

“Here is the Truth”: Characterizing YouTube’s Drama Community as a Public and
Reconceptualizing Microcelebrity

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Introduction

As the second most visited site in the world (Arthurs et al.), Youtube is a behemoth amongst other social media platforms, serving billions of viewers with needed news and entertainment. YouTube is particularly important to study in the context of modern celebrity culture, especially due to internet stardom on the platform appearing in bold, compelling ways. YouTubers from varying specialties garner millions of views on their videos, wielding their influence over starstruck subscribers who follow them from platform to platform. In fact, a 2019 poll from The LEGO Group reveals that today's children are "three times more likely to aspire to be a YouTuber (29%) than an Astronaut (11%)" and other related careers, thus furthering the connection between YouTube, aspirational fame, and career success (The LEGO Group).

However, whenever there is celebrity power present, there are also entities dedicated to their critique and evaluation (Marcus). On YouTube, such critics take the form of drama channels who coalesce in the self-defined drama community. These experts in celebrity critique inhabit the drama genre on YouTube — a reference to the heightened emotions and excitement around scandals — and report on influencer scandals, cover celebrity conflicts, and comment on general pop culture happenings of note (Lewis and Christin 1638). These drama channels are not sequestered to only addressing Internet celebrities, but also those in more traditional contexts, such as musicians and actors. They are often widely followed themselves, accruing their own star power through the viewership of millions keeping track of drama content to get the next piece of relevant gossip. The drama genre is itself hybrid, in which subgenres of drama content — namely, tea and commentary — become separated on often gendered terms (Lewis and Christin

1639). This key group of social media commentators and analysts is grossly underrepresented in the study of microcelebrity and necessitates greater exploration.

Due to their unique interest in the power of celebrities, broadly defined, I theorize the drama community as a distinct digital public, opening up a novel interrogation into this highly influential community. For this reason, this project seeks to fill a gap in the literature that explicitly addresses the ways in which this drama public perceives and negotiates power as a public participating in consistent debates over celebrity power. This research is thus guided by the following research question: *what are the key characteristics of the YouTube drama community digital public and how does it operate within the structures and objectives of microcelebrity?* In all, the purpose of this project is to uncover the dynamics and principles of the drama community on YouTube to understand how this digital public investigates, perpetuates, and operates within the practices of microcelebrity. Through grounded theory and critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), I will argue that the drama community on YouTube is a digital public with critical abilities bound to a specific set of microcelebrity practices and ethical principles. The drama community's main practices are: *recursive viewing*, *consolidating gossip*, and *liveness and making room for audiences*. Relatedly, the drama community's principles are: *care/justice*, *accountability*, *transparency*, and *authenticity*, all informing how the drama community understands power externally and internally.

Grounded theory and critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) serve as the foundational methodologies for this thesis, centered around the case study of the 2023 Colleen Ballinger scandal. Such an intermixing of methods is helpful for two main reasons. For one, studying the triad of artifact, practice, and belief under the guidance of CTDA helps to reveal the underlying meanings of marginalized/undervalued groups, as many of these channels are

female-coded, headed by people of color, and/or made with queer perspectives in mind.

Furthermore, this particular case study is ripe with fluctuations and variations in its approach to the coverage of scandal, offering an important foray into what power means to the drama community in relation to kinds of content produced and the kind of discourse added.

In examining the central characteristics of the drama public, this research reveals highly significant findings on behalf of microcelebrity studies and publics studies. On the micro level, the genre of drama on YouTube can be understood as a spectrum of the feminized tea subgenre and the masculinized commentary subgenre, in which channels find themselves in varying positions on the spectrum depending on their desire for status-building versus showcasing their authentic selves. Drama channels also engage in a supreme simultaneity, in which they are forced to take on the position of critic and celebrity at the same time. The borders between celebrity and the party problematizing celebrity collapse in on themselves because the celebrity power of drama channels is derived from how well they can adhere to the principles and practices of the evaluative drama public.

On the macro level, the drama public on YouTube engages in an inherent looking inwards, setting it apart from previous scholarly interrogation of publics. Publics usually form in relation to a more powerful other, where the public's purpose is to tamper down the other's power through meaningful debate and active membership. Contrasting the histories of theorizing publics against their powerful others — such as the liberal public sphere and the state (Habermas) — the drama public on YouTube aims to counter celebrity power through outward evaluation of celebrity actions, both of influencers and traditional celebrities. However, drama channels are often themselves the celebrities who are the object of judgment due to their influencer power, large followings, and desires for status. Thus, the public and the tangential,

powerful “other” meld together in this context, creating a nouveau kind of public which holds in itself the power it seeks to diminish and resist.

In all, this thesis sets up opportunities for future research in varying capacities, particularly in the relevance of YouTube as a governing body perpetuating whiteness on the platform. Gender as a bias has been explored as inherent to the perceived power of drama channels against other drama channels, particularly the division between tea versus commentary (Lewis and Christin 1639). However, YouTube also upholds a tradition of normative whiteness due to its penchant for neoliberalism and lax oversight of racist rhetoric on the platform (Hokka; Ma). Exploring the drama community through the lens of whiteness can thus offer novel understandings of what it means to be a part of the creation of modern celebrity culture, especially in uncovering the role whiteness plays in making only certain drama channels visible and legitimate.

The drama community on YouTube: definitions, activities, and common concerns

Origins and basic objectives of the drama community

Uncovering the inner workings of the drama community means first understanding its basis as an online collective and its connections to studies of celebrity. The drama community is a loosely tied network of video creators on YouTube who report on influencer scandals, cover celebrity conflicts, and dole out interpretive commentary, often on pop culture (Lewis and Christin). Here, drama YouTubers build on the long-standing tradition of celebrity journalism and tabloids facilitating star gossip, as popularized in the golden age of Hollywood (Feeley) and

continued in the 2000s with celebrity bloggers like Perez Hilton (Cereijido and Paliza-Carre). Since YouTube's inception, video makers have participated in inter-influencer feuds and drama, like the "flame wars" between Christian YouTubers (Pihlaja). The drama community furthers these dynamics, especially involved in "call out" and cancelation practices founded by queer communities of color (Clark). Therefore, the drama community is tied to the burgeoning activity of cancelation online through an ongoing "platform drama", in which digital commentators demand the deplatforming of controversial public figures and negotiate power with other actors, like YouTube and audiences (Lewis and Christin).

While their work in facilitating celebrity gossip has historically been feminized and deemed unimportant (Feeley), the drama community is a culturally significant, widely watched group that users of all creeds turn to for current events, entertainment, and informal guides to social norms. In essence, the drama community is a coalition of agenda-setters framing the ways viewers think about creator interactions and their own relationships, thereby shaping user beliefs around celebrity and appropriate behavior in general.

Central activities

Rebecca Lewis and Angèle Christin characterize drama on YouTube as a "hybrid genre" encompassing three central activities: reporting on influencer scandals, covering celebrity conflicts, and facilitating interpretive commentary (Lewis and Christin 1638-1639). Drama, thus, refers to the pursuit of "juicy", entertaining information as related to celebrity gossip, most often concerning YouTube celebrities. Drama channels shift between the three practices depending on

the circumstance, with some channels focusing more on one activity, like commentary, than others (Lewis and Christin 1639).

First, drama channels report on celebrity scandals, sharing “revelations about a celebrity’s bigotry or abuses of power” as well as discussions of any “perceived immoral behavior in interpersonal relationships” (Lewis and Christin 1638). Attention is also given to celebrities who scam or lie to their audiences, an egregious offense to the authenticity central to the professional lives of influencers (Lewis and Christin 1638). While Lewis and Christin focus most explicitly on drama channels reporting on YouTube celebrity scandals — YouTubers with massive followings on the platform — it is important to note that drama creators also detail wrongdoings of traditionally conceived Hollywood celebrities (“SHAWN MENDES”).

Drama channels also cover conflicts between Internet celebrities, denoting a stark dyadic relationship with opposing sides. Focus is most notably concentrated on the feuds of YouTube celebrities, where drama creators keep their viewers up-to-date on influencer back-and-forths and “[attempt] to gain behind-the-scenes information to reveal to their audiences” (Lewis and Christin 1638). This behind-the-scenes proof of a dramatic narrative can be conceptualized as “receipts”, or community-speak for any details that drama creators can add to support a claim in their videos, like screenshots of direct messages on Twitter or recovered videos posted to Reddit.

Finally, drama channels “engage in interpretive and normative work” by commenting on YouTube celebrity scandals and sometimes taking sides (Lewis and Christin 1638). For example, drama creators may construct their own versions of a scandal’s sequence of events and remark on the ramifications of an influencer’s decisions (“The END”). However, drama channels also comment on pop culture generally, observing and scrutinizing the digital world outside of YouTube. Drama video makers reflect on topics such as relevant memes, new pieces of digital

media technology, and trends on external social media platforms, like the popular genre of #WaterTok on TikTok (“WATERTOK”).

Many widely watched drama YouTubers have achieved microcelebrity status themselves, in which they themselves become fodder for critique and scandal (“Klein CALLED OUT”). Even channels which are not explicitly concerned with drama or celebrity gossip may become temporary drama channels, pointing to the hybridity and “porous boundaries” of the drama genre (Lewis and Christin 1638). Rosanna Pansino is one example — while foremost a baker sharing recipes with her viewers, Pansino took part in the attempted takedown of high profile YouTuber Mr. Beast, urging for his removal from the platform and for legal action to be taken against him (Pansino).

Professional considerations

Speaking further to drama creators’ enjoyment of influencer and professional YouTuber status, these individuals place significant considerations on: algorithmic visibility, authenticity, and intimate connections with their fan base. Though not unique to the drama community, drama YouTubers approach such issues in distinct ways.

As Sophie Bishop details, YouTubers manage algorithmic visibility to ensure their content is well-received and easily accessible (Bishop). Metrics — likes, comments, views — are quantifiable indicators of high visibility, thereby pointing to a YouTuber’s personal and commercial success for themselves and to others (Christin and Lewis). While YouTube keeps information on achieving visibility hidden from creators to “maintain a competitive advantage”, professional YouTubers pursue a variety of strategies to make their content and channel stand out

(Bishop 2590). This can mean participating in “algorithmic gossip” with other content creators, where YouTubers share their performance and frustrations with the platform (Bishop 2019). This can also mean relying on entertainment and cinematic conventions of humor, engaging editing, and clickbait (“Refracted Publics” 9; “WATERTOK”).

YouTubers and social media influencers broadly, including drama channels, are often pressured to be “authentic” in their gestures to the public as a “moral imperative” (Lewis and Christin 1649). Since every action is “monetizable” on YouTube, however, the lines between authenticity and insincerity become blurred (Lewis and Christin 1649). Professional drama YouTubers capitalizing on YouTube’s monetization features contend with revealing their real, personal opinions and offering a convincing, entertaining, and commercially-appealing performance guaranteed to get them viewership.

Moreover, YouTube encourages content creators to create intimate connections with their fanbase, where appeals to audiences become a crucial pursuit (Hokka 147-148). YouTubers must carve out their particular community of fans by any means necessary, separating admirers from the average viewer. For this reason, YouTubers encourage their fans to follow and support them on YouTube and external social media platforms, like the live-streaming app Patreon or Instagram (“Bizarre World”). They also ask audiences to engage with their content by liking, commenting, and subscribing to their channel, thus becoming a part of their specially-named, credited group of fans (i.e. Kurtis Conner’s “Kurtistown”, Danny Gonzales’ “Greg”).

Drama channel community: a broad umbrella

Because drama is a hybrid media genre on YouTube, there are many types of channels which fall under the drama umbrella and perform its key activities. This fluid, unsettled collective is itself the drama community, with the most popular subgenres being tea channels and commentary channels (Lewis and Christin 1639).

Tea channels, “largely run by women and gay men”, spend most of their content “[focusing] on beauty influencers” (Lewis and Christin 1639). Such YouTubers often follow scandals very closely and report on them as they unravel, posting updates as often as twice a day. One example is the channel SpillSesh, run by Kristi Cook, who publishes daily, short-form videos with snippets of controversies surrounding influencers and established Hollywood celebrities.

On the other hand, commentary channels, which are “largely run by straight men”, focus more explicitly on “celebrities in the worlds of vlogging, video game streaming, and pranks”, as well as off-platform trends and memes (Lewis and Christin 1639). Deviating from the conventions of tea channels, commentary YouTubers post more long-form, sometimes highly researched videos, often running 20 minutes and over. For example, commentary creator Kurtis Conner publishes videos concerned with niche yet relevant subjects in the world of digital memes and pop culture, such as investigations into Fortnite comedy (“Fortnite comedy”).

While not always apparent, the subdivisions in the drama community become starkly visible and contested when the question of “drama” on YouTube is interrogated by other content creators. Drama channels, specifically tea channels, receive criticism similar to that of tabloids, where YouTubers claim they lack substance, invade people’s privacy, and are generally problematic (tuv).

Celebrity, gossip, and drama on YouTube

Making sense of celebrities and power

For the drama community on YouTube, celebrities and their perceived power are the primary objects of study and discussion. Understanding drama on YouTube thus necessitates an understanding of celebrity in its connection to power and influence. P. David Marshall offers a useful theoretical framework for unpacking what celebrity actually means and how associated power is derived, viewing “celebrity as a system for valorizing meaning and communication” (Marshall xlviii). This system is translatable to a “wide variety of domains and conditions within contemporary culture”, from traditionally conceived celebrities reliant on the established entertainment industry and the more modern era of digital celebrity (Marshall xlviii). While the system of celebrity is “unstable” due to the role of audiences in adding to celebrity power, it is “consistent” from context to context (Marshall 1). Traditionally, media producers in the form of reporters covering “human interest’ content, including gossip reporting” added to the construction of modern celebrity culture (Feeley 470). Such tabloids and celebrity magazines maintained relevance throughout the early and mid-20th century, often asking fans and readers to “sit in judgment on the personal and private lives of stars”, in which audience evaluation was an imperative means of engagement (Wilson 27-28). Celebrity power in this environment relied on the contributions of the energetic audience and persistent coverage from print entertainment news outlets.

As Marshall writes, the system of celebrity is a consistent system dependent on the contributions of many, operating in similar ways from traditions in broadcast media and

transitioning into the digital era of celebrity gossip coverage. Entertainment blogs of the Web 1.0-era marked more modern interpretations of celebrity gossip communication, with bloggers like Perez Hilton following the every move of socialites and newcomer stars (Cereijido and Paliza-Carre). At the same time, the paparazzi and online tabloid industry clearly intersected with celebrity news websites such as TMZ, who fed into the “growing demand for paparazzi images” and popularized the genre of “entertainment photography” (McNamara 522-523). Now, drama channels on YouTube take up similar work in persistently giving input on celebrity drama and gossip, with press outlets like The Verge claiming that they have “created their own tabloid industry” (Plaugic 1). The rise of social media platforms in the 21st century has led to the concurrent creation of microcelebrity and influencers, indicating the broadening of “celebrity” from more traditional framings and the opening of boundaries to entry. Tabloids, celebrity magazines, and digitally-bound gossipers are covering celebrity drama tethered to a multiplicity of meanings, where “conventional” celebrities *and* social media stars all get their share of intimate examination.

Drama channel evaluations: identifying different forms of celebrity

In their work uncovering the oft implicit activities of celebrity transgressors, drama channels identify and evaluate differing forms of celebrity in line with the celebrity “system”, namely: “traditional” celebrities, influencers, and drama channels themselves. Because these varying iterations of celebrity negotiate power in largely similar ways due to the way celebrity system functions, the drama community on YouTube interrogates all of them for potential abuses of power and oversteps.

In the United States, celebrity has historically been tied to the mass and broadcast media industry, in which stars emerging from careers in blockbuster films, regular television programming, radio, and more are legitimated as modern celebrities (Marwick 333). Due to the longstanding impact of traditional celebrities, drama creators on YouTube do report on this more conservative understanding of celebrity, shown by the drama channel TeaSpill covering drama surrounding actress Blake Lively and her role in the film *It Ends with Us* (TeaSpill).

Aside from “conventional” celebrities, drama channels most typically question YouTube celebrities and other social media influencers (Lewis and Christin 1638-1639). Influencers, or internet celebrities who “attract and maintain a sizable following on their social media platforms” through “engaging and personalized content production”, differ in the kind of status-building strategies they perform as opposed to conventional conceptions of celebrity (“From Internet Celebrities” 71). Such influencers wield microcelebrity practices to construct a personal brand, use “strategic intimacy” to gain viewership and strengthen community ties, and “regard their audience as fans” (Marwick 333). Drama channels conceive of microcelebrity as both personhood and practice, thus tying a celebrity’s character with their visible, actionable behaviors — for example, drama channels open elements of influencers’ racist rhetoric or unsavory political views to the public for audience evaluation of their reputation (Unpoetic Justice).

Because influencerdom is not relegated to the historical pasts of broadcast and mass media, anyone can join and become an Internet celebrity, even drama channels themselves. In this case, drama creators shift between the role of celebrity and media producer, in which they simultaneously execute microcelebrity practices *and* evaluate and place limitations on the power of other celebrities as content creators. One key example is the live commentary podcast, H3

Podcast, hosted by Ethan Klein. The channel has a sizable following of 2.79 million subscribers at the time of writing, a result of carving out their personal brand of edgy, carefree humor and aesthetic. Here, it is clear that drama channels have the capacity to act as Internet celebrities and media commentators at the same time, speaking to the inconsistencies and fluidity of the drama channel community.

Social function of YouTube's drama channel community

It is clear that drama channels pursue a consistent social critique of celebrities, mainly those on YouTube. Such an assessment of celebrity activities becomes political in nature when it involves moral judgment and an interrogation of a YouTube celebrity's abuse of power — namely, the public admonishment of scamming audiences, racism, sexism, and sexual misconduct (Lewis and Christin; SmokeyGlow; Unpoetic Justice). Regardless of subgenre or professional status, drama YouTubers attempt to uphold an ethos of feminism, anti-racism, homophilia, and justice for YouTuber victims, in which they imagine themselves as a voice of reason. Not all drama creators conceive themselves as activists or promoters of social justice (Lewis and Christin 1634), but in their varied and commonly-held practice of celebrity critique, drama YouTubers become a community tied together by ideals of equity and limiting celebrity power. Due to the drama community's concern with negotiating power, the group can be thus theorized as a public, a novel interpretation of the drama community up until this point. Here, it becomes crucial to review the trajectories of other digital publics to better understand how the drama community interweaves its concerns of resisting celebrity power with the technological capabilities of YouTube as a platform.

Understanding contemporary networked publics

While drama on YouTube harkens back to the platform's inception, the collaborative, investigative drama channel public on YouTube is definitely contemporary in concept and part of a larger discussion of the many new digital publics ripe for interrogation. One form of digital publics also reliant on the presence of influencer culture is Crystal Abidin's "refracted publics" ("Refracted Publics"). As with drama channels navigating steep competition for visibility with other creators, Abidin views refracted publics as the result of beyond-the-radar user cultures which "enhance, deflect, or deter detection" in the saturated attention economy ("Refracted Publics" 3). Here, it appears that new networked publics are not always so easily observed or analyzed, as comprehension of their messages may require advance knowledge or access to private information.

Platform affordances become particularly key to understanding the formation of digital publics and counterpublics, or publics formed in the face of an oppressive other (Fraser; Squires). For example, Black networked counterpublics oscillate between inhabiting "networked enclaves" in less obvious digital spaces, like podcasts, and then move into "networked counterpublics" which operate by "engaging other, often hostile, publics" in mainstream spaces such as Twitter (Florini 73-81). TikTok's platform infrastructure encourages processes related to imitation and replication through features like sound groupings and sharing icons, thus conducive to the creation of an "imitation public" whose "digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (Zulli and Zulli 1882). On BeReal, a live networked public emerges based on a live, authentic, and shared temporal space (Taylor).

Modern networked publics and their dynamics depend upon the technical features users can adopt, the kinds of political concerns within the group, and, oftentimes, member identities as intertwined with visibility. For the drama channel community, YouTube emerges as a formidable player, not only in shaping the ongoing “platform drama” within its confines, but as a particular environment whose infrastructure and user guidelines determine the kinds of decisions drama channels make in their pursuit of microcelebrity and wider celebrity critique (Lewis and Christin 1649). Therefore, defining the drama channel public on YouTube means making considerations of technical features on the platform, YouTuber practices for influencer success, the power of drama creators as media producers, and the objectives of drama on YouTube.

Research question and aims

As detailed, the drama community on YouTube is largely an underrepresented group in celebrity studies, though it contains a plethora of participants, millions upon millions of viewers, and figures who teeter between mainstream acclaim and Internet stardom. Furthermore, this group has yet to be theorized as a distinct digital public, even with its fundamental group investment into the interrogation of celebrity power. While the drama community on YouTube has been studied as one particular actor in the ongoing “platform drama” on the platform (Lewis and Christin), there is a growing necessity in uncovering the nuanced inner workings of the group to make sense of its specific practices, principles, and its perceptions of power. Therefore, this research is guided by the question: *what are the key characteristics of the YouTube drama community digital public and how does it operate within the structures and objectives of microcelebrity?*

The goal of this project is to identify and explain the core components of the drama community in order to uncover how microcelebrity can become intertwined with practices and ideologies of critique. This research will thus contribute to both celebrity and publics studies in related ways. On the side of celebrity studies, this thesis will add greater insight into how celebrity is discussed and interpreted on behalf of public critics in a digital environment, especially ones who are often celebrities themselves. On the side of publics, this paper will outline a novel digital public reckoning with power in the context of celebrity, in which discussion and debate are formulated around answering the question of what celebrity means for members and what are appropriate actions for celebrities to be taking. In all, this research advances knowledge across seemingly separate fields, offering a path into cross-disciplinary scholarship around nouveau digital celebrity.

Methods

In attending to the intermixing of power and group formation on YouTube, this research engages in grounded theory and critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), centering specifically on a case study of the Colleen Ballinger scandal in 2023. Born out of a frustration in digital divide research which largely excluded the realities of marginalized users, André Brock fashioned CTDA to address technology as “cultural representations and social structures” (Brock 1012). CTDA specifically interrogates the “triad of artifact, practice, and belief” when examining information and communication technologies (ICTs), in which these three constitutive elements determine the kinds of discourse and interactions possible on a particular social media platform (Brock 1016). Data collection in CTDA rests on the nexus of multimodal data, interface

analysis, and discourse analysis, pushing researchers to view ICTs as distinct texts and to make choices around how to interpret the text and relevant discourses (Brock 1019). As with other studies of YouTube and digital collectives, making key considerations of platform mechanisms and the ways community members negotiate affordance use ultimately reveals the group's approach to discussion, power, and ideology (Brock; Lewis and Christin).

Because the drama community on YouTube engages in boundary-making activities related to identity — such as tea channels being queer and female-coded (Lewis and Christin 1639) — CTDA offers a necessary approach to capturing and analyzing the lived experiences of marginalized community members as they navigate YouTube's terrain and the expectations of others in the public. It is also important to note that all of these meaning-making activities take place in an environment of normative whiteness shading the sorts of critical behaviors possible for drama channels (Hokka; Ma). While this relationship between celebrity gossip and an invisible, taken-for-granted racial hierarchy is implicit on YouTube, it is present here and should be explored explicitly in future studies.

The Colleen Ballinger drama of 2023 offers a case ripe with complex group dynamics resting on discrete yet pervasive understandings of: drama creators' own power, the kinds of interactions which *can* and *do* take place on YouTube, microcelebrity practices and ethics, and how gossip can hold political weight. While the next section will elaborate on the case in greater detail, I will give a brief overview of the narrative, stakes, and key players. At its core, the drama involves the public admonishment of YouTube star Colleen Ballinger who gained notoriety and mainstream acclaim for her concurrent online persona Miranda Sings. Ballinger began her Miranda Sings channel in 2008 and grew her audience to millions of viewers, specifically children, by the 2010s. Her mass appeal granted her the Netflix show *Haters Back Off!* based on

the Miranda Sings character, as well as several appearances on late night television shows and interviews for traditional news outlets.

The scandal, as followed in this project, takes place from June 2023 to November 2023, though it relates to events in 2020 and further past. Former fans of Ballinger — most significantly, drama channel Adam McIntyre — alleged that she participated in grooming, inappropriate sexual discussions with minors in private group chats, racism, fatphobia, exploitation of her children as a family channel, and more. Ballinger's friends and family members faced similar allegations, namely Ballinger's close friend Kory DeSoto and her brother Trent Ballinger. These allegations manifested on a variety of social media platforms, including YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Reddit, with the majority of the drama playing out on YouTube. Much of drama channel coverage and audience commentary revolved around microcelebrities' parasocial relationships with fans and what kinds of relations influencers should have with their admirers. In sum, this case offers a glimpse into the rich and intricate world of drama YouTubers, especially as it displays the hybridity of the drama genre in involving different types of drama channels *and* intensive audience participation.

I first started with a general overview of channels relevant to the case study based on suggested materials within the videos and my own experience, identifying five key drama channels and five less central channels. From December 23, 2024 to January 20, 2025, I watched 23 videos across the 10 channels directly involved in the case study, taking a grounded theory approach to my note taking and initial analysis. For every video, I engaged in copious note taking and screenshotting based on: the drama community's principles and practices, YouTube's affordances and mechanisms, other platforms mentioned, how the community demonstrated the characteristics of a public, and power at play. While I remained tied to YouTube as a platform of

exploration in watching videos and reviewing comments, I still took note of the wider platform ecosystem integral to the function of the drama community. What became particularly remarkable was not only the involvement of drama channels in discourse-making, but the role of audience members in the facilitation of gossip and the shaping of drama conversations in real time.

As Lewis and Christin examined the “lifecycles of individual controversies as they unfolded over the course of hours and days”, so too does this research make sense of one particular scandal emerging, growing, and dissipating throughout the majority of 2023 (Lewis and Christin 1640). Such a combination of CTDA, case study, and grounded theory proved fruitful in uncovering: the context within which the drama community conducts discourse, how it discusses events, its ideology and ethos, and how power is perceived and enacted by members of the public. Much of this project thus realizes the constructive and distributive information potential of drama in the YouTube context, even as it relies nearly completely on the existence and activation of discourse on separate social media platforms.

Case study

2020: A preface

In the initial stages of the global COVID-19 lockdown, Adam McIntyre — a drama channel — posted an exposé video to his channel detailing his flawed relationship as an underage fan and later friend of Colleen Ballinger (“stop lying”). At the time, Ballinger was a long-standing star on YouTube, gaining initial acclaim with child fans due to her character

Miranda Sings, a bizarre parody of hyperactive theater personalities. Amongst other things, McIntyre alleged that Ballinger hired him to be an intern to run the Miranda Sings Twitter account without paying him and then stopped responding after McIntyre made a controversial post on the Miranda Sings Twitter that garnered backlash from fans.

In response to McIntyre's claims, as well as other concerns over racist and explicit content masqueraded as being safe for children, Ballinger rebutted with her own apology and accountability video ("addressing everything"). Here, she addressed McIntyre's concerns and other controversies, satisfying her fans. From there, McIntyre was completely vilified by Ballinger's fandom and the drama community, written off as a liar and clout chaser by smaller fans and Ballinger's own influencer friends. One drama channel participating in the admonishment of McIntyre was kodeerants, or Kodee Tyler, who made attempts to defend Ballinger as a righteous individual.

2023: The drama reignites

In early June 2023, three years after the initial controversy, Tyler restarted the scandal by publishing a now-deleted video revealing why she left the Ballinger fandom ("i was right"). Here, Tyler divulges new information about Ballinger, claiming that the influencer was on a smear campaign against McIntyre behind closed doors, specifically through private group chats with fans and in the direct messages of drama channels. Tyler also exposes Ballinger's infamous private Twitter group chat with her closest fans, known as "colleeny's weenies", where Ballinger would: inform her underage fans about her sexual behavior, disclose personal details about her

divorce with her ex-husband, Joshua David Evans, make fun of fans, and encourage members of the chat to seek out and digitally attack those that Ballinger despised.

The severity of the accusations led McIntyre to add greater context and commentary to the situation, as he was, at one point, the fan with the most intimate knowledge of Ballinger's personal life ("i was right"; "my relationship"). For the first time, McIntyre outright accuses Ballinger of grooming him and manipulating him through the promise of friendship in exchange for social favors.

Other fans of Ballinger also spoke out. Johnny Silvestri — Ballinger's former employee on her tour in 2018 — discussed the verbal and emotional abuse he faced at the hands of her best friend and assistant, Kory DeSoto (Silvestri). Furthermore, Silvestri accused Evans of grooming him as well, opening up future controversy down the line. Becky, another fan of Ballinger's, expressed her feelings of discomfort and sexual violation at sixteen-years-old when she was almost exposed on stage at Ballinger's tour. Oliver, one of the youngest to speak out, published a thread to Twitter detailing the attempts of Trent Ballinger, Ballinger's brother, to try to carve out an intimate relationship with him when he was only thirteen-years-old.

Running parallel to these newfound accusations, drama channels covered this scandal as new information came out. These videos varied in attention, tone, and form. For example, McIntyre mostly reuploaded his Twitch streams reacting and commenting deeply on other drama videos. The H3 Podcast channel, a commentary channel, delved into the drama through a PowerPoint structure, dedicating a series of slides spelling out important characters and events to the host, Ethan Klein. SpillSesh, a tea channel, posted quick recaps of the drama thus far, employing the language of a "developing story".

Finally, Ballinger responded. After much discussion and calls for Ballinger's deplatforming, Ballinger posted a strange and cryptic video to her vlog channel titled "hi." in which she writes off the accusations as part of a "toxic gossip train" poised to take her down ("hi."). Her response went viral, incentivizing mainstream news outlets and semi-related YouTubers to comment on the drama both on and off YouTube.

The drama did not end with Ballinger's response, however, as drama channels and other main players were also accused of similarly problematic acts. The catalyst for the scandal's renewed attention, Kodee Tyler, was the first to disappear. Drama and tea channel, Dustin Dailey, exposed Tyler for her experience being in a group chat with minors and writing inappropriate fanfiction with children fans included (Dailey). Later on in the scandal, former disgruntled fan, Johnny Silvestri, unsuccessfully attempted to tarnish Evans' character with allegations of grooming. Instead, a commentary channel, SWOOP, who had been following the drama as it went along, accused Silvestri of doctoring evidence, undermining victims' stories, and unjustly accusing Evans of grooming ("The DEVIL"; "Ex TELLS ALL"). While Ballinger was the central celebrity to this scandal, she was not the only one who emerged from the experience with a damaged reputation.

In sum, this controversy involves: a host of key players, a reliance on the wider platform ecosystem, and a variance in coverage of the same scandal. The most important players are: Colleen Ballinger, Adam McIntyre, Joshua David Evans, the H3 Podcast, SWOOP, SpillSesh, Johnny Silvestri, kodeerants, Kory DeSoto, and Dustin Dailey. Drama channels found the meat of her scandal to take place outside of YouTube, including Twitter, SnapChat, and Instagram. Furthermore, drama channel coverage of this scandal involved sourcing information from the r/ColleenBallingerSnark Reddit forum in some cases, as well as posting initial thoughts on

livestreaming platforms like Twitch. The hybridity of the drama genre on YouTube, as discussed by Lewis and Christin, is well apparent in this case, as drama channels differed in their particular connection to the drama and how they showcased their content (Lewis and Christin 1638-1639). These key elements set up the case as prime for the investigation of the drama community as a public and its salient characteristics.

Identifying the drama public's principles

At their core, YouTube's drama community practices are undergirded by a small set of principles, including: *care/justice*, *accountability*, *transparency*, and *authenticity*. These principles serve as the perceived moral guidelines for drama channels, shaping their practices and interactions with viewers and the celebrities they admonish. It is key to remember that these principles are consistent with the messaging found within the videos drama channels publish rather than intrinsic personal beliefs or private motivations. Furthermore, not all drama creators follow these principles — in fact, some actively subvert them and receive their own denouncements. Nevertheless, these values are invariably supported through drama channels conducting a performance of ethics within their videos.

Care and justice: validating victims

Perhaps the most visible and central ethical principle, drama channels focus their actions based on respect for “victims” — a label which the drama community uses frequently. The drama community creates stark boundaries between perpetrators and victims and promotes

victim justice through the sharing of their stories. Perpetrators are defined as the alleged wrongdoers in a particular scandal, while the victims are those suffering at the hands of the perpetrator(s). Promoting victim justice becomes heralded as what is right, especially in cementing victims' names and stories in the drama *and* giving attention to their literal voices. It is the drama community's moral imperative to ensure victims are given a platform to speak on their particular truths in the drama.

Showcasing and supporting victims' voices and stories

Unveiling the experiences of those who felt silenced in the face of influencer power is key to drama channel ethicality and credibility. A lot of the time this means explicitly naming victims, choosing not to recursively view appropriate materials, and interviewing victims over video or on the phone.

SWOOP offers a glaring example of the recognized need to support victim's speaking on their experience. Before her interviews with the ex-Ballinger fans, SWOOP makes a comment that she "[does] not support the idea of these victims being invalidated and their voices being silenced in any way shape or form" ("THE END" 6:48-6:57). SWOOP also interviews the victims on video calls and on the phone, dedicating large portions of her video to these interactions with McIntyre, Becky, Alex, Ella, and others ("THE END" 1:39-04-2:45:00). In some ways, SWOOP becomes a mediator for victims interfacing with the public, in which it is her moral duty to ensure that victim stories are not lost in the sea of accusations. She privileges these stories within her video, stating outright how important it is that she is giving these victims the chance to address the situation.

The H3 Podcast offers a similar, caring approach to victims through an in-depth interview of stories from Johnny Silvestri, Oliver, and Becky. In this instance, one of the victims — Silvestri — acknowledges the principle of promoting victim justice. He states, “thank you to all of you for giving us the platform and the voices because, without you, we would be shouting into an abyss” (“Apology PowerPoint” 4:33:53-4:34:00). Here, the H3 Podcast’s direct goal of fostering victim discussion is explicitly awarded with gratitude. Both victims and drama channels respect this principle and are thankful it is there.

Drawing boundaries between aggressors and victims

Boundaries between perpetrators and victims often blur as drama channels gather and distribute new information. In some cases, this means that those who were originally labeled as victims may then later be labeled as offenders.

Such is the case for Johnny Silvestri, who started out in the scandal as another victim following the lead of McIntyre’s confession. Silvestri came forward to reveal his experience as an employee of Ballinger on her 2018 Miranda Sings tour, in which he was subjected to verbal abuse at the hands of Ballinger’s assistant and best friend, Kory DeSoto (“Kory DeSoto”). At first, drama channels, like McIntyre, gave their full support of Silvestri, even telling their audience to follow Silvestri on his Twitter (“Kory DeSoto” 3:19). Reacting to Silvestri’s video rather than recursively viewing it showcases McIntyre’s concern for victim stories, as he allows Silvestri to speak without pausing the video and correcting him (“Kory DeSoto”). McIntyre thus adheres to the principle of promoting victim justice by dedicating the entire video to Silvestri’s own retelling of his experiences.

After Ballinger's pseudo-apology, however, SWOOP strips Silvestri of his victim status, then labeling him as a misguided pariah and an aggressor in his own right. Silvestri had also accused Ballinger's ex-husband, Joshua David Evans, of grooming him as Ballinger did to McIntyre ("The DEVIL"; "Ex TELLS ALL"). However, in her investigative work, SWOOP finds Silvestri to have doctored messages pertaining to Evans' "grooming", as well as attempted to devalue the importance of McIntyre's original story ("The DEVIL"). In an exclusive interview with Evans, SWOOP condemns Silvestri's initial accusations, instead framing Evans as a victim deserving of exoneration through a nearly four hour interview ("Ex TELLS ALL"). SWOOP uses Silvestri's "inconsistencies in his timeline" as one of the reasons for her current admonishment, adding to the notion that transgressors are deceitful and harm others with their fabrications ("Ex TELLS ALL" 2:26:40). Therefore, SWOOP finds transparency to be important in delineating victims versus perpetrators, in which it is her moral duty to uncover who the liars are.

While the principle of promoting victim justice is consistent throughout drama channel activities, it also unravels when the borders between perpetrators and victims evaporate. Public accountability underpins this principle, as drama channels attempt to categorize aggressors versus victims based on often private information. As long as offenses are made public and shareable, new labels can be reallocated for future use.

Accountability: defining violations

Drama channels deem it their overarching responsibility to determine the lines between celebrity mistakes versus condemnable moral violations. They emphasize their care over

defining transgressions by *educating* viewers on why they view an action as dangerous and examining how certain celebrity oversteps become egregious. Drama channels may also add comments relating to their personal investment in the scandal, delving out *first-hand experience* as proof of their deep concern.

Inserting her thoughts and revelations into the Colleen Ballinger controversy, SWOOP agrees with McIntyre's labeling of Ballinger as a groomer and his claims that she led inappropriate relationships with her underage fans ("The END"). In an effort to categorize Ballinger's actions as full-fledged grooming rather than a misunderstanding, SWOOP shows a screenshot of a definition of grooming from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) ("The END" 48:35). SWOOP is ethically predisposed to cross-examine McIntyre's lived experience with definitions from a legitimate source, thereby laying out exactly why Ballinger's actions were a form of grooming. Including this information means attaching a label to Ballinger and giving reason for SWOOP's interrogation of her character.

Aside from educating viewers and focusing on definitions, SWOOP also draws on her own personal experience with grooming to indicate her individual investment in the scandal outside of her status as a drama channel. Adding to the definition of grooming from the NSPCC, SWOOP reveals her vulnerable struggles with grooming and sexual assault at a young age, thus offering a clear cause for attention to the drama ("The END" 1:43:26). SWOOP feels she has an ethical obligation to define Ballinger as a groomer because she knows directly that there is a power in uncovering the depravity of an individual who otherwise may remain unscathed.

As shown in this example, the drama community on YouTube operates by ideals of accountability, in which those who have done wrong must pay for their misconduct. However, before the drama community decides to pursue any practices to give reasons for punishment —

namely, consolidation, liveness, or recursive viewing — they must first determine if a violation occurred at all and what that violation is. The drama community is grounded in answerability and knowing that certain moral boundaries exist for influencers' actions and inactions.

Transparency: publicizing transgressions

Amongst drama community members, there is a widely held belief that traditional celebrities and influencers alike may abuse their power in both public and private contexts, as well as on and offline. Therefore, it is the drama channel's responsibility to seek out this information through consolidation labor and make it available for mass viewership. The moral code of drama channels becomes making influencer issues not only *viewable* through the collection and reporting of receipts in public ways, but also *legible* through contextualizing the receipts with other relevant events, narratives, and backstories.

Transgressions in this context can be understood as any and all offenses interpreted and defined as egregious. Nothing is off the table — Lewis and Christin cite discussions of sexual exploitation, racism, theft, scamming, and fraud (Lewis and Christin). In digital spaces, such transgressions may be present in public scenarios or lurking behind closed doors, like private direct messages on Twitter. However, drama channels operate under the logic that all private spaces online can be transcended and welcomed into the public purview, a central dynamic to refracted publics which Crystal Abidin labels as “alternating public/private” (“Refracted Publics” 4). Abidin sees the “interference of platform features and algorithmic unpredictability” as causing instability in the categories of public and private, where the borders between them are “shaped in new ways” and often fall apart (“Refracted Publics” 4). Drama channels capitalize on

this reality in order to serve their ethical guidelines of making celebrity violations available for wide reproach.

In the case of Colleen Ballinger and her fans, McIntyre often refers to his videos as necessary exposés of a private, abusive relationship. His first video pertaining to the scandal says as such. McIntyre claims that the purpose of his initial sharing of screenshots between himself and Ballinger was to “get [his] side across and defend [himself]” (“stop lying” 0:48-0:51). All of the evidence he provides and the claims he makes about Ballinger rest upon McIntyre’s perceived need to get Ballinger’s manipulation out in the open. McIntyre holds himself responsible for unveiling the truth behind Ballinger due to the severity of her transgressions and his personal hurt.

On the side of Ballinger fandom, McIntyre also seeks to uncover the abuses he has faced at the hands of angry Ballinger supporters. McIntyre makes a video to announce that he has filed a police report against Ballinger fans threatening to release his address, murder him, his family, and his pets, and call the SWAT team to his house (“A police report”). Rather than keeping these offenses to himself and those close to him, McIntyre claims that this is “something that [he needs] to get out there because things are getting so out of hand right now with the Colleen Ballinger Army” (“A police report” 0:08-0:12). In this case, McIntyre brings mass attention to the crimes of fans as a moral necessity, believing that making these matters public is the right thing to do for himself and other victims.

At the same time, this ethical code extends to other drama channels — no person involved in a scandal is exempt from an exposé. Drama channels are not only persons-of-interest in a drama as a source of intel, but also as the source of villainous spectacle. Drama channel Dustin Dailey took part in the deplatforming of kodeerants during the initial weeks of the

Ballinger scandal, disclosing Tyler's own involvement in private social media group chats with minors (Dailey). Dailey explicitly claims that he "had to come on here" and "share what [he knows]", echoing the perceived principle of publicizing transgressions (Dailey 3:07-3:10). As McIntyre did for himself, Dailey sees moral need in making Tyler's messages public as a way to exonerate McIntyre and give him the support he was denied in 2020 (Dailey 11:48-11:57).

As Abidin discusses, beyond-the-radar subjectivities exist online, indicating a burgeoning possibility that some offenses slip under the view of Internet users and that some messaging of criminality is indecipherable ("Refracted Publics"). With this in mind, drama channels become grounded in an ethical ideal of transparency, as they are morally disposed to share any private information to the public as long as it offers credence to claims of celebrity violations.

Authenticity: verifying timelines

Authenticity remains one of the most important facets for maintaining microcelebrity success and audience trust. As Usher writes, microcelebrity practices are dependent on "authenticity" and "everydayness" to fuel high "performance and clicks" (Usher 172-173). This supports the practice of consolidating gossip, as ensuring the veracity of receipts and the concurrent timeline becomes a way for drama channels to furnish their credibility and continued viewership. For drama community members, authenticity becomes tied to the building of a "timeline", or community-speak for the sequence of events in a scandal that drama channels construct. Pieces of gossip known as "receipts" aid in the creation of this timeline and are essential to its formation. In the drama community on YouTube, whoever has control of the timeline has control of the narrative, but whoever has control of the timeline is morally bound to

ensure its authenticity. Determining the sequence of events as related to relevant information means nothing if the sequence is found to be incorrect or poorly put together. To create an ethical, trustworthy timeline, drama channels rely on a foundation of receipts which serve as evidence of any claims made about the timeline *and* as a currency of authentic messaging.

Post-kodeerants' inciting video which began the Ballinger scandal, McIntyre built out the timeline of his relationship with Ballinger across several social media platforms ("my relationship"). As he weaves isolated pieces of evidence together in a cohesive timeline of transgressions, McIntyre points to the thoroughness of his efforts, claiming that "[he's] not going to leave anything out" and that his efforts for the inclusion of all the information date back to his original 2020 video ("my relationship" 52:28-52:40). McIntyre emphasizes the need for authentic timelines to be exhaustive, in which excluding potentially relevant information is indicative of amorality and deceit.

Like McIntyre, SWOOP points to the necessity of complete, truthful timelines. In the first part of her series covering the Ballinger controversy, she introduces her contribution as "[digging] into a comprehensive telling of the events...you'll hear directly from [the victims] as I lay out the sequence of events" leading to the demise of Ballinger's stardom ("The END" 5:14-5:4). SWOOP ensures that every stage of the scandal has an associated piece of evidence, verified by not only SWOOP but her research team and the victims themselves. This work is founded upon her earlier statement of constructing a "comprehensive" timeline, one which is authenticated through laborious investigation.

Drama channels thus create content based on the ethical foundation of authenticity, which is applied to the timeline they construct. This becomes linked to their persona as well, a key feat that grows in importance as authenticity for drama channels is constantly challenged (Lewis and

Christin 1649). Authentic representations of their personhood change depending on the drama channel, even when the timeline is applied by many. McIntyre layers emotional appeals and the appearance of his everyday life — his bedroom, his pets — over the comprehensive timeline he makes as a way to add a vulnerable openness to his statements. On the other side, SWOOP claims veracity over her timeline and her persona by aligning herself with the aesthetics of traditional broadcast media, such as placing herself in a studio space and heavily editing her videos. Nevertheless, these varying approaches to constructing timelines are predicated upon the desire for authenticity, a moral guidepost helping creators and users answer “what really happened and when?”.

Tracking the drama public’s practices

The drama community coalesces as a public chiefly through its practices, which serve as the main methods for carrying out the group’s central activities of reporting scandals, covering celebrity conflicts, and producing interpretive commentary. Based on its information-sharing and social dynamics, the drama community engages in a few key practices, namely: consolidating gossip, capitalizing on liveness, and participating in recursive viewing. Acknowledging gossip’s political potential, drama channels make strides to gain greater influence through a wielding of microcelebrity and an enactment of moral and cultural command over scandal narratives.

Recursive viewing

While the drama genre remains hybrid and flexible, one thematic principle in content formatting remains consistent — drama channels reacting to previous videos from other drama channels. Drama channels break down and critique the commentary from related drama creators, unpacking the details missing from their peer’s videos and demarcating their own version as the more up-to-date, correct piece of the puzzle. Therefore, drama channels engage in the practice of *recursive viewing*, in which drama creators define their content in direct relation to the previous, “crude” video they are reacting to. Through this, drama channels vie for power, in which the drama channel participating in the reacting and judgment establishes itself as the closest to the truth.

Used frequently in programming, cybernetics, linguistics, and other fields, recursion is a concept which Hanna Hölling sees as involving the “embedding the action or object within another instance of itself and may involve hierarchic orders” (Hölling 4). Recursion should not be understood as the synonym of iteration, or “the process of repeating an action or object an arbitrary number of times” (Hölling 4). Rather, recursion is a progression based entirely on the existence of “underdeveloped” previous conceptions. That which is “current” — a snapshot in the ongoing loop — can be comprehended as the most complex because it requires all former knowledges of the concept to come into being. However, recursivity is “characterized by the looping movement of returning to itself in order to determine itself” with “every movement [being] open to contingency”, leading to particular singularities (King 7). There are no exact paths or predetermined futures, only advancements forward predicated on known “simpler” elements that infinitely grow in complication.

It is upon this definition that the concept of *recursive viewing* is founded. Drama creators react to an endless nesting of content — videos within videos — as means to propose their

increased relevance and importance in comparison with the former. Such viewership is not the same as that of “reaction videos” which Byrd McDaniel finds to be underpinned by an affective “reactivity” (McDaniel). Instead, drama channels actively complicate the validity and resonance of previous claims by asserting novel commentary and interjections to previous interpretations of scandal.

After Kodee Tyler’s, or kodeerants’, explosive video revealing her private direct messages with Ballinger and Ballinger’s inappropriate behavior with her minor fans, McIntyre uploaded a Twitch stream recording on YouTube dedicated to thoroughly reviewing Tyler’s exposé and filling in gaps when need be (“i was right”). McIntyre reacts to Tyler’s video and constantly pauses the video throughout to attach additional context and commentary. He gives extra insight into the Twitter group chat “colleeny’s weenies” because he was in it as a highly revered figure in the fandom. Where Tyler misses key information on the group’s dynamics, McIntyre is there to highlight any inconsistencies and put forth the realities of his situation with Ballinger (“i was right” 11:30-13:30). His actions complicate Tyler’s narrative by conveying the former version of her story as elementary and lacking in necessary details which only McIntyre can provide. Here, McIntyre recursively views kodeerants’ video by determining the most relevant and/or incorrect portions of the drama to discuss, further progressing the scandal with his own account and intimate view into the realities of the Ballinger fandom to be recursively viewed by others.

During the H3 Podcast’s initial PowerPoint on Colleen Ballinger, the team of hosts provides the head of H3, Ethan Klein, with the opportunity to recursively view McIntyre’s same reaction on Twitch to kodeerants’ catalytic video (“Ballinger PowerPoint”). The H3 slate possesses authority over the salient points of the Ballinger controversy narrative because they

hold control over YouTube's mechanisms in relation to the stop and start of audio-visual content. Klein and his colleagues determine when to pause and thus fragment McIntyre's retelling of the story — they can make jokes, comments, observations, or turn to the audience when they decide there is a need. The H3 video nests together two previous videos, now edited down and contained within the confines of the PowerPoint ("Ballinger PowerPoint" 2:10:45-2:14:30). Furthermore, the PowerPoint slides can only house clips of a limited duration, meaning that the H3 team takes charge in determining what the crucial moments of McIntyre's video are and what is filler.

Drama channels thus participate in recursive viewing as an enactment of authority over other drama creators' contributions to the scandal. While they do not necessarily refute former claims, they do point to inadequacies in coverage, labeling previous versions of the narrative as invalid or basic. This does not exempt their own videos from being recursively viewed and nested in future drama reporting, fueling drama channel attempts to be the last to contribute to a story. Nevertheless, as recursion ultimately details, scandals are never put to rest or completely ended, as there are infinite possibilities to claim authority over a narrative and for that authority to be taken away.

Consolidating gossip

YouTube scandals are never fully contained to the platform as they once were in the Christian flame war years (Pihlaja). With platformization and professional opportunities in influencing becoming standard across platforms, drama YouTubers must manage their microcelebrity and their commentary capabilities on multiple social media platforms

simultaneously, becoming specialists in Twitter, Instagram, and more. To fulfill their duties of facilitating celebrity gossip, creators in the drama public conduct a form of *consolidation labor* in their search for gossip related to the drama at hand. Drama channel community members seek out pieces of gossip, or “receipts” as they refer to them, across social media to place within their videos as evidence of their claims against an influencer’s transgressions.

Such receipts are essential to the formation of the “timeline”, community-speak for the sequence of events in a scandal which drama channels construct and reconstruct within their videos based on the contributions of others. For drama channels, authenticity is not only bound up in the kind of person they claim to be, but by the compositional motif of the timeline. The timeline answers the question of “what actually happened?” and is key to securing credibility once the gossip related to the scandal has been found. This often involves the parsing through of relevant information in a sequential order and making dates of drama occurrence clear to the viewers. The purpose of consolidation labor is to fulfill the promise of an authentic, approved, and well-researched timeline, which is why it becomes necessary to seek out gossip from a multitude of sources to ensure that the timeline is accurate.

In the process of tracking needed receipts, the intensity of the consolidation labor largely depends on the ease with which the drama creator can access the information they gather and put into their videos. Ultimately, consistent activity within, knowledge of, and expertise in the contours of the wider platform ecosystem becomes a necessary feat to support claims related to their particular social function of critique.

Making use of the platform ecosystem

Engaging in multiple social media platforms is not a unique practice for social media influencers. In fact, it is one of the central tenets to influencer activity and microcelebrity success. Now, authentic representation of the self on one platform is not enough for audience admiration — influencers put their image onto multiple platforms as a way to invite “competitive investigation into and comparison of [their] different strands of selfhood” (“From Internet Celebrities” 92). However, the entire foundation of drama genre content fundamentally rests upon drama creators engaging in continued and distributed research across the wider social media ecosystem, making their investment into multiple platforms unique.

In one of McIntyre’s first videos uncovering the intricacies of his relationship with Ballinger, he relies on direct messaging between them archived on three primary social media platforms (“my relationship”). McIntyre makes a strong claim that Ballinger not only manipulated him, but also groomed him by making false promises in exchange for McIntyre’s free digital and emotional labor. To supplant his claim with evidence, McIntyre turns to his and Ballinger’s accounts on Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram which contain related yet distinct bits of loaded gossip.

Though not the first to reveal the “colleeny’s weenies” private group chat on Twitter, McIntyre’s previous inner circle membership gives him full access to screenshots of direct messages. Going back to 2017-2018, he details and displays Ballinger’s array of sexual jokes made in the presence of fans largely under the age of 18, where Ballinger often targets McIntyre specifically (“my relationship” 7:30-9:45). Moving into 2020, McIntyre aims to give audiences a full behind-the-scenes account for his eventual rift with Ballinger, citing her Miranda Sings Twitter account as the catalyst for the entire controversy (“my relationship” 52:07-1:42:00). According to his direct messages with Ballinger, she asked McIntyre to run her widely followed

Miranda Sings Twitter account before eventually transitioning him to be a paid intern for her company. McIntyre scrolls through the stream of exchanges, pausing over and dissecting each interaction, as a way to lay stake in the claim that Ballinger repeatedly took advantage of him.

Similar to Twitter, McIntyre pulls a wealth of messages with Ballinger from Instagram. McIntyre gives a glaring example of Ballinger's false promises of in-person friendship in June of 2018, when she claimed McIntyre would get the chance to go backstage as a reward for his continued support, though he never got to ("my relationship" 26:33). As McIntyre states, Ballinger would consistently send him assurance of her appreciation for his encouragement over Instagram, weaponizing her influencer status and personal power for McIntyre to search gossip sites for opinions on Ballinger ("my relationship" 37:00-39:00).

Snapchat is another platform which McIntyre relies on for "receipts" ("my relationship" 12:00-13:30). McIntyre reflects on Ballinger adding him as a "friend" on Snapchat during his time in the fandom. He discusses the platform's perceived affordances of greater intimacy, as "friend" status is reserved for close friends only. While Twitter direct messages mainly offer contact via text, Snapchat messages intertwine audio-visual and text interactions for multiple streams of communication and connection. McIntyre finds Ballinger's aggregate of videos, pictures, and text-based messages to be representative of an active desire for McIntyre's privileged connection to amount in all-consuming attachment. Most fans would not gain access to Ballinger's private life the way McIntyre did on Snapchat, especially because he was exposed to the same level of digital intimacy that her in-person friends were.

Because McIntyre's claims of Ballinger's transgressions are both damning and based in experiences largely outside of YouTube, he is forced to traverse the differing platform environments of Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat with dexterity and thoroughness. Evidence of

Ballinger's false promises are in direct messages on Instagram, evidence of Ballinger's attempts for intimacy and unhealthy closeness are on Snapchat, and et cetera — for McIntyre to take authority over the various pieces of his argument, he must consolidate the scattered pieces of Ballinger's exploitation and funnel them into a clear, well-fashioned YouTube video. YouTube thus becomes a central hub where isolated pieces of information come to be injected with new, argumentative meaning.

Drama channels take part in this act of funneling receipts into YouTube largely because YouTube affords the creation and publication of long form videos with a seamless incorporation of audio-visual materials. For McIntyre, this means he can present his case with all of the, otherwise dispersed, information in a sole, consumable source for audiences to dissect. Such a breakdown of separate platform contexts for gossip relates closely to Crystal Abidin's notion of "weaponized contexts" as related to refracted publics. Weaponized contexts refer to "distinct socio-cultural contexts" which are "intentionally collapsed to generate potential for reappropriation" ("Refracted Publics" 4). The contexts and particularities of each social media platform's approach to communication are intentionally broken and refashioned into the compounding evidence to support McIntyre's claim. Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat messages from 2018 and beyond are stripped of their previous association with private, budding "friendship" and fused together into a sequence, or a "timeline", of offenses. One after the other, McIntyre flips through these recorded interactions, cementing his victimhood and centrality in the drama. From here, other drama channels can build on McIntyre's claims and pursue their own consolidation labor to either support, refute, or negotiate what has been stated.

Different approaches to consolidation labor

The YouTube drama genre's hybridity encompasses both differences in content *and* content formatting and approach. While all drama channels focus their videos on reporting on scandals, covering celebrity conflicts, and generating "interpretive commentary" through the assistance of consolidation labor, not all drama creators pursue the same level of investigation or research to supplement their content (Lewis and Christin 1638). This is especially true because, like Adam McIntyre, "drama creators sometimes become involved participants in scandals and conflicts, rather than mere observers", thereby holding deep personal connections to the controversy at hand (Lewis and Christin 1639). For this reason, drama channels with personal involvement in a scandal may choose to reveal their ties and open private messages across platforms to the public.

On the other hand, not all drama channels have a vested interest in the trajectory of a scandal other than channel success, slight personal intrigue, and audience investment. For drama channels on the periphery of controversies rather than persons-of-interest, consolidation labor becomes more crucial and difficult, as they lack direct, easy access to pivotal bits of gossip. Therefore, they must decide if they want to embark on their own research and scrutinize the validity of drama claims on their own terms, as well as attempt to unearth new evidence and suggest new narratives.

During the Colleen Ballinger scandal in 2023, SpillSesh, a tea channel led by Kristi Cook, poured out a slew of videos recapping the onslaught of fan stories detailing their poor experiences with Ballinger. On June 10, 2023, Cook essentially restates and distills McIntyre's long explanation of his relationship with Ballinger into a little over eleven minutes ("MAJOR

TROUBLE”). While she points to other social media platforms for documentation of corruption, like Twitter, and pulls some key screenshots of the “colleeny’s weenies” group chat, Cook does not engage in an intensive consolidation labor, instead relying on centralized gossip already featured in previous drama videos. Cook allows other drama channels to perform the consolidation labor for her, where SpillSesh’s role becomes a platform to restate and uphold others’ denouncements of Ballinger.

At the same time, exhaustive and visible consolidation labor can mean opportunity for other drama channels. For example, SWOOP, a commentary channel who goes by the same alias, runs headfirst into the exploration of Ballinger’s actions on various social media platforms. Framing her videos as documentaries underpinned by legitimating language like “research” and “my team”, SWOOP and her associates delve deep into Ballinger’s online presence across social media and traditional media outlets (“The END” 5:08). SWOOP also collects direct stories from fans through interviews (“The END” 2:03:45). Through this work, SWOOP uncovers some tweets not featured in other drama channels’ videos, like the thread from Becky discussing her participation in the Ballinger fandom and her thoughts on the traumatizing “yoga challenge” (“The END” 1:53:30). Here, SWOOP makes obvious her analytical and examination abilities, spending over two hours exposing previously unheard or once largely private fan stories. In comparison with SpillSesh, this concerted effort to consolidate gossip is rewarded by viewership and greater audience engagement, as SWOOP boasts 3,042,509 views over SpillSesh’s 311,481 views at the time of writing.

Drama channels’ consolidation of gossip to YouTube is a practice that enables the progression of drama narratives and is foundational to the kinds of videos drama channels make. YouTube lacks the social networking features of private messaging and group discussion

available on other social media platforms, meaning that close influencer relationships with fans are built outside of YouTube. Shedding light on microcelebrity abuses of power, especially the interactions that happen in seemingly private settings, asks drama channels to learn the contours of other platforms and collect any receipts that can bring a case of scandal to a close.

There is also a simultaneous boundary making and blurring associated with the consolidation labor practice. Drama channels acknowledge a world of gossip completely outside of YouTube, reinforcing a border between YouTube drama coverage and the rest of the social media sphere. At the same time, drama channels canonize external pieces of gossip to the YouTube drama they are discussing, pulling narrative threads from outside platforms through to YouTube and back again. As there is no YouTube drama without YouTube, there is also no YouTube drama without drama channels managing their own microcelebrity status and investigative capabilities in the larger platform ecosystem.

Liveness and making room for audiences

Liveness is a key technological affordance of a variety of social media platforms, like YouTube, that incurs participation and connectivity. For BeReal users, for example, togetherness is formed through affordances of liveness, or daily notifications encouraging members to join in posting within a shared temporal space (Taylor). On YouTube, content creators can start and record live streams, allowing audience members to join in the creator's discussion real time and/or tune in after the conversation has already passed. Drama channels on YouTube often wield the feature of liveness for their own gain. The drama community engages in the digital

affordance of liveness to both invite audience participation *and* redirect visibility to spaces outside of YouTube for temporary community formation.

Audience participation

YouTube has limited social networking features for direct engagement between audiences and content creators outside of liking, commenting, subscribing, and participating in a YouTuber's livestream. During livestreams, drama channels invite and reward audience members' discourse, as well as their financial contributions to the channel. Such an attempt to forge emotional relations with audiences is in line with microcelebrity practices related to the "networked reality practices of celebrities" reliant on "parasociality", or the "performance of emotional bonds ... to promote and build self-brands" (Usher 183). Liveness intervenes in this process of celebrity-fan attachment as influencers shift "from a culture of archived semi-permanent content to one of streaming always transient content", most likely motivated by "followers' cultivations of perpetual "FOMO," or the "fear of missing out"" ("From Internet Celebrities" 89).

Drama channels utilize live-streaming functions on YouTube and other platforms, like Twitch and Patreon, to capitalize on audiences' attention, money, and desires for omnipresent emotional intimacy. FOMO in this context can be understood as missing out on the drama influencer's updates — personal and otherwise — as well as missing out on active participation in the community discussion of a scandal. Thus, liveness as a practice of the drama public is founded upon goals of microcelebrity status by giving audience members transitory access to discourse-making.

The H3 Podcast demonstrates the practice and purpose of liveness as part of the Colleen Ballinger scandal. During their livestream on June 21, 2023, the commentary channel, hosted by Ethan Klein, Olivia Lopes, and others, toggles between a PowerPoint breaking down the controversy, commentary on the situation, and reading out comments from viewers (“Ballinger PowerPoint”). As the stream goes on, some viewers donate to the channel or are members of the channel, made visible in the live chat with enlarged comments and color coding denoting the approximate amount given. These comments are then prioritized by the hosts who read them aloud and thank the viewers for their financial support.

One such comment from a viewer, Amanda, is brought to hosts’ attention, with Klein announcing that she donated and that she wants to add a correction to Olivia’s description of Ballinger’s background (“Ballinger PowerPoint” 1:30:52). Amanda claims that Ballinger was only homeschooled for one year, instead of most of her childhood as had been stated. Though a miniscule portion of the controversy, Amanda’s two-fold action of donating to get her point of view across to the hosts conveys audience investment in being a part of the drama public and the forging of celebrity accounts in relation to scandal. Amanda wants to contribute her knowledge and insights to the conversation, putting her on more equal footing with the hosts, but in order to be acknowledged, she must dole out a financial offering first.

In this instance, the audience is given the opportunity, in some capacity, to *feel* as much a part of the drama public as the creators of the livestream are. While they may not possess their own drama channels or followings, the livestream offers a fleeting chance for viewers to make judgment calls, enable gossip distribution, and play by the principles of the drama community — albeit, for a price. The livestreaming functions on YouTube enable a real-time shaping of

discourse on behalf of the audience, as the hosts are incentivized to respond to comments from audience members and construct emotional bonds for continued viewership.

However, drama channels still possess full control over their live streams, regardless of audience desire to be involved in the discussion. Olivia immediately rebuts Amanda's claim around Ballinger's homeschooled status, stating that Ballinger constantly labeled herself as "The Homeschooled Kid" ("Ballinger PowerPoint" 1:31:00). Even though Amanda made a donation and joined the conversation briefly, her presence is reneged to the live chat section as soon as the hosts decide to move on from the topic. She is not in the room and, therefore, is subject to any of the hosts' moderation tactics posed on the chat, including limiting comments and blocking users. The H3 team, like other drama channel creators, are invested in protecting the claims they produce around a controversy and cementing them as fact, meaning audience participation is encouraged only in momentary, restricted ways.

Off-YouTube liveness

At times, the liveness offered on extra-YouTube platforms is more advantageous for the drama public. Besides drama creators receiving in-the-moment support, off-YouTube liveness allows drama creators to *reorient visibility* to their ephemeral live community before being brought back to YouTube.

Twitch is one such largely used platform, boasting intricate and advanced affordances relating to a viewing community's interactions with the drama streamer. Some are "social affordances" which "emphasise the importance of the user and their environment", and are found in elements like the webcam and microphone (Sjöblom et al. 22). Some are "revenue

affordances” which emphasize practices that “afford direct revenue in relation to specific behaviours”, such as “acknowledging the subscribers and donors of the stream” (Sjöblom et al. 23-24). For example, when a viewer gifts a subscription to a streamer’s channel, a message from the subscriber plays out loud and/or a gifting animation pops up on the screen, prompting the creator to verbally display their gratitude. YouTube’s livestreaming features are in direct competition with the mechanisms of Twitch liveness, where Twitch offers complex elements designed for variability in audience engagement with creators, whether it is through sound, gifs, or text.

Adam McIntyre relies on Twitch for a majority of his Colleen Ballinger scandal videos, where he records Twitch livestreams to later upload to YouTube. McIntyre thus permanently affixes his reactions on Twitch to the larger scandal narrative playing out on YouTube. In his YouTube comments, McIntyre invites viewers of his YouTube videos to join his Twitch livestreams for instant access to new revelations or receipts, even with the intention of posting these recordings to YouTube as soon as they have concluded.

Reacting to Ballinger’s original apology video in 2020, McIntyre first goes live on Twitch to give the initial glimpse of Ballinger’s true persona before those on YouTube get the chance to see it (“ballinger GASLIT”). For example, McIntyre breaks down Ballinger’s attempt to edit livestream footage — where she planned on gifting lingerie to McIntyre as a “joke” — to make it seem as if McIntyre was begging her for the underwear. McIntyre puts Ballinger’s apology side-by-side with the original livestream to prove the falsity of her story, stating that his truth was “the truth” (“ballinger GASLIT” 20:35). Here, McIntyre finds utility in liveness being off-YouTube, as it allows him to reorient visibility to a more intimate, close-knit space of true fans and admirers. McIntyre gives viewers the opportunity to seek out information — like

Ballinger's edit of the lingerie livestream — ahead of YouTube watchers in exchange for real-time financial and emotional support.

As McIntyre divulges the truth, the chat is littered with praise of McIntyre and the screen displays endless pop-ups of new followers. Although the Twitch livestream is open to all, only viewers who are truly invested in the Ballinger scandal *and* McIntyre's particular narrative actually join, especially with the knowledge that the recording will eventually be put on YouTube. Before the livestream recording is put to judgment in front of a larger YouTube audience, McIntyre momentarily sequesters his most adamant supporters to a space where they can voice their opinions and admiration in multiple audio-visual ways. This pseudo-private space offers the ephemeral illusion of an exclusive group gathering, one which has open borders and never claims otherwise, but essentially becomes a video call with a creator and his fans.

In some ways, McIntyre and his temporary community mimic the practices of “networked enclaves” which Sarah Florini details in her discussion of oscillating networked counterpublics (Florini). Marginalized peoples seek virtual spaces outside of the watchful eye of the mainstream to “interpret external rhetoric about themselves and create new rhetorical strategies” (Florini 73). Florini cites the Black online community as pursuing a “multimedia, transplatform, and mobile set of resources for creating enclaves”, often done through specialized podcasts and private Facebook groups, like the Chitlin' Circuit podcasts (Florini 73). Similarly, McIntyre presents his followers with the opportunity to join in a less visible space for discussion of sensitive topics and sheltered interpretations of conversations on YouTube. Because McIntyre's contribution to the controversy is subject to mainstream derision or disbelief (Papa Gut), his Twitch livestream becomes a place for active, controlled inclusion of believers and a destruction of hostility to McIntyre's story. However, McIntyre is not performing counterpublic

practices as per logics of systemic marginalization. Unlike the Black networked counterpublic maintaining boundaries between enclaves and the mainstream, McIntyre directs his Twitch livestream based on an understanding that the group will inevitably be brought to dominant discourse after publishing the recording to YouTube. Furthermore, McIntyre has clear financial motives for continuing his livestream rather than the protection of marginalized speech and the freedom to act outside of hegemonic norms. McIntyre accrues tangible revenue from audience donations and subscriptions, where membership in the Twitch community is kept through social and monetary means. Therefore, the drama public extracts and appropriates counterpublic practices to create a mirage of intimate spaces for unfiltered discussion amongst equals who have faced rejection from an unapologetic dominant party. In actuality, these livestreams are evanescent in their separation from the majority, ultimately leading directly back to mainstream avenues for viewership.

With such attention to audience involvement in the detailing of a scandal, drama channels take advantage of liveness on and off YouTube to gain backing for their renditions of the truth and to bolster their influencer power. By allowing brief yet consistent audience participation in a scandal's discussion, drama creators wield liveness as a strong affective force to make audiences feel as though they are on the same level of discourse-making as the creators. Between audiences and drama channels, liveness thus enables a give-and-take relationship. Audiences give their viewership and financial contributions to drama YouTubers. In return, they gain access to groundbreaking gossip before those on YouTube and/or gain the temporary ability to add to the construction of scandal narratives.

Discussion and conclusion

On YouTube, the drama community remains a key group facilitating the review and analysis of various kinds of celebrities, often focusing on overreaches of power and heightened transgressions. Altogether, the drama community acts as a public with concerns over encroaching Internet celebrity power and pursues actions to resist these transgressions, as allowed by the environment and governance of YouTube. The public's activities are fully founded on community principles of: *care/justice*, *accountability*, *transparency*, and *authenticity*. Such principles are revealed through practices of: *recursive viewing*, *consolidating gossip*, and *liveness and making room for audiences*. Studying the drama community on YouTube as a distinct public thus elicits new understandings of the drama genre, microcelebrity, and digital publics, especially in relation to power and what it means for members of this public. In particular, this research on the drama community opens up discussions around: the drama genre as a gendered spectrum of sub-genres, simultaneity as the path towards microcelebrity, and the drama public as inherently looking inwards.

Power in the public

As a public, the drama community is obviously concerned with power and who gets to exert it in which ways. What becomes crucial to understand is the layered approach to gaining and losing power on behalf of drama channels. On the micro level, drama channels operate under a gendered spectrum of sub-genres, in which they can exhibit feminized “tea” characteristics or masculine “commentary” characteristics in different levels depending on the situation. They can

also be conceived as multitaskers managing the challenges of simultaneity, in which they are both influencers and critics of microcelebrity at the same time. On the macro level, the drama public on YouTube can be characterized as a public standing counter to celebrity power online, which necessitates a looking outside of the public and a consistent looking inward for transgressors.

Drama: a gendered spectrum of sub-genres

While the drama genre on YouTube has been theorized as hybrid, it can also be understood as a spectrum of sub-genres between the feminized tea genre and the masculinized commentary genre. The position of the drama channel within the spectrum informs the kind of influencing and legitimating power they have, especially in association with masculinity, though these positions are unstable as dramas and creators evolve.

Adam McIntyre identifies the markers made by commentary channel Papa Gut to distinguish commentary content from tea content, in which association with femininity through emotionality is seen as a problem (“it’s not grooming” 1:21:00). In reality, the lines between commentary channels and tea channels are very blurred, as drama channels move between “commentary” and “tea” attributes often. The drama genre on YouTube exhibits variance due to its sub-genres, with the most prominent being tea and commentary (Lewis and Christin). Such sub-genres are staunchly gendered, with tea channels being associated with more feminine forms of content like beauty (Lewis and Christin 1639). Conversely, commentary channels are male-coded due to their relation to masculine objects of study such as gaming and prank videos (Lewis and Christin 1639).

These gendered lines of content also come with particular conventions in form, in which drama channels operating within these distinct sub-genres utilize specific kinds of editing techniques and aesthetic sensibilities to add to their label of either tea or commentary. For example, most of the commentary channels observed in this particular research (i.e. The H3 Podcast, SWOOP) rely on long-form videos which often included in-depth interviews and dark backgrounds to connote seriousness. Tea channels teeter between long and short-form videos, which are often stylized to mirror the aesthetics of tabloid magazines with flashy imagery and bright lettering. In their direct relation to the gendered nature of drama's sub-genres on YouTube, such practices of presentation become gendered as well.

Depending on the circumstance, however, commentary channels may pursue tea channel attributes and vice versa. In this case, it becomes helpful to think about the drama genre as a *spectrum between tea and commentary*, where all drama channels fall in line somewhere along the spectrum in every controversy they cover. These points are not fixed and drama channels can change their position in the spectrum at any time. Here, tea is related to mainstream understandings of the feminine: nurturing, care, attention to appearances, flamboyant aesthetic choices, and vulnerability. Commentary holds on to conventional understandings of the masculine: strong words, brashness, dark and minimal aesthetic choices, and being unapologetic. Such tea versus commentary labels are a modality for expressing gender, especially as a legitimating force. Those more in line with the commentary attributes, and thus masculinity, are viewed as more credible and worthy of status (Lewis and Christin 1652).

In thinking of McIntyre again, he shifts between masculine and feminine attributes all the time. Papa Gut, a commentary channel, describes McIntyre as a tea channel and mocks him for this ("it's not grooming" 14:20). In a small way, he is right, as McIntyre does exhibit

characteristics of tea channels. He is not afraid to be emotional in his videos (“a police report”; “i’m sad”). He displays a deep care for female celebrities and stars, with his computer background displaying a photo of Mariah Carey (“why i dont talk”). He deliberately platforms fellow victims as an act of care, reminding them that their stories are important (“speaking to weenies”). At the same time, McIntyre does deviate from the tea label. He uses bold, strong language to tear down his offenders (“kory desoto”; “it’s not grooming”). In many ways, McIntyre is also the leader in the scandal as its original inciter in 2020, thus aligning himself with more commentary characteristics.

As McIntyre claims, tea and commentary channels are essentially the same in their practices and principles within the drama umbrella (“it’s not grooming” 23:16). However, there are distinct, identifiable, and gendered markers for each subgenre informing each channel’s place on the spectrum. Whether a drama channel more closely identifies with feminine “tea” characteristics or with masculine “commentary” attributes, drama channels make deliberate choices around their positioning on the spectrum in order to negotiate power while simultaneously staying true to their branded selves. This adds to ongoing discussions of drama as it operates on YouTube, in which the distinctions made between seemingly feminine or masculine drama channels are fraught and allow for variability in expression.

Simultaneity as the path towards microcelebrity

Drama channels gain their influencing power through microcelebrity practices unique to traditions of celebrity critique, illuminating new understandings of microcelebrity. Unlike other

forms of influencers, drama channels are the critics and celebrities simultaneously, shading the kinds of behaviors they exhibit when building their followings.

On their own, drama channels do not fall precisely under the definitions of what it means to be an influencer. While they maintain large audiences of admirers through “highly engaging and personalized content production” to “amplify messages”, this activity is intertwined with drama channels’ purpose for celebrity judgment (“From Internet Celebrities” 71). In many ways, drama channels simply do more than previous conceptions of influencers, not only in practices of engagement but in the ways they choose to gain authority over their particular narratives and timelines.

Drama channels thus derive their power from critique *and* their wielding of unique, drama-specific microcelebrity practices. Akin to already defined microcelebrity practices, drama channels do pursue the construction of “self-conscious, carefully constructed personas” within their videos (Marwick 337). However, as they build up their fame through appeals to audiences and an attention to the technological capabilities of YouTube as a platform, drama channels enact their authority over others through drama-specific practices of critique undergirded by their specific principles. For example, it is not just that drama channels will pursue liveness as a way to connect with their audiences as a way to gain fame. They pursue liveness to connect with fans by giving them the opportunity to participate in discourse-making *and* for means of in-the-moment judgment and admonishment of celebrities who they deem are deserving of punishment. Building an audience and a channel persona is a rite of passage for an influencer — microcelebrity for drama channels means being an influencer built on fundamentals of critique.

Drama YouTubers are a distinctive kind of celebrity which stretches definitions of influencers and Internet celebrities to new and exciting possibilities. In many instances, they are

the media producers, the celebrities, and the audiences all wrapped up into one, possible through the flexible system of celebrity (Marcus; Marshall). For this reason, this research advances conceptions of microcelebrity in which the borders between celebrity and critic collapse in on themselves. The ways to gain celebrity for drama channels is inherent in their practices of judgment and their ethical foundations of transparency, authenticity, and protection of the unheard.

The drama public: an inherent looking inwards

As a whole, the drama community not only manages its power as a public in its evaluation of influencer and traditional celebrity power, but also manages power within itself through a consistent looking inwards for transgressors. This is, again, due to the reality that drama channels are often influencers in their own right with very large followings and branded selves. Conceiving of a digital public built on critique as one managing borders between external-internal dramas shines a light on the flexibility of such a public and how it approaches power.

While YouTube may be the most “powerful player” in enacting authority over the drama community (Lewis and Christin 1649), drama channels vie for power over each other *every time* they make a video. With recursive viewing, for example, drama channels fragment each other’s narratives and indirectly presuppose that their own version of events is the most correct one. Drama channels’ status against others is a consistent concern for drama channels and, in some ways, more present than the looming existence of YouTube. This dynamic of inherently looking inwards is central to the everyday practices and principles of this public.

Publics generally form in relation to a larger body of power as means to resist its influence through debate and heightened participation from members. In this sense, there is the public and the powerful “other” which stands outside of and is tangential to the public. For Habermas, there is the liberal public sphere and the state (Habermas). For Florini, there is the Black networked counterpublic and whiteness in the digital mainstream (Florini). For Abidin, there are the refracted publics and the heavily saturated attention economy (“Refracted Publics”). In the case of the drama community, the public is formed for the purposes of drawing attention to and countering celebrity power.

However, what remains novel about the drama public on YouTube is the inherent and consistent act of looking inwards at its own celebrity power. Drama channels constantly critique those outside of the public (traditional celebrities, YouTube influencers) as much as they evaluate the actions of those within the public. In the case of the Colleen Ballinger scandal, drama channels called out Ballinger as well as the “miscreants” within their own camp, such as kodeerants and Johnny Silvestri. Here, there is not necessarily a public and its powerful other. In YouTube’s drama community, the drama public and the powerful other meld together and become one at the same time. Recognizing this possibility for publics in the digital age is necessary for approaching new online groups vying for authority, especially ones which are concerned with assessing the actions of others.

Limitations

Due to the time constraints of this research project, there was not an ability to interview drama channel creators or examine drama channel presence on other social media platforms.

While drama channels did consistently link their other social media accounts on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, it was not feasible to explore these areas outside of what was explicitly mentioned on YouTube within the two months of data collection. For this reason, this project may be missing some key characteristics pertaining to the practice of consolidation labor and how drama channels navigate the differing digital environments nascent to the various social media platforms involved.

In relation to the lack of interviews, the principles laid out in this thesis are eked out based on the kind of messaging communicated via the videos at hand, but may not be indicative of intrinsic personal motivations or emotions. Such moral codes are tied to a performance of ethics that reveals the kinds of guidelines and self-checks that are deployed by the drama community, but cannot speak to the beliefs of individual channels. Furthermore, in line with the beyond-the-radar activities of nouveau digital, refracted publics, there may be some messaging on behalf of drama channels related to social steganography, or information hidden in plain sight meant for only certain audiences (“Refracted Publics”). It is vital to keep in mind that the content drama channels produce only tells certain parts of their inherent practices, principles, and perceptions of power, and some of the nuances may be lost when not directly interacting with drama channels themselves.

The case study itself also presents a set of limitations. Because this is a singular drama in the midst of a sea of scandals, there may be some other important principles and practices apparent in other cases which were not featured in this work. While this case study undergirds a variety of drama activities in meaning-making as well as associated ethical guideposts, drama channels may change their strategies for delivering information depending on the type of scandal

and the players involved. All of this had to be set aside due to the restricted time required to finish this project, and does set up the potential for future iterations of this sort of research.

Sampling drama channels presented a limitation, as only drama channels connected to the case study were chosen for inspection. All of these delivered an Anglo-spheric perspective due to their primary location being centered around the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. Here it becomes clear that this project cannot offer a comprehensive understanding of the drama community globally, as that was out of the scope for this research.

Finally, whiteness was originally a key theory for approaching the drama community that had to be let go. YouTube has a tradition for perpetuating normative whiteness through its neo-liberalist tendencies (Hokka; Ma), and, in the beginning of this project, there was a desire to explore the drama community through the lens of whiteness, especially in relation to the male-coded commentary sub-genre of the drama community (Lewis and Christin). However, as the process of theorizing and data collection went along, it became too difficult to track all of these moving parts. Normative whiteness, particularly in relation to discussions of patriarchy, is still integral to making sense of YouTube's role in modern celebrity culture, and should continue to be considered in other related studies.

Future research

The practices and principles laid out in the definition of YouTube's drama community as a public serve as fruitful ground for new discoveries around microcelebrity and publics. The principles of the drama community, as identified and explained in this thesis, may add to the possibilities of defining influencers in the digital era of celebrity critique. Internet stardom may

be tied to previous conceptions of microcelebrity practices — showcasing a seemingly authentic branded self — but for drama channels this influencer power shows up as tied to desires for questioning celebrity overreaches, specifically tied to practices of seeking out information, creating unique timelines, and participating in the narrative-making process within scandals. Therefore, future studies into microcelebrity should contend with this possibility for the construction of Internet celebrities in spaces outside of YouTube and within YouTube itself.

As a public, power is a fundamental consideration of the drama community with often gendered undertones. Those who are perceived as closer to gossip, or tea, are feminized and often deemed less worthy of credibility or support (Lewis and Christin 1652). However, YouTube's historical reckoning and acceptance of normative whiteness may also have an impact in shaping the kinds of discourses and activities possible for the drama community. Whiteness is thus a major discussion point of the bias apparent on YouTube, in which future scholarship may seek to study the drama community through the lens of whiteness. In this way, such studies can uncover how the practices and principles laid out in this project can be connected to the racial dynamics of YouTube which affect creators' statuses and their visibility.

Returning to microcelebrity, the practices laid out in this project can be applied and interrogated in other contexts and for other means, such as looking into the widely-followed drama community on Twitter. This can potentially widen the boundaries of what is considered to be the drama public, in which considering the possibility of a cross-platform existence may be crucial. For example, the practice of recursive viewing can be applied to other settings and other sorts of creators, though this may be used for purposes outside of critiquing celebrity transgressions and coverage associated with this. Such inquiries can have a revelatory potential,

uncovering what it means to broadcast oneself online for the purpose of questioning others, all for a slew of interested parties to examine this interrogation themselves.

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