DESERTING THE INNOCENT: THE PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF YOUTHFULNESS IN INFLUENCER APOLOGIES

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DEDICATION

To my wife who, with great patience, endured much to bring this paper to fruition. Also, to my daughter, Josie, born in the middle of the pandemic and in the middle of this thesis – thank you for bringing me so much joy in a time of great stress and great uncertainty.

ABSTRACT

Prior research on crisis communications predicts that apologies from youthful (vs. older) influencers generate more social support because younger influencers are perceived as more honest and innocent and therefore deserving of support. Ironically, I found that the inherent innocence of young influencers can have seemingly undesirable consequences because it reduces the amount of support extended to them in times of crisis. Specifically, youthful (vs. older) influencers on YouTube received less social support (i.e., fewer like votes) for their apology videos. Further, this negative relationship was magnified when the influencer was perceived as less responsible for the transgression. I account for these contradictory results using the helping paradox. By exploring youthfulness in influencer apologies, I provide a more nuanced understanding of the value of like votes on social media. Thus, fewer like votes can be good or bad depending on the circumstance.

PREFACE

The work herein was completed as part of requirements for the Master of Science (Management) program at the University of Lethbridge. I programmed the survey and analyzed the data in consultation with my thesis committee. The research in this thesis required ethics approval which was sought out and approved through the University of Lethbridge Ethics Committee.

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I would like to express much gratitude toward my thesis committee, which, despite difficulties during my graduate program, held faith and confidence in me. They inspired me to continue each day, even when it felt like there was no light at the end of the tunnel. Katie, Tanya, and Rhiannon thank you for continually pushing me.

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PR	Public Relations

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A common damage mitigation tactic following a public relations (PR) crisis is a formal public apology (Benoit, 1995, 1997). Apologies are often considered a default response because they may be accommodative and victim-centered (Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Though apologies may have varying definitions, apologies are often defined as accepting responsibility for a transgression and seeking forgiveness, but may also include conveying remorse, showing regret, preventative measures, and reparation (Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Despite this, PR and communication researchers still debate the true efficacy of apologies since apology receptivity can be volatile (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

Where public apologies were often completed in person at press conferences and public events, the digital age has shifted focus toward online mediums, such as social media (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Valentini, 2015). Now, the internet presents influencers (i.e., social media celebrities) as having seemingly ubiquitous PR crises; it is difficult to navigate social media or news websites without running into a new scandal (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Jin et al., 2014; Valentini, 2015; Wigley, 2011). Because social media has enabled information to be disseminated quickly online, PR practitioners must act quickly to prevent significant reputational damage to their clients (Jin et al., 2014; Valentini, 2015; Wigley, 2011). Therefore, public online apologies, such as video apologies, are critical.

Young influencers may experience increased susceptibility and exposure to PR crises because social media adoption rates and usage are often highest among young users (Hahn, 2019; “Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018,” 2021; Valentini, 2015; Wigley, 2011). Further, the reception of apologies from young influencers has been mixed. For example, a young video game influencer, Jarvis, received mixed results following his PR crisis and subsequent apology video (Webb, 2019). Some argued that his youthfulness allowed some

leniency, whereas others suggested his youthful foolishness deserved punishment (Jarvis, 2019). Currently, little research has focused on youthfulness in relation to apology outcomes (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Weiner, 2005). For example, Gorn et al. (2008) found that "baby-faced" spokespeople elicited more favorable responses relative to their non-baby-faced counterparts because they were perceived as more innocent, honest, and credible. But it is not yet clear if these effects translate to online mediums. Thus, there are still significant gaps in understanding where perceived youthfulness may be positive or negative because apologies from young influencers do not always result in positive outcomes (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). Understanding how youthfulness impacts online apology outcomes (e.g., the number of like votes received on apology videos) is the first aim of this research.

In doing so, this research also looks at the effect of perceived responsibility. Currently, there is little understanding of how perceptions of responsibility shift social support towards young influencers (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Attribution theory offers some insights, namely that we make quickly rationalize why things happen and part of that rationalization may be based on appearance (Coombs, 2007; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Thus, the second aim of this study is to understand how perceived responsibility for a transgression might impact apology outcomes.

Finally, this paper will test the interaction between youthfulness and perceived responsibility on social support outcomes. Traditionally, youth are perceived to be less culpable for their actions and receive more lenient punishments for their transgressions in some cultures (Canada. Department of Justice, 2013; Hesse, 2009; Lamb et al., 2013; "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018," 2021). Attribution theory might suggest that when youth transgress, their transgression is perceived as a product of their youth rather than their character, whereas an adult would be held more internally accountable (Coombs, 2007; Weiner, 1986, 2005; Weiner et al.,

1991). Internal and external attributions are critical in forming attitudes, yet preconceived ideas or biases about the influencer may influence how an audience attributes a transgression by potentially shifting blame or the justification for why the transgression occurred (Brownlow, 1992; Hovland, 1951; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Thus, the third aim of this study is to understand the relationship between perceptions of responsibility and perceived youthfulness on apology outcomes.

This research tested the effects of youthfulness and perceived responsibility by analyzing the reception to apology videos posted on YouTube. Yet, counter to my expectations, I found that youthful (vs. older) influencers on YouTube received less social support (i.e., fewer like votes) for their apology videos. Further, this negative effect was magnified when the influencer was perceived as less responsible for the transgression. I account for these contradictory results post hoc using the helping paradox (Fisher & Ma, 2016). By exploring youthfulness in influencer apologies, I provide a more nuanced understanding of the value of like votes on social media. Thus, fewer like votes can be good or bad depending on the circumstance.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 YOUTHFULNESS AS AN ATTRIBUTIONAL SHIFT

Despite a significant body of research focusing on apologies and the context or characteristics of the influencer, very little research has focused on youthfulness' role in apology reception and social support outcomes (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Gorn et al., 2008; Hill & Boyd, 2015; Thomas et al., 2008; Walfisch et al., 2013). Currently, the average social media user's age is becoming younger and younger, with first adopters of social media often being in their teens (Hahn, 2019; "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018," 2021). These youthful users may become influencers, who garner significant attention and a large follower base (Hahn, 2019;

Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Those followers show their support by liking and sharing posts from the influencer; sharing a post allows followers to express their approval of the content to those within their network (Chen et al., 2017; J. E. Chung, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, social support may be defined as actions the followers of an influencer take to express their agreement or lack thereof with the influencer's response (i.e. apology; Chen et al., 2017; J. E. Chung, 2017). For youth, going through a PR crisis may be catastrophic since youth may be incapable of navigating PR situations wisely and may not have the resources to acquire professional help (Benoit, 1997; Jin et al., 2014).

Some research has indicated that the actual face of the influencer, or other physical characteristics, can lead to either positive, negative, or neutral responses depending on the context of the transgression (Gorn et al., 2008; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Thomas et al., 2008; Walfisch et al., 2013; Wei & Ran, 2019). Gorn et al. (2008), for example, found that in major PR crises, a "baby-faced" (i.e., more Youthful) spokesperson was perceived as more honest and innocent and thus more credible. This credibility translated into more positive attitudes toward the influencer. Notably, such beliefs surrounding youthfulness and its attachment to guilt are embedded into law (Canada. Department of Justice, 2013). For example, in North American culture, youth are perceived as less culpable for their actions, with surveys showing that adults believe them to be less responsible for their wrongdoings (Girard & Mullet, 1997; Gorn et al., 2008). Additionally, the Youth Criminal Justice Act provides some leniency toward youth who have committed crimes (Canada. Department of Justice, 2013). Thus, when an influencer is young, there is a general belief that they are more innocent or less culpable for their actions (Canada. Department of Justice, 2013), whereas adults do not enjoy the same effect (Eibach et al., 2009; Ferguson & Williams, 1996; Gorn et al., 2008). As a result, when youthfulness is high

(i.e., perceived as under 21), viewers offer more social support following an apology relative to their less youthful counterparts. This is due to viewers attributing their behaviour to external (vs. internal) factors such as being manipulated or misinformed (Coombs, 2007; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1986). Formally,

H1: There will be a negative relationship between age and social support, such that audiences will offer more support toward younger (vs. older) influencer apologies.

2.2 THE ROLE OF PERCEPTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY WITHIN APOLOGIES

Both practitioners and academics have considerable interest in explicating effective apologies in a PR context (Compton, 2016; Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Valentini, 2015). Within the PR and apology literature, who is viewed as responsible is considered a vital component to effective apologies, especially when a transgression is conspicuous (Weiner, 2005; Weiner et al., 1991) and is posited as one of the central tenets to meaningful, effective apology strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Guiniven, 2007; Weiner et al., 1991). Taking responsibility often involves an admission of guilt or wrongdoing; accepting that one is morally culpable (Weiner et al., 1991).

However, other research has noted that there are times where taking responsibility may be a detriment to the apologizer or those they represent (Gorn et al., 2008; Hill & Boyd, 2015; Weiner et al., 1991). Weiner et al. (1991) connected and compared confession (i.e., taking responsibility and assuming blame) and perceived lack of responsibility, noting that if someone were to confess to something they were perceived to not be responsible for, the confession would have negative consequences. For example, Weiner et al. (1991) suggested that those negative consequences might include negative inferences about their character. It is also pertinent to mention that apologies are less ameliorative when the transgressor is not perceived to be

responsible (Weiner et al., 1991). Additionally, taking responsibility may also have severe repercussions, such as loss of a job or access to a service (S. Chung, 2011).

Perceived responsibility reflects attributional shifts, which means that audiences perceive that the cause of the transgression was internal to the influencer or external to the situation (Coombs, 2007; Weiner et al., 1991). When responsibility is attributed to the influencer, audiences assume that the influencer is to blame and morally responsible (e.g., "the incident occurred because the influencer is manipulative). In contrast, when responsibility is attributed to something else, audiences assume that the influencer is more innocent and shift blame to something or someone else (Weiner et al., 1991). Thus, audiences may offer more social support toward influencers when they perceive something else (vs. the influencer) as responsible for the incident.

H2: There will be a positive relationship between perceived responsibility and social support, such that audiences will offer more support towards the influencer when they perceive something else to have caused the transgression.

2.3 INTERACTION EFFECT: PERCEIVED RESPONSIBILITY AND YOUTHFULNESS

I predict that there will be an interaction between youthfulness and perceived responsibility. Specifically, the negative relationship between youthfulness and social support should be mitigated when audiences perceive the influencer to be more responsible because of changes in attribution. Gorn et al. (2008) found that a youthful appearance increases perceived credibility and innocence. However, when responsibility is attributed to the influencer, audiences assume that the influencer is to blame and morally responsible (e.g., "the incident occurred because the influencer is manipulative"; (Jarvis, 2019; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016;

Wigley, 2011). Such attributions of responsibility may not overcome the audience's positive perception of youthfulness (Canada. Department of Justice, 2013; Gorn et al., 2008). For example, if a teenager were to vandalize the side of a school with spray paint, they may be required to apologize, potentially face some fines, and be forced to otherwise make amends for their transgression. However, despite their attempts to make amends, they may still sit with a reputation of vandalism and a general distrust among their community, which is why legislation like the Youth Criminal Justice Act exists (Branch, 2019; Canada. Department of Justice, 2013). Thus, while youthfulness increases perceptions of innocence, it should do so to a lesser extent when the transgression is attributed to the influencer. Likewise, when younger (vs. older) influencers are perceived as less (vs. more) responsible for their actions, they should be more likely to receive social support (e.g., like votes) because it confirms the audiences' perceptions of innocence.

H3: The negative relationship between youthfulness and social support should be mitigated as the influencer is perceived as more (vs. less) responsible for the transgression.

2.4 YOUTUBE APOLOGY VIDEOS

YouTube apology videos are a method of attempting to regain social status or the respect of their audience by publicly addressing a transgression (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). Oftentimes, the influencers explain their perspective on the transgression, show remorse, and explain how they will change or what they will do to reconcile their actions (Guiniven, 2007). According to Google Trends, YouTube apology videos initially became in 2009 and 2010, which also prompted a surge in parody apology videos (See Figure 1).

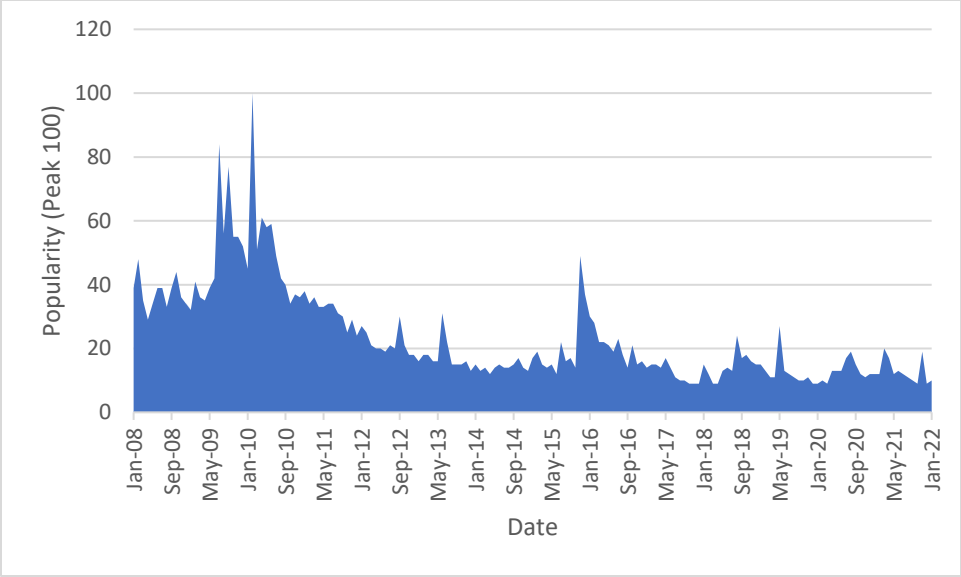

Figure 1: Youtube Searches for "Apology" from 2008 – 2022 (Worldwide)

These apology videos also provide a means of near-immediate feedback from the audience of the influencer (Santos & Gonçalves, 2019). Like and dislike votes may allow the influencer to determine whether their apology was effective. Sometimes, when an apology video receives significant disapproval, influencers may remove the video to avoid further backlash.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH PROJECT

3.1 STUDY OVERVIEW

This study analyzes YouTube apology videos from influencers to test the relationship between youthfulness, perceived responsibility, and social support outcomes (i.e., the number of like votes). Specifically, the purpose of this study is to test how youthfulness and attributions of responsibility are related to social support outcomes (i.e., the number of like votes received on a social media post). I predicted that youthfulness would be negatively related to the number of like votes received, but perceptions that the influencer (vs. something else) is responsible would mitigate this relationship.

3.2 METHODS

I collected publicly accessible YouTube videos posted by influencers in a PR crisis between September 22, 2005, and October 29, 2020. using the following search terms: “apology”, “apology video”, “gamer apology video”, “I owe you an apology”, “sorry”, “super sorry”, “tfue apology”, “twitch apology video”, “xqc apology”, “youtube apology”, and “YouTuber apology video”. The videos collected vary widely in length, quality, and context to ensure sufficient variation, but each video contained an influencer apologizing for a transgression. After exhausting available videos using these search terms, a snowball effect was used via finding well-known apology videos on Google and through other online referrals. Videos that did not include an apology (such as music videos) or parodies were excluded from the dataset. Videos that were made private, deleted, or otherwise inaccessible were checked before the start of the survey and were deleted from the video collection. Videos with an 18+ restriction were also excluded because participants would be forced to log into a Google account to watch the embedded videos on Qualtrics or else viewing them would be blocked. Each of these videos had an influencer apologizing for a transgression where their follower (subscriber) count ranged from 4 to approximately 110,000,000. Due to YouTube API restrictions, the precise number of followers cannot be identified. For example, influencers with larger subscriber counts are presented as a number to the nearest thousand.

This set of apology videos provided me with a wide variety of apologies utilizing different strategies with influencers from all different contexts. All channel and video data were collected on July 12, 2021, using a paid Google Sheets add-on called “YT Tracker”. Data scraped included video ID, video title, channel name, published date, duration, number of views,

number of likes, number of dislikes, number of comments, channel ID, channel creation date, number of videos, number of views, and number of subscribers.

Coders

Participants (coders) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (N= 884) to code the videos in exchange for a fee (Litman et al., 2017); M_{age} = 41.8; 32.8% male). At the beginning of the study, participants were presented with a consent form (see Appendix A) and voluntarily chose to opt-in or out of the study. Participants that failed the attention check after the consent form ("To indicate that you have read the questions above and wish to continue with this survey, please select the circle marked three as your response below") could not proceed to the survey (n=51). Additionally, participants who did not watch the apology video and participants who participated in the study more than once (identified via mTurk ID) were also excluded (N=77). Six partially completed surveys were accepted into the dataset because they passed the initial attention check and watched the entirety of the video. The final sample included 756 coders. While collecting the apology videos, I coded the videos for the following: crying, original uploader, and likes hidden.

Design

Coders were randomly assigned to one of the 112 publicly accessible YouTube apology videos from our library. There was an average of 7 coders per video. Then, participants watched the entirety of the video. Participants rated the videos and responded to demographic questions.

Measures

Independent Measure. Participants' perceived age of the influencer in their video was used as a proxy to indicate youthfulness. Participants were asked the question "how old do you

estimate the apologizer to be (in years)?" followed by an empty box for their answer (M = 31.8, SD = 101). A binary (dummy) variable was created to separate those whose perceived age was over 21 and under 21. If the influencer was perceived as over 21 the binary variable was set to 1 and if they were perceived as under 21 the variable was 0. 19.5% of videos had an influencer that the coders thought was 20 and younger. I used the age 21 because it is considered an age majority or recognition or threshold into adulthood for the participants who are from an American sample (A Practical Guide to Family Law, 1995).

For this study, perceived responsibility outlines the extent to which the influencer was considered responsible for their actions (the transgression). Coders were asked, "Do you feel the apologizer (the person) or something else was more responsible for the transgression?" followed by a Likert scale from 1 (The Apologizer) to 7 (Something Else) (*M* = 2.91, *SD* = 1.96).

Dependent Measure. To operationalize social support outcomes, the number of "likes" each YouTube video received at the time of collection (July 12, 2021) was used (*M* = 106,579, SD = 250,810). Like votes validate people's interest in or agreement with a video and its contents, which conveys their support for the influencer (Santos & Gonçalves, 2019; Tafesse, 2020; Tresa Sebastian et al., 2021). Following prior work with this dependent variable, I log-transformed this measure because it is a count variable and like votes are often over-dispersed (Ford, n.d.; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018; Tafesse, 2020). In this study, the variance of the count variable (like votes) exceeded the mean indicating over-dispersion (*Variance* = 63,233,069,989, *M* = 107,058; see Table 2).

Control Measures.

Video Duration. The duration of the video was controlled because longer apology videos may have more opportunities to apologize in greater length (*M* = 7:19.34, SD = 5:08.59). YouTube video length can allow for more information to be disseminated, but practitioners have argued that there is an inverse relationship between video length and engagement, with engagement largely dropping off around two minutes (Fishman, 2016; Welbourne & Grant, 2016) Therefore, there was a chance that longer videos would accrue more like votes because they had more opportunity to explain and express themselves, but also a chance that length negatively impacted the experience of the coders through lack of engagement (video durations ranged from 00:39 to 35:47).

Months Posted. The amount of time in months between when the video was uploaded and posted on YouTube and the date the data was extracted (July 12, 2021) was controlled for because videos that had been posted earlier had more opportunities to be watched and receive like votes (*M* = 28.1, SD = 27.2) (Chopra et al., 2021; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018; Welbourne & Grant, 2016).

Number of Subscribers. The number of subscribers for each influencer was controlled for because YouTube channels with the larger following have more opportunities to receive like votes because more people will see the video in their subscription box or receive notifications that the video is live (*M* = 5,125,035, SD = 12,946,095) (Tafesse, 2020; Welbourne & Grant, 2016). Further, influencers with larger, more dedicated followings may receive more like votes out of feelings of loyalty (Chopra et al., 2021; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016).

Severity of Transgression. Transgression severity was measured by asking participants "How would you rate the severity of the transgression?" and having them rate the severity on a 7-point Likert scale from "Not severe at all" to "Very severe" (*M* = 3.68, SD = 1.86). Severity of

the transgression is important because prior research has shown that when transgressions are severe, it is more difficult to garner positive reception and recover (Merolla, 2008; Ohbuchi et al., 1989).

Other Measures

Three additional measures were excluded from the final regression model: direction of harm, credibility, gender identity of the apologizer, and empathy. They were not found to be significant in the model. Participants rated direction of harm and credibility using Likert scales from 1 to 7. They were also asked about their perceived gender identity of the apologizer (male, female, or other). As a means of determining a potential alternate explanation, coders were also asked to indicate how they felt toward the apologizer (moved, soft-hearted, touched, empathic, warm, concerned, compassionate on a scale from 1 “not at all’ to 7 “very much”.

3.3 RESULTS

Most of the videos in the sample received few like votes and a small number received many like votes. The final model controlled for severity, months posted, video duration, and number of subscribers. See Tables 1, 2, and 3 for the descriptive statistics.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*N*	*M*	*Variance*
High youthfulness (20 and under)	132	63,685	46,259,387,625
Low youthfulness (21 and up)	545	117,563	66,869,678,686
Age Total	677	107,058	63,233,069,989

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics – Number of likes as a function of youthfulness

Variable	M_{total}	*SD*
Youthfulness (i.e. age)	31.80	101
Responsibility	2.91	1.96
Number of Likes	106,579	250,810
Number of Subscribers	5125035	12946095
Video Duration	7:19:34.10	5:08:59.157
Months Posted	28.1	27.2
Severity	3.68	1.86

Like votes. To analyze the effect of age on the log-transformed number of like votes, I ran a hierarchical linear regression controlling for months posted, severity, number of subscribers, and video duration. The overall regression was statistically significant ($F(7, 648) = 47.4$, $p < .000$, $R^2 = .339$). Unexpectedly, age was a positive predictor of like votes such that those over 21 received more like votes than those under 21 ($\beta = .822$, $t(649) = 7.37$, $p < .001$).

The baseline model also included the measure of perceived responsibility to analyze the effect of responsibility on the log-transformed number of like votes. As expected, responsibility was a positive predictor of like votes such that those who viewed the apologizer as more responsible relative to "something else" (coded as 7) received fewer like votes than those who were seen as more responsible (coded as 1). ($\beta = .822$, $t(649) = 7.37$, $p<.001$; see Table 4 for details).

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics – Binary Variables

Responsibility Level	Youthfulness (Age)	*M*	*SD*
1	20 and under	127,455	346,590
	21 and up	130,362	309,935
	Total	129,781	316,795
2	20 and under	9,032	15,807
	21 and up	87,650	206,278
	Total	74,641	190,679
3	20 and under	9,916	16,699
	21 and up	132,549	282,769
	Total	114,012	264,047
4	21 and up	68,214	132,629
	20 and under	133,414	273,999
	Total	118,368	249,186
5	20 and under	67,443	119,887
	21 and up	120,276	188,574
	Total	111,650	179,217
6	20 and under	29,937	66,690
	21 and up	121,423	211,935
	Total	82,033	172,230
7	20 and under	26,524	47,710
	21 and up	121,423	211,935
	Total	100,274.02	191,768
Totals	20 and under	64,171	215,833
	21 and up	117,966	259,462
	Total	107,479	252,305

Table 4
Interaction Effect

Variable	*β*	*SE*	*t*	Sig.	Standardized B.
Intercept	3.16	.119	26.6	.000	
Responsibility	.072	.023	3.16	.002	.105
Age Over 21	.822	.111	7.37	.000	.246
Months Posted	-.007	.002	-4.46	.000	-.147
Severity	.105	.024	4.35	.000	.146
Number of Subscribers	0.00000004	.000	11.7	.000	.381
Video Duration	0.00001	.000	5.58	.000	.186

$R^2 = 0.333$

Next, to analyze the effect of age x responsibility interaction on the log-transformed number of like votes, I added the interaction term to the model. The interaction explained

additional variance in like votes above the control variables and age and responsibility (R^2 change = .005, $F(1, 648) = 5.23$ $p = .023$). Unexpectedly, when the influencer was viewed as responsible (coded as 1), those over 21 received more like votes than those under 21 ($\beta = .458$, $t(648) = 2.36$, $p = .019$). Further, the age x responsibility interaction on like votes was significant such that this positive effect of age increased as something else was viewed as more responsible ($\beta = .121$, $t(648) = 2.29$, $p=.023$; see Table 3). Tables 3 and 4 include standardized beta coefficients.

Table 5
Linear Regression Results including Interaction

Variable	*β*	*SE*	*t*	Sig.	Standardized B.
Intercept	3.45	.173	19.9	.000	-
Responsibility	-.022	.047	-.475	.635	-.033
Age Over 21	.458	.194	2.36	.019	.137
Months Posted	-.007	.002	-4.18	.000	-.138
Transgression Severity	.103	.024	4.3	.000	.144
Number of Subscribers	0.00000004	.000	11.8	.000	.383
Video Duration	0.000014	.000	5.7	.000	.190
Age x Responsibility Interaction	.121	.053	2.29	.023	.186

$R^2 = 0.339$

4.0 GENERAL DISCUSSION

For H1, I predicted that there would be a negative relationship between age and social support outcomes, such that apology videos from younger (vs. older) influencers will receive more like votes. However, the results indicated that there was a positive relationship between age and like votes, such audiences offered more social support toward older influencers. Thus, H1 was not supported. The opposite of what was predicted occurred.

One theory for this opposite effect could be the helping paradox (Fisher & Ma, 2014). By definition, people should only offer support when someone is in need. If there is no actual or potential for suffering, then it is not necessary to offer support. Thus, if the audience perceives

that a youthful influencer is innocent, they may not feel compelled to offer support or engage with the apology because the audience thinks that young influencers will easily secure the justice they deserve from society (Fisher & Ma, 2014). Essentially, audiences believe that youthful influencers may not need assistance because they are already perceived as being innocent.

Another theory for this opposite effect could be that youth are perceived as less trustworthy compared to their adult counterparts (Gorn et al., 2008). Gorn et al.'s (2008) research found that in cases where apologizing baby-faced spokespeople were perceived to have committed intentional harm, participants lost significant trust in both the person and the company. Where laws are in place to protect youth and provide more lenient sentencing, there are also laws that prevent youth from engaging in activities of consequence, like consuming alcohol, smoking, and voting (*Facts about Voter Registration, Citizenship and Voter ID*, 2022). Thus, it is possible youth garnering fewer like votes than adults is a reflection of lack of trust.

For H2, it was predicted that there would be a positive relationship between responsibility and like votes, such that audiences will offer more support towards the influencer when they perceive something else to have caused the transgression. Consistent with my theorizing, the results showed that responsibility was a positive predictor of like votes such that those who viewed the apologizer as more responsible relative to "something else" (coded as 7) received fewer like votes than those who were viewed as less responsible (coded as 1). H2 was supported.

Finally, the results suggest that when participants attributed the transgression to something other than the influencer, those perceived to be age 21 and older received more like votes than those 20 and younger. Further, the positive relationship between age and like votes increased as something other than the influencer was attributed to being the cause of the transgression. This finding contradicts my initial hypothesis that younger (vs. older) influencers

would receive more social support (i.e., more like votes), particularly when attributions were more external (but not internal). Thus, H3 was also not supported.

The helping paradox (Fisher & Ma, 2014) may also explain the unexpected nature of this interaction. Because young influencers are perceived as innocent, they are also perceived to be in less need of social support. It leads audiences to infer those young influencers in crisis are differentially successful in securing the justice they deserve from society. Building on this, it could be that young influencers received even less social support (i.e., like votes on their apology video) when participants perceived that something external caused the transgression because it further confirmed their innocence. Figure 2 highlights this study's result. If that is the case, the lack of social support is not necessarily a negative outcome for young influencers. Further, a lack of like votes on social media can be good or bad, depending on the circumstances.

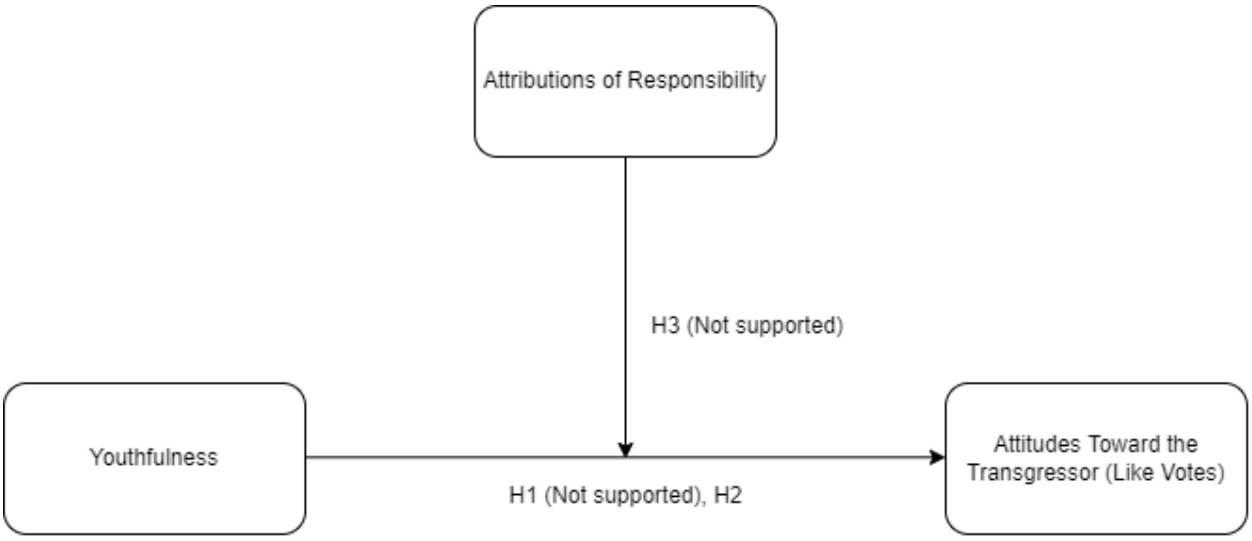

Figure 2: Adjusted Model

4.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This research contributes to PR and apology literature by examining the relationship between youthfulness, attributions of responsibility, and support for the influencer (via the

number of like votes received on an apology video). This research extends prior PR literature and attribution theory by showing that youthfulness may not always elicit more social support (Gorn et al., 2008).

This research found that, contrary to H1 and prior research, young people received less like votes on their apology videos. While this contradicts finding from Gorn et al. (2008), it supports Jarvis' apparent backlash (Webb, 2019). This may be because Gorn et al.'s work specifically looked at babyfaces in *adults*, so participants were aware that the spokesperson was an adult even if they appeared youthful. In the present study, participants were asked to indicate the perceived age of the apologizer, so if a youthful-presenting adult was perceived to be more child-like, the participant may have assumed they were, for example, a teenager. This nuance may have affected perceptions of innocence and subsequent social support by triggering the helping paradox (Fisher & Ma, 2014).

Weiner (2000; 1991) theorized that *who* is responsible may affect apology outcomes. I extend this theory by being the first to test this in a PR context. This provides a significant contribution to PR and apology literature because prior research has focused solely on facial differences in the same person or other contextual differences like gender or attractiveness and the literature inferred that context made a significant difference but neglected to specifically look at youthfulness (Compton, 2016; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018; Thomas et al., 2008; Walfisch et al., 2013; Wei & Ran, 2019).

The results also showed that youthful influencers, when something else is seen as responsible, received even less social support (i.e., fewer like votes). This may be the case because North American society is generally more lenient toward transgressions committed by youth, and they anticipate that youth will naturally make mistakes as they mature (Canada.

Department of Justice, 2013; Eibach et al., 2009). According to the helping paradox (Fisher & Ma, 2014), when something else is perceived as responsible and a youthful influencer is apologizing, it may further confirm their innocence. When there is no actual or potential for suffering, then it is not necessary to offer support. Thus, young influencers may have received less social support because audiences assumed they would be differentially successful in securing the justice they deserve from society anyway. Additionally, it may seem like the youth is being pressured to apologize or is being coached since the perception is that they are less (or in some cases, not) responsible.

While this interaction contradicts the findings of Gorn et al. (2008), it adds to our understanding of the value of a like vote on social media. Because we view like votes on social media as a currency, we assume that fewer votes mean less favorable attitudes (Santos & Gonçalves, 2019; Tafesse, 2020; Tresa Sebastian et al., 2021). However, in crisis communications, the lack of support is not necessarily a negative outcome for young influencers. Thus, a lack of like votes on social media can be good or bad, depending on the circumstances.

4.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present research has significant practical implications for PR practitioners, especially those that work with influencers. First, PR practitioners who work with youth should be especially mindful of how audiences react to apologies from youthful influencers. For example, PR practitioners might consider an apology to be unsuccessful based on the number of like votes that the apology video received. However, the lack of social support may reflect the audience's perception that support is unnecessary. Thus, PR practitioners may need to change their measures of success depending on the perceived youthfulness of their client in crisis.

Second, Weiner (2000) theorized that personal responsibility has a significant impact on social support outcomes because it changes perceptions of innocence. PR practitioners should note, however, that the relationship between perceived responsibility and social support outcomes depends on contextual factors, such as youthfulness. Specifically, the findings of this research suggest that pushing attributions externally may help older influencers receive more social support but not necessarily younger influencers. Thus, pushing responsibility to external sources may only increase social support in some circumstances.

4.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Because of the nature of field research, there are many avenues for future research. First, future research could consider the impact of deleting, removing or making apology videos private may have on results. When collecting videos for this project, I had to confirm that the videos were not removed before beginning the data collection. This is because, typically, if an influencer receives a very negative response to their video, they will simply remove it. These sorts of videos may elicit stronger emotional responses, thus one of the limitations of this research is that despite attempting ecological validity, it still cannot fully capture apology video reality. As a result, results may be skewed toward less severe transgressions and therefore a higher likeliness to forgive. Thus, the results may have been impacted by the inaccessibility of some very negative videos.

Similarly, future research ought to consider whether removing the videos is worse for the apologizer's reputation compared to keeping the video live themselves since most public apology videos are often reuploaded on other channels. Analyzing like votes on videos that have been reuploaded may also be problematic as the audience evaluating the video might not view the like

vote as a symbol of approval or disapproval for the apology, but instead approval or disapproval of the person re-uploading the video.

This research controlled for the severity of the transgression. Still, videos with higher levels of severity may have been excluded from the dataset because YouTube prevents people from watching videos designated 18+ unless they log into a Google account (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007). It may be valuable to conduct a case study wherein only videos that deal with "extreme" topics are included to see how youthfulness impacts apology reception. Future research could potentially download more severe videos and directly upload them to Qualtrics or another survey hosting website that would allow researchers to bypass the required login for 18+ verification, thereby allowing researchers to collect data that was not included in this research.

The present research also did not include authenticity as a control variable. Authenticity has been noted as one of the most important factors to apology success (Bentley, 2018; Finsterwalder et al., 2017; Thurlow, 2019). Investigating the relationship between youthfulness, responsibility attributions, and authenticity may be a worthwhile endeavour because it will further explicate the role of contextual factors like youthfulness on apology outcomes. If, for example, there is a link between perceived youthfulness, responsibility attributions, and authenticity, this would further reinforce the findings in the present research.

Due to the nature of collecting public apology videos, the dataset contained some videos with only a voice. As a result, the participants would then need to surmise the age based solely on context clues and the voice of the influencer. Some videos even contained dolls or animated persons rather than real people. Future research ought to consider the impact physical representation or lack thereof might have on like votes. It is reasonable to believe that a physical

representation may either be positive or detrimental given the context of the apology and the apologizer themselves.

Within the present research's dataset, some videos had opted to hide like votes, and others were reuploaded onto a third party's channel because they had been deleted prior. It is possible that the latter could skew like votes since people watching may opt to like in approval of the reupload rather than the approval of the apology. Videos that hide their like votes could represent videos that received an extreme disparity between likes and dislikes, thus skewing the dataset to be more favorable. Future research could isolate only videos that do not show their likes to differentiate from the present research and analyze for differences.

Given that many of the limitations in this study present a positive skew in the apology video dataset, a study that specifically looks at severe transgressions might help to tease out whether there is a significant difference between youth and adults in a more serious context. Youth and adults may also stereotypically make different mistakes and it may be assumed that adults are more likely to commit more serious transgressions. Furthermore, an experimental design that measured additional variables like credibility, trustworthiness, and empathy could be valuable, because understanding these things could help account for why H1 and H3 had oppositive effects than what was predicted.

Despite many of the apologizers being perceived to be young, all the coders were adults given the platform (MTurk) used. Future research might consider specifically analyzing youth's responses to apology videos in a similar context to discover whether a difference between adults and youth's perceptions of the apology videos differ.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The present research suggests that although there may be some proclivity toward a standardized apology practice, contextual factors such as youthfulness and perceptions of responsibility play an important role in apology outcomes. These findings suggest that PR practitioners ought to consider how they measure success depending on the characteristics of their clients. Lower levels of social support may not necessarily be a bad thing, especially for youthful influencers.

Given the growing number of influencers, followers, and impact of social media on PR, it is vital that this growing area of marketing be given more research attention. For influencers, the stakes are high. It is possible to lose a career, future opportunities, relationships, and in many respects, and social support from one misdeed and poor apology. This research shows that if an influencer is able to shift some responsibility away from themselves, they will receive more social support and that, for youth, garnering that social support is more difficult, even when responsibility is shifted.

5.0 APPENDIX 1

CONSENT LETTER

Letter of Invitation: Public Relations and Apologies Study

Please read the following letter of information carefully before beginning the survey:

Principal Investigator: Braden Simpson, MSc (Mgt) Student, Dhillon School of Business, University of Lethbridge

What is this study about?

You are invited to participate in an anonymous survey. This is a research study concerning public relations, influencers, and apologies. Through your participation, I hope to better understand what makes apologies effective or ineffective. This invitation to participate is being extended to adults 18+ on the Mechanical Turk platform.

What is expected of you?

The survey contains XX questions and will take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. You will be asked to respond to statements asking you how accurate they are or how much you agree with them. You may choose to skip any question you prefer not to answer.

What are the anticipated uses of the data collected?

The responses to the survey will be aggregated and presented in a report to the Project Manager of the Recruitment and Retention Project at the University of Lethbridge. The aggregated findings may also be published in scholarly presentations and publications.

What are the risks and benefits of participating?
There are no anticipated risks from participating in this study. There are no direct benefits from participating although you may gain some insight into public relations and apologies.

How will your confidentiality and anonymity be protected?

Participation is voluntary and your responses will not be identified with you personally as the survey collects no identifying information; however, as with any online survey, neither anonymity nor confidentiality can be completely guaranteed. The survey is being hosted on Amazon Mechanical Turk and their privacy policy can be accessed at https://www.mturk.com/privacy-notice.

The responses to this survey will be kept on a password-protected computer with restricted access, and will be deleted two years after data collection has been completed.

How can a participant withdraw?

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled by simply closing your browser before you submit your responses and they will not be included. If you choose to

discontinue participation after you have submitted your responses, it will not be possible to withdraw your responses because they will not have identifying information linked to them.

Who is conducting this research?

For more information on this study or for a summary of the findings (available after September 2021), you may contact me at braden.simpson@uleth.ca. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747 or Email: research.services@uleth.ca).

This research study has been reviewed for ethical acceptability and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee.

You must be 18 years or older to participate in this survey.

If you wish to participate in the survey, please proceed to the questions now at [*insert URL here*]. Submission of your responses will be accepted as implied consent to participate. Thank you in advance for your participation.

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