, was criticized for deceptive advertising of her bikini line. The bikini line was advertised as high quality; however, fans found the same designs on cheap Chinese retailer websites (Dodgson, 2021; Barnet, 2021).</li> <li>• Today, she has a subscriber base of over 5 million followers and a net worth of \$ 4 million (Celebrity Net Worth, n.d.).</li> </ul>
Gabbie Hanna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoys a successful music career</li> <li>• Today she has a subscriber base of 5.5 million and a net worth of \$2 million (Wallin, 2021).</li> </ul>
Philip DeFranco	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continues to operate his news channel without scrutiny.</li> <li>• Today enjoys a net worth of \$12 million and a subscriber base of six million (Celebrity Net Worth, n.d.).</li> <li>• The BetterHelp scandal has since been swept under the rug and has not been talked about since.</li> <li>• BetterHelp, it is still a successful e-counselling service today.</li> <li>• As of June of 2021, Ariana Grande partnered with them to give away \$2 million of free therapy (McNamara, 2021).</li> </ul>
RiceGum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In July of 2021, RiceGum found himself in hot water for another deceptive advertising scandal, with this particular debacle revolving around promoting a crypto currency that was promised to succeed but was instead exposed for being a cash grab (Jones, 2021).</li> <li>• Today enjoys a total of 10 million followers and a net worth of \$8 million (Western, 2021).</li> </ul>
TmarTn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TmarTn has since stopped uploading regularly to the YouTube channel from which the initial advertisement and apology video was posted.</li> <li>• At the time of writing this thesis, his second channel currently has over 4 million subscribers and he enjoys a net worth of \$2 million (The Wealth Record, 2021)</li> </ul>