

6 Trust dynamics in Ambiverse

A case study of Amberlynn Reid's
YouTube channel, the commentary
community, and audience
engagement

Grzegorz Filipczyk and Agnieszka Filipczyk

Introduction

The chapter investigates the complex dynamics of trust in the context of YouTube content creation, focusing on *LolCow*-type content. The study employs the case of Amberlynn Reid, a prominent figure known for her candid portrayal of personal struggles and a failed weight loss journey. Due to several controversies caused by her since her debut on YouTube on December 5, 2011, she became one of the focal characters within the YouTube commentary community, gaining notoriety as a so-called *LolCow*.

Rationale for the study

The ease of publishing on social media allows every Internet user to create their own content. As a result, on most platforms, you can find a wide range of creators presenting diverse attitudes and producing a wide range of content. Not all of them gain popularity for the right reasons. *LolCow* culture is an Internet phenomenon consisting of mocking content creators whose views or behavior have been deemed comical. Content creators who become the target of mockery in Internet slang are called *LolCows*. The concept originated from the combination of the phrases:

- “laugh out loud” (LOL) – a popular Internet slang acronym indicating amusement;
- “cash cow” – a term used in reference to products, services, or individuals that bring in large profits, which are then used to fund other endeavors of a particular entity (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2024).

Internet content creators who have been recognized as *LolCows* often remain unaware that they are providing entertainment at their own expense to thriving Internet communities. The title of *LolCow* can be gained due to:

- Displaying unusual, self-destructive, or controversial behaviors;
- Expressing scandalous views;

- Consistently facing failures in their endeavors;
- Engaging in online conflicts.

Research methods and objectives

The research was conducted using the method of desk research, participant observation, and qualitative analysis of Amberlynn Reid's YouTube channel and some of the most notable reactionary videos created by various commentary YouTube channels active within her community. A literature review on trust in social media was also performed. The aim of the research presented in the chapter is to outline the mechanisms of building trust in pathological online communities, using the *Ambaverse* as a case study.

Literature review

Social media, understood as any online resources designed to facilitate interaction between individuals (Aichne et al., 2021), have become an integral part of our surrounding reality. One may wonder about the issues related to trust in social media and the communities built using these platforms. Considering trust in the context of social media, we can discuss (Håkansso & Witmer, 2015; Hatamleh et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023):

- Trust in platforms,
- Trust in content creators,
- Trust in the communities built around content creators.

In their works, (Håkansso & Witmer, 2015) and (Zhang et al., 2023) conduct a systematic literature review on trust in social media, attempting to answer questions such as how trust is defined in social media, how trust can be measured, and whether social media can contribute to building trust.

A different approach to issues related to trust in social media is presented by (Kridera & Kanavos, 2024). The authors of this publication examine the multifaceted nature of trust – its definitions, types, and mechanisms of creation and maintenance. They use machine learning models to study the dynamics of trust.

From the perspective of the considerations in this chapter, issues related to trust in content creators, especially those who can gather a large following (influencers), are particularly significant. In the literature, aspects related to trust in content creators mainly focus on influencer marketing. For example, (Alkan & Ulas, 2023) and (Mahmoud & Latif, 2022) describe studies aimed at demonstrating the impact of trust in an influencer on their followers' purchase intentions. Another similar aspect involves studies dedicated to building trust in content creators or in a specific brand's customers.

One might argue that every content creator aspiring to become an influencer intends to build the largest possible group of trusting followers and commentators. It is also worth considering how the reactions and comments accompanying content published on social media affect trust in content creators and whether followers and commentators can build trust among themselves. Research indicates that content published within closed (private) groups on social media generates more trust than the same content published on open channels.

Presented research focuses on issues related to the impact of trust on community formation. We will attempt to consider both content creators and the organized groups of followers and commentators surrounding them.

Results

Internet users involved in ridiculing the *LolCows* gather in communities dedicated to tracking their online activities and documenting them on dedicated forums or using social media. Media analysts analyze their behaviors as one form of harassment and classify them as one of the subgroups of troll communities (see, e.g., (Bishop, 2014)).

LolCow-type content is collected in various forms. Commentary channels commenting on the actions of *LolCows* are popular, where members of the audience community act as reporters gathering content and presenting it in a coherent form for those who, for various reasons, do not follow the actions of *LolCows* at the source. Another form of collecting this type of content is Internet forums. Until 2022, the most popular of them remained KiwiFarms, founded as early as 2013 to persecute the controversial webcomic author known as Chris Chan (Veale, 2020). Since then, the forum has gained significant popularity; its administrators declared in 2022 that about 16,000 users log in daily (Le Monde, 2022). In 2022, the forum disappeared from the Internet (WIRED, 2022), but new ones quickly emerged, including *LolCow* Farm (<https://lolcow.farm/pt/>). Other commonly encountered channels for disseminating *LolCow*-type content include X (formerly Twitter) and wiki-type platforms such as Encyclopedia Dramatica.

The *LolCow* phenomenon arouses significant controversy among Internet users. Some consider it a harmless source of entertainment, likening it to reality TV. Others criticize it as a form of cyberbullying and persecution.

LolCow culture is a specific form of cyberbullying. By “earning” the title of *LolCow*, creators become victims of persecution, but they must have previously exhibited some form of activity that attracted the attention of an audience community thirsty for Internet “drama” (a common Internet slang term for conflicts in the realm of the Internet). Nor is a one-time incident sufficient to maintain the attention of this type of audience; *LolCows* must repeatedly engage in actions that provoke outrage. Considering that many *LolCows* are at least initially unaware of their status, they can be seen as creators who exhibit problematic behaviors.

When the status of a given creator as a *LolCow* is solidified, the audience community takes provocative actions aimed at escalating the situation.

The negative impact of community actions on the mental health and well-being of *LolCows* is undeniable. Discussions often arise between creators and their audiences, and the emotional reactions of creators only fuel the wave of mockery, bringing no effects other than providing the audience community with materials for new memes. There are also opinions pointing out the harmfulness of behaviors exhibited by *LolCows*, which, due to the activity of the community, gain publicity and reach susceptible individuals.

Amberlynn Reid and evolution of the Amberverse

Amberlynn Reid (ALR) is a well-known social media personality, particularly recognized for her presence on YouTube. She started her YouTube channel on November 18, 2013, focusing primarily on weight loss vlogs, daily life updates, and personal experiences. Over time, her channel has evolved to include a variety of content such as mukbangs (eating shows), hauls, and story time videos, and has garnered an unfavorable audience due to repeatedly causing controversies.

Unlike many modern-day *LolCows*, ALR's content tends to be curated. She generally does not rely on livestreams. When she does interact with her audience, a significant discrepancy from her normal persona can be observed. Despite her low-effort video editing style, she is still in control of what she chooses to publish on her channel, indicating that at least some of her controversies may have been stirred deliberately. It is important to note that, as far as she discloses, social media presence is ALR's only source of income. This incentivizes her presence on YouTube and the activity of the community surrounding her, making her an active agent within the community. Unlike classical *LolCow* influencers who stand in opposition to a community of "haters," ALR and her community share an almost symbiotic relationship, reinforcing the worst behavioral patterns in each other.

ALR's online presence resulted in the creation of an online reactionary community, which began to gain popularity around 2018 when ALR's following increased significantly. The social ecosystem consisting of ALR and all agents of the reactionary community, as well as all data reposted on various platforms, is known online as *Amberverse* (a portmanteau of Amber + Universe). *Amberverse* is not a secluded structure; it is a fraction of a larger community called *Gorl World*, which focuses on a particular type of *LolCow* influencer, specifically overweight vloggers and mukbangers whose content depicts failed weight loss journeys or fat acceptance/body positivity activism. The characteristic that connects influencers categorized as *Gorl World* members is their lack of consistency and presenting narratives without showing any proof of their truthfulness.

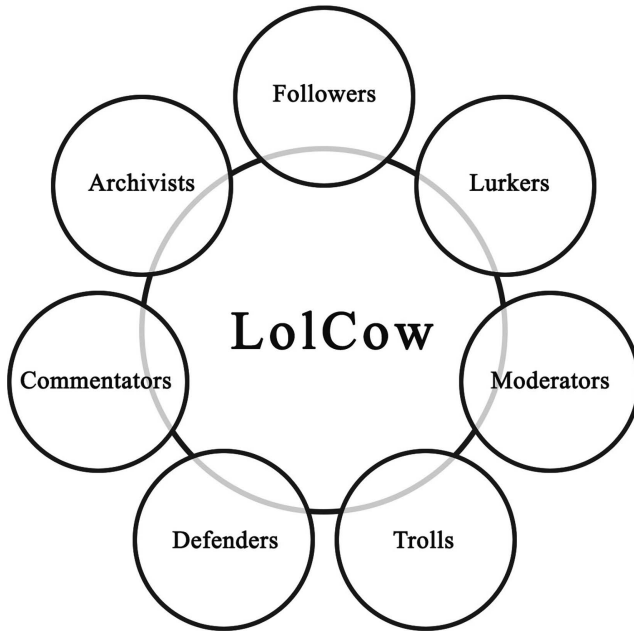


Figure 6.1 The structure of the community gathered around *LolCow* influencer

Source: Own work.

As in any community surrounding a *LolCow*, *Ambiverse* members can take on various roles and display different patterns of behavior. There are several basic roles that its members adopt, as shown in Figure 6.1:

- ***LolCow*** – The influencer constituting the center around which the community gathers.
- **Followers** – Community members who follow the *LolCow* solely for their content, sometimes unaware of the larger existing community, or aware but engaging only in direct interaction with the central influencer.
- **Lurkers** – Community members who remain inactive.
- **Moderators** – Community members who control or try to control its activity, typically spotted on forums or during live streams. Some members also try to adopt a more moralizing and controlling tone on a larger scale, usually ineffectively.
- **Trolls** – Community members focused on creating humorous content or causing confusion for entertainment purposes.
- **Defenders** – Community members who try to protect the central influencer from negative actions within the community. They are often aware of *LolCow*'s shortcomings but focus on reducing the community's impact on them.

- **Commentators** – Community members who comment on the current or past activity of a *LolCow*.
- **Archivists** - Community members who gather, archive, and analyze content published by the *LolCow*.

Role of the commentary community

The commentary community is an online community focused on creating comments, analyses, and reviews related to content available on the Internet, social media, or popular culture. In the case of the *LolCow* community, the commentary community focuses on the online activity of *LolCow*-type influencers. Commentators often become recognizable figures within the community. They may be active in one of the sub-communities focused around the *LolCow* or in multiple such communities.

The most recognizable platform for commentary community activity is YouTube, but such activities can also be observed on other social media platforms and Internet forums.

Commentary community's influence on trust dynamics

ALR's channel started as a candid account of her attempts at weight loss, but over the years it gained an unfavorable following. As it became apparent that her weight loss attempts were leading nowhere and manipulative accounts of dieting could be observed repeatedly, ALR's audience began to form a *LolCow*-type community around her. Consequently, commentary channels began to appear. Throughout ALR's presence on YouTube, large amounts of data have been archived, some of which became notable for the community and its identity.

The analysis of ALR's activity led to the creation of the theory known within the Amberverse as "The Cycle." The Cycle refers to a sequence of events regarding any new narrative ALR introduces to her channel. The Cycle consists of four steps (Reddit, 2024):

1. **Redemption** – ARL takes on a new endeavor, typically a weight loss plan; she expresses motivation; uploading patterns tend to be consistent showing progress toward a set goal.
2. **Ignorance** – ALR starts to deflect from the previously set plan; videos focus on mundane things with little to no mention of the plan; clickbait titles are typical, as well as short inconsistent uploads.
3. **Indignation** – ALR displays relapse toward negative behavior, mukbangs, shopping hauls, very inconsistent uploading, and finally admission she abandoned previously set plan.
4. **Manipulation** – ALR presents highly emotional reactions involving crying on video trying to justify failure and convince viewers it was out of her control.

It inevitably leads to the failure of whatever endeavor ALR declared to undertake.

With *The Cycle* being a commonly acknowledged phenomenon around the *Ambervverse*, commentary channels can not only report on ALR's activity but also shape the community's perception of it. Therefore, trust regarding ALR's Internet presence does not depend on the same factors as in the case of typical influencers. It is not transparency, authenticity, and relatability that viewers expect from her channel, but failure, dishonesty, and lies.

In that context, ALR's content started to be treated by the community as a narrative similar to a TV series or reality TV, with people appearing in vlogs referred to as side characters and events being grouped together into eras or seasons. Eras are being divided based on ALR's current partner or place of residency, and with characters cast of characters consisting of her partner, family, friends, and even pets. Each era has significant events and quotes often being referenced by commentators even years later. These comparisons and linguistic patterns are present across the whole community, being reinforced by commentary channels. This allows the audience to easily detach Internet content from the real person and events in their life, leading to a decrease in empathy and the dehumanization of a *LolCow* influencer, in this case, ALR. This detachment allows for audience engagement despite the lack of trust toward the main content creator.

The events presented are treated like a meticulously crafted film script. Audiences expect strong emotions, plot twists, lies, and intrigue, rather than the honesty and accuracy typical of most vloggers. With that perception of ALR's content, the traditional understanding of trust in social media communities is being transferred to commentary channels.

Notable controversies and their impact

The following analysis presents a basic timeline of events, using the division into "Eras" described earlier to facilitate chronological ordering.

Krystal era (2013–2015)

This period incorporates content from the beginning of ALR's channel. ALR's channel had not yet gained popularity; her persona was very timid, focused on weight loss, and vlogging everyday life. The most notable and controversial video from this era is "GOING THROUGH A BREAKUP:(," published on April 15, 2015. This video marks the end of the "Krystal Era" and is the first of several breakup videos uploaded on ALR's channel. Breakups are a significant part of ALR's content, often analyzed and compared with each other. Because of ALR's record of insincerity, seemingly vulnerable accounts of events tend to receive negative feedback, encouraging increased activity in the community.

Destiny era (2015–2017)

During this era, ALR's channel began to gather a larger audience, and the first commentary channels covering ALR's content were created, leading to the

formation of a *LolCow*-type community. Several controversies arose, solidifying ALR's status as a *LolCow*. Notable events include the first mentions of animal mistreatment, the activity of ALR's sock account (a false online identity used for deceptive purposes) named Damon White on Facebook groups, spreading both favorable and unfavorable opinions of ALR, and a dispute regarding allegations of domestic violence involving her pre-YouTube partner Casey. The video "CONFESSING EVERYTHING I'VE LIED ABOUT!!!!!!:(," published on August 5, 2016, is particularly significant. In this video, ALR details all her lies told on her channel up to that point. The video did not receive a positive reaction, as it was seen as a performative act aimed at increasing reach through the clickbait effect rather than a sincere attempt to take responsibility for her actions. Manipulative behavior toward ALR's current partner, Destiny, is also evident in the content published during this era, especially in December 2016, shortly before their breakup in January 2017, marking the end of the "Destiny Era."

Becky era (2017–2021)

This era marks the peak popularity of ALR's channel and, in response, the highest activity within the *Amberverse*. This is due to many factors, including the presence of many "side characters" on the channel. ALR interacted with both well-known figures, such as another YouTuber, ObesetoBeast, and anonymous individuals, like a dietitian from Instagram or a health coach from the Optavia program. This increased social activity made the content more diverse, with side plots appearing, making the narrative more engaging despite the lack of sympathy and trust in the main influencer. Notable videos from this period are "STRUGGLES BEING ME | PART 1" and "STRUGGLES BEING ME | PART 2," published in July 2018, which gained popularity outside the *Amberverse* community. Viewers familiar with ALR's content were unsympathetic to her account of her daily struggles, while those unaware of her Internet history showed compassion and support. An important event in this era is ALR's cancer diagnosis in June 2020, which demonstrated that despite the pathological nature of the *Amberverse*, viewers are capable of empathy and respect toward ALR in serious situations. During this time, multiple reaction channels decided to step back and even openly support ALR. The breakup with Becky on June 29, 2021, marks the end of this era.

Wifey era (2021–2023)

The beginning of this era was primarily focused on live streams. The discrepancy between ALR's persona in edited videos and her live content became more apparent than ever, showing that while inconsistency in efforts and uploading frequency is not crucial for her community, the consistency of her character is. Despite this, several controversies emerged, the biggest of which was Destiny's

return to YouTube to share her perspective on her relationship with ALR, sparking reactions from commentary channels and ALR.

SingleLynn era (2023–present)

This era encompasses the most recent events on the channel, which is slowly losing traction as the repetitive dieting cycles and lack of engaging content cause boredom within the community. ALR tries to cause controversy by clickbaiting her health condition and providing incomplete information, leaving room for speculation. However, these efforts remain in vain, as the presented narrative is too rigid to interest a wider audience. While the *LolCow* audience does not expect truth and transparency, authenticity is an important factor in building the audience's relationship with the influencer.

The earlier analysis shows that even though ALR's community does not place traditional trust in her, there are still certain expectations. Authenticity, consistency of character, and providing entertainment through diverse content seem to be the main factors contributing to the audience's engagement with ALR's content.

Transparency, authenticity, relatability, and viewer responses

While traditional influencers base their income and reach on building trust of their audience by maintaining transparency, authenticity, and relatability standards in ALR's case, this mechanism is reversed. It is a lack of trust that builds engagement in the community. However, there is a fine line between motivating the audience to analyze ALR's content in search of discrepancies and proof of lies and making members leave the community.

In *Amberverse* trust is not deposited in ALR, her videos tended to gather more dislikes than likes (YouTube rating system), although as of now the amount of dislikes is hidden; what is not hidden however are comments and majority of those are voicing disappointment and distaste in ALR's content and actions. ALR's community is based on distrust toward her, which motivates trust-based bonds with other agents of the community, most vocal being commentators.

Platform policies and user trust on YouTube

Platform policies and user trust are integral aspects of YouTube's community. There are three main strategies that play a crucial role in shaping user trust by establishing clear standards for content:

1. Community Guidelines;
2. Content Moderation;
3. Creator Monetization Policies.

Community Guidelines outline what content is allowed on the platform and what is not. These guidelines cover areas such as hate speech, harassment, violence, and misinformation (YouTube, 2024). Failure to follow the rules may result in a warning, limitation of available functions, and, in the most extreme cases, removal of the channel. Despite that, *LolCow* Community flourishes on the platform producing hours of content every day. Even though several of those videos infringe on community guidelines appropriate punishments are rarely served. However, the reporting system became one of many tools utilized by the community, with commentary content often reported for copyright infringement.

YouTube employs a combination of human moderators and AI-driven systems to review and moderate content uploaded to the platform. *LolCows* often generate controversial or polarizing content, which can be challenging to moderate and commentary channels disseminate such content even further.

YouTube has policies governing monetization through its Partner Program. It is important to remember that both *LolCows* and some of the Commentators profit from the created content, while their content may break the Community Guidelines rules.

In the case of pathological communities such, as *LolCow* communities, YouTube's moderation policies tend to be used as a weapon toward the disliked members of the community. Most notably false copyright infringement claims are being reported toward commentary channels resulting in temporary restrictions such as the inability to upload videos or live broadcasts for one week.

Conclusion

The dynamics of trust within online communities is a topic often overlooked in research on social media trust. Most literature focuses on the trust relationship between influencers and their audiences and the impact of trust on purchasing tendencies. The heterogeneous structure of the audience community and the connections formed among its members are frequently ignored. Understanding these relationships, particularly in pathological communities such as *LolCow* communities, can contribute to better refining the functioning principles of social media platforms. Analyzing the dynamics of trust in such communities can provide valuable insights into the functioning of pathological groups on the Internet. Understanding how trust is shaped and utilized in these contexts can help develop strategies aimed at reducing the spread of harmful content and increasing user safety.

The case study presented in the chapter should be considered as preliminary research, outlining the problem. Further studies are necessary, encompassing other similar communities centered around various *LolCow* influencers and gathered on different platforms. Exploring these aspects can contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of trust in online communities and help create safer and more user-friendly online environments.

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