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The Role of PR in Celebrity Crises: Doja Cat 2020 Case

In 2020, Doja Cat, a rapper and singer, faced numerous accusations regarding her online behavior. Public Relations practitioners are crucial to alleviating the impact of a celebrity's negative public image. PR practitioners influence controversies by reshaping negative stories; they offer assistance with online apologies and rebranding. It was up to her PR team to redirect the negative attention toward her new song "Say So". This essay will cover crisis communication for celebrities, showing how PR professionals adapt to their actions and culture, and examine the rhetorical situation by considering rhetoricians, audience members, and external influences that shape a public response.

A great first step to alleviate a celebrity's negative image would be to develop a crisis communication plan. This consists of a public statement and apology, providing clarity of the situation. William Benoit, who coined Image Repair Theory, illustrates how public apologies and correcting one's behavior can lessen the resentment of audience members and increase their trust. Taking accountability for the offensive act reduces the public backlash the celebrity receives, according to Benoit (1997). PR professionals are skilled, helping with the tone and delivery of the core message to ensure the audience is in balance with the celebrity. Doja Cat received backlash in 2020 after old videos resurfaced online. Doja Cat was accused of participating in online chat rooms, engaging in offensive language and behavior. She was guided through her PR

team and issued a public apology via Instagram live. She addressed her behavior and expressed regret for her actions, which is an example of taking accountability in hopes of regaining the audience's trust and forgiveness. PR practitioners must account for loyal supporters, those who are willing to forgive, casual listeners, and critics, who view the apology as a pretext or superficial tactics.

A second step to focus on is strategic media management, monitoring, and evaluating media activities. PR professionals historically divert the media's attention to positive outlooks. In the past, celebrities have participated in sit-down interviews to explain their side of the story with factual evidence. Sometimes, you will hear about upcoming projects or what the artist is working on to improve their image or save face. Following the chat room controversy, Doja Cat's PR team promoted the viral song "Say So," which marked a significant peak in the artist's career in 2020.

PR professionals focus on long-term reputation to rebuild the celebrity's image. An example would be seeing in the media how the artist might "rebrand" themselves, or enter into a new "era". Some might donate to charities or volunteer for community work. PR strategies like these are pivotal because the media typically has the last word. General audience members might agree with "canceling" a celebrity, regardless of whether an apology was issued. Due to the rapid spread of information through various media outlets, narratives or rumors that remain unaddressed can significantly damage a celebrity's career/reputation. PR professionals support celebrities in addressing the concerns of audience members or supporters. A celebrity's audience responds positively when they actively work on themselves, not for clout, but to learn from poor decisions, being a leader for those whom they inspire (Benoit, 1997).

The history of mitigating celebrity crises through the media has impacted the heightened tensions seen today. Due to platforms like Instagram, Twitter (X), and TikTok, PR professionals

now have to navigate the speed of the crises, affecting the development of their PR plans, monitoring their clients' media, focusing on long-term goals, and rebranding. PR professionals historically have served as mediators between celebrities and their audiences. Doja Cat is an example of a celebrity who is creative, funny, spunky, versatile, and also open when communicating about her online engagement. In cases like this, will traditional PR strategies be sufficient to alleviate crises on social media, or will PR practitioners need new frameworks for crisis communication to protect a celebrity's image?

The Case of Doja Cat's 2020 Controversy Using Generic Criticism

According to Benoit (1997), image is a central concept to the field of Public Relations. The Theory of Image Restoration Discourse (IRD) considers the nature of attacks in a crisis. Some components are holding the accused responsible for their actions and considering whether the act is offensive. IRD plays a significant role in understanding how celebrities restore their reputation after a controversy. Five strategies from IRD are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing one's offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. These strategies are beneficial to PR practitioners. Generic criticism will be employed to examine rhetorical acts within crisis communication, such as celebrity controversies, using the 2020 Doja Cat controversy as an example.

Kim Wee Sng, Li, and Tan (2019) explained how word of mouth (WOM) or personal recommendations are more credible than traditional advertising (Liu, Jin, & Austin, p 54). Their research reviewed how the credibility of celebrities and influencers is strengthened through trust-based emotional bonds connecting them to audience members, as well as sharing candid insights. Being authentic is how celebrities and influencers gain endorsements and support from

their fans. Their study analyzes the behavior of such influence from digital media and how crises spread rapidly. Celebrities have learned to balance honesty and issue apologies for their offensive online behavior.

Alharbi et al. (2022) demonstrate how celebrity reputation and brand congruence are intertwined. Millennial and Gen Z members expect corporations to take a clear stance on socio-political issues and communicate it effectively. The study examines the effect of controversial campaigns featuring a controversial celebrity. Congruence occurs when consumers compare their identity to the brand's image. Noted in the study, Corporate Social Responsibility is connected to brand activism. Consumers compare their identity to the brand's persona, making moral judgments. As a result, consumers who strongly identify with a brand's identity are more likely to engage and purchase the brand's products. For example, if I strongly identified with Doja Cat's online persona, I would be more prompt to purchase her new album Vie, released September 26, 2025. Cognitive Dissonance Theory supports that certain situations may modify consumers' beliefs. If a celebrity's actions are incongruent with their supporters' beliefs, their cognitive dissonance will be affected, causing them to boycott. The rhetorical act is shaped by actions, what is stated by the brand/celebrity, and the relationship of the consumer's identity with the celebrity or brand.

Osemwegie, N. O. (2025) emphasized crisis communication in the entertainment industry to highlight the importance of online media responses and emotional bonds, affecting the positions of PR professionals, etc. His work illustrates that crises seen today are rapid due to virality and public opinion. Celebrities or brands must be strategic regarding their rhetoric to maintain a satisfactory reputation within the media. I will apply generic criticism to Doja Cat's

2020 controversy, demonstrating that her previous online behavior generated public backlash.

The rhetorical act studied is her apology via Instagram Live.

Doja Cat applied image restoration strategies from Benoit (1997), such as mortification, apologizing to her fans, corrective action, ensuring that she will behave productively in the future, and reducing offensiveness by reviewing her actions to create understanding. By apologizing for engaging in online chat rooms, she demonstrated that she can take accountability, which helped mitigate some of the public backlash she received. Doja Cat's choice to utilize Instagram Live for her apology reflects her versatile, yet spunky nature.

Supporting Kim Wee Sng, Li, and Tan's (2019) study, which focused on the strategic communication of influencers, not only implements Image Restoration Discourse, but also addresses PR risks. Social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) acknowledges the power of WOM in traditional media and represents the relationship between "influential social media creators, social media followers, and inactive members" with an organization in times of crisis (Liu, Jin & Austin, p.54).

Consumer-celebrity congruence model (Alharbi et al., 2022) explains how the audience might perceive celebrities like Doja Cat. Fans whose identities are congruent with Doja Cat's online identity are more likely to forgive her for offensive behavior. Osemwegin (2025) notes that redirecting this behavior, such as giving attention to the hit single "Say So", reframes Doja Cat's online persona, benefiting her career goals.

Generic criticism supports rhetorical resources like Image Restoration Discourse and inspects a new genre, Doja Cat's communication style. She uses her sense of humor and self-awareness to communicate feelings about criticism and feedback through her music and social media platforms. This establishes effective crisis communication patterns for PR

professionals to strengthen client credibility and authenticity, catering to their ethical concerns, evaluates how fast crises can arise online, if celebrities' responses are in alignment with audience-centered messages, and their effects.

The Intertwinement of Parasocial Relationships under the Scope of Generic Criticism

Utilizing generic criticism, this essay will expand on how digital visibility, fan dynamics, and media virality influence Doja Cat's image and past crises, shaping rhetorical acts.

Abidin, C. (2021) offers a deeper dive on “visibility labour”, utilizing research done on the work of influencers and celebrities through platforms such as TikTok. The study explains how influencers and celebrities must perform to maintain “relevancy” due to TikTok's and Instagram's algorithms. Abidin noted that platforms like TikTok require quick adaptivity due to trends. Users engage through forms of views, likes, comments, and shares, resulting in celebrities and influencers seeking ways to go “viral” and remain visible on the app. Visibility is constant engagement, self-monitoring, etc. Therefore, artists like Doja Cat, when in crisis, must cater to their niche and audience due to the constant demand of performing.

Paravati, E., Gabriel, S., Valenti, J., Valent, K., & Buffone, A. (2022). Research connects digital visibility and parasocial relationships, arguing that social media amplifies a sort of intimacy, direct bonding between the fans and the celebrity. Parasocial relationships form through repeated exposure and an increase in information given about the celebrity, creating an emotional connection. According to *Concordia Journal of Communications Research*, 8, parasocial interactions are referred to as a media user's reaction to a celebrity, such that the media user perceives the performer as a friend or romantic conversational partner. The researchers suggested that people who have anxiety about their real-life relationships experience

attachment anxiety, which could be the leading cause of parasocial relationships via media outlets. Their findings also support that those with high attachment anxiety feel closer to the celebrity. If Doja Cat receives a heavy amount of backlash from numerous supporters, fans who feel closest to her are more likely to defend her due to the perceived connection made online.

Diallo's (2023) article highlights a similar approach by reviewing how Doja Cat's supporters ("kittenz") behavior is addressed through conflict with other fans. For example, Diallo connected several challenges that celebrities face when interacting with fans online. When Doja Cat expressed her appreciation for fans coming to her defense, she also said via Twitter, "If you call yourself a 'kitten' ... 'kittenz' that means you need to get off your phone and get a job and help your parents with the house." Some of her fans felt she attempted to push them away after they defended her from other fans resurfacing her own comments about her music. In the past, Doja Cat admitted to making certain music for cash grabs. However, she explained that she wanted a more stable interaction with fans due to feeling obligated through the pre-existing parasocial relationship created after the "SaySo" fame era.

Osemwiegie, N. O. (2025) exclaims crisis in the entertainment industry occurs at unpredictable speeds due to the virality of the crisis on social media. PR practitioners are needed here because celebrities like Doja Cat benefit from brand management. PR teams implement great strategies, mitigating public backlash and intending to maintain a strong audience. The study supports Abidin (2021) by stating that a key factor in a crisis is the participatory nature of social media. If past content, such as Doja Cat's previous comments (on Twitter or X) and videos from online chatrooms resurface, users who respond can be the main reason as to why the crisis expands. User-generated content, such as reaction videos, comments, and posts, inflames the issue even if the artist apologizes for their behavior.

Galan, A. (2021) brought awareness to a major concern: the academic research domain continues to lack theoretical models of crisis analysis and prevention. Crises are perceived as a disruption of self-presentation, Galan exclaimed. Galan noted that most research utilizes discursive strategies by Benoit (denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, coercive action, mortification) used by celebrities when dealing with reputational crises.

To conclude, Doja Cat's rhetorical act was influenced by "visibility labour". Her Instagram Live apology serves as a rhetorical strategy used to maintain parasocial relationships created with fans. Parasocial relationships impact how the crisis is interpreted because fans are emotionally bonded to Doja Cat. Her rhetorical act is then influenced by public discourse because there are fans who feel she is obligated to uphold the relationship because they made her famous. Fans demanding "labour" from Doja Cat come across as entitlement to her. PR professionals are equipped to use crisis communication strategies because of the repeated cycle seen within the media. Rhetorical Acts presented throughout this case reflect and are shaped by public discourse because public viewers are the very ones who demand high performance, affecting controversy, digital visibility, and media virality. This research could be more developed if psychologists and PR professionals collaborated on how parasocial relationships between celebrities and their respective audience challenges the outcome of crises.

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