Racist Tweets and Real Tea: The Laura Lee Scandal

An Examination of the PR Transgressions within the YouTube Beauty Community

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JMC 309: Public Relations

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November 27, 2018

The YouTuber: the blossoming career path creating celebrities out of anyone who owns a camera and editing software. Since the creation of YouTube, a revolution has occurred within the public domain and redefined what it means to be a celebrity and given the public new ways to learn, laugh, and grow. However, with the increased interconnectivity and unprecedented access to YouTube, the celebrity populous has become inundated with raw, vulnerable, somewhat relatable figures that lack the refined grace and business acumen previously associated with established conventional celebrities. YouTube's utilization of the internet relies on the use of other social media platforms to stay relevant and connect with fandoms. Social media has become the birthplace of controversy for YouTubers. Enter Laura Lee, a beauty YouTuber upended by the revelation of past racist tweets. Throughout this paper, the scandal will be summarized, the response from Lee will be dissected, and finally, observations will be made to understand and learn from Lee's scandal and response.

August 2018: YouTube's Beauty Community is in times darker than a poorly blended smoky eye. War is afoot between five of the bigger beauty bloggers. On one side: Manny MUA, Laura Lee, Nikita Dragun, and Gabriel Zamora. Their foe, Jeffree Star. The basis for this is shrouded in mystery and broken friendships. In response to a picture tweeted by Zamora of the foursome, captioned with the following, "Bitch is bitter because without him we're doing better."[1] Due to ongoing issues between the two sides, Twitter users attributed the "Bitch" as being Jeffree Star. In response to this photo and tweet shade, unknown users dug into the backgrounds and social media feeds of the foursome and unearthed troubling tweets. Each

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[1] Schroeder, A. (2018, October 30). More YouTube beauty vloggers' racist posts unearthed after Jeffree Star callout. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/youtube-vlogger-racist-laura-lee-gabriel-zamora-jeffree-star/

member of the foursome had tweets revealed, however, the tweet that garnered more attention was that of Laura Lee. The tweet in question was a reply to the principal tweet of another user only known as @minor15. The reply in question is the following, "tip for all black people if you pull your pants up you can run from the police faster.. #yourwelcome." The reply was tweeted on July 12, 2012. Six years later, this tweet would cause the emerging Laura Lee economic empire to crumble.

Laura Lee began posting YouTube videos from her native Alabama in 2013.[2] After amassing her initial YouTube following and clout, Lee relocated to Los Angeles – which serves as the YouTube capital. Since moving to Los Angeles, Lee has amassed a following of 5 million subscribers pre-scandal.[3] This success allowed her to create her own makeup line and work with several brands on collaborations. Due to the scandal, Lee suffered a massive economic downturn. According to SocialBlade, as of August 31, Lee's channel has 4.48 million subscribers.[4] According to Vox, the loss of 200,000 subscribers is estimated to cost Lee approximately 25,000 dollars per year in income.[5] Using this statistic, it is estimated that Lee can lose 125,000 dollars in income per year due to the loss of 1 million subscribers. In conjunction with the previous loss, Lee's tweet also caused several brands to end collaboration projects and business dealing with both her personal brand – Laura Lee – and her cosmetics brand – Laura Lee Los Angeles. Such

[2] Wikipedia. (2018, November 16). Laura Lee (YouTuber). Retrieved November 26, 2018, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laura_Lee_(YouTuber)

[3] Urgo. (n.d.). Laura88lees YouTube Stats (Summary Profile) - Social Blade Stats. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/laura88lee/monthly)

[4] Urgo. (n.d.). Laura88lees YouTube Stats (Summary Profile) - Social Blade Stats. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/laura88lee/monthly)

[5] Abad-Santos, A. (2018, August 31). Laura Lee, Jeffree Star, and the racism scandal upending the YouTube beauty community, explained. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from https://www.vox.com/2018/8/28/17769996/laura-lee-jeffree-star-racism-subscriber-count

brands include Ulta, Diff Eyewear, Morphe, Colourpop, and Boxycharm.[67] The effects of the tweet are not only business-related but also personal. The foursome has since broken up, with lines being drawn between parties involved and differing opinions and versions of what occurred.

The severity of Lee's scandal eclipsed that of the other members of the foursome due to the abhorrent public relations response taken by Lee. At the beginning of the issues, Lee deactivated her Twitter, deleted the tweet in question, and went silent for a short time. After her silence, Lee uploaded an apology video and released a twitter statement shortly after. Her response showed a lack of planning and, in turn, caused the crisis to grow exponentially.

First, the risk for each impacted audience was overwhelming. The tweet offends much of the general public. This wide audience contributes to the second audience: those who do not know or follow Lee directly. The impact on those who do not know her is minimal, but powerful nonetheless. This audience is able to judge on the issue alone, without much bias. In turn, this public may become vocal on the issue. The risk is that those who may not know or follow Lee can influence those who do or others who do not. They can also be vocal with valid points and opinions that can influence public opinion. This vocal nature impacts the public that is comprised of her followers because it can create a moral dilemma: continue support or take issue with her behavior?

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[6] Williams, J. (2018, August 23). Laura Lee's racist tweet causes beauty brand to drop YouTube blogger's sponsorships. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from https://www.newsweek.com/laura-lee-youtube-makeup-tweet-racist-2018-1088232
[7] Abad-Santos, A. (2018, August 31). Laura Lee, Jeffree Star, and the racism scandal upending the YouTube beauty community, explained. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from https://www.vox.com/2018/8/28/17769996/laura-lee-jeffree-star-racism-subscriber-count

The risk associated with the follower population is the most volatile. The follower population contributes the most to Lee's success, and also influence the mindset of the companies that choose to work in tandem with Lee. If her follower base shrinks, Lee will be less appealing to potential collaborators. Followers are also the fiercest defenders and critics of influencers like Lee. Just as the first audience is vocal, the disgruntled follower wields much of the same influence.

The third audience is the companies that currently have existing deals or partnerships with Lee. This audience directly affects Lee's income and public perception. Corporate partners also have a stake in how Lee represents herself due to the attachment and association of their brand with her. Collaborators such as Morphe display Lee's name prominently across their website and have used her likeness in promotional material. This association can be fruitful for companies and their YouTube collaborators. However, this can also be detrimental for both entities. With their association, companies must make decisions quickly if public relations issues akin to the tweet arise in order to avoid damaging their reputation through association. It is the responsibility of the corporate partner to monitor and manage who they associate with in order to preserve their brand. This preservation is why corporate partners are an audience that must be considered in every public relations decision. Once a brand attaches itself to an idea or a figure, it is associated with all aspects of that item. The result of Lee's lack of risk management prior to the crisis was a negative impact to each audience.

Lee's response contained few actions that truly mitigated the risks posed to each audience and her overall brand. Two actions that somewhat mitigated the risk was Lee's release of her apology video and her twitter release statement. These actions helped to provide some sort of apology and commentary from Lee. However, they also proved to be somewhat ineffective due

to their short nature and lack of detail. Lee did create a consistent message throughout her apology video and statement, however, her message is rife with misinformation, which negatively impacts its effectiveness. She kept the same message throughout while simultaneously committing several public relations don'ts.[8]

The first don't Lee commits is lying.[9] This occurs with two points in her message: her appearance and the details of the tweet. In the apology video, Lee attempts to cry and cultivate a distraught appearance. Regardless of its true sincerity, her appearance made her video seem fake or heavily edited.  Within her video, Lee references the tweet in questions as a retweet when in actuality it is a reply to a tweet. This lie is important, because it shifts the blame and attempts to absolve Lee of the responsibility for the tweet. This is repeated in the written statement as well. By saying it is a retweet, Lee attempts to minimize her part in the tweet's creation as if it was someone else's and she republished it onto her account. However, since it was a reply, Lee was the one responsible for the tweet's origin and wording. Committing this don't is detrimental.

The second don't Lee committed was leaning toward withholding information.[10] Since her apology video was 4 minutes and 45 seconds in length, a massive amount of information is being withheld. Rather than give her side of the story and truly apologize, Lee withheld information and negatively impacted the effectiveness of her apology by doing so. Instead of attempting to be sincere and forthcoming with her following and the other publics, she delivered a short, curated response that did not produce much detail and enlightenment.

[8] Seitel, F. P. (2019). The practice of public relations (13th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
[9] Seitel, F. P. (2019). The practice of public relations (13th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
[10] Seitel, F. P. (2019). The practice of public relations (13th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.

Considering the mishandling of the delivery, Lee's apology did manage to utilize some crisis do's, such as limiting the lines of communication.[11] Lee deactivated her Twitter for a brief period as well as disabled the comments on her YouTube channel. This limiting of social mediums helped streamline the communication channels and keep her message consistent.

Lee did not handle the media beast effectively.[12] With her response, she lacked the finesse to effectively inform the media. Lee's apology video created fodder for the media and speculation as to its authenticity. By being so reserved with her apology, it lacked the detail and commentary necessary to supply the media with enough information to minimize the speculation and opinion within their commentary on the crisis. Instead, articles related to the crisis critique her video, scrutinize Lee's response and overall commentate on the situation rather than provide information.

If I had represented Laura Lee as a Public Relations specialist, I would have advised her differently. I would have encouraged open communication with her followers, accurate acknowledgement of the tweet and its origin, advised her to take responsibility for the tweet and her actions, and overall improved the authenticity of Lee's methods and messages. In order to improve the communications, I would have advised Lee to communicate as soon as possible. The faster she would be able to apologize, the faster she would be able to salvage her image. Lee would have been able to also give her side of the story first and provide accurate information to the media and her followers for them to judge her on. Lee also did not truly acknowledge her role in the creation of the tweet. If I were her PR professional, I would have encouraged Lee to recognize that the tweet was a reply, not a retweet and had her acknowledge her role. This

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[11] Seitel, F. P. (2019). The practice of public relations (13th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
[12] Seitel, F. P. (2019). The practice of public relations (13th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.

acknowledgement would allow Lee to take complete ownership of her actions. Complete ownership is needed in this situation because it is ethical. Finally, I would increase the authenticity of Lee's methods and messages. I would personally have her reshoot the apology video and tell her not to attempt to cry and to not edit the video. Overall, I would have communicated an ethical, honest apologetic message taking full responsibility for Lee's tweet through her social medias and YouTube channel. I would use these communication pathways because they are the two that are most used by YouTubers and their followers and allow for more direct contact while giving the impression of familiarity.

Other techniques I would have employed in this situation include a charitable endeavor to help those afflicted by social justice issues. I would suggest partnering and working with– not just donating to– a legitimate charity that works to decrease the impact of certain social issues within the African-American community. I would suggest an organization such as the Innocence Project, which is a nonprofit organization that provides free legal services to those who may have been wrongly accused. By partnering with an organization and doing charity work, Lee could enhance her education on the topic and help those disenfranchised by the situations afflicting the community. Overall, Lee would have to work to repair her image and that of her brand. In order to do so, she would have to be unfiltered, honest, and forthcoming concerning the situation.

August 2018 proved to be a controversial month for YouTube's beauty community, one filled with revelations and tears. Through the scandal of Laura Lee's racist tweets, the fallout from her response and the actions both taken and not, society has learned how fragile YouTube celebrity can be. The missteps by Lee show that if not handled correctly and adequately planned for, a public relations crisis can become detrimental for anyone, especially a YouTuber whose brand is their personality and name. The crisis Lee found herself embroiled in included racist

tweets unearthed by Twitter users and resulted in the dissolution of her influencer friend group.

Her response was less than ideal. Through the supposed use of editing and the misinformation

contained within her statements, Lee fanned the already raging flames of the internet with fodder

for commentary and speculation. In response, I proposed the methods and manners in which I

would have handled Lee's crisis if working as her public relations consultant. By implementing

methods such as doing actual charity work, showing authentic remorse and sorrow, and taking

responsibility for her actions, Laura Lee could have mitigated the risks of the crisis at hand and

potentially saved her reputation and business. The internet is forever, and sometimes it can haunt

you. As Bill Gates said, "The internet is becoming the town square for the global village of

tomorrow."[13] If one is not careful, they may find themselves shamed in the town square.

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[13] Gates, B. (n.d.). Bill Gates Quotes. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from
https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/bill_gates_384628?src=t_internet

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