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# THE CURIOUS CASES OF CANCEL CULTURE

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THE CURIOUS CASES OF CANCEL CULTURE

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A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

———————————

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Communication Studies

———————————

by

Loydie S. Burmah

August 2021

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ABSTRACT

Cancel culture is a complex phenomenon that challenges our notions of civic practices, perpetuates surveillance practices amongst individuals who encourage digital public shaming and obscures communal ideas regarding accountability. Hence, it is imperative to complicate and nuance "cancel culture" to understand the different meanings derived from its diverse mechanizations. Other matrices such as power, platform governance, decoloniality, and more bolster ideas about the phenomenon's extensive sociocultural reach. Using a critical digital ethnographic approach, I exemplify with the analysis two cancel culture cases uncovering themes such as selective cancelations, cancelation effectiveness, performative activism, performative wokeness, hypocrisy, victimization, and empathy. This study seeks to complexify cancel culture research approaches.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

To my parents Lucienne and James. I am forever grateful for all your endless love and support. You two remind me that I can create whatever life I want to. To carve my niche within this grand epoch here on Earth.

To my brother Christopher. You are the first person I ever recall learning about independence from. You influence me to get it on my own terms. And now—I'm gettin' it.

To my nieces Jayla and Khalani. Wow, I cannot wait to see who you two will be. You two big heads taught me how to play all over again. You both constantly remind me that exploring and learning *is* living.

To my Wondertwin Steven. What we have is cosmic. You inspire me to live authentically, unabashedly. To embrace transformation. Let's continue this boogie into the afterlife. In the meantime, while we're here, let's continue reveling in this journey. *Where's Mathangi!?*

To the readers. My expressed gratitude for taking a moment to read this behemoth!


To Me. One of the realest to ever do it. *We continue*.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Curious Cases of Cancel Culture

Donald Trump? Canceled, impeached, and banned from Twitter! Brother Nature? Canceled, at least two times—but still controversially popular! Student debt? Still pending. Both individuals—minus student debt, although one might liken it to a living, breathing bully—are targets of "cancel culture," a complex sociocultural phenomenon that continues to garner incredible social momentum since its earliest documented inception circa early 2018. Each respective "cancelation" involved generating grassroots support for the legal prosecution of Trump or the ceasing of Peña's fan support, dependent upon the intent of different users demanding reprimand for both situations. Such mentions are an incredibly small waterdrop in a sea of cases that continue to reach a depth like the Mariana Trench. Much like the first documented explorers of the deepest oceanic trench, I investigate cancel culture to uncover what lies within such unknown territory.

Definitions of the cancel culture phenomenon continue to cause contention amongst different individuals. However, what is somewhat agreeable, is that canceling involves those that invoke a form of accountability, reprimand, or even act of revenge against individuals or organizations accused of problematic, harmful behaviors and attitudes. In the case of Trump, his numerous cancelations are a result of publicly documented egregious statements and

actions towards countless others during his presidency—and even prior. For social media influencer Peña, screenshots of older tweets posted circa 2012 featuring racist and sexist jokes resurfaced, causing some individuals to demand apology and punishment. Canceling is invoked for different intentions and reasons. If any problematic wrongdoing is perceived—more importantly, documented and distributed for mass engagement—canceled targets may find themselves at the rage, amusement, or mercy of others. Therefore, since cancelations manifest uniquely, examinations into cases will produce different perspectives and dialogues.

The study of cancel culture is now rapidly manifesting in scholarly research. Whereas prior, regular social media users, critics, influencers, writers, mainstream media news organizations, and many more dominated different popular discourses. Therefore, I am contextualizing my thesis amongst academic conversations related to "civil" practices, digital public shaming, mediated peer-to-peer surveillance, accountability, and more. I integrate previous and current relevant additional studies as well.

I am passionate about this exploration into cancel culture simply because it is an area of study I have yet to entirely understand as both a scholar and curious regular social media user. It is also a new area of research that is ripe for inquiry. I feel as though I am a part of crafting new territory, which can be fortified upon or challenged to establish a stronger research foundation. What I hope this thesis will demonstrate is how this phenomenon, at this contemporary period,

altered how we approach discourse, activism, and accountability in a heavily technologically mediated era.

Numerous cancel culture definitions continue to emerge as different perspectives contribute to its meaning within our public consciousness. Ng (2020) describes it as "withdrawal of any kind of support for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic" (p. 623). Clark (2020) details the act of canceling as a form of "expression of agency," whereby an individual withdraws their attention, presence, time, and money from someone or something "whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive" (p. 88). Norris (2020) describes it "as attempts to ostracize someone for violating social norms" (p. 2). These definitions and many others approach the concept from diverse positionalities.

When I initially started researching cancel culture in October of 2018, I wanted to establish a definition that provided a concise yet impactful summary. Thus, I described it as a socio-cultural phenomenon that features diverse, complex communication processes whereby individuals create and assert forms of punitive justice against others whose behaviors, attitudes, characters, etc., are deemed problematic. Yet, I still feel as if this description is incomplete! Nonetheless, it provided me with a locus from which I initiated my submersion. Here's what I recovered from my deep dive.

While cancel culture typically initiates within the digital or online space like social media, the consequences perpetuate offline. For instance, if an individual

asserts a harmful opinion that is sexist, racist, homophobic, etc., using their personal social media account, other users may collect specific posts as a form of "evidence" for redistribution. Users share evidence amongst their networks containing additional context, such as support for reprimand to ensure that the perpetrator is accountable for rectifying the dissemination of harmful discourse. Communication may also include an expression of outrage or the sharing of satirical content like raunchy memes. However, at times calls for reprimand typically extends beyond the requirement of a simple acknowledgment and subsequent apology. Individual users may locate and distribute personal information (e.g., doxing) like the offender's work address (or even more personal identifiers/relations), encouraging others to engage in varying forms of harassment. While psychological torment is an integral aspect of this gambit, perhaps the most crucial repercussion to result is the shaming and censoring of the "wrongdoer." Subsequently, one can only imagine to what extent an individual's reputation would be affected.

During the decade of the 2010 Internet epoch, social media seemingly appeared to be a lawless place, one in which users could express with a few keystrokes their most controversial beliefs without so much as only to receive a barrage of scathing insults in response. Even "2012 Twitter" is recognized by some as one of the most notorious eras of user debauchery where tweeting disparaging remarks indicates one's edginess. Now, one can be canceled without warning—unless a thorough archival deletion has occurred. There is

more to be studied regarding cancel culture as a pivotal influence for different types of reform. One cancelation for an average person may seem minor compared to larger authoritative institutions. Still, the overall pursuit for justice urges more individuals to become critical activists of oppressive ideologies and structures—or so they might believe. Intertwined with authentic objectives of restorative justice (or radical activism) are acts of performative "wokeness" in which individuals capitalize their social media platforms by creating posts meant to provoke user engagement. So, while some folks are genuinely interested in accountability and resolving harm through corrective means, others seek to capitalize user attention for profit and fame. I intend to complicate, and nuance cancel culture as a phenomenon.

While intending to research and define what cancel culture is and understand the parameters of cancelations, I found the existence of a complex matrix through which users operate as digital trials and juries using social media platforms. To further understand cancel culture at both micro and macro levels, I consider five research questions for inquiry. RQ1: What is cancel culture? RQ2: How does cancel culture inform online civility practices that favor hierarchical relationships? RQ3: What can cancel culture tell us about hierarchical matrices of power and injustice? RQ4: What historical parallels appear concerning cancel culture that might suggest decolonial practices? RQ5: What type of strategies do victims of cancel culture adopt to respond to their threatened identity?

Cancel culture is a diverse phenomenon that requires a complex and varied methodological approach that tackles multiple fronts simultaneously. A traditional, one-dimensional, or even two-dimensional format of inquiry would not suffice. I invoke a call to experimentation at this point in the discourse around cancel culture. This study provides a framework influenced by decolonial practices in its format of epistemological exploration and analysis.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rules of "Civility"

Cancel culture serves as a powerful mechanism for individuals to regulate intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors, attitudes, values, etc. In fact, with each outrageous case, we are reminded just how obsessed we are about monitoring practices within both online and offline contexts, respectively. After all, cancel culture is only practical to the extent of our collective gaze [poignantly at each other]; otherwise, how else will we reprimand, instruct, and force each other to *behave* correctly? Papacharissi's (2010) concept of the networked self could potentially describe how cancel culture and its link with new media technologies reinforce normative behaviors and attitudes in respective public and private performances of identity.

Self-identity in public and private life traverses distinct yet connected planes of interaction or networks. Technology provides the stage for such advanced multidimensional communication, linking the individual, separately or simultaneously, with multiple audiences. Online social networks constitute such sites of self-presentation and identity negotiation. (p. 304) Thus, digital media serve as a camino real for enacting peer-to-peer or lateral surveillance, collecting and interrogating what some (or many) perceive as minimal or severely "abnormal" performances that detract from implicitly/explicitly agreed upon sociocultural norms that govern interaction and relations. By collecting, archiving,

and sharing evidence gathered from monitoring practices, we validate

participatory acts of vigilance meant to sustain multiple even contradictory

perceptions of social order or normalcy. Since cancel culture is multifaceted in

appearance dependent upon purpose, we can study how individuals are

socialized. I research cancelations including, but not limited to, canceling threats

to norms, canceling abnormal norms, and canceling just because to present

different critical perspectives regarding how we essentially civilize one another.

Within these sections, I explain how cancelations may exist concerning "civil"

behaviors and attitudes based upon personal observations from reviewing

specific cases. By providing such a foundation, I want to reinforce how important

it is to consider the many different intentions for cancel culture manifestations.

<u>Canceling Threats to Norms</u>

If anyone (or anything) is considered a disruptor, cancel culture acts as a

rectifying force meant to restore an imagined order. The transgression serves as

an example of what is not accepted. For instance, if a majority agrees that

institutionalized racism is wrong or abnormal, then eradicating anything

interpreted as problematic racist rhetoric or behavior allows us to reinforce

explicitly shared consensus and norms that claim to champion diversity and

inclusion. So, if a form of collective surveillance reveals that an organization or

individual enforces racially discriminatory practices against certain groups, cancel

culture reprimands that abnormal behavior. Thus, because of such practices, the

idea that our collective vigilance effectively corrects deviance—so long as we

constantly remain hyperaware—is reinforced. This form of cancelation addresses challenges to particular norms that specific groups maintain with shared consensus about certain ideologies related to reinforcing certain behaviors. Based upon personal observations, I notice that this deployment of cancel culture attempts to redress perceived violations that disrupt a group's understanding and practice of acceptable behavior. For example, in Peña's case, his derogatory posts violated some of his fans' shared beliefs about inclusivity. Therefore, Peña's cancelation serves as an example of what some individuals perceive as unacceptable.

<u>Canceling Abnormal Norms</u>

Cancel culture also reproduces a different form for dictating agreed-upon attitudes and behaviors that create our shared sense of civil practices. Conversely, such monitoring practices may intend to redress normalized oppressive attitudes and behaviors. Cancel culture in this regard serves to recognize perpetual transgressions that dictate our sociocultural interactions and relations so that new norms resolve such violations. Therefore, if collective surveillance exposes racial stereotyping or homophobia, cancel culture mechanizes communal activism to cultivate new norms. Therefore, users add another critical approach to their constructed sense of public identity that ultimately justifies panopticon-like practices. For example, the exploitation of violence against Black individuals for profit has always been an abnormal normalized practice. In this era, amidst genuine protests concerning police

brutality against Black individuals in 2021, some organizations commodified instances of Black death by capitalizing from mass social engagement. For example, SHEIN, an international fast-fashion e-commerce company, faced backlash for selling a phone case featuring the image of a handcuffed Black person outlined in chalk by a white hand, presumably a police officer. SHEIN removed the item when confronted by users. More shockingly, SHEIN also admitted that they never received explicit permission from the original creator to use the graphic for their product. This instance is simply one of many transgressions that SHEIN committed to profit. In this case, users emphasized how some retailers perpetuate abnormal normalized commodification practices that harm countless individuals. Therefore, some folks use cancel culture to address specific behaviors and attitudes that are considered common but highly detrimental.

Canceling Just Because

We can also explore a petty—or let's say different—utilization of cancel culture that also serves as a determinant for attitude and behavior modification—one where personal preference is precedent to morality or fairness. Here, trivial concerns regarding difference become grounds for fierce contestation, where one opinion, belief, or thought seeks to dominate the other. Some weaponize cancel culture as a dogmatic means of indoctrination to subjugate those who disagree. However, this form is not entirely new, only exacerbated by social media—it is simply much more accessible today to gather for a digital pillory

(Hess & Waller, 2014). What is also considerably troubling about this manifestation are the restrictions concerning freedom of expression. Latif (2020) states that contemporary discourses exist within "awkward boundaries" which ultimately decide who is allowed to discuss what "epistemic perspectives" (p. 134). So, although social media may provide more accessibility to public debate, "participation still tends to be limited to certain groups and factions" (Elliot & Holt, 2020, p. 107).

Further examination is needed to reveal why and how specific groups use digital media to dominate public discourse. For instance, other social and financial capital factors allow factions to publicize their ideologies and agendas. Also, the concept of accessibility in this regard must expand to include why marginalized voices are silenced or attacked for attempting to participate. There are clear distinctions that determine whose voices are present within the mainstream, so it is imperative to understand the ecology in which communication occurs. Similarly, cancel culture functions like this as well. By discussing canceling threats to norms, canceling abnormal norms, and canceling just because I present distinctive perspectives to consider when studying cancel culture cases. Moreover, there is an ultimate objective within each function: to reinforce or enact norms that establish how to act and socialize.

So, understanding the context of norm violations, like, who is responsible for invoking the cancel, identifying the perceived transgression, and recognizing the intended target, is required. Therefore, social media platforms and digital tech

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propagating lateral surveillance exacerbate the intensity of the phenomena

(Andrejevic, 2004). Because digital and social media allot access to select

individuals or groups, understanding how platforms serve as gestation spaces for

cancel culture to breed is imperative as cancelations conjure by using media

technology to ensure their documentation and dissemination. Cancel culture

further proves that platforms are not neutral conduits for interconnectivity.

Instead, the phenomenon reveals just how contingent it is upon monitoring

practices that are implicitly and explicitly encouraged through technologically

mediated channels.

Social Media: Cancel Culture's Burn Book

Social media serve as cancel culture's digitally advanced mobile version

of the Burn Book à la *Mean Girls* (2004), which primarily operates through lateral

surveillance occurring between users. Such new media technology allows us to

replicate law enforcement and marketing monitoring practices that inculcate

normative behavioral patterns (Andrejevic, 2004). We watch one another to

determine potential risks and harm. "Practices of mutual monitoring rely not just

on a generalized skepticism and wariness, but upon conceptions of risk that

instantiate the imperatives of productivity, hygiene, and security associated with

the maximization of productive forces" (p. 494). Cancel culture encourages us to

expand our individual and collective gaze because it cannot otherwise function,

as witnesses or participants must be present. Users transform into novice data

intelligence agents, utilizing social media platforms to collect and report

information about cancelations. Countless transmissions of evidence spread,

demanding attention and participation, luring folks into a digital arena of

blustering discourse filled with truth, revelations, rumors, and libel. Once an

archaic and obnoxiously pink spiral-bound gossip-laden notebook restricted to

Regina George and her minions, the Burn Book has now become digitally

reappropriated to scorch transgressors for their wrongdoings. Although we have

advanced in some fashion from simply listing offenders as "fugly sluts," an insult

to their reputations, social media serve as an imperative participatory

surveillance-like mechanism for cancel culture to thrive effectively. And with

ample transmission, the digital Burn Book normalizes cancelations as a valid

behavioral and social reform method.

The Effects of Platform Governance and Guidelines on Cancel Culture

Since social media are an integral tool for our interaction, platform

governance also affects cancel culture's influence on "civility" practices online

and offline in tandem. Platforms contain explicit and implicit regulations that

govern user interactivity. Gillespie (2018) describes how platform "terms of

service" and "community guidelines" present users with rules that govern

interactivity. While the former is more representative of legal or contractual

obligations that users must follow to participate on the platform, the latter defines

what is deemed appropriate. "And they [guidelines] do important discursive work,

performing but also revealing how platform companies see themselves as

ambivalent arbiters of public propriety" (Gillespie, 2018, p. 46). Here, cancel

culture affects and is affected by platform moderation as all parties (users and developers) negotiate protections. Platform community guidelines are beneficial, dependent upon their specific use, despite their "necessarily subjective and shifting and incomplete" definitions (Gillespie, 2018, p. 47).

Therefore, it is crucial to study how cancel culture incubates via social media amidst platform moderation which governs user performance of attitudes and behaviors through guidelines. Platform guidelines inform and dictate user conduct to create a safe, accessible environment. For instance, Twitter states that its rules (Twitter Rules) exist "to ensure all people can participate in the public conversation freely and safely" (Twitter, 2021). Policies about violence, abuse/harassment, private information, and more describe how the platform addresses behavioral violations that discourage freedom of expression. However, their rules are dependent upon arbitrary implementation practices that protect some and exclude others. Cancel culture also challenges the enforcement and effectiveness of such guidelines as users negotiate their behaviors against intended targets. In some cancelations, issues such as abuse/harassment that violate platform guidelines can potentially create life-threatening situations—for either the canceler or canceled involved. Yet, policy enforcement appears lacking. Therefore, social media platforms also influence how cancel culture materializes.

In cancelations, either of importance or even triviality, potential issues like harassment or abuse may arise. In such cases, users are technically violating

community guidelines that would require the platform to enforce policy protections in response. However, context must be thoroughly assessed, e.g., differentiating between a sarcastic retort of physical harm and a severe threat of violence. Developers ultimately influence cancel culture discourse by monitoring user interactivity to reinforce acceptable behaviors. Interestingly, such notions have expanded to include discussion about who is allowed to say what. Palmer (2020) argues that cancel culture is "directly linked with the spiral of silence theory," whereby individuals self-impose restrictions to maintain public consensus (p. 25). Paired with Gillespie's (2018) notion about platform developers as "private curators of public speech" (p. 71), guidelines influence how users choose to self-censor (p. 74). Different forms of cancelations display such complexity in diverse degrees.

Censorship: *Who* Can Say *What*?

Some users may interpret cancel culture and platform moderation as grounds for self-censorship. For example, Latif's (2020) research about American Muslim character cancelation describes how prominent Western Islamic scholar Shaykh Hamza Yusuf Hanson faced a series of "aggregating controversies" because of his comments about Black Lives Matter in December of 2016 (p. 137). "With his intentions and decades of public service being questioned, Hanson was visibly pained and subsequently stopped blogging, and thereafter all of his administrator-run social media accounts were also closed down in early 2017" (Latif, 2020, p. 137). Regardless of his public status before the

decontextualized BLM comments controversy, Latif (2020) argues that Hanson's Muslim identity became a locus for exaggerated public scrutiny and subsequent cancelation. Whatever platform guideline protections afforded to Hanson during that initial period until recently have not been determined.

Nonetheless, Latif (2020) noted Hanson's "privation of his personal engagement on critical platforms" (p. 141) because of many oppositional discourses directed against him. Hanson's limited engagement and even silencing may be due to ever-shifting platform guideline definitions. Although certain acceptable, cordial behaviors are encouraged, users can still creatively circumvent such suggestions to maintain decorum by intentionally creating hostile environments. Besides, for some individuals, additional entries into their chapter of the digital Burn Book that is social media is not worth the risk of engaging in asymmetrical discourse.

To another complex degree of examining the intersections of cancel culture and platform moderation in their effort to direct "civility" practices, we can discuss a different extreme.

> After close review of recent Tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account and the context around them — specifically how they are being received and interpreted on and off Twitter — we have permanently suspended the account due to the risk of further incitement of violence. (Twitter Inc., 2021, para. 1)

Twitter's ban of former U.S. President Donald Trump dramatically shifted

discourse regarding cancel culture, platform moderation, free speech protections,

and censorship. Some shared that Trump's ban would discourage harmful

rhetoric, while others felt that Twitter set a dangerous precedent for platform

moderation practices by enforcing a form of extreme suppression. Moreover,

questions arose about what differences, if any, existed between canceling and

censorship. Fervent opponents to cancel culture continued to argue that the

phenomenon essentially silences targets while those in favor supported stricter

platform guidelines to eliminate unsafe behavior. Overall, the ban further

emphasized social media's influential relationship with cancel culture.

Twitter's explanation of the ban cited two of Trump's tweets published

after the Capitol riots on January 6. One expressed his support for the

"75,000,000 great American Patriots" who voted for him, and the other stating his

non-attendance to the 46th inauguration of President Joe Biden.

> We assessed the two Tweets referenced above under our Glorification of
>
> Violence policy, which aims to prevent the glorification of violence that
>
> could inspire others to replicate violent acts and determined that they were
>
> highly likely to encourage and inspire people to replicate the criminal acts
>
> that took place at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. (Twitter Inc., 2021,
>
> para. 10).

Twitter's assessment stated that Trump's tweets "must be read in the context of

broader events in the country" (Twitter, Inc. 2021, para. 9). They believed that the

former president's language (e.g., "American Patriots" to describe Trump supporters) and concerns about election legitimacy encouraged "off-Twitter" discussions about planned armed protests. More importantly, Trump's actions online were "likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021" (para. 17). Trump had already faced a series of cancelations and criticisms leading to and especially throughout his presidency. His social media presence via Twitter had been a place of contention between his ardent supporters, political pundits, critics, trolls, and more. Calls for platform moderation through account restriction regarding Trump's account had already been a seriously debated topic, tangentially along with discourse regarding cancel culture and First Amendment protections.

Before Trump's ban, a letter titled "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" published July of 2020 in Harper's Magazine featured a series of academics, journalists, writers, critics, etc., signatories claiming that "it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought" (Williams et al., 2020, para. 2). Despite what seemed to be a sincere concern for suppression of thought and the need for healthy disagreement presented by the artists and intellectuals, some critics of the letter wondered why certain signatories such as J. K. Rowling were featured. Rowling, before the letter, was canceled for publishing tweets considered transphobic and a subsequent extensive blog post featuring her opinions about sex and gender. Writer Thomas Chatterton Williams who led the

creation of the letter, stated in an interview for *The New York Times* that: "It's a

defense of people being able to speak *and* think freely without fear of punishment

or retribution, of the right to disagree and not fear for your employment"

(Schuessler & Harris, 2020, para. 39). The writer's comments about cancel

culture in this regard seem to express sincere concern about the phenomenon's

employment as a form of canceling just because, however, it is also important to

remember that this iteration of cancel culture does not represent the entirety of

the phenomenon. Yet, the Harper's Letter does not necessarily mention such

distinctions. Instead, it emphasizes cancel culture as a form of censorship,

seemingly adopting a unidimensional definition that ideologically positions the

phenomenon solely as a destructive force for suppression. Additionally, the

concerns expressed in the letter do not address how platform governance and

moderation practices influence debate between users.

Following his social media ban and White House departure, Trump spoke

at the Conservative Political Action Conference's (CPAC) aptly titled event,

"America Uncanceled." He declared that the Republicans in attendance would be

responsible for opposing "radical Democrats, the fake news media, and their

toxic cancel culture" in the restoration of American politics (C-SPAN, 2021, 6:51-

6:57). "No matter how much the Washington establishment and the powerful

special interests may want to silence us, let there be no doubt—we will be

victorious, and America will be stronger and greater than ever before." (C-SPAN,

2021, 5:07-5:22). Trump's Twitter ban currently remains in place, in addition to

other disbarments from other platforms such as Facebook and its affiliates. Nick Clegg, VP of Global Affairs at Facebook, announced a two-year ban of Trump from the platform. Afterward, experts will assess the risk to public safety to determine possible extensions or termination (Clegg, 2021, para. 3). "When the suspension is eventually lifted, there will be a strict set of rapidly escalating sanctions that will be triggered if Mr. Trump commits further violations in future" (Clegg, 2021, para. 4). Clegg wrote that Facebook's approach to the ban serves as a reflection of how the platform attempts to balance freedom of expression and safety as "enshrined" in their Community Standards (policies) (para. 8).

Nevertheless, Twitter's enforcement of its guidelines (Twitter Rules) continues to be criticized by some for its misappropriation in cases made against world leaders such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran. Iranian journalist and activist Masih Alinejad wrote in an op-ed that Jack Dorsey's response that Khamenei's "anti-Semitic tweets and his calls for the eradication of Israel" did not violate Twitter's rules at a Senate hearing in October of 2020 (Alinejad, 2021 para. 3). "Since Khamenei's verbal attacks weren't aimed at his own citizens, Dorsey claimed, they were permissible" (Alinejad, 2021, para. 3). Khamenei's Twitter post in May of 2021 stated that Palestine "must increase their strength, stand strong, confront the enemy, and force them to stop their crimes" (Khamenei, 2021). Alan Klein, a senior adviser to Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, criticized the leader's remarks. "How has Twitter not banned Ali Khamenei over the below post outright inciting terrorism against Israelis? His

tweet is a virtual signal to Iran-backed Palestinian jihadists" (Klein, 2021).

Platform guidelines, such as Twitter Rules, continue to receive criticism for their validity and reliability as notions of free speech protections are contended against between users and owners. As well as how platforms shape public discourse by deciding which voices are present disseminated through their medium.

Platform governance and moderation further complicate issues of cancel culture, censorship, and free speech. Social media offers a seemingly accessible conduit for "free" expression. Platforms embed terms of service and community guidelines to provide some form of protection for user interactivity. Yet, a phenomenon such as cancel culture highlights how severe power imbalances exist intra-communally among users and the platform itself. Platform policies and decisions ultimately reiterate certain behaviors that are deemed acceptable within the online and offline space. I examine to what extent they should be allowed, and the effects cancel culture has on their assessments.

Uneven Cancelation Distributions

Despite cancel culture's ever-increasing popularity, however, its effectiveness has yet to be genuinely demonstrated against punishing institutions or prominent figures (Mishan, 2020). Cancel culture and its proliferation through social media is a distinctive phenomenon that, because of its unique accessibility, numerous entities can establish, maintain, or challenge norms and notions about "civility." "What cancellations offer instead is a surrogate, warped-mirror version of the judicial process, at once chaotic yet ritualized" (Mishan,

21

2020, para. 17). While some public figures maintained their careers, regular individuals faced severe consequences.

For defending J. K. Rowling, Working Partners and HarperCollins fired Scottish children's author Gillian Philip after the author tweeted her support (Sarkisian, 2020). "Working Partners had received numeral tweets from angry fans calling for them to fire Philip. Eventually, she was" (Sarkisian, 2020, para. 5).

> The more power someone has, the less affected they are: The British writer J. K. Rowling, one of the signatories of the Harper's letter, has been publicly excoriated in the past year for expressing her views on gender identity and biological sex, but people continue to buy her books. (Mishan, 2020, para. 18)

Although Working Partner's managing editor Chris Snowdon attributed Philip's firing not to her "personally expressed views," but because of Philip's association with Erin Hunter, a popular pen name used by creatives and writers. Erin Hunter is a collective of writers, authors, and editors for the *Warriors*, *Seekers*, *Survivors*, and *Bravelands* series published by HarperCollins. Snowdon believed that her views might serve as a representation of the collective (Sarkisian, 2020). So, to remove any assumed associations with Philip's personal views and the Erin Hunter brand, she was fired (Sarkisian, 2020).

Regular individuals are often the more vulnerable victims—or easier targets—to the effects of cancel culture. "The point of cancellation is ultimately to establish norms for the majority, not to bring the stars back down to earth," (para.

21) wrote opinion columnist Ross Douthat in "10 Theses About Cancel Culture" (2020) for *The New York Times*. Philip accredited her firing to "an abusive mob of anonymous Twitter trolls" (Sarkisian, 2020, para. 3). Rowling also faced a barrage of critique, but her occupational collaborations appear to remain unscathed. Although its nebulous nature does not operate by a single "apparatus" (Mishan, 2020, para. 16), hierarchical relations are created or reproduced in cancel culture discourse.

Some cancelations, particularly those involving regular folks, shape public perceptions about acceptable attitudes and behaviors concerning freedom of expression, censorship, social media, and the repercussions of threatening social order. "The goal isn't to punish everyone, or even very many someones; it's to shame or scare just enough people to make the rest conform" (Douthat, 2020, para. 21). Therefore, to introduce how and further analyze why certain implementations of effective reprimand exist, the next chapter is dedicated to understanding how digital public shaming affects regular individuals that become engrossed in notoriety. Additional exploration will present how individuals navigate stigma following cancelation and what identity performances they adopt as a result.

## Digital Public Shaming

Cancel culture transforms our notions and methods of shaming because it includes digitally mediated tools to collect evidence and distribute it through numerous social platforms to garner massive amounts of spectators. This

phenomenon's functions are partly motivated by lateral or peer-to-peer surveillance practices that address any transgressions that cause harm to varied perceptions and considerations of social order. Because of this, individuals can extend their vigilant gazes to document detractors that pose as threats. However, regardless of the reason for imposing a cancelation, once invoked, an eternal digital pillory (Hess & Waller, 2014) envelopes the accused, who must learn to navigate stigma using identity maintenance tactics, such as passing and covering.

Shame augments in cancel culture because of the exposure granted to numerous witnesses who can spectate and chastise offenders for their perceived transgressions. After all, "nobody can be vulgar all alone" (Sartre, 1956, p. 315). Sartre states that shame is recognition by the Other, a process by which the experience of another being witnesses one's abnormal attitudes and behaviors. "Thus the Other has not only revealed to me what I was; he has established me in a new type of being which can support new qualifications" (Sartre, 1956, p. 315). With digital tech and social media, this process is replicated and redefined by countless Others.

> Correspondingly, when we collectively lambast an individual for plagiarism, a tasteless joke, or a racist comment online, the motivation behind the act is not to convince the wrongdoer that he is redeemable or that he has learned and improved as a person, but rather that he is now and forever fallen. (Presswood, 2017, p. 46).

This gigantic, anonymous amphitheater allows cancel culture to thrive in its effort of shaming offenders.

Since digital records of the offense exist and may reproduce for constant distribution, Hess & Waller (2014) argue that because of new digital tools, "citizen media producers" can use social media platforms to enforce shaming tactics (p. 109). Thus, what was once a practice limited by locality and community is now available to individuals with access to technology and an Internet connection (Hess & Waller, 2014, p. 108). Through their study of Kerry Ann Strasser, an Australian woman filmed publicly urinating at a rugby match, Hess & Waller (2014) explore how new media formats that alter shaming practices affect individuals in the contemporary era of advanced technology and sociality. "The case of Strasser highlights that through the media technologies available to them, 'ordinary' people are now playing an increasing role in the surveillance of individuals in digital space" (Hess & Waller, 2014, p. 105). The authors attribute Strasser's shame to a spectator who used their device to record and distribute the incident. Citing this practice of ordinary individuals using mediated technology to punish behavior as "isurveillance," they conclude that the act of documenting encourages users to perpetuate the embodiment of surveillance system practices (p. 105). Because of this, traditional forms of news media begin to siphon content from citizen media producers, which then also become involved in reinforcing shaming traditions. "We suggest in the digital age, media have the power to

impose a digital mark of shame that is difficult to remove" (Hess & Waller, 2014, p. 108).

The digital pillory becomes affixed to the accused's identity. Furthermore, by examining other instances of advanced digital practices of shaming closely, such as samples of online firestorms, we can further assess possible reasons as to why individuals decide to engage in cancelation and shaming practices.

Online Firestorms

Cancel culture is motivated by the amount of engagement generated from individuals coalescing into a collective movement. Massive amounts of participation gestate via different forms of communication like comments. Online firestorms function in a very similar manner. Gruber et al. (2020) describe online firestorms "as the collective form of protest [that] can be especially effective in exerting pressure and bringing about the intended change" (p. 565). Users within the online space incite communicative action as a means of reforming issues. "By contributing to the online outrage, people attempt to enforce the social norms that they perceive to have been violated and to affect the social change that they desire" (Gruber et al., 2020, p. 566). Like cancel culture, individual participation in collaborative practices vastly differ—and what allures users to engage is how accessible it is through digital tech and social media. Gruber et al.'s (2020) study extended research about online firestorms and the situational theory of problem-solving (STOPS) (Kim & Grunig, 2011) by including slacktivism, collective identity, and community efficacy as additional categories for understanding user

participation (p. 567). STOPS details how communicative action is motivated by problem-solving, which is "influenced by a person's problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement recognition" (Gruber et al., 2020, p. 566). Therefore, Gruber et al. (2020) characterize online firestorm participation as a "communicative act of problem-solving" by forwarding issue-related content via shares, likes, or comments (p. 566). Much of what the authors determined can also be applicable to cancel culture phenomena for different motives.

Regarding collective identity, Gruber et al. (2020) noted that individual participants might be motivated by perceptions about community through unification against a particular problem. Thus, for some, unifying is about accumulating collective power. For others, their participation is passive involvement or slacktivism (p. 574). Overall, despite personal reasons for participating in online firestorms, the authors assert that the amount of user involvement may cause a "persistent threat of spillover into other online or mainstream news media" whereby "the risk to reputation can be a clear threat" for the targeted individual or organization involved (Gruber et al. 2020, p. 575). Cancel culture presents another approach to STOPS because it is also a communicative approach utilized to address and resolve issues. However, the intent for initiating a cancelation varies greatly. As much as cancel culture deploys against severe offensives, trivial uses may generate unnecessary problems. Regardless, as cancelations garner different forms of audience interest, heightened publicity threatens the offender's vulnerability to potential

attacks. Ultimately, in response, this presents a challenge to how an offender can resolve their perceived violation. An apology is no longer a past performance because the evidence will continue to exist and become reproduced within the online space as different individuals interact with scandal.

<u>Digitized Avowal: Endless Apology</u>

Cancelations have altered traditional forms of avowal or public truth-telling practices because offenders are forever bound to their transgression via digital records. Foucault (1981) defines avowal as "a verbal act through which the subject affirms who he is, binds himself to this truth, places himself in a relationship of dependence concerning another, and modifies at the same time his relationship to himself" (p. 17). Such a practice cannot occur without an audience, much like Sartre (1965) expressed that the presence of the Other facilitates shame. Presswood's (2017) study about digital public shaming assesses how Foucault's (1981) notion of the "exomologesis" practice of avowal—where "the public wants to see a sinner's awareness of sin manifested"—has significantly transformed because of digital technology and social media (p. 46). Whereas before a "sinner's" actions and their public performance of remorse were restricted to their locality and community, technological advancements have expanded those boundaries to a global audience—like what Hess & Waller (2014) studied about shaming practices exasperated by new media and surveillance.

Cancel culture ensures that offenders will forever face ridicule by evidence of their wrongdoings. Their entry in the digital Burn Book provides a record, whether authentic or forged, that a canceled victim must learn to negotiate. Presswood's (2017) research seems to foretell one aspect about cancel culture's effect upon the ritual of public apology. Hence, avowal becomes seemingly endless because their digital record stigmatizes the canceled individual.

<u>Navigating Stigmatized Identity</u>

Canceled offenders learn identity maintenance practices to navigate their stigmatization because of their wrongdoings. Goffman (1974) states that deviations from normative expectations influence how a stigmatized person socializes with others, dependent upon the visibility and mutual awareness of the stigma. "The fully and visibly stigmatized, in turn, must suffer the special indignity of knowing that they wear their situation on their sleeve, that almost anyone will be able to see into the heart of their predicament" (Goffman, 1974, p. 127). Cancel culture fortifies stigmatization through perpetual forms of hypervisibility à la the digital record. Because cancel culture proliferates through digital tech and social media, persistent inquiry about transgressions become popularized in trending searches. Consider search engine results generated via platforms from user participation. Often, cancelations become affixed to an offender's overall identity, first appearing digitally, then subsequently translating into offline, reinforcing stigmatization. What is striking particularly about this process is that it occurs differently for individuals due to their social status.

As Mishan (2020) and Douthat (2020) each noted, cancel culture rarely affects celebrity figures or powerful institutions but wreaks incredible havoc on the lives of regular individuals. Even Hess & Waller's (2014) assertions about reputation damage in the advancement of digital tech and social media remain valid for their case study about Strasser to this very moment. By performing a search query about Strasser now, populated results still feature the recorded 2011 video of her public urination along with extensive press coverage about her defamation. In addition, at the time of this inquiry, a Facebook page titled "The feral bogan woman pissing in her seat at Lang Park" is still active—with featured posts posing as Strasser herself.

Similarly, cancel culture produces the same results—offenders are bound to their digital records. Still, differentiation exists because of their social status. While inquiries for Trump's cancelations might include a more thorough search, queries for other regular individuals are immediate. Nonetheless, both must still negotiate their respective stigmatizations to preserve their identities.

Goffman's (1974) notion about passing and covering can help us understand how individuals navigate cancelation stigma. Suppose an offense has yet to face exposure. In that case, a person may attempt to pass by withholding information about their stigma until a potential confrontation arises in which what was secret is made known. Conversely, covering describes the process by which an individual with a publicized stigma employs an adaptive technique (p. 102). Goffman (1974) states that stigmas that are visible such as

physical handicaps, influences how an individual "may have to learn about the structure of interaction in order to learn about the lines along which they must reconstitute their conduct if they are to minimize the obtrusiveness of their stigma" (p. 104). Since identity and presence manifest through virtual means, accessibility to one's digital records creates difficulty for a canceled individual to hide their stigmatization. Furthermore, because user participation is not static, increased awareness generated at any moment can produce a cancelation to reoccur or become reinforced. By examining identity maintenance both within online and offline contexts, we can continue exploring cancel culture's overall effect on shaming practices.

<u>Identity Performance</u>

Cancel culture's effect on identity performance reveals a symbiotic nature between online and offline presence, indicating the powerful influence of digital public shaming. Using social networking sites (SNS), users actively create and authenticate themselves through identity maintenance practices that ultimately establish networks with numerous publics. Platforms collect and monetize user data through such performances to "promote the culture of self-scrutiny, self-branding, and self-promotion where popularity and reputation become the most desirable commodities (Marwick, 2013b)" as cited in Szulc (2019) (p. 19). Szulc's (2019) study of this phenomenon discusses how identities are performed and constructed through incentivized platforms. Thus, abundant and anchored selves proliferated by SNS to influence user behaviors (p. 23).

The existence of this phenomenon further advances Szulc's (2019) notions regarding digital media's influence on identity practices. Since platforms are an integral component of social interactivity, individuals learn to become fluent in performing and preserving identity online with brand-like practices. Contextualizing the abundant self, Szulc (2019) declares that SNS requires a "continuous confession of the private, a constant sharing of ever more details of one's life" (p. 17). Users, therefore, create more data about their personal lives to network with other individuals. When considering this with Goffman's (1974) idea of information control, we can determine how detrimental cancel culture is to one's identity performance, both constitutively affected online and offline.

Consequently, a canceled individual's network faces jeopardy as others weaponize their data against them as a form of reprimand. The abundance of information nightmarishly serves as a potential threat to the individual's livelihood, especially considering what public realms they occupy. Additionally, because the quantity of data is anchored to a particular individual typically required by SNS to verify authenticity, identity performance becomes perceived as a static representation or characterization (Szulc, 2019). Meanwhile, regardless of why specific cancelations occur, platforms continue to capitalize from identity datafication as expressed and distributed through their channels. And users who participate in cancel culture utilize personal information for their shaming agendas, affecting how an offender protects their brand. Interestingly,

such practices potentially indicate how cancelations may have developed

markets to monetize digital public shaming.

<u>Profit from Slander</u>

If reputation can be considered a form of currency, then exploiting the

conditions of cancel culture can generate a series of profits or losses—

depending on one's intent. Krolik & Hill's (2021) investigation into the slander

industry for *The New York Times* revealed how digital smear campaigns hosted

via "gripe sites" have a highly sophisticated commercialized market. Gripe sites

feature information condemning or ridiculing a particular target. For example,

Krolik published a series of posts about himself stating that he is a "loser who will

do anything for attention," attached with a selfie to a few gripe sites. "The posts

spread quickly. Within two hours, the Cheaterboard one had popped up on

FoulSpeakers.com. Within a month, the original five posts had spawned 21

copies on 15 sites" (Krolik & Hill, 2021, para. 12). Noticing a particular ad that

consistently appeared with proliferated posts about Krolik, the authors discovered

a reputation-management site that charged users thousands of dollars to remove

negative posts.

Moreover, they uncovered that some individuals both produced the

slander and ran websites removing them (Krolik & Hill, 2021). Considering cancel

culture's numerous iterations—particularly mechanizations of trivial means—one

must wonder to what extent particular posts exist to induce shame and generate

profit. Currently, Twitter is experiencing an influx of paid and proliferated content

from users wanting to capitalize from user engagement. It is already a challenge to determine what cancelations are valuable, and now, more potential complications muddle cancel culture's validity because individuals use it as a means of financial exploitation. Recalling what Szulc (2019) mentioned about identity performance of the abundant and anchored selves via platforms, canceled individuals' online and offline presence are at extreme risk. Still, of course, this depends on who the individual is and what might be gained or lost. So, while some individuals seek to capitalize on reputation smearing, others seek to employ losses for their intended victims.

Before Krolik & Hill's investigation, Hill (2021) investigated a Toronto woman (Nadire Atas) who "poisoned the reputations of dozens of her perceived enemies" (Krolik & Hill, 2021, para. 3). One of Atas' "enemies," Guy Babcock, was a victim of a digital smear campaign that also affected his wife, sister, brother-in-law, teenage nephew, cousin, and aunt (Hill, 2021). "The Babcock family had been targeted by a super-spreader, dragged into an Internet cesspool where people's reputations are held for ransom" (Hill, 2021). As a super-spreader, Atas published thousands of damaging posts on numerous websites. Although a judge found Atas responsible for multiple counts of defamation against Babcock and countless others, the plaintiffs were responsible for determining how to remove the slanderous posts (Hill, 2021). "For someone like me, with lots of pre-existing Google results, posts on sites like BadGirlReports barely show up. But for people with less of an online presence, like Mr. Babcock,

the sites still dominate search results" (Hill, 2021, para. 85). However, despite years of numerous requests to Google, Pinterest, and WordPress, the problem of populated results attached to the victims have yet to be sufficiently resolved (Hill, 2021). Much like Krolik's experience with submitting requests to Google to remove the posts he created about himself for the investigation, images from the gripe sites still appear in his search results. "Other people who have used Google's form reported similar experiences: It mostly works, but is less effective for images. And if you have an attacker who won't stop writing posts about you, it's almost useless. The slander remains" (Krolik & Hill, 2021, para. 73). Cancel culture appears to embody this type of persistence with digital recordkeeping practices propagated online. While the phenomenon is not limited to reputation-management sites, user participation mimics smear-like campaigns because information can reproduce at any moment on any platform. Given the user's intent, they may monetize from the slander by advancing their cancelation narratives.

Cancel culture advances digital public shaming practices because of the technological tools and social media used to reprimand individuals. In addition, surveillance methods support this phenomenon by encouraging individuals to monitor transgressions that deviate from established norms. What must be examined next is cancel culture's transformation of accountability practices related to justice and activism.

Future of Accountability

Cancel culture complicates discourse regarding accountability, significantly altering our perspectives about justice and activism. Since cancelations vary in their intent and formation, complex relations exist whereby participants and offenders attempt to negotiate punishment. Hence, difficulties arise when considering cancel culture's potential as a reformative force, as its effects can be devastating when misemployed. Yet, it can inspire critical discourse and action regarding numerous oppressions and violations when directed towards sincere reform. By examining different iterations of accountability, we can perhaps explore cancel culture's possibility as a decolonial practice of authentic communal activism.

Clark (2020) asserts that examination of the phenomenon "must begin with an analysis of the power relations by which it is defined" (p. 89) because the meaning of canceling is often misappropriated to affirm the concept of moral panic, rather than a sincere form of addressing "extant social problems" (p. 88). "Canceling a person, place, or thing is socially mediated phenomena with origins in queer communities of color" (Clark, 2020, p. 89). Understanding that notion, and the practice of canceling as an act initialized as a meme by Black Twitter, it is imperative to realize the misappropriation by "observers, particularly journalists with an outsized ability to amplify the(ir own) white gaze" (Clark, 2020, p. 89). Clark (2015) defines Black Twitter as "the meta-network of culturally connected communities on the microblogging site," as cited in Clark (2020) (p. 89).

Therefore, what should be considered a "last-ditch appeal for justice" (Clark, 2020, p. 89), is often mispresented as a form of censorship or silencing. "Thus framing these unruly discourses as "cancel culture" has found utility among those who wish to quash any attempts to critique their social position" (Clark, 2020, p. 90). Hence, the elite use cancel culture as a crutch to reassert their dominance over public discourse to navigate an era where numerous "counterspheres and optional publics" exist (Clark, 2020). "They have yet to reconcile how coalitions of the Othered are now equipped to execute a responsive strategy for immediately identifying harms and demanding consequences" (Clark, 2020, p. 91). Clark (2020) critiques "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" (Williams et al., 2020) published in *Harper's Magazine* as an example of the elites reframing cancel culture as an attack on free speech rather than as a discursive practice for marginalized communities, particularly Black individuals (Clark, 2020). In Romano's (2020) *Vox* article titled "Why We Can't Stop Fighting About Cancel Culture," the author notes that cancel culture's rise historically links to "civil rights boycotts of the 1950s and 60s" (para. 29). Anne Charity Hudley, the chair of linguistics of African America for the University of California, Santa Barbara featured in Romano's piece, shared that canceling is essentially an old "survival skill" of resistance for Black folks. "If you don't have the ability to stop something through political means, what you can do is refuse to participate," Hudley said (Romano, 2020, para. 28). By analyzing cancel culture through this perspective, we can examine the phenomenon's utility for communities to become a part of

and ultimately disrupt mainstream public discourse (Clark, 2020). Moreover,

compared to other discursive accountability practices like calling out (call-out

culture) or calling-in, additional delineations about cancel culture as a reformative

justice practice can also be assessed.

<u>Canceling or Calling-In?</u>

Other perspectives regarding accountability practices like calling-out, and

more recently, calling-in, attempt to redefine social justice approaches to cancel

culture. Professor Loretta J. Ross, one of the signatories for "A Letter on Justice

and Open Debate," asserts that calling-in instead of canceling should serve as

the primary form of accountability activism. "Calling-in engages in debates with

words and actions of healing and restoration, and without the self-indulgence of

drama" (Ross, 2019, para. 19). Ross (2019) claims that call-out culture is still

justified when addressing powerful offenders that are known to violate and

oppress others. However, it is often employed to shame those who are not

influential public figures and whose perceived transgressions are typically not as

severe. "More troublesome, Professor Ross and others agree, is when small

infractions become big infractions; when context gets lost and facts are distorted,

or it becomes difficult to discern between the two" (Bennett, 2020, para. 38).

Thus, this type of behavior that cancel culture elicits creates a fearful, toxic social

environment in which individuals learn to self-censor to avoid persecution. "Call-

outs make people fearful of being targeted. People avoid meaningful

conversations when hypervigilant perfectionists point out apparent mistakes, feeding the cannibalistic maw of the cancel culture" (Ross, 2019, para. 17).

However, in an interview with Kai Wright for WNYC's The Takeaway podcast, Clark expressed that calling-in is a "useful phrase and useful idea" but that power dynamics must still be recognized (Hill, 2021, 6:28-6:35). "To call someone in means that you have to have an existing relationship with them. And that, that person has to respect you," Clark said (Hill, 2021, 6:36-6:44). Calling-in is essentially limited when addressing public figures, whereby relations are by default impersonal. "So, we've got to come with something else that works: public accountability," Clark expressed (Hill, 2021, 7:05-7:10). According to a Pew Research study by Vogels et al. (2021), when asked to describe cancel culture in their own words, the "most common responses" from respondents referenced accountability. "Some 49% of those familiar with the term said it describes actions people take to hold others accountable" (Vogels et al., 2021, para. 11). A small percentage who identified accountability in their definitions also discussed how some instances of cancel culture were "misplaced, ineffective or overtly cruel" (Vogel et al., 2021, para. 12). Yet, Clark reiterates in the interview that cancel culture and accountability are often "conflated" (Hill, 2021, 7:19-7:25) by influential people to manipulate discourse that deflects the phenomenon's damage against their reputations rather than addressing serious issues. And in other cases, this conflation, when applied by regular participants against presumed offenders, the effects are incredibly detrimental.

When wrongfully misdirected as a form of "accountability" against regular

individuals or those with some public presence, cancel culture reveals how

personal dogma severely misconstrues perceived infractions as cause for

reprimand. Natalie Wynn of ContraPoints, a YouTube channel dedicated to

presenting counterarguments against alt-right discourse (Hall & Brownstein,

2019), faced a series of cancelations in which users attacked the commentator

for relatively minor transgressions. In a video titled "Canceling," Wynn provided

an extensive account of cancel culture in its complex existences, particularly

critiquing three tropes that invalidate accountability practices. Wynn discussed

the presumption of guilt, abstraction, and essentialism (Wynn, 2020). Trope 1,

the presumption of guilt, emphasizes that the accusation or cause of cancelation

serves as proof itself (Wynn, 2020, 5:37-7:19). Trope 2, abstraction, utilizes

generic statements to replace specific concrete evidence (Wynn, 2020, 7:20-

9:35). Trope 3, essentialism, describes the process whereby the individual is

criticized rather than the action itself (Wynn, 2020, 9:36-10:03). Ross cited

Wynn's characterization of "contamination" or "guilt by association"—which also

affected Wynn—as the reason for folks canceling the professor for appearing as

a signatory in the letter published by Harper (Bennett, 2020).

In an interview for On the Media podcast with Brooke Gladstone, Wynn

reaffirmed previous statements that her cancelations were worse than receiving

vile abuse from Nazis—and her sexual assault. "What makes the canceling

worse is that it's being done to you by people in your own community. You sort of watch yourself be erased by this sort of parody, evil version of you" (Feder, 2021, 11:54-12:10). Wynn further states that the stigma created by the cancelation fosters isolation as the responses of allies and companions undermine a canceled individual's self-worth, ultimately causing a depressing experience (Feder, 2021, 12:20-12:43). Thus, this specific misguided conflation of accountability and cancel culture dangerously expose minor public figures or individuals to an influx of unnecessary, potentially life-threatening harassment. Subsequently, this could lead to victims removing themselves from social media to avoid conflict. Which is a direct contrast to deplatforming practices meant to banish harmful transgressors for actually "breaking platform rules" (Rogers, 2020) by publishing abusive rhetoric—e.g., Trump's Twitter ban. So, discourse about accountability practices and cancel culture is complicated. Rather than consider liability through a polemic that restricts labeling the phenomenon as simply good or bad, researchers must adopt ambivalent perspectives to define cancelations' role in activism.

Ambivalent Perspective of Accountability

Cancel culture is incredibly nuanced, and by asserting an ambivalent position, we can determine how accountability is employed. Bucher (2019) argues that the politics of polemics, "of pitching a celebratory account of technology against a supposedly more "critical" one" (p. 1), is a rampant notion that informs thinking and writing about digital technology and its effects on

human interactivity. "Polemics is a rhetorical strategy of dispute, one that is more preoccupied with getting one's own position across than trying to engage with the other" (Bucher, 2019, p. 2). Bucher proposes that ambivalence encourages interaction with complicated differences to challenge academic polemical associations of one perspective or another. "Far from being agreeable or a cop-out, the ambivalent position means having to negotiate an ongoing tension without necessarily finding resolution" (Bucher, 2019, p. 3). By utilizing this position in all aspects of cancel culture research, particularly in the realm of accountability, diverse discursive practices will emerge in our understanding of the phenomenon's function. Ng (2020) cites Bucher's proposition of embracing ambivalence to avoid denouncing cancel culture as a digital ill: "Cancel culture demonstrates how content circulation via digital platforms facilitates fast, large-scale responses to acts deemed problematic, often empowering traditionally marginalized groups in the moment, but it also highlights the dearth of considered assessments and debate" (Ng, 2019, p. 625). Therefore, nuanced perspectives are needed to determine how cancelations and accountability manifest in distinct instances. I suggest that cancel culture warrants examination from a decolonial perspective that adds to preexisting literature concerning grassroots activism.

Cancelations as a Decolonial Practice

It is imperative to consider how coloniality influences cancel culture at this very moment when considering the phenomenon as a decolonial form of

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activism. Quijano (2020) states that the coloniality of power, capitalism, and Eurocentrism are the "three central elements that affect the quotidian life of the totality of the global population" (p. 545). What demands investigation is how these elements manifest in cancel culture and how they interrupt the pursuit of accountability. Clark's (2020) research indicates cancelations as a decolonial practice, specifically a Black discursive practice, primarily since it is associated with diverse iterations such as reading, dragging, and calling out (Clark, 2020, p. 89). Because of this, Clark considers cancel culture to be an "indigenous expressive form"—a notion initially presented by Johnson (2011) to describe the concept of reading as a specifically Black performance of discernment.

Furthermore, Clark believes that analysis of power relations in cancel culture is needed to understand the context by which it exists. For instance, interactions between individuals and platforms can expose how imbalances of control affect communal engagement for accountability. Additionally, how capitalistic motivations determine platform governance and content moderation through the datafication of personal information. Since cancel culture is attributed explicitly to Black Twitter—and is a more significant part of Black cultural history—content creation concerning cancel culture has become a trendy topic meant to increase engagement. For instance, McGrady (2021) traced the origin to Niles Rodgers of Chic's 1981 song "Your Love is Cancelled," which ultimately influenced screenwriter Barry Michael Cooper to write Wesley Snipes' infamous "cancel that bitch" scene in *New Jack City* (1991). About 20 years later, Cisco

Rosado of the reality television program *Love & Hip-Hop: New York* (2014) repurposed Snipes' line in a confrontation with his lover at the time, and Black Twitter popularized cancel culture into global meme history. "The commodification of Black slang is practically an American tradition" (McGrady, 2021, para. 13). McGrady's (2021) historical assessment about the origins of cancel culture describes how White mainstream appropriated Black cultural concepts of "cancel" and "woke." The author states that "young Black people have used these words for years as sincere calls to consciousness and action, and sometimes as a way to get some jokes off. That White people would lift those terms for their own purposes was predictable, if not inevitable" (McGrady, 2020, para. 13). I also read McGrady's statement regarding analyzing Eurocentric practices of ideological ownership and its domination in public discourse. As Clark (2020) stated, "outside observers" misappropriate cancel culture to expand their gaze" (p. 89). The three elements of power, capitalism, and Eurocentrism are present within cancel culture discourse—it is simply a matter of investigating how they appear. By utilizing a decolonial lens, we can determine how marginalized communities employ cancelations as a reformative action to critique the matrices of oppression that continue to violate and suppress people of color.

By studying its complexities, I wanted to explore different manifestations to determine its functionality as a reformative practice. Thus, answering RQ2 through 4 to examine additional complications regarding preexisting cancel

culture research. By researching the phenomenon from a divergent perspective, employing diverse methodological approaches was essential to assess the different embodiments of cancel culture. However, there are still some elements missing from the design. It is an exploratory inquiry that seeks to provide a potential map for future studies.

By exploring cancel culture's relation to behavioral modification, technologically mediated forms of shaming, and accountability first, I can analyze how such ideas exist in varied cases. For instance, how users discuss perceived transgressions, what tools aid in ritualizing shaming, and the debate about reprimand practices. Then, I create a thorough and cohesive argument that strives to acknowledge cancel culture's multiplicity by proposing complex parallel inquiry.

# CHAPTER THREE

# METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

## Critical and Digital Ethnographical Approach

I use a critical and digital ethnographical approach to study two cases of cancel culture, Kelvin "Brother Nature" Peña and Natalie Wynn. Regarding digital ethnography, I realize that information shared via social networking sites must be appropriately contextualized (Murthy, 2008). Using Twitter as a study site, I can access countless data streams, from personal information to conversations. However, this affordance is still limited because power relations exist online, perpetuating digital divides such as ethnicity and gender (Murthy, 2008). Furthermore, issues of accessibility determine which communities can share and amplify their voice.

Although I also intentionally chose to use Twitter from an anonymous position to preserve my own identity, I realize that potential harm in data collection is present despite employing security measures to protect users. I removed identifying markers that would link the data to its creators' attributing quotes to "User" followed by a numerical association (e.g., User 1, User 2). I consulted with an IRB research compliance officer about an exempt review to ensure minimal risk and harm to the best of my abilities. Unfortunately, information about Twitter policies concerning educational research appears nonexistent. I had difficulties finding resources that would assist in my careful

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collection of data. Regardless, I maintained user protection and privacy as respectfully as I could manage.

This digital ethnographical approach allowed me to deploy an extensive reach into Twitter as a site for interactivity. Using a self-reflexive critical ethnographical methodology, I assess my "power, privilege, and biases" (Madison, 2004, p. 14) and their effects on my interpretations. Therefore, rather than asserting a dominant perspective, I view this research as a dialogic performative study (Madison, 2006). I sought to communicate with Others to negotiate meaning through a critique of our respective experiences. Both approaches are imperative to my research because cancel culture requires nuance and ambivalence (Bucher, 2019).

<u>Selection of Cases</u>

I selected two cases that demonstrated the incredible range of cancel culture's complexity. In this analysis, I focus on two specific instances of cancel culture: Peña and Wynn. Throughout this study are references to numerous cancelations to display the diverse existence of this phenomenon. I examine how users define offenses as violations of acceptable behavior, digital shaming practices, and debates about reprimand and accountability. Additionally, I saw Peña's cancelations occur in real-time, which strengthened my interest in studying cancel culture. I distinctly remember feeling a series of complicated emotions ranging from amusement to shock as I witnessed some individuals attack Peña as others protected him. As for Wynn, I wanted to explore an

unrecognizable, unique case. I was unfamiliar with her extensive popularity and influence within different political and social spaces. Therefore, I spent countless hours researching and collecting information about her to understand why and how she became a cancelation target. Overall, I also wanted to know how race/ethnicity and gender affected perceptions about both individuals regarding their cancelations. Peña identifies as a man of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent. Wynn identifies as a white transwoman. By providing a closer reading about just two instances, I want to complicate restrictive discourse about cancel culture to examine what it is and is not simultaneously.

Tweet Collection

I collected a series of tweets via screenshots specifically related to my case selections. For Peña, I searched for tweets published from October 2018 to May 2021. I selected October 2018 as an origin point because this period is where I witnessed his first cancelation. For Wynn, I searched for tweets posted from January 2020 to May 2021. I chose January 2020 because of the heightened attention that occurred for Wynn after publishing her "Canceling" taxonomy via YouTube. I uploaded them into ATLAS.ti to code themes emergent from my interpretation and others in vivo (Saldaña, 2012). In each case, I delegated a specific time frame. For Peña, I examined a series of tweets about his cancelation starting in 2018 until 2021 using search phrases such as "brother nature canceled," "brother nature cancel culture," "brother nature cancel," and "brother nature cancelation." For Wynn, I selected data from 2019 until 2021 and

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searched for: "Natalie wynn cancel culture," "Natalie Wynn canceled," "Natalie Wynn cancel," "Natalie Wynn cancelation," "ContraPoints cancel culture," ContraPoints cancelation," and "ContraPoints canceled." I modified Twitter's search engine to account for a specific time range, popular tweets, recent posts, and authored posts from both individuals.

Brother Nature

Studying Peña's two prominent cancelations presented a complex mosaic about different understandings of cancel culture. I coded 75 tweets to assess a variety of themes. I began with 79 initial codes. Then, I simplified my findings into diverse categories: selective cancelations, cancelations effectiveness, performative activism, performative wokeness, and hypocrisy for deeper analysis. Significant overlap existed among these notions.

Peña, notably known by his moniker Brother Nature, is a social media influencer of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent. He became famous for filming and publishing viral video encounters with a family of deer circa 2016. Peña's antics earned him over two million followers across different social media platforms and garnered support and sponsorships from numerous organizations.

Many users shared that Peña's first cancelation was unfounded because his older publicized racist and sexist tweets created when he was a teen did not reflect his personality or character as an adult. User 1 commented,

"y'all are canceling brother nature for being an immature 13 year old Internet troll like anybody else has been but won't cancel 69 for touching

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13 year olds and saying "n****" when he's not black… I swear people are

so twisted."

Users debated comparisons to other violations and offenses committed by public

figures. Specifically, in the discussion about rapper Tekashi69 (Daniel

Hernandez), who "pleaded guilty to the use of a child in a sexual performance"

(Juzwiak, 201, para. 2). Before his guilty plea, the rapper of Mexican and Puerto

Rican descent faced accusations of Black cultural appropriation and using the

word "nigga." Specific discussions attempted to present strict delineations

between both Peña and Hernandez and their use of the word. Some defended

Peña by claiming that the context in which he published tweets with that word is

satirical or purposefully induced controversy. However, others asserted that his

other derogatory statements about Black individuals in conjunction with his use of

"nigga," indicate anti-Black sentiments. As for Hernandez, some users stated that

his intent for using "nigga" is a testament to his vulture-like tendencies to infiltrate

Black culture.

Interestingly, reading different perspectives concerning the word

influenced me to reflect on my experiences with non-Black individuals using it

graciously. One pertinent realization is that those folks wanted proximity to

Blackness through language while ignoring historical and cultural contexts. So

often, defense of their *right* to use "nigga" detailed how accessible the word

should be to everyone—not exclusively to Black folks. As time progressed,

however, some of their initial reasonings began to change. Some for genuine

reasons and others realized how serious repercussions resulted from social justice rhetoric and activism. With the latter, I see connections to what User 2 says about what appears to be, for some, self-righteous performative wokeness and performative activism. This idea of wokeness seems to indicate a sense of hyperawareness that credits an individual with a strong moral compass of right and wrong. Although with a purer context, the concept can detail someone with an epistemological and emotional dexterity who recognizes all forms of oppression in pursuit of reformation. Black artist Georgia Anne Muldrow, credited for reintroducing the phrase "stay woke" into our public lexicon circa 2005, said that her use of the concept meant to signify the totality of Black experience and her own (Watson, 2018). However, Muldrow shared with Watson that despite its true origins, woke is becoming mainstream and commodified.

> Sure, she's happy to see the word woke become a rallying cry of resilience for black people in America. But she also doesn't mince her words on wokeness becoming a performative trend for the masses in recent years. "Most people who are woke ain't calling themselves woke. Most people who are woke are agonizing inside," Muldrow says. "They're too busy being depressed to call themselves woke." (Watson, 2018, para. 6-7)

Now, wokeness also doubles as a chiding remark, one meant to discourage and devalue genuine rallies for action against institutions that attempt to suppress individuals into a coma-like unreactive state, à la Jordan Peele's The Sunken

Place in *Get Out* (2017). Even more so, it pays to act woke. So, many individuals are capitalizing on mass engagement to advance their agendas for financial gain and high social status.

Therefore, arguments meant to absolve Peña attempted to reveal performances of self-righteous hypocrisy. Some users questioned the intentions of others, damning Brother Nature. Especially if they too were not as "woke" as they expected Peña to be at 12-years-old. Here, we can see how users debate abnormalized behaviors considered normal for that period. Few users mentioned how Peña's transgressions were indicative of user interactivity on Twitter and other forms of social media circa 2012. Thus, in consideration of Peña's age, his past behavior is not an indication of who he is currently. Instead, he essentially learned how to reform his behavior to participate in new public discourse about harmful language and its role in satire within the online space.

User 2 wrote, "white people pulling up old tweets of brother nature when he was a teenager to "cancel" him is kinda racist yall swear none of you cracked a fucked up joke as a kid like stop lying." Interestingly, at the time, this tweet is the only one in my collection that referenced race—specifically white misappropriation of cancel culture as a deflection tactic to attack others for transgressions they may have committed themselves. In response to User 2, User 3 stated, "Thinly-veiled racism in the form of performative wokeness." Other users critiqued the fallibility of Peña's statements against openly bigoted offenders. User 7 questioned, "y'all let a racist homo/Islam/transphobic nazi

supporting illiterate CHEETO have CONTROL OF OUR COUNTRY but wanna

cancel brother nature for being a twitter troll at 12 years old for saying heil hitler?'

User 7's perspective reminds me of what I propose about canceling threats to

norms, canceling abnormal norms, and canceling just because regarding "civil"

behavior and attitudes. Trump's controversial presidency featured an extensive

record of intentionally disparaging comments about many groups.

      Moreover, his position afforded him vast power, whereby he implemented

discriminatory policies to enforce compliance. Compared to Peña, whose "troll-

like" comments are just offensive—if anything—imposing a strict cancelation

effort seemed incredibly unfounded. Trump's cancelations served to punish him

for his attempts to "civilize" and subjugate. He was a threat to diversity and

inclusion, a norm for those that many individuals agree to practice. His constant

perpetuation of racism, sexism, homophobia indicated his efforts to normalize

hate and ignorance. But with Brother Nature, the cancelation seemed borderline

personal for some, which many users who defended Peña expressed

extensively.

      Additionally, users discussed how other misappropriate digital public

shaming practices within cancel culture dependent upon an individual's ethnic

identity/race, age, social status, or proximity to power and influence. In doing so,

some individuals sought to emphasize how particular shames are publicized and

disseminated instead of instances that demand more attention, like sexual abuse

allegations. Others criticized the misuse of digital documentation in demanding

reprimand and how such evidence is often a misinterpretation.

It is imperative to remember that although Peña is responsible for

authoring those tweets, many of them were lyrics (e.g., "fuck that, Im [sic] Hitler.

Everyone's a fucking Nazi) from artist Tyler "Tyler, The Creator" Okonma. Like

the craziness era of 2012 Twitter, Okonma is also known for his extremely

controversial music antics during the early 2010s. Many accused the "Flower

Boy" artist of promoting homophobia through his excessive use of "faggot,

misogyny with his violent lyrics depicting murder and rape, and much more. But

that was then. Now, the multitalented polymath no longer creates that kind of

malicious content.

> "Cancel culture is purposely trapping people into boxes. Brother Nature
>
> tweeted Tyler, The Creator lyrics when he was 13 years old. Now Brother
>
> Nature is cancelled, but Tyler is still thriving. Does that add up, chief?
>
> Tripping over middle school tweets lmao y'all are embarrassing,"
>
> commented User 4.

Some folks even tried to cancel Tyler, The Creator retroactively, but ultimately,

he escaped any form of noticeable reprimand.

What remains unclear is determining comparisons for the extent of how

influential both Peña and Okonma's identities contributed to calls for cancelation.

Both individuals identify as a man. Tyler, The Creator is Black and Peña is

Latino. Although Okonma barely discusses his sexuality, the musician references

many relationships with men. Thus, most of his fans continue to posit that he is queer, bisexual, or gay. Peña's sexuality at this time cannot be accurately determined. Overall, I initially thought that Okonma's perceived queerness affords him certain protections that Peña does not have. However, I also suspect that social and financial status may have to do more with how each cancelation manifests. Although again, Okonma's "cancel" is not to the extent that Peña's was—and still is in some respects. Regardless, considering such notions offers a new avenue to explore for future studies regarding the mentioned factors.

Some arguments demanded that if cancelation were to occur for Peña and his considerably minor infractions, so should all offenses. User 5 stated,

> "selective cancelation is the worst. cancel everyone if you're going to cancel. if u cancel brother nature, cancel jeffree star. if u cancel james gunn, cancel shane dawson. don't pick based on whether or not you like them, or if their problematic aspects apply to u or not."

User 5's sentiments are almost like User 2 in that they both express the hypocrisy of self-righteousness, virtual signaling, and performative wokeness. This selectiveness, User 5 implies, is informed by a participant's proximity to the target's offense. As User 2 suggests, some White folks encroach on this opportunity to assert that Brother Nature is racist, potentially ignoring that they also may have shared similar sentiments in a joking manner. Moreover, by targeting a person of color, such as a Peña, they attempt to absolve their past violations through deflection by centering another individual's race/ethnicity.

Because some users were acting selectively, assumptions mainly surfaced that they may have also committed similar personal failings—they just were not caught.

Interestingly, however, considering what Peña published (e.g., "I hate coons dammit," "Jay Z look like a monkey," etc.), one user's comment was quite perplexing. "Wow cancel culture really is toxic huh? People cancelled brother nature, a Puerto Rican/Dominican man for making white supremacy jokes when he was 12…" wrote User 6. While the individual attempts to describe the selectiveness of cancel culture, their reasoning is highly misdirected. Peña did not joke against white supremacy. Instead, one of his resurfaced tweets exclaimed: "WHITE POWER," followed by a white male emoji and fist. However, to add nuance to Peña's statement, one may argue that the tweet references one of Dave Chappelle's notorious characters, Clayton Bigsby, from The Chappelle Show comedy sketch series. One of the skit's most notable moments is when Bigsby—a blind white supremacist who has yet to realize he is Black—exclaims "white power" to a group of white individuals while donning a KKK hood. Both Bigsby and the crowd raise their fists in solidarity as he lambastes different marginalized groups.

While Tyler, The Creator lyrics are evident to many users—this tweet could be contested due to unfamiliarity with Chappelle's comedy. In this case, User 6 mentions Peña's ethnic identity to emphasize the unfair treatment the influencer faced in contrast to white individuals, specifically Jonny Craig. "…but

Johnny [sic] Craig is still successful even though there's stacks of evidence against him? Okay." User 6 continued. Craig, the former singer and songwriter of Slaves, had "bullied and sexually harassed a female crew member" (Deville, 2015, para. 2) amongst other accusations of scamming and much more by the time Peña's offenses surfaced. User 6's commentary invites further inquiry in addressing selective cancelations by implicitly asking, what's worse? A Latino influencer who jokes about white supremacy (although this was not the case) or an actual white offender with a criminal history?

Furthermore, Peña's case invites contention about the effectiveness of accountability and reprimand. Some users questioned if his cancelation ever worked, as the influencer still receives engagement and support. After all, Peña presumedly redeemed himself—at least the first time. Peña's initial cancelation granted him some sympathy, but his second violation was much worse. When caught lying about an incident that he provoked, some users sought to invoke another cancel culture once more. According to a video interview—which is now unavailable for viewing—with the individual involved in the altercation, the man alleged that Peña acted confrontationally towards him and others (Schocket, 2019, para. 6-8). Released footage recorded from Peña's vantage point shows him pointing at the man and another person saying to each that they are a "dead man." "Y'all really cancelled Brother Nature unless I just don't see him anymore [face with tears of joy emoji] every time he tweet he get hit with the "you must thought we forgot" then he don't tweet again," User 8 shared. Peña's beating

from the fight he instigated became a running gag. Anytime he would interact via Twitter after that, folks evoked cancelation. One person asserted that the second cancelation proved effective. "The person on twitter who truly got "canceled" was Brother nature. It's been like 2 years and people still comment "you think we forgot" lmaooo no one is ever going to let him live down the sandwich shop incident," User 9 commented. However, this does not necessarily appear to be true. One glance at Peña's Twitter account reveals that he is still active—even with sandwich shop comments inundating his posts. Peña is essentially adopting a covering technique to continue advancing his brand and support. His once considered genuine nice-guy persona is now at times viewed as a contrived caricature. Perhaps in a longitudinal study, future research should determine to what extent the influencer navigates his stigmatized identity effectively by examining his platform engagement metrics.

Overall, Peña's case reveals how much nuance is within cancel culture discourse. Selective cancelations, cancelations effectiveness, performative activism, performative wokeness, and hypocrisy emerged as relevant themes across different opinions and perspectives. Users contended with one another to challenge, expose, and discuss how cancelations affect discourses about social media's influence on personal digital records, technologically advanced shaming practices, and contrition exercises. Furthermore, how specific identity metrics influence how others perceive who deserves cancelation, particularly regarding proximity to power and social status. Occupying an ambivalent attitude helps to

reveal complex results. Next, I examine Wynn's case to determine what subtleties exist.

Natalie Wynn

Like Peña, Wynn experiences a series of cancelations (perhaps even more). Still, one of her most notorious experiences occurred through what she defines as "contamination (guilt by association)" in her taxonomy of cancel culture (Wynn, 2020). I began with 53 codes, then designated two themes, victimization and sympathy.

Wynn's case analysis provides a fascinating study whereby complexity is present and stricter critiques about her character. Many tweets that I examined either claimed Wynn is a victim or as an intentional transgressor. Some folks claimed she self-victimizes to avoid accountability, while others believe she is victimized by varying political pundits. Some express that she is undeserving of empathy, and others declare their support. It is a mixed bag with seemingly limited categories; nonetheless, they are evident in my selected tweets.

Wynn's most notable cancelation occurred because she collaborated with Buck Angel, an infamous public figure considered harmful by some trans and nonbinary communities. Allegations against Angel, a self-identified transman, claim the public figure uses toxic rhetoric and exclusionary language against other trans and nonbinary identities. Because Wynn featured Angel in a short voiceover segment—ten seconds to be exact—she was considered guilty by association (or contaminated) in one of her videos. Those crucial ten seconds

were "enough for people to associate him with me so that I am guilty of his sins unless I publicly condemn everything bad thing he's ever tweeted," Wynn stated (Feder, 2021, 4:44-4:53). Thus, many canceled her. It is imperative to note that my reading of Wynn's cancelation is limited to about 22 tweets spanning what appears as different cancelations. Regardless, they still offered insight into identity politics, framing practices, verbal harassment, and much more.

> "Strange how cis men can do whatever they want but if a trans woman as much as talks to the wrong person she's canceled. Some of you really fucking hate trans women and hide it behind progressive language. Get a grip,' User 10 tweeted.

Although this tweet predates Angel and Wynn's collaboration, the sentiment expressed is still helpful for this context. This notion critiques the selective outrage element in cancel culture through a gendered lens. Because Wynn is a transwoman, she is scrutinized more aggressively because of her visibility. Yet others do not believe that this still does not absolve her from knowingly or unknowingly associating with harmful offenders. "Natalie wynn and breadtube as a whole are always complaining about parasocial relationships and cancel culture when none of them have gotten anything worse than criticism for what should be blatantly obvious things," User 11 proposed. This tweet specifically appears after the collaboration was published. It seems to highlight how Wynn and BreadTube or "left-wing community YouTubers" (Urban Dictionary, 2019) fail to recognize the extent of their relationships with well-known offenders.

Therefore, User 11 considers their complaints about backlash insignificant, as the effect of receiving criticism is not necessarily harmful. But Wynn suggests that when the tweets add up—it is "emotionally overwhelming" (Feder, 2021, 14:46-14:58). Users debate about the enforcement of civil practices since public figures (regardless of popularity) continue to maintain questionable relationships with other offenders. Because Wynn chose to interact with Angel, his behaviors become a reflection or abstracted representation of who she is (guilty by association) (Feder, 2021, 4:44-4:53). Thus, Wynn's behavior, in this case, is scrutinized for their perceived inconsistencies against her trans rights activism.

Moreover, because of her marginalization as a transwoman, cancel culture damages her relationships with the trans community (Feder, 2021, 14:05-14:17). User 12 tweeted that "its sad that Natalie feels alienated from her own community," detailing the importance of "holding our own accountable," but that in Wynn's case, it's different. "…we're blindly hating on her out of spite, misinformation, and poor media literacy," they wrote. Regarding User 12's notion of support, other individuals asserted that Wynn's critics ask for that same empathy and understanding but face villainization instead. Here, I believe issues of digital public shaming and its effects on different parties arise. Wynn highlighted that receiving an inundation of backlash is damaging because it reinforces messages of isolation that prevent her from connecting with her communities. Yet, one individual shared that Wynn "set her followers" upon them after criticizing what they thought was "racial stereotyping." Her followers called

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the user an "n-word" along with other transphobic and ableist remarks. "I don't have her platform though. I don't get to voice how shitty that was. Neither does anyone else who has been through something similar with her fans," User 13 wrote. User 13 also criticized User 12 for asserting that "civil discussion" would address "disagreements" while other white users who say "harsher" criticisms remain unblocked. "I wonder what makes ME uncivil and nobody else? Hmmmmm" User 13 concluded.

I did not see any discussion about Wynn's race/ethnicity within the selected tweets. Wynn identifies as white. The only context in which race/ethnicity is mentioned comes from User 13 describing how Wynn's fan attacked *their* race/ethnicity. I wondered to what extent Wynn's whiteness and proximity to white womanhood allot her different treatment regarding her cancelations. After all, she did what Brother Nature could not—capitalize from the controversy. Her covering efforts appear to be more sophisticated and successful. Little, if any, extreme repercussions interfere with her success, aside from what Wynn mentioned about the detrimental emotional and psychological tolls. Perhaps a closer examination could potentially reveal how whiteness affects public perceptions about accusations, guilt, and apology. Next, we will examine how accountability manifests.

After the Angel incident, Wynn's cancel culture taxonomy video published via YouTube the following year in 2020 garnered incredible traction with over 3.7 million views. Wynn challenged, analyzed, and deconstructed cancel culture

phenomenon to explore its prevalence within this contemporary period. User 14 described 1 hour and 40-minute feature as "super informative." They declared their support for Wynn, stating: "The fact that the internet went batshit crazy and tried to cancel her, a trans woman, for not being woke enough in their delusion, was always nutso." Perhaps this relates to User 10's assertion that Wynn's identity as a transwoman limits how much understanding folks give to her for talking to the wrong person. Furthermore, what's intriguing about User 14's statement is that it emphasizes Wynn's identity as a transwoman concerning her wokeness. Almost as if to assert that because Wynn is trans, she already occupies a locus of woke politics—so, just how much more woke should Wynn be? In contrast to what User 11 mentioned about awareness of "blatantly obvious things" like interacting with offenders, Wynn should be more woke. And of course, with great "wokeness" comes great responsibility. User 11 suggests that Wynn must know how to behave because of her popularity, particularly knowing who she can contact.

User 15 expressed confusion about Wynn's positionality with cancel culture. "I absolutely hear what Natalie Wynn is saying re: so-called "cancel culture," but it all feels very hyperbolic rebranding as canceled marginalized YouTube person(ality)," User 15 began. Here, the idea present is that Wynn is using her cancelations to adopt a new marginalized identity as a pariah. "Trying hard to stay in my lane but also make sense of this," they stated. While User 16 wrote that Wynn adopted cancel culture rhetoric from the right-wing "because

unfortunately this shit works." User 17 directly challenged User 16's claim stating: "Or because..... they've personally experienced that a lot of what the right has to say about cancel culture is accurate?" But User 17 maintained that it is a misappropriation of accountability. "Like if you're wrong about something, double down and play the victim? You're right, they do share that experience," User 17 responded. This comment particularly relates to Clark's (2020) assertion about cancel culture's misappropriation by social elites. Also, to User 13's statements about their experience of a form of cancelation by Wynn's followers. While User 15 attempts to understand how Wynn is using cancel culture to rebrand. User 16 alleges that Wynn uses a specific rebranding tactic of right-wing rhetoric to fortify her marginalization as a victim. Both are essentially sharing similar notions that Wynn is capitalizing from publicity granted by cancel culture to avoid accountability. User 13 claims that in pursuit of proper accountability from Wynn, other communities receive punishment instead. Again, as white people alleged to have said harsher criticisms, they were not attacked. In this case, the influence of race/ethnic identity concerning accountability and its effectiveness. Particularly indicating that in some fashion, cancel culture provides protections and privileges—whether intentionally or unintentionally—for some but not others.

Other perspectives also described Wynn's identity politics and behavior. For example, user 18 described Wynn as "a pick-me binary trans woman who invites known transphobic trans ppl like buck angel onto her huge platform, is shitty to nonbinary trans folk, and whines nonstop about cancel culture bc people

are sick of her shit." This comment responds to another person's inquiry about Wynn within User 12's thread about empathy, accountability, and community inclusion. Although this analysis of Wynn's case appears limited in scope as it pertains to only two categories, victimization and empathetic support are relevant and tell of cancel culture's influence on different individuals such as Wynn. By understanding how cancel culture mechanizes in other experiences, additional nuances will continue to shift cancelation discourse.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Cancel culture is extraordinarily multifaceted and demands complex inquiry to deconstruct its everchanging appearance. Within a larger context, especially related to historical studies about power, research about its different situational manifestations reveal more intricacies about relational practices. Cancelations challenge us to re-examine how we enact punitive forms of justice. Moreover, they encourage new dialogue about individual and collective agency within this technologically mediated era. This study sought to examine cancel culture through a series of theoretical lenses related to "civility" practices, digital public shaming, and accountability. The concept of civility I refer to here is defined through its relation to coloniality and the preference for generalized, and usually Eurocentric, processes and ideals. In its unique instances and methods, cancel culture may appropriate, reconfigure, and/or turn the concept of civility on its head, reconfiguring it in attempts to dismantle supremacy. In this attempt to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, individuals considered uncivil are forcefully indoctrinated into practices meant to reform their behavior and attitudes (Lorde, 2007). Thus, cancel culture influences behavior and interaction as we create normative practices. Since digitally mediated tools are integral to its existence, our methods of shaming shift and expand. Also, new discourse about justice and reprimand challenges definitions of accountability. I include other areas such as identity performance, platform governance, power,

etc., in the conversation to explore the different matrices that exist within

numerous cancelation instances.

Furthermore, by studying two cases, I wanted to provide an extensive

exploration and interpretation of such matrices to present an ambivalent

perspective that transcends polemical boundaries. Cancel culture happens for a

variety of reasons, all of which are diverse in employment. Whether to reinforce

norms, challenge abnormal behaviors, or enforce dominating dogma, the

phenomenon has significantly altered our interactions and relations with one

another. It is a discursive practice that demands extensive research to develop

more critical tools to examine its impact. I believe that this study provides a

comprehensive exploration into cancelations from multiple dimensions rather

than a singular dominant perspective. I demonstrated that nuance and

complexity are integral for complicating our understandings of this topic. Lastly, I

sought to situate numerous connections to amplify how cancel culture discourse

is changeable. Cancelations occur for many reasons. Therefore, contextual

research and analysis are required. Hopefully, this study encourages the

importance of complexifying.

## Future Research

Study limitations include the number of cases, theme scope, and user

data collection. By examining additional instances, more results about other

manifestations would surface. For example, like reviewing a case before cancel

culture's etymological inception, or another case about how indigenous

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communities utilize cancel culture for grassroots campaigning and activism. I imagine one possibility for that case would display how marginalized communities dominate mainstream conversations. Additionally, I would like to continue researching cancel culture affects other institutional areas such as academia. Here, I would like to explore how the phenomenon alters discourses heavily regulated to maintain specific epistemological and ideological perspectives. I imagine that an investigation will reveal how some scholars' pursuit of radical transformation in academia creates backlash and contention.

Regarding themes, more collected tweets would generate salience to preexisting ones. My suspicions about 2012 Twitter's relevance proved true to some extent, but I did not have enough data to explore this concept further. I think studies about 2012 Twitter warrants its unique research, but concerning cancel culture, I believe it also influences nuanced perspectives about expression, censorship, and so much more. Lastly, for user data, I think attribution would grant proper accreditation and opportunities for conversations. Therefore, I would further amplify other perspectives of the topic overall.

To expand cancel culture studies, more diverse methodological approaches should be integrated. For example, in advancing digital ethnography, comparisons between platforms could provide a more comprehensive investigation. As well as determine how the political economy of production influences surveillance and censorship practices. Differences in platform governance and guidelines will reveal how cancel culture mediates socially and

digitally. Also, this could affect preexisting research about platform power and its shaping of public discourse. As Ng (2020) proposed, long-form engagement would yield more qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews with users, regular individuals, and public figures affected by cancel culture must also be included. Participant conversations will garner more meanings, interpretations, and understandings. Additionally, a quantitative component like surveys can illuminate cancel culture's effect through numerical data sets that chart its impact. Lastly, a thorough re-examination of preexisting literature about phenomena that predates but is similar to cancel culture needs evaluation.

Cancel culture is a new area of study with incredible variations for inquiry, interpretation, and debate. My research is extensive yet simultaneously limited, and my knowledge and curiosity about the subject continue to mature. By continuing a detailed examination of cancel culture, we can continue to become more comfortable with its amorphous appearance. Moreover, to develop discourse and practices to develop our understanding of the phenomenon beyond strict ideological boundaries.

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