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“It’s Just A Prank, Bro!”: The Deplorable Immorality of YouTube “Prank” Videos

YouTube is host to a plethora of various genres of videos, from education to comedy to gaming, and each genre has its quirks. One would think that YouTube videos, regardless of their classification, are just innocent, harmless entertainment due to the site’s robust community guidelines, which attempt to eschew reprehensible videos. However, one subgenre in particular is toeing the line of what is morally acceptable content on YouTube. A frighteningly popular brand of videos referred to as “prank videos” often display several common traits that do not bode well for anyone involved in the production, execution, or viewing of the videos.

The majority of YouTube prank videos that pose such problems involve the content creator, or prankster, accosting strangers who are minding their own business and conducting any one of many “pranks,” which in this context aren’t even conventional pranks. The so-called “prank” is often simply annoying strangers, asking an ambiguous or provoking question, performing profoundly bizarre actions around strangers, or plainly harassing them. Even worse, some content creators hire actors to stage their videos, but do not tell the viewer that the situations are fabricated (The Prank Reviewer). Even worse still, some content creators add in racist or sexist taglines in order to attract more viewers and therefore earn more ad revenue (Dockery). All of these factors add up to videos that are quite indecent on the content creator’s part and evoke disturbing reactions from viewers. These prank videos that are staged, offensive, or pushing a prejudicial agenda are immoral due to their reliance on racist or misogynistic tones while also pretending to depict a legitimate, unstaged reality.

The most disheartening facet of the prank subgenre is the presence of videos with a harmful agenda. Most commonly, these agendas zero in on depicting situations that appeal to the

prejudices of viewers and reinforce stereotypes. Virtually every prank video with such an aim targets either black people or women. For example, a particularly popular (and disputed) strain of such videos are “Pranks in the Hood Gone Wrong”, in which the white male prankster approaches black male victims in an impoverished, crime-ridden part of an American city. The prankster asks an intentionally ambiguous question about guns, drugs, or fighting, and after the prankster refuses to clarify the question, the victim suddenly pulls a gun or punches the prankster. In one rather sensationalist example, prankster DennisCee asks three black guys in the ghetto of Brooklyn, NY if they want to “buy a gun real quick”, without them aware of the fact he is secretly referring to a harmless squirt gun he has in his pocket (SoFloComedy, “Selling Guns Prank In The Hood”). After a terse pause, one of the victims draws his .45, exclaiming “I already got a fuckin’ gun, homie”.

Understandably, such footage paints black people in a negative light, but one can make any argument with enough cherry-picking, or exclusion of content that doesn’t support the narrative. The vast majority of the aforementioned exchanges definitely did not result in anything notable. If so, the footage of it would be in the videos, and the average runtime of “Pranks in the Hood Gone Wrong” videos would be much longer than just two minutes. Instead, the pranksters who insist on getting enough content for such a video resort to repeating the prank to different people hundreds of times until they have enough reactions. This has been proven by YouTube prankster OckTV, who says the “Pranks in the Hood Gone Wrong” videos are simply montages of the few people who react with enough fervor to fit the narrative (Anyoku).

Carefully selected footage is the least frustrating characteristic of racist videos, sadly. The fact that content creators are monetizing racism and stereotypes is even more ethically questionable, since there’s no way to tell if they themselves are bigoted or not. The evidence leans towards the latter since there is a homogeneous, established formula for hood prank videos:

target only black males, include the words “gone wrong” in the title, and have the thumbnail of the video be an image of the black person aggressing upon the prankster. In any case, suppose they aren’t actually racist. The fact that they see nothing wrong with making money by releasing racist videos indicates how morally off-base the pranksters are. The burden of ethics doesn’t just lie on the shoulders of the content creators, though. The viewers allow themselves to be strung along by the fallacious footage. Not only that, those that participate in the comments section often feel the need to voice their racist opinions for all the world to see, further taking the uploader’s bait (Ellefson). Both the content and the comments translate into adverse consequences in the real world. Due to the ubiquity of the Internet and its many videos, people have begun to share YouTube links like the contemporaries of the late 20th century recalled an interesting story they saw on the evening news. Naturally, as the audience for these prejudiced videos increases, so too will the number of people who are convinced by the videos’ carefully tailored clips.

Not surprisingly, the hood prank subgenre’s racist agenda is all but identical to the “gold digger prank” subgenre’s misogynistic agenda. In this subgenre, a young white man accosts an attractive young woman and asks if he can take her out for dinner (SoFloComedy, “Gold Digger Prank”). The prankster leans on a luxurious sports car while asking, implying the car is his. The woman accepts, but after the prankster enters a mundane sedan parked behind the sports car, the woman scurries off. By employing the same cherry-picking techniques, the content creator appeals to viewers’ prejudices of women being overly concerned with their man’s wealth and reaps profit from it regardless of whether or not he espouses himself with the belief. The gold digger prank subgenre is even more homogeneous and reactionary than the hood prank subgenre, perhaps signaling that stereotyping women is less damnable than stereotyping black people.

Either way, both subgenres reveal the immorality of pushing prejudicial agendas in prank videos just to attract more viewers and therefore make a heftier profit.

A more complex and subtle characteristic of the most popular YouTube prank videos is their staged nature. A sizable portion of prank videos are deliberately faked by the content creators in order to capture the desired reactions without having to re-attempt the scenario hundreds of times (DeFranco). There is a whole slew of evidence to back up this claim, beginning with the simple detection of unnatural speech patterns and movements, indicating bad acting (Schroeder). More convincing evidence is very widespread and relatively easy to find. Keen viewers have recognized semi-professional actors in prank videos and referenced the actors' pictures in ads (BackwardsHat). Also, eyewitnesses, and sometimes actual participants in the prank, have come out and testified to the falseness of such videos (DramaAlert).

The most consistently staged series of prank videos on YouTube is the "Kissing Pranks" series, which is uploaded by Chris from PrankInvasion. Every single one of the videos has the same formula, but Chris slightly tweaks the false premise in each one to create the illusion of differentiation. In the videos, Chris approaches a seemingly random woman in revealing clothing and proposes a little game or bet, that, should the woman lose, says she has to give him a "quick kiss" (PrankInvasion). The outcome of the minigame turns out to be unimportant, however, as Chris ends up making out with each woman regardless. At this point it becomes clear that the videos are ridiculously fake. Every single woman shows no resistance or reluctance whatsoever when Chris escalates the "quick kiss" to a full-fledged makeout session in the middle of the sidewalk, in broad daylight. The women keep it going even when Chris starts to get a little handsy, which is both unnerving and unbelievable.

The motivation of content creators to stage their videos is rather deducible and intuitive. For one, the absurd outcomes that a dramatized scenario affords are vastly more entertaining

than innocent pranks with no faked elements (Walker). Hence, scripted prank videos may in fact be popular simply because they provide a visceral, thrilling style of humor, whereas tame and genuine prank videos only evoke chuckles from viewers. Renowned anthropologist William Beeman supports this stance, pointing out that offensive humor has a certain alluring quality:

Humor and offensiveness are not mutually exclusive, however. An audience may be affected by the paradox as revealed in the denouement [sic] of the humor despite their ethical or moral objections and laugh in spite of themselves... [I]ikewise, what one audience finds offensive, another audience may find humorous (105).

It is reasonable to assume that the content creators are aware of the increased entertainment factor tied to staged videos, so there is some financial motivation by proxy. Finding the effects and significance of staging videos is when things become less apparent. Fortunately, there is an infamous “prank” video out there which beautifully illustrates the consequences of faking a video. “How Does A Homeless Man Spend \$100?”, crafted and uploaded by YouTube prankster Josh Paler Lin, shows Lin donating a hundred dollars to a homeless man, and the homeless man in turn using the money to buy food for other homeless (JoshPalerLin). The video has garnered 42 million views, but is known to be faked for two principal reasons. Firstly, there is an eyewitness account of Lin colluding with the homeless man behind the scenes, and secondly, the site of Lin’s initial donation is across the street from a grocery store, but the man inexplicably walks four blocks to buy food at a liquor store.

The implications of the video’s fraudulence intensified exponentially when the news broke in June that the homeless man in the video died of alcoholism. According to Lin, over \$145,000 was raised and donated to the man after the initial video went viral. However, the Los Angeles Police Department indicated that the man was still homeless when he died (“Homeless star...”). What kind of person neglects to buy a home after being handed \$145,000 of tax-free

cash? No one would do such a thing, which raises the possibility of Lin keeping the sum of money for himself after pretending to donate it to the homeless man. In fact, this explanation seems to be ever more reasonable, as the brother of the deceased homeless man said in an interview that he wasn't sure that the man even got the donation. After all, Lin has been known to lie, given that he adamantly maintains that the video is real even in the face of the contradicting evidence. In this way, the consequences of staging prank videos becomes plain to see: falsely claiming a staged video as real establishes the content creator as a liar, which jeopardizes the credibility of every other video and statement he issues. In other words, a prankster's inclination to lie about the legitimacy of his pranks may suggest the prankster lies in other situations also, which is clear immoral behavior.

One final concerning trait of some prank videos is the harassment and demeaning of women. Although this is much less common than the two previous facets, it still pops up once in awhile, and when it does, there is no shortage of outrage. The most well-known controversy surrounding a prank video depicting sexual harassment involved an individual named Sam Pepper. In September 2014, Pepper uploaded a "prank" video in which he used a fake hand to distract women while he used one of his actual hands to grope them, much to the women's disgust. How Pepper thought such a thing was both appropriate to do and upload to the Internet is beyond all logic and reason. YouTube thankfully removed the video within days, but enough bad press had come upon Pepper that he was forced to defend himself. On Twitter, he revised the parameters of the videos, first saying it was just a "social experiment", then claiming it was staged and therefore consent from the actresses had been granted, and finally asserting that the message of the video was increased awareness of sexual abuse (Wang). Some time after, in October, several women on YouTube stepped forward and alleged that they were raped or sexually harassed by Pepper (Jaworski). Clearly, "prank" videos that depict actions that verge on

sexual assault speak volumes about their creators and the faulty moral compasses of those who excuse such despicable behavior.

Knowing that “prank” videos often possess at least one of these three egregious traits, one struggles to see how content creators could possibly have the gall to employ the word “prank” when describing their work. After all, the traditional meaning of pranking is innocent practical joking that causes neither harm nor foul to either party. So how is it that the average viewer of the prank genre doesn’t seem to know or care about the callousness of its videos? Psychology may have the answer. According to one article in the *Review of General Psychology*, “[w]hen one feels duped, the interaction partner is seen as coming out the winner and as having gained from the self’s loss” (Vohs et al. 128). The problem is that the viewer usually places himself in the shoes of the prankster and not the victim. This is because the viewer is more intimately connected to the prankster – he knows the name and mannerisms of the prankster, yet knows nothing about the victim. If the viewer were to empathize with the victim and imagine being “pranked” by someone like Josh Paler Lin or Sam Pepper, the depravity of the prank genre would become more clear. However, empathy with the victim is not the end-all-be-all of being cognizant of the genre’s pitfalls because of the nature of how the prankster and the victim interact. In true prank scenarios, Vohs et al. argue, “[b]eing duped produces an aversive self-conscious emotion with a threat of self-blame” (127). However, in “prank” videos, rarely is the victim actually misled or tricked, since most “prank” videos simply involve the prankster annoying strangers who are minding their own business. There is never any elaborate joke that the victim is the butt of, and there is never a point at which the victim blames himself since the prankster acts upon him no matter what. As a result, the viewer never observes the victim feel regret or self-blame and can’t feel the negative side of prank videos.

Beyond the elementary psychology of prank videos is a much more concerning phenomenon: the prankster-victim dynamic. On YouTube, content creators of prank videos are almost unilaterally young white males. By contrast, the victims are usually women or black people. Interestingly, a case could be made that the prank genre is one big reflection of the patriarchy and white dominance in the West. After all, most prank videos show a white man exercising his dominance over women and minorities (and getting paid for it). Perhaps hidden behind the guise of prank video entertainment is the newest incarnation of white male privilege.

The moral failure of prank videos is the fault of both content creator and viewer. Content creators' readiness to capitalize on their audience's prejudices in the name of profit is not only immoral but also unethical, since they are knowingly contributing to racism and sexism. Content creators also habitually lie whenever they publish a staged prank video without disclosing the fact that it's fictional. In more extreme cases, the moral ignorance of content creators can be correlated with harassment, assault, and even death, in the case of the homeless man in the Josh Paler Lin video. On the other side of things, the viewer lets himself be persuaded by fallacious, cherry-picked evidence, lending himself to align with the agendas unethically promoted by the content creators. In addition, the viewer may give approval to morally objectionable prank videos by clicking the "like" button, sharing it with his friends, or subscribing to the offending content creator. With this approval comes proliferation of stereotypes, due to the possibility of a new viewer coming along and having his preconceived notions confirmed by the prank video's agenda, comments section, or both.

In the end, prank videos in their current form are bad for YouTube and bad for society. The usage of the word "prank" implies fun, light-hearted craftiness, but prank videos on YouTube are anything but. Pairing such a word with dreary, shameful content may indoctrinate viewers, subliminally convincing them that bothering strangers is excusable, since one can



always fall back on the classic “it’s just a prank” defence. Staged prank videos also mislead viewers who aren’t sharp enough to spot their fakeness by deceiving them into believing the fictional, rehearsed events are what can happen in reality. Finally, the inherent offensiveness of some pranks, as well as their bigoted agendas, will always cause harm to someone in society, usually a minority or woman. Bearing all this in mind, one thing is clear: when it comes to seeking entertainment on YouTube, people often forsake the moral implications of prank videos.

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