

The Truth Hurts Lizzo's Reputation

Introduction

Lizzo, also known as Melissa Viviane Jefferson, is a four Grammy award-winning rapper and singer who is known for her hip-hop songs including *Truth Hurts*, *Good As Hell*, and *Juice*. A large part of her brand is built on body positivity and empowerment. In August of 2023, Lizzo was accused of multiple forms of harassment by her former tour dancers. These allegations turned into a lawsuit against Lizzo, as well as her production company and her tour's dance captain. (McCarthy, 2023).

In this lawsuit, Lizzo was accused of creating a hostile work environment for her dancers while on tour in the spring of 2023. It was said that Lizzo exposed her dancers to an overly sexual environment and often forced her crew to outings with a nature of nudity and sexuality (McCarthy, 2023). The three dancers, Crystal Williams, Arianna Davis, and Noelle Rodriguez, mentioned nine different areas of misconduct during Lizzo's "Special" Tour they were a part of. It should be noted that David and Williams were fired from Lizzo's crew, and Rodriguez resigned due to the poor treatment her friends and colleagues had received. The allegations made against the three defendants, Lizzo, her production company, and her tour's dance captain, featured claims of sexual harassment and failure to prevent both religious harassment and sexual harassment. Allegations related to sexual harassment include pressure to attend a club in Amsterdam with nude dancers, to eat bananas that were placed near nude genitalia, and pressure to touch the breasts of a dancer. The plaintiffs felt they had to comply with requests that put them in uncomfortable situations to retain their jobs. Allegations relating to religious harassment were mostly made against Lizzo's tour dance captain. However, dancers were all forced to participate

in Christian prayer as a group, no matter what their religious background was. Lizzo's dance caption practically pushed Christianity onto the dancers by heavily preaching it and also focused heavily on some of the dancers' virginity. While this part of the lawsuit did not mention Lizzo, it is still important because the dance caption played a huge role on Lizzo's team and the fact that Lizzo did nothing about this places some blame onto herself. Davis also mentioned that Lizzo made multiple comments about her weight fluctuation even though Lizzo is known for being body-positive (Zhou, 2023). Davis struggled with an eating disorder and claimed that Lizzo placed Davis under the impression that she had to explain her weight gain and disclose personal information to not lose her job (McCarthy, 2023). Shortly after these allegations were brought to the public's attention, Lizzo responded.

In an attempt to repair her image, Lizzo's response included four different screenshots of her notes app posted to her Instagram feed. She mainly denied all of these actions, while also mentioning these employees were let go for their inappropriate and unprofessional behaviors. Lizzo's response was well written, and it will be up to the courts to decide if Lizzo is being truthful in her denial. The lawsuit has not been finalized, so there is no verdict yet.

Review of Literature

In the image repair theory, outlined by Benoit, there are five main strategies, including denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Along with these categories, there are also twelve subcategories, including simple denial, shifting blame, provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. When someone attempts to repair their image, they use a vast range of these tactics to regain the trust back from their

followers (Benoit, 2014). In the case of Lizzo's response, she used denial, attacking the accuser, and shifting the blame. Denial is claiming something to be untrue, which is the main focus of Lizzo's response to the accusations towards her. Her next focus of the response was to attack the accuser or to reduce the damage to one's image by placing accusations on the person who made the first accusations. The final strategy Lizzo uses is shifting the blame, which means instead of accepting blame for the alleged accusations, the blame is shifted onto another party to take the weight off her shoulders.

Throughout the past century, and even more over the past few decades, there have been countless celebrities who have been caught or accused of doing something they should not have been doing. To gain the trust of their followers back, they use a variety of methods from Benoit's image repair theory to repair their images. Similar to Lizzo, Kate from *Jon and Kate Plus 8* used the strategy of attacking the accuser in an attempt to repair her image after she found out her husband was cheating on her. Kate's implication with this strategy is that her husband's actions were so unforgivable and terrible that a divorce was the only option (Moody, 2011). The main point of Lizzo's response was denial, which can also be seen in Judge Kavanaugh's attempt to repair his image after being brought to court for sexual assault. The main focus of his speech was saying the incident he was being accused of never happened (Benoit, 2021). Another image repair case that used denial as the main strategy was Hillary Clinton. Involved in many scandals and wrongdoings, Clinton's response to the Whitewater Scandal as well as the Lewinsky scandal was simple denial. While it was found that Clinton had no part in the Whitewater Scandal, her denial strategy did not work well enough as it made many of her followers question her ethics (Oles-Acevedo, 2012). While there is a huge overlap of strategies that can be seen in various celebrity image repair efforts, the effectiveness of each strategy can be determined on a

case-to-case basis rather than an overarching idea. If one strategy does not prove to be effective for someone, that does not mean it cannot be effective for someone else.

Analysis

Lizzo's response to these allegations, made by three of her former dancers, was posted in the form of a screenshot from her notes app on her Instagram account. Her response seemed to be well-written and thought out. The three main strategies from Benoit's image repair theory that were present in Lizzo's response include denial, attacking the accuser, and shifting the blame. It should be noted that Lizzo's response is towards the allegations made towards her directly, not including those made towards her dance caption or her production company.

Denial

The main focal point of Lizzo's response to the allegations is her denying the accusations. She begins her denial by saying "Usually I choose not to respond to false allegations but these are as unbelievable as they sound and too outrageous to not be addressed." Within the first couple of sentences, she is already making it clear that these accusations are false, and that she cannot just ignore a problem like this. Later on in her response, she claims "I know what it feels like to be body shamed on a daily basis and would absolutely never criticize or terminate an employee because of their weight." Now she denies accusations relating to her body shaming another woman (Lizzo, 2023). Part of her brand as a celebrity is body positivity, which can be seen in her size-inclusive clothing brand. If these allegations were true, it would be a terrible look for her clothing brand as well as her body positivity ideas. Whether she is speaking the truth or not when denying these allegations, we are not sure as the case has not been finalized.

Attack the Accuser

As well as denial, Lizzo also attempts to attack the accuser to show she is not the one at fault. In the second section of text in the first screenshot of Lizzo's response, she states "These sensualized stories are coming from former employees who have already publicly admitted that they were told their behavior on tour was inappropriate and unprofessional." She did not go into more detail to explain what their inappropriate and unprofessional behavior was, however. By claiming these people behaved in ways that were not appropriate at the time, Lizzo attempts to take the accusations off of her back and place them on the back of the people who accused her in the first place (Lizzo, 2023). By saying this, Lizzo makes people wonder if the accusations were correct or if the behaviors brought up in the accusations were prompted by the plaintiffs themselves rather than being forced upon them by Lizzo.

Shift the Blame

Throughout Lizzo's response, she mentions how she is portrayed by the media and followers who have learned about the accusations. Similar to what was said previously about her attacking the accusers, she is also shifting the blame towards them. While she does not give detailed insight as to why they should be blamed, she does say they acted in inappropriate ways. Lizzo begins the second slide of her response by saying "I am not here to be looked at as the villain that people and the media have portrayed me to be these last few days." She says she is not the villain in this situation. When she says this, she is trying to shift the blame to the accusers and call them the villains without actually calling them the villains. By attempting to place the blame on the dangers who placed the lawsuit on Lizzo, she is victimizing herself. She claims "These last few days have been gut wrenchingly difficult and overwhelmingly disappointing. My

work ethic, morals, and respectfulness have been questioned.” By stating her feelings and making these claims about the people accusing her, she is shifting the blame onto them and trying to make it seem they are the ones in the wrong (Lizzo, 2023). This is both because they were the ones acting inappropriately and because they were the ones putting out terrible allegations that, in Lizzo’s words, were not true.

Evaluation

It is up in the air whether her response was effective enough to repair her image after these allegations were made against her. After analyzing her response, it can be noticed that she only responded to the accusations regarding body shaming, but not allegations related to sexual harassment. She did not deny or apologize for the sexual harassment allegations, she never mentioned them at all. It is also interesting that she did not mention the allegations at the beginning of her response, rather she just said the past few days have been rough. In many celebrity apologies, they give a short overview of the situation to inform their followers what happened rather than making them collect multiple different stories from different news sources and have to decide which one is reputable.

While her response did look well thought out and organized, the effectiveness of it is unclear at this point. Lizzo’s following is still not sure what to make of the situation, as the court decision has not come out yet. It will be interesting to see what the court decides, if she was correct in denying the allegations, or if she will be flamed even more for denying things that did happen. The hearing for her case will happen later this month, so the true effectiveness of her response, and probably another response made after the hearing, will be found then.

Conclusion

There is no clear “correct” side in this case. Serious allegations were made towards Lizzo, and Lizzo quickly responded claiming they were false. It will be up to the court to decide whether the accusers, Crystal Williams, Arianna Davis, and Noelle Rodriguez, are speaking the truth, or if the accused, Lizzo, is being truthful. The effectiveness of Lizzo’s response on social media, an attempt to repair her image using denial and an attempt to shift the blame and attack the accuser, will be tested when the final decision is made by the court. Lizzo’s brand sits on the idea of body positivity, and her clothing brand’s whole mission is to be size-inclusive for people of any shape and size. If these accusations were found to be true, her whole brand and persona could crumble.

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