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STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES, BUT WILL COMMENTS EVER HURT
ME?: A BURKEAN ANALYSIS OF CANCEL CULTURE IN SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES

KAYLIN LANE

132 Pages

In the modern social media era, “cancel culture” is a growing phenomenon used to hold public figures accountable for perceived wrongdoings. But who gets to cancel these celebrities? And how does someone get canceled? The concept of “cancel culture” has often been discussed in the past in the sense that the United States is a culture that is prone to want to cancel others. In my study, I am looking at the fact that there is a desire to cancel a perceived wrongdoer from an online space that is functioning as its own individual culture. The terms used to describe cancel culture by scholars and online users are often imprecise, so this thesis seeks to provide a clear distinction on what cancel culture and being canceled means and provide a new concept to help explain the phenomenon: a call for cancelation. YouTubers Logan Paul and Tana Mongeau and their apology videos’ comments sections serve as the focus of this thesis that rhetorically analyzes the culture calling for cancelation in an online space. The findings of this thesis help contribute to scholarly and industry knowledge of cancel culture: what it is, how to define it, related concepts, who is calling for cancelation, and what may happen when a public figure receives a call for cancelation from the supporting culture.

KEYWORDS: Cancel culture; culture; influencer; platform; social media; YouTube

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ME?: A BURKEAN ANALYSIS OF CANCEL CULTURE IN SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES

KAYLIN LANE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

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ME?: A BURKEAN ANALYSIS OF CANCEL CULTURE IN SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES

KAYLIN LANE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

If someone is openly accused of making racist posts and engaging in micro aggressive behaviors on social media, can they still be the face of Broadway two years later? Lea Michele sure can, but not without major backlash and the loss of a brand deal (Iervolino, 2022). Many would agree that this is an example of cancel culture at work. Norris (2021) defined cancel culture as “collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of [allegedly] offensive words or deeds” (p. 4). This led to the core question of this thesis: How does cancel culture even work?

This thesis aimed to understand cancel culture in a deeper, more fundamental way as a form of an actual culture. I looked at calls for cancelation as a form of culture itself. Norris’s (2021) definition of cancel culture suggests cancel culture is a collective call to cancel someone, and that is a common scholarly suggestion of how society operates, but the culture calling for cancelation had not been further explored. Although there are many scholarly definitions of culture, Baldwin, Coleman, Gonzales, and Shenony-Packer (2014) define culture as, “the way of life of a group of people, including symbols, values, behaviors, artifacts, and other shared aspects” (p. 5). In my thesis I am looking at cancel culture as part of the cultural foundation for a community. In other words, part of the community’s set of norms and expectations is an agreement that if someone violates the group’s norms, the community can join together to purge the wrong-doer from the group. When commenters participate in the cancel aspect of the culture, they are contributing to a group effort to cancel a public figure, which means encouraging other members of the fandom or community to support having the offender removed from the social media space. In doing this, the fandom may also seek to shift the culture’s support to another public figure within their specific online community. Online communities are defined by Bond

(2020) as “a group of people with a shared interest or purpose who use the internet to communicate with each other” (para. 5). This definition correctly recognizes that online communities exist for many reasons beyond cancelation which is important to understand in this thesis’s efforts to explore cancelation as an aspect of online cultures. Specifically, I am focusing on the act of cancelation and how the call to the group to support cancelation becomes one of the shared purposes that builds and reinforces a sense of a community. Cultures value the purity and unity of the group. When members are perceived to have threatened or violated this sense of purity and unity, one action that can be taken to restore the unity and purity is to expel the offender from the culture. Other less extreme efforts of purification can include censure, punishment, or shunning. In social media spaces, cancelation seems to be the most common response to an offense. This may say something about the types of cultures that rise around content creators in social media spaces. I recognize that there are channel-based online cultures, such as the overall YouTube culture, and that more specific subcultures operate within the broader YouTube culture. Each of these subcultures has its own distinct set of group norms and practices, while at the same time featuring a number of the aspects of the broader YouTube culture. I consider these subcultures to be fandoms that center around a public figure on a social media space. In this thesis, I use the term “fandom” to describe a situation in which a group of unrelated supporters interact initially with the sole purpose of supporting the content creator, in the case of social media spaces. The important part to note is that a sense of culture or unity develops as these fans interact within these shared social media spaces. These specific fandoms have rules and expectations for both the content creators and fan base that the culture must follow. When these values are broken, the wrongdoer potentially faces being purged from the culture.

In this thesis, I treat the concept of culture as both a set of norms and values in keeping with the Baldwin, et. al (2014) definition, but also as a description for the group of individuals who identify as a distinct group and are governed by this shared set of norms and values. In this second sense of a definition, culture functions as a synonym for terms such as community, fandom, and online group. Because of this, it makes sense to talk about “the culture” of “a culture” as I am working to do throughout this thesis. This distinction highlights much of the confusion that can result when people use the term “cancel culture” to mean either the culture itself or the group value that invites group members to cancel those they perceive to have done wrong.

In a “cancel” culture, individuals band together to claim someone is canceled, but sometimes people in these groups go along with what others in their culture say even though they do not know what the implications of calling to cancel someone can be (e.g., someone who is said to be canceled may be publicly banished from social media spaces and experience a loss of followers, brand deals, and other online sources of income). This ambiguity called for a clearer distinction between the concepts cancel culture, canceled, and calls for cancelation. The idea is that the call to cancel emerges from a specific culture, but at the same time the calls to cancel begin to define the culture too. Many scholars refer to a public figure being canceled and them receiving a call for cancelation as if they are the same thing, and my thesis looked to establish the distinction in a clear way. Also, the scholarly idea that cancel culture operates as a group activity implies that the United States culture is a cancel culture where publics take extreme reactions to things, but it is possible that some of these offenses may not need to be reacted to in such a radical way. The overall culture calls for cancelation, so even the individuals in the

community who disagree to cancel the perceived wrongdoer become associated with the cancelation call.

My thesis went a step further into studying cancel culture because it is argued for something different: because cancelation seems to live in social media spaces, cancel culture is related to the culture that lives in these spaces and motivations for canceling someone needed to be further explored. Public figures are receiving these cancelation calls because they are going against their supporting culture's order (e.g., group rules and shared values). Also, there are various cancel cultures in social media spaces, and cultures can arise in these spaces in different ways depending on both the platform and the way the platform is used. If cultures grow up in social media spaces around specific public figures, then a cancel culture specific to that public figure and social media space will emerge. If there is an offense, cancelation becomes a form of purging the offender from the culture and space. So in summary, past scholars have treated cancelation as simply a group of people declaring someone is canceled and leaving it at that, but I looked to provide a deeper meaning of cancelation being about a call to remove someone from a specific culture, such as a social media space. By doing this, the thesis makes a clear distinction between the concepts cancel culture, canceled, and a call for cancelation. I accomplished this by studying the call for cancelation in the same space the original transgression occurred.

In this thesis I analyzed viewers' responses to cancel culture apology videos in a scholarly manner because an apology video and the content creator's video upload timeliness could be further fuel for users to want to call to cancel the public figure. While I could have analyzed the original video where users were offended, the real decision to cancel a public figure often comes through reactions to their apology video. Some communities feel the need to purge

the content creator from their online space based on their apology video, and this needed to be explored.

My thesis is a unique study that analyzed cancel culture as a culture, and I predicted the comments will be about community building and reinforcement as much as the call to cancel the public figure. Some scholars have looked at the calls for cancelation as a form of crisis and how public figures respond to such crises (Lewis & Christin, 2022a), such as image restoration (Liu & Lu, 2017), but I focused on how the call for cancelation defines the culture that the call comes from. Other scholars have studied the motive for wanting to cancel a celebrity, or the type of offenses people have been canceled for, such as Clark (2020) who refers to canceling as “an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money” (p. 88). This quote reflects the motivations of individuals in wanting to cancel a celebrity. What my thesis adds is an exploration of the group’s motives to cancel, which can often include preserving or restoring the sense of order in the group and its collective commitment to group values and attitudes. My thesis looked at cancelation at a cultural level, and I looked to understand the relationship between the call to cancel and the nature of the culture from where the call emerges. For this thesis, cancel culture was considered as a situation where online users actively speak out and encourage others to revoke their support for the public figures who have committed morally wrong acts. Individual supporters then precisely withdraw their support by actively calling for cancelation in the comments section as an attempt to have the offender removed from the social media space and its supporting culture. This approach is consistent with other scholars' research about cancel culture, as others have looked at individual video comments to the content creator (Madden, Ruthven, and McMenemy, 2013a). However,

what my thesis does is to include a consideration of how the posted calls for cancelation also function as a form of community reinforcement.

Also, my thesis studied cancel culture in a new way because it analyzes the culture's response to these apology videos. Specifically, I looked for a group effort to cancel a public figure because individual people cannot cancel someone by themselves. Given the theme of this thesis, how cancel culture operates as a culture, some of the questions I asked are:

RQ1: What are the roles of ringleaders who call for cancelation on a social media platform?

RQ2: Do commenters seek to claim power/influence by encouraging other users to cancel the public figure?

Further, past scholars have tended to focus on the canceling aspect of cancel culture by analyzing what publics do to try to cancel a public figure and whether or not their effort is effective. This thesis went beyond what others have done to consider what cancel culture actually is to consider if participating in the call to cancel becomes part of creating or reinforcing the values of a culture. Specifically, in the case of YouTubers that I looked at in my thesis, I looked at the situations where the original transgression took place on a social media platform, and the call for cancelation is an effort made by viewers to have the YouTuber removed from the social media space, where the supporting culture may still live on without them. These are unique cases where the entire call for cancelation takes place in the same online space where cultures existed before, and possibly even after cancel culture occurs.

In order to explore this relationship between the calls to cancel and a sense of culture, I decided to focus on two YouTubers who deserve scholarly attention, Logan Paul and Tana Mongeau. These content creators have millions of subscribers that give them a platform with the

potential to influence their viewers, such as to buy products or act in certain ways and create a supporting culture. Also, Paul and Mongeau deserved scholarly attention because they have made millions of dollars through brand deals and other media monetary affiliations from their YouTube content creation, such as creating daily video blogs (vlogs) and uploading story times about their lives. Both Paul and Mongeau are at the center of a culture of followers on the social media platform, but both engaged in behaviors within this culture that offended their followers. A culture of fans has risen around content creators, but in many ways calls for cancelation also help to create unique cultures among the fans. The comments posted to these apology videos helped me to see some of the details of this culture and how it works, because the calls for cancellation were expected to point out how the content creators' deeds violated the norms and expectations for that specific culture. These cases also give people in the culture the opportunity to make specific calls for cancelation instead of simply stating that the public figure is canceled and waiting to see what happens. Thus, the culture can call to purge someone from this specific social media space and its supporting culture.

Paul was called to be canceled after he uploaded a YouTube video that contained content making jokes about and showing a deceased human he found in the Aokigahara Japanese forest, often referred to as the "suicide forest" (Keefe, 2017). Paul is known for uploading attention-grabbing content (e.g., pulls pranks, does dares, tries to do out-of-box content). When he uploads content that is offensive to his followers that is out of the normal expectation of his content, it upsets the group of followers. Paul's specific followers can be offended when he goes too far past what is considered the normal "out of the box" content for his channel. Paul's content in general may be too extreme for mainstream United States culture, so when his fandom becomes offended, it indicates the level of offense Paul had made. His culture has values and

standards, such as it is okay for Paul to upload extreme content as long as he does not take it “too far,” but that is what Paul did with his “suicide forest” video. Specifically, the “suicide forest” was deemed as disrespectful by his culture, and ultimately that is what got him in trouble with his fandom because he violated a shared value. A petition, “Delete Logan Paul’s YouTube Channel” received over 190,000 signatures in protest to have Paul removed from YouTube, but the petition was unsuccessful (Yam, 2018). The outcome of Paul’s “suicide forest” video is important to my thesis because regular users were not effective in having him removed from the YouTube platform (e.g., YouTube bans Paul’s channel). Therefore, the effort to remove Paul defaulted to the specific fandom that supports him; a culture that cancels.

Mongeau was called to be canceled after a series of self-inflicted events were publicly analyzed on social media spaces by users resharing the information and conversing with other users about Mongeau’s behaviors they found to be wrongful. Fans tend to be the case with this type of YouTube content, as fans would have come to Mongeau’s channel in a variety of different ways. Some may have come across a video of hers and watched the first one without realizing what kind of content she creates. The YouTube algorithm likely led others with interests in similar types of content to Mongeau’s channel. Either way, fans stayed with Mongeau’s channel because they appreciate the kinds of content that she posts. The order of this social media space evolved through as Mongeau continued to provide content that fans appreciated and as fans continue to “like, subscribe, and comment.” This became the expected order for both the content creator and her followers. Mongeau’s content (which is what her followers expect, and thus becomes part of the cultural order of her channel) is lifestyle vlogs and “story times” where she shares her life experiences (usually in relation to partying or fashion). In return, her culture supports and interacts with her content. When Mongeau suddenly

posted apology videos, this upset the order of her channel because she was suddenly uploading content that the audience was not expecting. The fandom can accept some deviations from her typical content, but when she posted multiple apology videos, she was suddenly moving away from her expected pattern of content. This specific video I am analyzing in this project is even more of a violation because it is an apology for the apology videos.

In a society that is pushing for equality, a general group norm for a YouTube culture is that the content creator at the top of the hierarchy needs to treat everyone respectfully, especially because they have a status. When Mongeau uploads offensive content and gets accused of breaking these group rules and shared values, it upsets her culture, and she risks receiving a cancellation call. First, Mongeau had numerous racial and microaggressive tweets resurface from her earlier days on Twitter. Due to the backlash she faced, she uploaded an apology video to YouTube where she addressed and apologized for her previous tweets and her other wrongdoings, such as other apology videos she had uploaded in regards to her other scandals that were not accepted by viewers. As a result, Mongeau faced further backlash from commenters about how long it took her to apologize and for the amount of editing that was in her apology video. Therefore, commenters could point to multiple wrongdoings that Mongeau was accountable for as they called for her to be canceled (Griffin, 2018).

After the public started speaking out to hold the YouTubers accountable for their actions, both Paul and Mongeau uploaded apology videos as an attempt to maintain their status with their supporting culture. Researching viewers' responses in the comments section to these YouTubers' apology videos provided insight about how cancel culture operates on the same platform the original transgression occurred and if the comments were about community building and reinforcement as much as the call to cancel the public figure that contributed to scholarly

research and knowledge of cancel culture in general and involving the YouTube community. Also, it was important to research cancel culture in the YouTube community because of the possibility that when a YouTuber is called to be canceled it could affect both the YouTuber and the viewers through the culture that has grown up among those viewers. This possibility needed to be further explored.

Studying Cancel Culture and Its Effects

Published literature on cancel culture, social media, content creators, and public opinion served as a foundation for my thesis. Specifically, previous definitions of cancel culture acted as a foundation to this thesis as I worked to include in the definition of cancel culture a recognition of the ways that calling to cancel someone creates and maintains a sense of belonging in a community, that is separate from the sole act of calling to cancel someone. Previous research on cancel culture in the YouTube community was mentioned to clarify how this thesis is unique and among the first of its kind to analyze cancel culture as a culture.

What is Cancel Culture?

Before there was cancel culture, the public would use boycotting as a method to publicly shame and revoke support to those who had engaged in offensive actions, whether the offenders were public individuals or organizations. Although the idea of canceling a public figure has been around for millennia (e.g., ostracizing, shunning, exiling), modern internet technologies including social media platforms have significantly improved our awareness of others' wrongdoings and extended our ability to call to cancel them. Today, cancel culture operates primarily on social media as a way to boycott someone or something online, and is the term used to refer to events when publics actively try to bring awareness to and debate a public figure's reputation and their supporting culture as a result of their social offense.

An example of a culture shifting from one YouTuber to others in the community was when beauty YouTuber, James Charles, was called to be canceled after he was called out online by another beauty YouTuber Tati Westbrook with an accusation that Charles had been grooming a minor. Charles lost millions of subscribers, and his supporting culture left to follow and focus on supporting other YouTubers in the YouTube Beauty Community. Articles have even been published that encourage Charles's once supporting culture to shift their support elsewhere, such as *The Berkeley Beacon's* "Bye Sister: James Charles needs to be in prison edition" (Fehr, 2021). Also, users engaging in cancel culture could even lead to the disbanding of a culture that supports a public figure if the culture does not want to shift their support to another public figure within the community.

Thus, specific platforms have distinct cultures, but in each social media space (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook) they also have sub-communities such as fandoms, and each group has its own distinct culture. Within these cultures, there are implied expectations for values and behaviors, including a sense of discussable topics in the space, and sometimes a sense of a competitive attitude among other fandoms or communities that support similar public figures. When a public figure is called to be canceled, it is possible that the culture may move onto another public figure amongst the same or a similar community.

Cancelation in Summary

Calls for cancelation begin with the public figure committing an act that the supporting culture finds offensive because it is seen to violate the group's norms and expectations. The call for cancelation typically begins with individual supporters proclaiming unhappiness with public figures on social media for an undesirable action. The online space gives users an opportunity to express their disfavor to the offender while also signaling to other supporters that there is a

problem and they need to agree. Then knowledge of the offense spreads to the masses, and a call to cancel the public figure can be formed by others joining in on the online push for cancelation, and in order for there to be a call to cancel someone, a group of people must be making an active effort to try to cancel a public figure. In the cases of Paul and Mongeau, they responded to their call for cancelation by creating apology videos, that pushed the call to cancel them to go through another set of steps. The apology video can add to the original offense, and must be considered by the fans and supporters before a decision on cancelation can be made.

Method

My thesis was designed to analyze the public's side of enforcing cancel culture in the YouTube community. My project analyzes the comments that were made to Paul and Mongeau's apology videos. I looked at specific terms in the comments section in two different ways. First, I analyzed the comments that were specific calls for cancelation. Second, I looked to see how users' comments create and reinforce a sense of community or culture among the content creators' followers.

The values shared by individual YouTube communities can often reflect the same values of the broader United States culture. If hard work is seen as an important value in the U.S. culture, the same celebration of hard work is often a part of social media spaces. Supporters of individual content creators will compliment the creator for the effort in posting multiple videos per week for example. Social media communities tend to either implicitly support the same sets of norms, values, and expectations as the broader national culture, or explicitly reject those norms and values and in the process create a new set of subcultural norms and values. For example, a collective of YouTube content creators known as the "manosphere" purposefully pushes back on the idea of egalitarianism in today's U.S. culture, pointing out that men are

regularly unequally treated in divorce court. The set of norms and expectations in this culture are very different from those in U.S. society. Some YouTube communities exist within the United States culture and share the same group norm. Within the YouTube community, some of the group norms that exist are in relation to following the platform's policies, such as needing to follow copyright policies or get a copyright strike. Within these YouTube communities are smaller communities that center around a public figure, such as a fandom. Paul and Mongeau are at the top of their respective followers. Their communities' shared values include concepts from the United States culture (e.g., we support you as long as you treat others equally). However, these communities also have shared values unique to the culture that deal with order. In Paul's community, his order is that he has uploaded hundreds of videos where his fans can expect him to upload content that "pushes the barrier," but is still approved by his fandom. When Paul uploaded his offensive video, the fandom considered the footage to be going "too far," and that is why his community sent him cancellation calls. Similarly, with Mongeau, her community her order exists on the grounds that she uploads vlogs about her life and videos she calls "story times." These videos become part of her community's identity as that is the type of content her fandom can expect her to upload. As Mongeau begins to have to upload apology videos due to other offenses, those videos become a part of her order as well. (It becomes normal for her to offend her culture and apologize.) However, relating back to the YouTube community's shared values, apology videos need to appear to be genuine. Once Mongeau uploads apology videos that seem over edited and insincere, her community becomes offended. Mongeau's community was already upset with her previous apology videos, so when adding the concept that she has racist allegations, her community "doubled down" on the reason to cancel her.

Data sets were pulled from two different time frames with the help of Dr. Nathan Carpenter and the software Netlytic to help narrow down Paul's 1.2 million and Mongeau's 33,000 comments and focus on users during two different parts of the cancelation process: immediate and delayed responses to the apology videos. The time frame was chosen to analyze the culture calling for cancelation immediately and years later to provide insight on how the cancel culture process works over time. I then analyzed the comments rhetorically by using Burke's (1970) cycle because it helped me identify what I was trying to understand in my study. It was important to analyze the earlier published comments about the video because the ones that responded first were likely the ones that were reacting most strongly to the perceived violation to the content creator, and were also very likely to be the ones to initiate the call for cancelation. Specifically, the retrieved comments were analyzed to find explicit calls for cancelation and to identify the commenters who were most persistent in calling for cancelation based on Kenneth Burke's (1970) guilt-purification-redemption cycle. In *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1970), Burke writes:

Here are the steps

In the Iron Law of History

That welds Order and Sacrifice:

Order leads to Guilt

(for who can keep commandments!)

Guilt needs Redemption

(for who would not be cleansed!)

Redemption needs Redeemer

(which is to say, a Victim!).

Order

Through Guilt

To Victimage

(hence: Cult of the Kill). . . . (pp. 4-5).

I chose to use Burke's (1970) cycle instead of image restoration theory (Benoit, 1995; 2015) because I analyzed the culture that was calling to cancel the creator based on a group decision to purge the creator from the social media space as a sense of community reinforcement, not because the users want to cancel the content creator because they do not accept their apology. I was not focused on the effectiveness of the apology, but instead I was interested in if the users in the comments section are acting as a culture in their decision on what to do with the content creator (purge them from the community and find a new content creator to support and start the cycle over again).

Burke's cycle begins with order, and that is a condition of the status quo that suggests that humans are always working toward feeling secure. Human societies can create this sense of safety and being comfortable, but it must be through a sense of a stable social hierarchy. In such order, there are people throughout the social hierarchy; this means that there will always be some people that are higher on the hierarchy than others in the hierarchy. Burke argues that because order involves hierarchy, order always leads to guilt (e.g., about where they are on the social hierarchy) that happens to people throughout the social order. For example, individuals in a YouTube hierarchy may feel guilty looking down because they may believe they do not deserve

their status and the adoration of their fans, but at the same time, they may feel guilty because they have not achieved the same level of success as other YouTubers in the same genre community (e.g., such as the beauty community), while people on the bottom may feel guilty that they are not on top as well because they did not work as hard as those above them. This sense of guilt makes people uncomfortable, and Burke believes the best way to purge these feelings of guilt is through a process of purification in one of two forms: either people purify the culture by punishing themselves or removing themselves from the culture, known as mortification, or people identify a scapegoat. A scapegoat is someone or something that plausibly caused a problem in the culture (e.g., disrupted the order, broke a shared value) and must be identified in the community so that the problem or pollution of the order is removed. People can then shift the guilt onto the scapegoat and purge the scapegoat from the culture. After the person is removed, the culture can assume a new order and start the process all over again. Once the act of purification is complete (i.e., the process to unburden the culture from the guilt), then redemption can occur by establishing a new order. Thus, there are several steps to Burke's (1970) cycle, but I am specifically focusing on the purification step in my thesis as that is where cancellation calls are issued. The cycle in its entirety is illustrated by the following model:

Figure 1

Burke's Cycle of Order (1970)

(1) Order

(status quo; relationship between participants in the culture are understood; shared values and expectations develop)

(2) Guilt

(transgression of group norms/ expectations resulting imbalance in social order, causing feelings of guilt for perceived offender and other members of culture)

(3) Purification

(group members call for cancelation to remove perceived offender as source of guilt)

(4) Redemption

(group members seek to strengthen and reenforce culture following removal of offender)

(5) Transcendence/New Order

(group members elevate someone to replace expelled offender or seek new target of group adoration)

*The figure runs from left to right starting with 1 through 5

I worked to understand the comments function within cancel culture by using Burke's (1970) cycle as a lens to understand the culture in the comments sections. It was important to first analyze the order by looking at the conversations about the calls for cancelation because they helped me distinguish between the calls for cancelation, someone actually being canceled, and cancel culture itself. Specifically, I first analyzed the calls for cancelation, but then looked for the meaning behind them. Were the calls for cancelation an act of vigilantism? I analyzed the order through the calls for cancelation by looking at specific comments that contain terms related to cancel culture. Then I analyzed the culture by looking to see if the culture on the bottom is using Mongeau and Paul as the scapegoats they are trying to remove from the YouTube hierarchy. I analyzed the comments for culture related themes to see if there was a community sense needing to protect their culture by purging the creators, that I predicted would be necessary depending on the level of the culture's guilt to reinforce the sense of community. Therefore, I analyzed Mongeau and Paul's cases by Burke's cycle through apology video comments sections that helped me distinguish between the calls for cancelation and cancel culture and to see if there was a culture that was calling for cancelation to reenforce a sense of community on the same social media space where the original transgression occurred. Specifically, I looked for comments that reflect the elements of Burke's cycle starting with the commenters pointing to Paul and Mongeau as the necessary victims they want to cleanse the community. In order to understand how cancel culture works in a fundamental way, this thesis explored the following question: What are the commenters saying in their response to the apology videos that would indicate that they are looking for this kind of purification and a return to a sense of order in their online culture?

Also, it was important to collect comments with multiple posts within these time frames in the initial data collection using terms such as “YouTube” and “apology” so that the meaning of these terms regarding cancel culture and a sense of community can be analyzed, and a second search could be conducted depending on the sufficiency of the initial findings. I looked at several comments from users actively calling for cancelation, as one of the things I sought to discover is how the sentiment to cancel tends to grow on the YouTube platform. Among the questions I was seeking to answer by looking through the data are:

RQ3: Do commenters discuss the supporting culture and its shared values indicate community building and reinforcement, and suggest a shift within the community at all?

Examples of comments that accomplish these kinds of themes were focused on and analyzed through the method.

Thus, once the final data was retrieved, the most centered comments, such as those with the most likes and responding comments that push for cancelation or community building, were analyzed to look at the meanings within the messages. These cancelations calls happen during the purification step of Burke’s (1970) guilt-purification-redemption cycle. Although I am applying all of Burke’s cycle, the purification step is the central focus of this study. Even though I had not yet looked at the comments, given my experience with other calls for cancelation on YouTube, the following are themes I am expecting to find: Viewers would be looking in their comments to influence the attitudes of other people in that comments section. Also, viewers could be accepting the apology of the YouTuber in their comments, or they could be pushing for the others in the comments section to join them in canceling the YouTuber.

There may be an invitation to call other public figures to be canceled in the comments section space. Also, there may be a group of or specific individuals who call to cancel public figures, similar to a ringleader. This “ringleader” can be identified either through the person’s efforts to convince other users to agree to cancelation or as an individual who other commenters actively support. Lastly, users may discuss disbanding or shifting the supporting culture elsewhere. This thesis idea proposed analyzing the most centered comments that push for the YouTuber to be canceled based on Burke’s (1970) cycle and contain specific cancel culture terms pulled from the first 48 to 72 hours of the apology video being uploaded, as well as comments from years later to demonstrate how the culture in the space endures even after the YouTuber is no longer active in the space. This data provided insight on how cancel culture functions on the same platform that the original transgression occurred on, if cancel culture operates as a culture, and provided clarity to make a clear distinction on the difference between cancel culture, canceled, and the call for cancelation. I predicted apology video comments will be about community building and reinforcement as much as the call to cancel the public figure that will contribute to scholarly research and knowledge of cancel culture.

Preview of Remaining Thesis Chapters

The remaining chapters of the thesis explores in more detail this phenomenon of cancel culture at work in the social media space of YouTube. Chapter 2 consisted of a thorough literature review that served as the framework for the thesis. Among the topics I explored in this chapter are: Origins of cancel culture, culture, and vigilantism. Chapter 3 contained the methods section that explained what was researched and how the data was collected. I explained Burke’s (1970) cycle further, and discussed how I applied this cycle in my analysis of the comments. Chapter 4 will consist of a data analysis and results. I analyzed the comments to Paul and

Mongeau's apology videos for a way the comments call for cancelation and create a sense of culture. Lastly, Chapter 5 discussed the significance of the findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research. In this final chapter, I also sought to provide practical terminology for public relations practitioners, consultants, and scholars working in and researching crisis communication and social media.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to get a better understanding of cancel culture, a review of literature helps provide background on and insight into the cultural components of the cancel culture phenomenon. Although cancel culture now primarily occurs in social media spaces, a deep dive into where cancel culture came from and how it tends to operate is provided. Previous literature on cancel culture helps create a foundation of the concept and points to holes where this thesis will contribute to scholarly and industry knowledge. Also, a further explanation on the differences between the concepts cancel culture, canceled, and calls for cancelation with examples, and information on core topics such as: vigilantism, rebrand or potentially get canceled, motivations and impacts of cancel culture, the importance of the publics' perspectives, social media, social media influencers and their influence in general, YouTubers and canceling YouTubers in particular, apology videos and comments sections, and how this thesis is analyzing cancel culture in a new way are provided.

An Explanation of Cancel Culture in Social Media Spaces

Cancel culture in social media spaces functions as a relationship between those in the public spotlight and their fans. A celebrity must do something considerably offensive to others in order to receive a call to be canceled. Generally, a public figure is targeted with a call for cancelation after they commit an offense that goes against the values of their supporter community. If act is perceived to be significant enough violation of the group norms, and if enough members of the group perceive the violation to be of this magnitude, and if in particular this is a repeat violation, publics will advocate for cancelation of the offender. Sometimes the call for cancelation is immediate; sometimes followers only learn of an earlier transgression after some time has passed and then decide to join in the cancelation act, but the call for cancelation

tends to be immediate once the followers become aware of the earlier transgression. Therefore, someone can receive a cancelation call regardless of how much time has passed since a committed offense. An example of a late offense which received a modern day cancelation call is when *Bachelor* contestant Rachel Kirkconnell, a young, White female was close to winning Matt James's season. James was the first Black bachelor. His season aired in early 2021. Towards the end of his season, photos of Kirkconnell wearing an antebellum dress for a Greek life college party emerged. James addressed the situation on the television show, and the parted ways for awhile. Thus, although Kirkconnell had been out of college for several years, online users found old pictures of her which impacted her present day relationship and caused a controversy online (Bowenbank, 2021). These calls are issued to potentially remove the public figure from a space. Sometimes, a public figure will commit more than one offense, and the fan culture is motivated to use the offenses as double ammunition to try to cancel the celebrity from their online space, as a way of doubling down on the perceived wrongdoings. However, calls for cancelation can take place in many different forms; getting someone canceled from a social media platform is one of these examples.

The functions of cancel culture highlight the power differentiates between the participants in the process. On the surface it would appear that the celebrity being canceled is more socially important than the fans doing the canceling; yet the ability to convince others to band together to cancel a person in the public spotlight is in itself an expression of influence and therefore of power. Individual members of a culture never experience the same levels of power and influence; in fact, part of the experience of inclusion in a culture is working through the hierarchies that always exist within culture. In social media spaces, for example, fans who have been following a content creator for a longer period of time, or who claim to know the content

creator personally, will have more influence than newcomers to a social media space. I refer to these more powerful members of the fandom as “ringleaders” throughout this thesis.

Any culture can engage in calls for cancelation, but I have specifically predicted that fan cultures often engage in this process for two reasons. First, the process typically results in the target being canceled, which is seen as a positive result for the culture from which this person was eliminated. Second, the ability to gain enough support from other users to remove a public figure from their community after they commit a perceived wrongdoing yields a sense of power to the person who initiates the process. Common themes that public figures get called to be canceled over are proof or allegations of discriminatory remarks or sexual misconduct, such as using racist, homophobic, or transphobic slurs or accused of grooming minors. “As involvement in cancel culture increases, the call to have a person apologize [is not always sufficient because people may get canceled anyway, but it is used as an attempt to save face], then dig[ging] into their past, also increases” (Mueller, 2021, p. 11). Thus, with cancel culture’s recent growth in the 21st century, it is necessary to further explore its distinctions, implications, and umbrella terms (calls to be canceled and canceled) and to understand what platforms modern day cancel culture functions on. For example, in this technology-focused era, cancel culture operates on social media because that is the palace online users go to try to gain support to cancel a celebrity. Calls to be canceled happen on social media platforms, even if public figures’ offenses did not occur online. Sometimes the original transgression that calls to cancel the public figure occurred in the past and resurfaced, but public figures can get canceled over recent matters, too.

An interesting concept that emerges is when public figures create their own content, that later leads to calls for cancelation by members of their supporting culture. Logan Paul and Tana Mongeau are YouTube content creators who have been called to be canceled on YouTube. Paul

and Mongeau are in the spotlight for this thesis as the focus is on YouTubers who have been called to be canceled on the same platform they originally committed a perceived wrongdoing on (e.g., breaks a group value, such as being disrespectful to others). As a result, they uploaded apology videos with a public comments section in an attempt to save face or potentially prevent cancelation calls. Mongeau also serves as an example of someone who has committed more than one offense, as she had racist and microaggressive tweets resurface on Twitter and as a result uploaded an apology YouTube video where she apologized for her tweets and other former apology videos that received backlash. Thus, her fan culture has doubled down on the offenses in their original call to cancel her and needed to be further explored. Also, it is important to consider that these YouTubers are only famous because of their start on social media, and when they are called to be canceled, there is a higher risk for them to be canceled because their offense also occurred on social media. Since Paul and Mongeau's claim to fame comes through social media content creation, if they are canceled it may force them to end their online career if they are pushed to exit social media entirely.

Application of Burke's Theories in Social Media Spaces

Kenneth Burke's ideas have proven to be highly useful in and for wide varieties of human symbolic action. For example, Burke's ideas have been used by scholars to help understand group identities: (e.g., Branaman, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2009; and Davis, 2008).

Some scholars applied Kenneth Burke's theories to social media studies. Jensen (2016) applied Burke's (1966) cluster analysis to data pulled from Twitter during the 2015 United Kingdom general election. Burke's cluster theory was used to help understand the meaning of the campaign communications. Gondringer (2020) applied Burke's (1945) pentad when studying cancel culture. Specifically, Burke's pentad was applied as a tool to help dramatically analyze

how cancel discourse impacts academic institutions. Jensen (2016) and Gondringer (2020) serve as two examples of scholars beginning to take a Burkean approach to social media studies.

However, there is room for more scholars to apply Burkean ideas, particularly his cycle of order, to social media research. Like these studies, my using Burke's ideas to the context of online communities is appropriate, and this thesis helps to contribute to those applications and discoveries.

The Culture Behind Cancel Culture

In order to study cancel culture, it is important to understand how the culture calling for cancelation operates. In a digital age, there are now internet cultures (also known as online or digital cultures) that exist in online spaces that allows for users internationally to engage with one another. Internet cultures can take place in media channels, such as those analyzed in this thesis. "Each social media platform has its own culture, often with many subcultures that correspond to different communities or channels. It is also no exaggeration to say that social media [content] greatly influences all modern culture such as the culture of nations" (Spacey, 2021, para. 2).

Thus, each social media platform has cultures that have distinct cultures of their own. One example of an internet culture is a fandom that centers around a public figure on a social media platform, such as a celebrity or a content creator. Followers of these public figures create their own culture by engaging with other users in social media spaces over topics centered around their culture (e.g., news, drama, and rumors centered around a public figure). Most notably, I have predicted that these fan cultures call to cancel public figures who have acted wrongfully from their social media spaces as an act of cancel culture to purge the wrongdoer from their community.

Online users tend to be strongly invested in their cultures, so they want to protect their culture against anyone who appears to be a threat to the culture. This idea reflects Burke's (1970) guilt-purification-redemption cycle. In my analysis of fans' calling to cancel Paul and Mongeau, I look to see if the fans are truly looking to protect their fandom culture. Thus, in order to better study cancel culture, the culture calling for cancelation must first be analyzed.

Cancel Culture as an Aspect of Culture

This thesis argues that there are multiple public figures being called to be canceled at any given time, and that these calls for cancelation come from an established culture at some level. Some of these calls are coming from the broader U.S. culture, while others are issued from the members of more specific subcultures within the broader American culture. In this latter case, the perceived transgression is of the more specific norms and values of the specific subculture. When an individual is called to be canceled in such a case, the call is for the individual to be purged from the smaller, more specific subculture rather than from the U.S. culture more broadly. Whether cancelation is sought from U.S. culture or from a smaller subculture, "cancel culture runs rampant in today's America" (Blair, 2021, para. 1), as smaller individual cultures within the overall American culture can also engage in the process of cancelation. One significant catalyst for this proliferation of calls for cancelation in the United States is social media; users often turn to social media in a technology driven age to discuss their opinions about anything and anyone online and seek to be agreed with by others. In fact, the US as a cancel culture is actually made up of a variety of individual calls for cancelation, most often in social media spaces. These distinct, individual calls for cancelation are becoming more and more common in the US in the 21st century. For example in a poll that surveyed Americans, "53% agreed with the statement that 'even though free speech is protected [and in very specific ways,

some speech more than others if at all], people should expect social consequences for expressing unpopular opinions in public [especially about matters not related to redressing grievances with the government], even those that are deeply offensive to other people” (Lizza, 2020, para. 29). Therefore, the cultures actively participating in cancel culture online are furthering the growth of cancel culture, regardless if public figures are simply being held accountable for their actions online or actually are canceled from a space.

I have argued that online cultures that once supported public figures begin to engage in cancel culture once wrongdoings (according to a community’s values, rules, and norms) have occurred. In these situations, in relation to Burke’s (1970) cycle, the public figure would need to be purged from the online space because the culture feels guilty that they are a supporter on the bottom of a social media hierarchy supporting a public figure on top with wrong morals. After successfully purging a public figure, the culture can have a sense of relief from purging the perceived wrong-doer from the online culture. This idea of an online culture purging a creator from an online space was further explored in the data analysis and findings sections.

Origin of Cancel Culture

Canceling a public figure from an online group or culture as a way to reinforce a sense of a community is an aspect of cancel culture that has not been studied. No one has the power to cancel someone by themselves, so public comments sections become the place where individual comments try to build support for a group decision to try to remove a public figure from a social media space. One of the purposes of the thesis is to explore the reasons why people post comments to YouTube videos, looking to see if there is community building (e.g., the community becoming stronger through its members agreeing that the content creator should be

canceled and that they should shift their support elsewhere) going on as well as judgment of the content creators.

Past research shows that cancel culture has a number of different origin points. Dudenhofer (2020) claims that cancel culture began on social media after a 2014 *Love & Hip-Hop* episode, when an actor told their love interest they were canceled, and the concept was later picked up online. Cancel culture became especially prominent on Black Twitter (an informal but defined community on Twitter where black users engage with one another) both in serious and joking manners and later picked up relevance in other communities. However, similar concepts of cancel culture have been around for decades and displayed in a variety of ways. In 1947, government investigations of Communist influence in Hollywood began during the Cold War. Some people in the media industry refrained from answering when questioned and as a result served jail time, that motivated Hollywood to take a stance on the issue. “Hollywood then started a blacklist policy, banning the work of about 325 screenwriters, directors and actors who the committee had not yet cleared. Some people were able to keep working, whether it was through pseudonyms or crediting their friends. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the ban began to lift” (Gibian, 2017, para. 2). Thus, the Hollywood blacklist is one of the earlier examples of a situation similar to cancel culture as it was an industry cancellation based on the government’s reaction. It is possible that, during the late 1940s and most of the 1950s, Hollywood wanted to remove people from their space because they assumed their publics would no longer be interested in wanting to watch media productions with the screenwriters, directors, and actors on the blacklist. Around this time, Senator Joseph McCarthy was campaigning and led a senate committee that investigated Americans for alleged communist ties (specifically targeting the media and entertainment people). He eventually lost his credibility after it came out that some of

the accusations and claims he had made were false. McCarthy was canceled—he was “censured by his Senate colleagues, ostracized by his party, and ignored by the press” (United States Senate, 2023a, para. 6) Thus, McCarthy’s wrongdoings offended his supporting community. As a result, “McCarthy fell before the demand of the Senate that its members conform to the body’s rules of comity and civility” (United States Senate, 2023b, para. 12), and he was purged from the community because of the followers. Many recent examples of public cancelation have involved corporations in essence canceling public figures by withdrawing sponsorships. The result has been these figures disappearing from public media spaces like films and television commercials. In my thesis, I am showing how the power has shifted from these acts of highly visible public cancelation to online users calling to cancel public figures from much smaller social media spaces.

It is possible that cancel culture now serves as an extra step for online users to police public figures from acting wrongfully (e.g., going against the group’s shared values, rules, and norms) as an act of power. If a content creator breaks the order of harmony existing within a community the members may purge them from their community. There are many types of power that may function within a hierarchy. While many focus on positions within the hierarchy and talk about the legitimate power that comes with being at the top of the hierarchy, Foucault (2018) visualizes power as a negotiation between people in these different positions. For example, in an online community, the content creator is seen to be at the top of the hierarchy because the creator is the focus of fan attention and adoration, and is also seen as the figurehead who pulled the online culture together. However, in Foucault’s (2018) way of thinking, any power the content creator has is actively negotiated with the creator’s followers, who can express their own influence by simply leaving the online community in search of other creators to follow. In

essence, the content creator agrees to continue providing content that pleases the followers and the followers agree to continue to provide positive feedback and actively support the content creator. Either party, can claim an upper hand in this balance by threatening to upend the patterns or norms that have been tacitly established between the two. Within the followers themselves, there is also a hierarchy based on such characteristics as how long a follower has participated in the fandom and the follower's "cultural capital" or knowledge of both the content creator and the fandom's set of cultural values. When a content creator violates the order of community harmony, the fandom has the power to issue cancellation calls that can ultimately influence the content creator to leave the platform. The fandom will act as online vigilantes so that they can purify and redeem the culture, and eventually start Burke's cycle elsewhere. Thus, these types of power help to maintain the order of what is expected in the community.

Whenever there are not legal channels to punish a celebrity for a perceived wrongdoing (e.g., breaking the order of community harmony), online users turn to social media to gain support to cancel someone as a way of exercising their power to punish a wrongdoing. This is why there needs to be a group of online users in the community who will act as vigilantes to call for a celebrity's cancellation because individuals cannot cancel someone from a space on their own. For example, Chris Harrison, the former long-time host of the *Bachelor* franchise was canceled after he defended a former contestant's college party antebellum photos on Instagram. Harrison was publicly shamed online and as a result was fired from his job with the ABC Network (Drew, 2022). Although there was nothing illegal about what Harrison said, online users who were fans of the *Bachelor* franchise called for Harrison to be canceled online that ultimately held Harrison accountable for his words and left him without a job. This idea of online

cultures engaging in cancel culture represents themes of vigilantism, that is further explored in this chapter.

Anyone can participate in cancel culture online by advocating for others to stop supporting someone who has committed a perceived wrongdoing on social media platforms. Cancel culture has also evolved to become a more common household phrase. As of September of 2020, 44% of Americans reported that they had heard at least a fair amount about cancel culture, and 22% of those participants reported they had heard a great amount about cancel culture (Vogels, Anderson, Porteus, Barnovaski, Atske, McClain, Auxier, Perrin, & Ramshankar, 2021), and by June 2022, the number of Americans that reported they had a heard a fair amount of cancel culture jumped to 66% (Vogels, 2022b). Thus, in a technology-focused era, cancel culture is constantly expanding on social media.

The United States as a whole has an attitude of holding people accountable for their actions by the need for others to be based on grounds that are morally and ethically correct, and that is what has helped produce modern day cancel culture. Sometimes, celebrities try to prevent their calls for cancelation by removing themselves from social media spaces. Somewhat similar to *Bachelor* franchise host Chris Harrison, actress Roseanne Barr once made a racist tweet on Twitter and later apologized and stated she was leaving the platform, but it was too late to undo her damage; ABC canceled her television show *Roseanne* shortly after (Rice, 2018). It is possible that once ABC found out about Barr's racist tweet they had to react due to its cruel nature and how publics were reacting to Barr's racist tweet, so it may have been the best decision for ABC to cancel the television show and advocate for justice in response. Thus, one statement made online can lead to calls for cancelation, whether that be from a social media space,

organization affiliation, or fandom support, depending on how the offense is perceived by the online culture, as shown as through the examples of Harrison and Barr.

There have also been other historical events that have helped shape modern day cancel culture on social media, such as the #MeToo movement.

The “me too” movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low-wealth communities, to find pathways to healing... In October 2017, the movement went global as the #MeToo hashtag went viral and survivors across the world came forward about their experiences with sexual assault (Global Fund for Women, 2023, para. 4).

The movement helped many women online users feel more comfortable speaking up for what they wanted and bring attention to those who needed to be held accountable, even if their offender’s actions or words were not considered criminal in the eyes of the law.

The #MeToo movement raised awareness of the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment and made it explicitly clear that inappropriate and dangerous behavior were in violation of personal rights and that consequences would follow. Actions of sexual misconduct that follow the movement indicate that such conduct will continue unless public figures are called out and effectively canceled. Cancel culture works to change a society that currently enables these injustices in various social environments by giving marginalized voices a platform to speak upon. Those with greater social status often escape legal consequences, leaving the responsibility in the lap of those who enable their careers with their votes, purchases or attention (Loiselle, 2021, para. 4-5).

Thus, the #MeToo movement helped shape modern day cancel culture because it helped motivate online users to assert their influence. This influence came from their willingness

to share experiences where they perceived themselves to have been treated wrongfully by others offline. In this process, they were welcomed into a growing subculture of women who banded together to support each other as survivors of these experiences of mistreatment, but also eventually to collectively call for cancelation of those they saw as guilty of mistreatment. Although such wrong-doings may have occurred in a physical setting, the news is spread online. Users can then act as online vigilantes to potentially purge the wrongdoer from a space for their perceived breaking of the order: in the case of #MeToo, the order being the set of cultural norms and expectations surrounding norms and behaviors governing romantic relationships between men and women.

Rather than exploring situations like #MeToo where the perceived transgressions in the real world, but the calls for cancelation occurred in social media spaces, this thesis goes a step further and analyzes what happens when a wrongdoing occurs in a social media space and is perceived to violate the norms and values of that cultural space, and the calls for cancelation occur in that same space. The goal is to gain a better understanding of how cancel culture operates on social media to contribute to both scholarly and industry knowledge of cancel culture.

Examples of Cancel Culture

Cancel culture occurs when a public figure or organization is publicly shamed, called to be canceled, or is successfully removed from a certain space, as a result of a perceived public wrongdoing (e.g., breaking a group's shared value of treating others with respect). Because the United States often engages in cancel culture (e.g., publics hold people accountable when they do not act morally correctly) even public shaming can be considered a part of cancel culture. For example, if a public figure receives backlash for a wrongdoing but there that person is not

removed from a space, that reaction from the culture is still a part of cancel culture, but less severe as that public figure is simply being held accountable for their actions. Nowadays, it is becoming more common for this form of public shaming to occur on social media, regardless of whether or not there is a full cancelation.

It is possible every culture could function as a cancel culture, as people do get removed from spaces in various ways, such as getting fired from a job. Publicly bashing someone or something in general is also a form of a culture acting as a cancel culture, regardless or not if there are thousands of people banning together online to remove someone from a space (even if the users are “wrong,” in their cancelation justification, majority rules minority opinion when it comes to cancel culture). These various forms of cancel culture suggest any culture could function as a cancel culture, although the concept is primarily focused on holding celebrities accountable for their actions online. However, this idea that every culture could function as a cancelation culture should be considered when studying the concept as these online cancelation communities are accumulating with the evolution of technology in the twenty-first century.

An example of a public figure being canceled from a media production space due to cancel culture on social media is the talk show host of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, Ellen DeGeneres. In 2020, DeGeneres was called to be canceled on social media for allegations regarding her behavior and actions surrounding her talk show, both on and off camera. DeGeneres was accused of various wrongdoings, such as making *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* a toxic work environment, being racist, firing employees when they have personal problems (e.g., missing work for a car accident), and had a staff member ask another employee to remove their *Go Fund Me* fundraiser to financially support their medical problems because it would hurt DeGeneres’s image (Simao, 2020). These allegations surfaced online and drew negative

attention from publics. DeGeneres issued a public apology on the opening show of her 18th season regarding the allegations, but cancelation cultures on Twitter were still unhappy with DeGeneres and voiced their opinion online (McPherson, 2020). Despite her apology, because publics were still upset with DeGeneres, she announced her television show would soon be coming to an end, that later ended after its 19th season in 2022 (Deggans, 2022). Therefore, DeGeneres's allegations happened in-person, but were moved online where a call for cancelation occurred, and later resulted in DeGeneres's decision to cancel her television show because of the public shaming she received on the internet. Because DeGeneres went against the shared value of treating others with respect, which is vital to the community order and, the grounds for her cancelation calls. Not all reasons for public figures receiving cancelation calls are as explicit. This example of DeGeneres's cancelation is an example of cancel culture on social media and the powerful, life-changing effects cancelation culture can have on the person who was called to be canceled from their perceived wrongdoings.

Another example of someone being held accountable for their actions online, but not being fully canceled is singer and song-writer Adam Levine. In 2022, Levine caused a public controversy after numerous women came forward on social media with allegations against him having an affair with them. Although nothing illegal occurred, Levine had received major backlash online (Emmanuele, 2022), that could lead to a number of losses for Levine (e.g., supportive culture, damaged reputation), but not necessarily cancelation from a social media space or the music industry. Levine has since put out a public statement regarding the rumors on Instagram, but has not deleted his account, and still has an upcoming Maroon 5 world tour planned (IANS, 2022). However, an overall criticism of cancel culture it is common for people to misuse the term canceled for a public figure receiving any form of online criticism. For

example, podcasters Emma Skidmore and Lauren Serge uploaded a podcast on September 27, 2022, titled *Stay Tuned: ADAM LEVINE IS CANCELLED* (Skidmore and Serge, 2022), although Levine was not removed from any space. Therefore, Levine has received backlash, that could affect how publics (e.g., fan cultures) view him, but he was not canceled.

Anyone can go onto a social media platform and declare someone is canceled, but unless a large number of other online users voice their opinion in comments sections and apply pressure on the organizations that do have the power to truly cancel someone (e.g., brand sponsorships, record companies, media productions), then the cancellation statement does not end up being true. This is where some of the confusion occurs on whether or not a public figure is actually canceled, and is one of the reasons why fans on social media platforms tend to focus their cancellation efforts on things they can control; removing someone from an online fan culture. Thus, a clearer distinction between being canceled and receiving calls for cancellation needed to be provided to differentiate between cancel culture as a whole for this thesis. Also, although it is subjective if someone deserves a cancellation call or not, it is likely that a public figure would not remove themselves from a platform unless they believed a large amount of their supporters no longer wanted them in the space. Therefore, cancellation calls need to be studied further to better understand why they have such an impact on public figures.

Canceled vs. Calls for Cancellation

Canceled and calls for cancellation are both cancel culture terms, but they have entirely different meanings. It is common for cancel culture concepts to be used incorrectly, such as by scholars, authors, or the general public. As showcased with Adam Levine's public shaming, a typical mistake that occurs is when someone refers to publics' calls to cancel a public figure as someone being officially canceled, even if they are not removed from a certain space.

Online cultures want to hold public figures accountable for their actions, and calls for cancelations originate from these conversations, as analyzed in the data section of this thesis. Calls for cancelation are a form of online public shaming, as the online cultures first engage with one another regarding the public figure to bring awareness of the wrongdoing, hold the public figure accountable, and figure out what to do with the information, all that are still a part of the cancel culture process. A wrongful transgression could be something that interrupts the order (e.g., in a YouTube context, offensive footage in a video) or violates a shared group value (e.g., a public figure is accused of or is shown doing something offensive; the community would feel too guilty to support a racist and would want to purge them). Then, calls for cancelation can emerge from public shaming, that is simply users voicing their opinion to remove the public figure from the space, but there needs to be significant support from the online culture in order to actually cancel the public figure. Specifically, there must be enough users who expressed unhappiness with the creator that has created enough pressure for the content creator to exit the platform. This number is arbitrary and will differ for each content creator. If the majority of the culture is on board with canceling the public figure, the online community will band together to purge the public figure from their online space. The culture will attempt to remove the public figure by constantly posting reminders as to how the public figure should not be idolized or supported to other users or the public figure themselves. These comments are typically an on-going conversation until the public figure somehow leaves the platform, thus, canceled from the space. However, if there is not enough rationale to remove the person from the space, the person will continue to exist, just perhaps with a damaged reputation and loss of some supporters. Therefore it is necessary to point out that while calls for cancelation are a part of cancel culture, it is a separate concept from someone who was actually canceled by a culture.

If someone is actually canceled, it is sensible to assume that the public figure is no longer welcomed in certain spaces, such as a social media space (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook) by a culture of people (e.g., their once supporting fandom). In hindsight, someone who has been claimed to be canceled from a space (e.g., social media platforms, television productions, film productions, Broadway), needs to have been actually removed from a space either temporarily or permanently. Cancellations tend to play out by either the public figure being removed or banned from the space by the company, the public figure removing themselves from the space, or the public figure remaining in the space, but goes on a hiatus before their attempted return for a new group of supporters. Thus, if the public figure wants to return from their cancellation, a new version of Burke's (1970) cycle can start with a new order because once the public figure returns to the space there will be a new culture of supporters to exist in the new hierarchy.

A call to cancel a public figure who has committed a perceived wrongdoing can give online cultures a feeling of influence, so it is sensible to assume this is one of the motivations for online users to engage in cancel culture. However, even though online users can call to cancel a public figure, it does not give online cultures any real power. Calls for cancellation are what happen in a social media space, and true cancellations are an act only the public figure can do themselves or by another person such as an organization in a position of power who has the authority to remove someone from a space (e.g., media production, social media platform). Thus, it is important to note that although online cultures can engage in the cancel culture process and create the first wave to getting someone canceled by bringing negative attention to a perceived issue, the true power for to cancel someone is not controlled by the online communities, but instead by the people who have the power to remove themselves or others from a space.

Ye, formerly known as rapper Kanye West, has been canceled in 2022 for hate speech online. The original transgression occurred on his social media accounts, and Ye was banned from both Instagram and Twitter for antisemitic comments (CBC Kids News, 2022). However, Ye's cancellation goes much farther than being locked out of his social media accounts: Ye has been dropped by several brands and his talent agency, that accumulates to a loss of over \$1 billion (ET Spotlight Special, 2022). Thus, Ye has been canceled both from the space where the original transgression occurred, even if it is only temporarily, but in other spaces he was a part of, such as contracts for clothing brands and music, that could be permanent. Fans of Ye have also expressed their disappointment in him (McKinney, 2022), that could make it harder for Ye to attempt to return to any space, especially a social media space during a time where fan cultures can engage in cancel culture.

Actor and singer Lea Michele, known for her starring role on the television show *Glee*, was canceled in 2020 for racist allegations made on Twitter from previous co-stars (Marcos, 2022). Michele eventually deleted her Twitter account, that removed her from the same social media space where the allegations were made public and were picked up by online cancellation cultures. As of November 2022, Michele has not returned to Twitter or television production, but instead has joined the social media website TikTok and announced her return to Broadway. Thus, Michele has not made a comeback to the same social media or television production space, but has instead made appearances in other spaces where she was not canceled.

Another example of a public figure who was canceled from a space, but later returned to the same platform is YouTuber Shane Dawson. The creator was canceled in June 2020 for old videos where he used racial slurs, blackface, inappropriate sexual references regarding a then 11-year-old Willow Smith, joked about abusing his cat, and was accused by Tati Westbrook, the

Youtuber who originally called out James Charles for his inappropriate behavior to the beauty community, for gaslighting her alongside his friend Jeffree Star for pressuring her into publicly exposing Charles (Ojomu, 2021). Shortly after online cancelation cultures began to publicly shame Dawson and unsubscribe from his channel, he uploaded an apology video that addressed these wrongdoings and turned off the comments section so online cultures could not engage in cancel culture on that specific video. The apology was uploaded on June 26, 2020 and now has over 21 million views (shane, 2020). Dawson then went on a hiatus from YouTube for over a year and did not upload a new video until October 7, 2021 (shane, 2021). As of November 2022, Dawson has uploaded numerous videos since his comeback video and has 19.5 million subscribers (shane, 2022), so he has in fact returned to YouTube after being canceled from the YouTube space. Thus, Burke's (1970) cycle occurred as the original cancelation culture redeemed itself by allowing Dawson to return, but for a new culture of supporters.

Therefore, public figures may be able to return to the same space after time has passed, but will continue to receive backlash from some publics and should expect for their original status to never be the same. The idea of someone being canceled, but being able to return to the space after time has passed needs to be considered because unless someone is legally forbidden from existing in a certain space, it is possible that some person will want to return to the space, especially if the space is a source of income, so the person may try to find a way to make a return possible even with continuous backlash from the online culture. Thus, I have suggested that there is a need for a clearer distinction between the concepts cancel culture, canceled, and calls for cancelation, and this thesis sought to clarify those concepts. Explored.

Vigilantism

Conversations about someone being canceled, receiving calls for cancelation, or being part of cancel culture are occurring as a form of online public debate by vigilantes in online cultures. This phenomenon needs to be further explored because there could not be a culture of cancelation without vigilantes pushing to cancel public figures from a social media space.

Vigilantism is a claim to power that helps shape public debate, and vigilantes in this these are referred to those who participate in cancel culture. These vigilantes do not have an official form of authority bestowed upon them by a community, but they participate in online policing by making cancelation calls on social media platforms. They specifically are looking to hold wrongdoers accountable for offending the culture (e.g., such as breaking the order, or going against a shared group value, such as not treating people respectfully in a society where we are actively pushing for equality). Typically, they patrol online spaces looking for violations of group norms. In the twenty-first century, vigilantism has transformed digitally. Cyber vigilantism, digital vigilantism, and internet vigilantism are defined as,

the act of carrying out vigilante activities through the Internet. The term encompasses vigilantism against alleged scams, crimes, and non-Internet related behavior. The expanding scope of media savvy and online interaction has enabled vigilantes to utilize methods specific to the internet in order to distribute justice to parties they consider to be corrupt, but who have not committed a formal crime or have not been held accountable by the criminal justice system... (e.g., hacking, baiting, and public shaming) (DBpedia, 2022, para. 2).

Also, vigilantes help to push Burke's (1970) cycle forward from pushing the order step to the scapegoating and purging step. Vigilantism occurs when people engage in behaviors that

are perceived to be wrongful, but they are not illegal, so law enforcement cannot take action. That is where vigilantes come in and take matters into their own hands to try to punish someone. Vigilantes in cancel culture may try to bring a public figure who has committed a wrongdoing negative attention online to try to have their sponsorships pulled and potentially remove them from a social media space as a consequence to their action so that they are purged from the online community. Thus, vigilantes must reinforce group expectations to remind those on the top what can happen if they take advantage of their position on a platform.

Cancel culture allows a space for online vigilantes to form. The goal of vigilantes can be thought of as selectively punishing certain offenses, so attention can be drawn attention to specific issues (Bateson, 2021). In relation to Burke's (1970) cycle, online spaces create an opportunity for a social hierarchy to exist, and within these spaces, it is possible for online vigilantes to form to push the cycle forward. In an online community, there is greater sense of guilt that people feel for both people on bottom and top of a social media space, especially when the person on top is a self-made influencer who was not a originally paid actor to promote products. At the bottom of this social media hierarchy, individuals may feel guilty they are not on top of the platform as an influencer themselves, especially because many people are becoming influencers in this social media-driven era. The guilt these individuals at the bottom feel could include shame because they feel lazy that they are not doing any content creation, so they are not getting attention from others online or receiving financial compensation like they could be. Contrary, the public figures who are on top of the social media space may feel guilty they are high up on the hierarchy because they may feel like a regular person getting paid to promote products and are becoming famous. Thus, when the need to purge a public figure from the top occurs, the individuals at the bottom of the space act like vigilantes and engage in cancel culture

to try to remove their guilt by pushing it onto their scapegoat (the public figure at the top of their community) and cleanse their community.

Vigilantes are catalysts for a cancel culture and can become powerful through influencing others, but influence is not the only reason why vigilantes participate in online policing. Vigilantes engage in cancel culture because joining in on holding a public figure accountable relates to the idea that I am arguing in my thesis: that members of an online culture band together to strengthen their community through purging wrongdoers from their community when they go against the community's expectations. Cancellation becomes part of the vigilante spirit, and wrongdoers will likely face consequences for going against a culture's shared values. Specifically, a culture will hold someone who goes against their community accountable for their wrongdoing and engage in vigilante spirit by purging them from their culture. By gaining a group's approval for their calls for cancellation, vigilantes are in a position to claim a sense of mastery over the group culture. Perhaps they may even feel a greater mastery than the content creators themselves, given that the creators have demonstrated their lack of understanding of the group culture as a result of their offense. Therefore, vigilantes' influence becomes multifaceted. Cultures embody a vigilante spirit when they access the culture's norms and values as evidence that an individual should be punished, rather than using established laws to achieve the same end. In the process, they influence how people in their order act, but also strengthen and reinforce their culture, and create consequences for going against the culture's shared values. In the context of my thesis, Paul and Mongeau's online culture (fandom) wants them to act a certain way (e.g., following the unique, shared values, rules, and norms that make up the community's sense of order). When Paul or Mongeau go against the order and break these shared values, the fandom creates calls for cancellation to potentially purge the wrongdoer from the community to

hold the person accountable, but also to protect and strengthen the culture, and create consequences for offending the community. Then the vigilantes have the power to shift the support of their community elsewhere and start the cycle all over again.

Simply put, cancel culture is an expression of original vigilantism, just modernized in an online space. In fact, “cancel culture can sometimes become digital vigilantism. Advocates of canceling some public figures often believe that they hold the moral high ground... entitled even to disparage or humiliate someone on the grounds of political correctness” (Chiou, 2020c, p. 297). Thus, it is necessary to consider how cancel culture is a form of digital vigilantism because it can help to explain how cancel culture operates; there are a group of people advocating to publicly shame or remove someone from an online space because of a wrongdoing. These online cultures at the bottom of a social hierarchy feel the need to take the law into their own hands when there is a real, perceived need of purging, and advocate to remove the person bringing guilt into the community from the space. Thus, it is possible that some of the users calling for cancelation are serving as vigilantes trying to purge the content creator from the online community for moral righteousness and the sake of the culture, that is analyzed in this thesis.

Rebrand or Get Canceled?

A number of public figures and brands have undergone a rebrand during the 2020s, coincidentally or not amidst the surge of cancel culture on social media spaces. For example, in 2020, Land O’ Lakes butter removed their Native American woman logo after almost 100 years to instead use a font reading “Farmer-Owned.” “It comes as many businesses, universities and sports teams have begun to drop Native American images and symbols from logos” (Kallingal, 2020, para. 3). Also in 2020, The Quaker Oats Company announced that they had decided to change the brand name Aunt Jemimah and remove the portrayed image of the character from the

branding as the origins of the brand came from racial stereotypes (The Quaker Oats Company, 2020). This change comes after the killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis in 2020. The death made international news and energized the Black Lives Matter movement, where people and organizations ban together to bring awareness to the mistreatment of African Americans in modern day from law enforcement both on social media and offline (Black Lives Matter, 2022).

Former canceled public figures have also rebranded for a new culture in recent years. Previously, the country music group the Dixie Chicks were claimed to be canceled from country music after one of the singers criticized the United States' president in 2003 and refused to apologize. However, the group did eventually make a comeback to the country music space (Moss, 2020), but for a new group of supporters. This example can be applied to Burke's (1970) cycle where the group's return pushed them into a new culture of supporters, so the original cancellation culture can remain redeemed from the original transgression.

In 2020, the music group changed their name to The Chicks to distinguish themselves from a name associated with the Confederate Union. The Chicks' new name was announced with the release of their new song "March March" and its music video, where "its lyrics and video reference current and past public protests involving racial justice, police brutality, gun violence, climate change and LGBTQ rights. The video compares current themes to historical fights in the U.S. for women's right to vote and the struggles for Black and LGBTQ civil rights. The video also scrolls the names of dozens of Black victims of police brutality and those who died in apparently racially motivated confrontations" (Tsioulcas, 2020, para. 2-3). It is possible that the effects the group felt from their first experience with cancel culture pressured them to rebrand ahead of the curve, coincidentally or not during the surge of cancel culture in the 2020s.

Therefore, this thesis sought to dive deeper into this topic by analyzing the culture of cancelation in social media spaces to help contribute to industry knowledge of how publics may respond to public figures' or organizations' lack of attention to social movements or public wrongdoings.

Motivations and Impacts of Cancel Culture

In this project I looked at the possibility that one motivation to call for cancelation is the greater sense of community that is created and reinforced through that process. Some scholars who have analyzed people's motivations for participating in cancel culture have found "While seeking accountability was a big factor for most participants, the concept of justice and the motivation to educate others were also prevalent" (Tandoc Jr., Ru, Huei, Charlyn, Chua, & Zhang, 2022, p. 8). The reference to justice in this quote suggests that defense of cultural norms and values is a significant motivator for vigilantism. Thus, the only criterion for a public figure to receive a cancelation call is for them to break the order the culture follows. In modern day, society is pushing for equality, so a shared group norm across cultures (that becomes a part of the order for each community) is that public figures are expected to treat others with respect. That is why many public figures get canceled for being racist or transphobic.

Sometimes when the public seeks accountability from a public figure, their arguments for cancelation are an extension of the mistreatment of others. Blitvich (2022) analyzed people's motivations for engaging in online public shaming and then responded with "further aggression or impoliteness" and found their actions "to be related to the expression of a battery of moral emotions, indignation and empathy, directed towards the deviants and those who supported them and the victims respectively" (p. 72). The public has an expectation that people in a position of power and potential influence should know that having a following comes with the responsibility to ensure their actions and words are morally correct at all times. The repercussions for public

figures when they speak or act wrongfully can be life-changing, while there are not any consequences for the people that call to cancel public figures in an extension of wrongfulness. In fact, “The mentality behind cancel culture is some forms of ‘moral righteousness’ that people believe that it is morally justifiable to denounce someone who is morally inferior and deserves the criticism.” (Chiou, 2020a, p. 297). Also, cancel culture can negatively impact those who are called to be canceled.

Public shaming on many occasions can be excessive and simply becomes a way of judging and rejecting anyone who holds a different socio-political viewpoint. This phenomenon has led to concerns (e.g., one recently expressed by the former President Barack Obama) that it has detrimental impacts on society, particularly on young people (Chiou, 2020b, p. 297).

However, when the public calls to cancel someone from a true wrongdoing, the public can benefit from what could be considered the positive effect of cancel culture: justice can be served. “In contrast to such forms of destructive communication on the Internet as trolling, hate, cyberbullying, stalking, catcalling, shaming, blaming, flaming, ghosting, outing, queer baiting – cancel culture is in essence a form of communication aimed at combating aggression, the struggle for justice, and, consequently, is a positive phenomenon” (Yaremko, 2021, p. 112).

Also, cancel culture has turned political.

Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to say that, in general, calling people out on social media for posting offensive content holds them accountable (65% vs. 34%). Conversely, 62% of Republicans – but only 32% of Democrats – believe this type of action generally punishes people who didn’t deserve it (Vogels, 2022a, p. 11).

Therefore, it has been confirmed that different political parties have different views on the purpose of cancel culture, and it is possible those actively participating in cancel culture are liberal. Lastly, it is important to consider that when a public figure and its supporting culture is called to be canceled, the supporting culture could shift to support a different public figure in a similar community, that was further analyzed. An example of a supporter shift in the YouTube beauty community after a cancelation occurred on the platform was when beauty Youtuber James Charles was accused of inappropriate behavior in a YouTube video uploaded by another beauty Youtuber Tati Westbrook. “The video took over the internet in short order, causing Charles to lose hundreds of thousands of subscribers as viewers rescinded their support for the star” (Glaze, 2022, para. 2) and sided with Westbrook.

The Importance of the Publics’ Perspectives

Cancel culture could not exist without publics, sections of a community with common interests (Merriam-Webster, 2022) that often speak out about their feelings on different topics. Public opinions can alter a social media influencer's social status, and that is why it was important for this thesis to analyze how cancel culture operates on the same platform a transgression occurred on because the public can respond back to apologies or other related topic threads. Publics, groups of individuals who take it upon themselves to take action and get others aware of the topic (e.g., acting as a vigilante), will go looking for ammunition against public figures with the motivation to purify their online community by removing the bad person.

Social media users often voice their opinions on topics such as public figures, content creation, and media productions on social media, and their thoughts can be impactful and make a difference because it could alter public figures’ careers and future productions. Anderson-Lopez, Lambert, and Budaj, (2021) found that “participatory culture reflects established online practices

and may be used to sustain media projects, end them, or to invite revision and the production of new media content...Creativity and authorship are always about reception and pleasing the audience; in a networked media age, the audience simply has more immediate and wide-reaching means to make their perspectives heard” (p. 80). Thus, cancel culture can be thought of as a call for action for publics to hop on the cancelation bandwagon, revoke public figures’ support for their wrongdoing, and prevent their supporting culture to either move on to support a new figure in a similar community or disband completely. For this thesis, it was important to study publics’ perspectives because groups of united people can voice their opinion and call to cancel public figures because it can dramatically impact the public figure and their supporting cultures if the public figure feels pressure to remove themselves from social media platforms.

Social Media

In this thesis, cancel culture is defined as the call for someone to be canceled from social media. These platforms are growing online spaces that can bring people all over the world together. Specifically, the definition of social media for this thesis are “Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others” (Carr and Hayes, 2015, p. 54). Anyone who has access to the internet can create an online account for a social media website, although some websites require for their users to be a certain age.

Past scholars have studied the way people interact on social media, that helps to support the idea that social media cultures exist and who may be a part of these online cultures. In 2011, the Pew Research Center researched how social media is becoming a place for groups to form and interact with other users in the same space. In a survey, 65% of participants said that they

read updates on social networking sites about their groups (with 75% of users ages 18-29 scoring highest for this category), and 30% of participants post news about their group on social networking sites (also with 40% of users ages 18-29 scoring highest for this category) (Purcell & Smith, 2011). Thus, this research supports that social media is becoming more popular for groups to form on, such as online cultures, and ages 18-29 is a popular age group to be active in online groups. 10 years later, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey that analyzed the social media users who were most active on and outspoken about the need to prevent climate change and found that Gen Z and Millennial adults are more likely to converse about this topic online in comparison to older generations (Thigpen & Tyson, 2021). If Gen Z and Millennials are the generations who are turning to social media to banner support towards an environmental issue, it is possible that these are some of the online users participating in online cultures, such as fan cultures and engaging in cancel culture. This research supports that there are online groups and specific generations who have turned to social media to bring awareness to a topic and banner support for a call for change, and these behaviors mirror modern day cancel culture conversations on social media platforms.

Research on social media culture has been conducted to further analyze how online users interact with one another. Brooke (2022) suggested that social media culture can be broken down into three parts: communication, socialization, and change. Social media platforms allow for users to engage with one another and also bolster a need for a call to action when something happens that is not generally accepted by a group of online users. “Social media serves, a more recent, important purpose of teaching individuals what is socially acceptable. Social media gives people examples about how to act and present oneself as well as how to not act and not present oneself” (para. 7). This suggestion that social media cultures gather to bolster change for

wrongful behaviors supports the concept of this thesis that online cultures turn into cancel cultures when perceived wrongdoings occur. Thus, it is important to study the culture in the comments section of apology videos for YouTubers to get a better understanding of the cancel culture that exists on social media platforms, how they impact the way the social hierarchies operate online, and if they function through Burke's (1970) cycle. This thesis argues that Burke's cycle of order can explain how online communities function as a cancel culture. Burke's cycle consists of steps or phases that are taken when there is a perceived need to cancel a public figure from a space.

Because social media platforms allow users to engage with one another, and they often provide opportunities for their users to have an easier time keeping tabs with others. For example, although it depends on the website, most social media offer a follow feature; the ability for users to subscribe to the content of another user with a public account or a private account that allows select individuals access. Also, the follow feature has allowed the ordinary public to reach the masses and become a public figure with a large sum of followers, most commonly referred to as an influencer or content creator. Self-made social media public figures are separate from other well-known people on social media websites such as celebrities, political figures, and professional athletes, because those stars have already created a fanbase and following separate from social media and most likely would still be in the public eye without a social media platform. When someone gains a following, they are opening their platform to create a following culture. However, regardless of how someone gains followers on a social media website, anyone in the public eye is open to backlash and being canceled for wrongdoing at any point in their career with allegations or traced evidence, such as in Mongeau's situation.

Cancel culture often occurs on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, that is why this thesis analyzed YouTube and its video comments section feature. Users gather in the comments sections to voice their opinion and bring attention to the need to cancel others.

Social media has not only become a prism for information exchange, it also paved the way for the rise of digital participatory cultures and social movements. It has become a contested site for competing forms of knowledge, culture, and ideology. The act of canceling someone, thus, is one of those spontaneous collective practices initiated by social media users, without consideration for its possible ramifications (Velaso, 2020a, p. 2).

Thus, it was important to analyze comment sections to better understand cancel culture as a culture and to make a clearer distinction between the concepts cancel culture, canceled, and a call for cancelation. I predicted that the overall use for the comments section was used to converse with others as a way to re-enforce the supporting culture while deciding if the culture still wants to cancel the public figure.

There are all kinds of examples of public figures who have been called to be canceled on social media, such as the well-known author of the famous *Harry Potter* series, J. K. Rowling.

On June 6, 2020, J.K. Rowling tweeted, ‘If sex isn’t real, there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth.’ This seems to have

offended the transgender community, that led to her cancellation (Velaso, 2020b, p. 4).

The Morning Consult conducted a survey that compared the public's favorability of Rowling from 2018 to 2022 and found that 58% of their adult respondents indicated that they preferred Rowling in 2018 dropped to 35% in 2022 after her transphobic tweet that brought the public to cancel her (Shevenock, 2022, chart 1). However, "Approximately half of adults, along with roughly 3 in 5 of the franchise's fans, said they wouldn't boycott the Harry Potter book series" (para. 8). Regardless of the culture that still supports Rowling, her transphobic tweet has hurt fans and negatively affected her reputation with the remaining public. Also, it is important to note that Velaso stated that Rowling was canceled, but was she? Or was Rowling just called to be canceled by the LGBTQ+ community? This is yet another example of scholars using cancelation and calls for cancelation interchangeably even though they are clearly different concepts. Thus, cancelation as a concept is ambiguous and needed to be further studied. Lastly, at no one's fault but her own, it is possible that Rowling's cancelation or call to be canceled will follow her for the rest of her life, that is why it was important to study how cancel culture can impact social media influencers. If a social media influencer is called to be canceled from the platform their transgression occurred on that is also where their line of work is, what would the social media influencer do for a career?

Social Media Influencers and Their Influence

It is important to understand who social media influencers are because this thesis studies how cancel culture impacts social media influencers. In this thesis, my definition of a social media influencer is, "a self-created public figure who has a large following on social media and influences their followers to buy products or try new experiences." Influencers often work with

brands by accepting sponsorships or brand deals; the brand will typically pay the influencer in an agreed upon measure (usually a financial sum, but could also offer them a variety of free products) in exchange for the influencer to post about or mention the brand in their content creation.

A social media influencer who has an authentic social media presence will be able to recommend products without raising suspicions from their following that they may be promoting a product only because they have been incentivized to do so and not because they actually use or enjoy the product (Adobe, 2022, para. 5).

Companies could benefit from using influencer marketing because influencers “can help drive engagement, shape audience attitudes, set trends, and impact the purchases people make” (Nogueira, 2022, para. 11). Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2010) analyzed perceptions of social media influencers personalities and found that the participants “viewed the SMIs as verbal, smart, ambitious, productive, and poised” (p. 91). These findings support that it could be a smart move for a company to choose to work with influencers if the influencers they work with help them reach their target audience.

Social media influencers can be found on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, that is why this thesis analyzed cancel culture on YouTube. For example, on TikTok, influencers with brand deals may create a TikTok video to feature a new product to encourage their viewers to buy from the brand. Similarly, on YouTube, YouTubers may include a clip of them talking about the video’s sponsorship to fulfill part of the brand deal requirement. As more companies are pushing to work with social media influencers, working with influencers through brand deals is becoming a more common public relations strategy to help brands keep up with competing companies that already have worked with influencers and

had success (e.g, financially, increased exposure and engagement). In this thesis, the social media influencers who were studied are Paul and Mongeau. Also, it is important to note that celebrities tend to delete the original transgression that got them in trouble, or sometimes their whole account entirely. For example, actors, athletes, politicians, and other forms of celebrities public figures may still be able to perform without a social media following. However, if a social media influencer has content that needs to be deleted it could hold a greater significance for them because if a social media influencer has to leave their online platforms, such as a YouTuber having to leave YouTube, where else would they go to work as a content creator?

YouTubers

The type of social media influencers who were analyzed in this thesis are YouTubers, and my definition of Youtubers that is used in this thesis is, “Content creators who have a YouTube channel and actively upload public videos to the platform.” Typically, YouTubers who regularly upload public videos are more likely to gain a following. The most popular YouTube video types in 2022 are: Video tutorials, ask me anything (AMA) videos, whiteboard videos, listicle videos, product reviews, educational videos, challenge videos, unboxing videos, behind the scenes (BTS) videos, explainer videos, product demo videos, video testimonials, reaction videos, webinar teasers, community-based videos, business results videos, meet the team videos, employee spotlight videos, company values videos, company culture videos, video blogs (vlogs), product launch videos, and video podcasts (Memon, 2021).

There are a few ways YouTubers can make money off of their content creation on YouTube such as joining the YouTube Partner Program and the YouTube Shorts Fund. In order to join the YouTube Partner Program, the creator must apply and have their channel and content undergo review to ensure they are following all policies and community guidelines before they

can be accepted into the program. A few of the ways YouTubers can financially profit from being a part of the YouTube Partner Program include: Advertising revenue, channel memberships, official branded merchandise, super chat and super stickers fans must pay for to use in chat streams, and YouTube Premium Revenue. In contrast, YouTube will reach out to qualifying creators for the YouTube Shorts Fund to compensate them from their \$100 Million YouTube Shorts Fund (YouTube Help, 2022).

Additional ways YouTubers can financially profit off their channel include brand deals and sponsorship. Contracts will operate differently depending on the brand, but commonly the deals ask YouTuber to shout out the company, show a product from the company, or encourage their viewers to purchase something from the company in their video. It is important for YouTubers to attract viewers and create a substantial following if they want to financially profit off their content creation. Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, and LaGroue (2018) analyzed content trends amongst the most subscribed YouTube channels and found that “self-disclosure is present across videos from the top YouTube channels, even among genres that might be perceived to be very different from each other” (p. 93). Thus, YouTubers who post videos that include self-disclosure, such as vlogs and question and answer videos, will be more likely to connect with their viewers, build a large audience, and be able to profit off of their YouTube content creation. Additionally, Westenberg (2016) studied Youtubers’ influence on teenage viewers and found that YouTubers can have a huge impact on active Youtube consuming teenagers and that many of the teenagers are unaware of the influence the content creators have on them. For example, “Teenagers ask YouTubers for advice, want to buy things YouTubers promote and copy their actions, language and clothing” (p. 28). Thus, if YouTubers can connect with their audience enough to influence their viewers to keep coming back to watch more of their content, YouTubers can create a

following and potentially even profit off their connection with their viewers in ways such as brand deals, sponsorships, and advertisement revenue.

If the YouTuber is successful enough on their channel viewer and profits enough through methods such as advertisement revenue, it is possible that the YouTuber could make content creation their full time job if they desire. Forbes ranked the highest paid YouTubers in 2022 as: MrBeast (\$54 million), Jake Paul (\$45 million), Markiplier (\$38 million), Rhett and Link (\$30 million), Unspeakable (\$28.5 million), Nastya (\$28 million), Ryan Kaji (\$27 million), Dude Perfect (\$20 million), Logan Paul (\$18 million), and Preston Arsement (\$10 million) (Brown & Freeman, 2022). Therefore, it is important to research how cancel culture can impact the YouTube community as YouTubers are up-rising internet celebrities with millions of dollars, subscribers, comments, and views, such as Paul and Mongeau. This thesis analyzed cancel culture in the YouTube community through the comments sections of Paul and Mongeau's apology videos.

Comments Section

Many social media platforms allow public and private comments sections for their viewers to converse with others on, such as on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, and allows for social media cultures to interact with others and create a sense of belonging in the online space. The comments section of a YouTube apology video is as equally, if not more important, than the apology video itself because the purpose of an apology video is to convince the target publics, the supporting culture and those hurt by the scandal, to accept the public figure's apology. In the comments section, viewers will discuss topics with other users such as, how they rate the apology, if they accept or decline the apology, converse with others about conflicting opinions, and declare if they still push for the public figure to be canceled or not.

Mongeau and Paul's apology videos have the comments sections turned on, so those comments were analyzed in the thesis.

Nguyen (2021) analyzed participants' reactions to the controversy between YouTubers James Charles and Tati Westbrook.

An interesting tension that was discovered was that, in most cases, participants were not advocates for canceling culture. Many saying that they strongly disagreed with this type of punishment, but on the other hand, they said they would also be unfollowing and advocating for their favorite YouTubers in a scandal. Perhaps, they feel this pressure by the community to partake (p. 33).

Therefore, it was essential to conduct further research on the comments section of apology videos of YouTubers who are called to be canceled to get a better understanding on how cancel culture operates, especially in terms of a community aspect.

Madden, Ruthven, and McMenemy (2013b) analyzed and categorized YouTube videos' comments sections to better understand the ways that the comments section functions as a way for users to use self expression and communicate with one another, and found that the comments sections on YouTube videos can serve as "a means of paying tributes to the deceased, expressing personal desires and making recommendations on how to behave" (p. 20). Therefore, the viewers' uses of comments sections of YouTube apology videos needed to be further explored, especially since there are new discoveries on different ways the public uses comments sections.

Also, another reason why the comments section on apology YouTube videos was explored is

Comments and ratings can lead to further insights on different types of users (helpful users, spammers, trolls, etc.) and on social relationships between users (e.g, friendship, rivalry). This could, for instance, be applied for identifying groups of users with similar interest and recommending contacts or groups to users in the system (Siersdorfer, Chelaru, Nejdil, & San Pedro, 2010, p. 899).

Thus, it was important to research the users that were commenting on apology YouTube videos to get a better understanding of who the users that were the most centered on pushing cancel culture are, and if there was a sense of relationships among users engaging in the cancel culture culture.

Youtube video comments also hold significance because they can be an indicator for how positive the YouTube video's engagement will be. Schultes, Dorner, and Lehner (2013) analyzed user comments on Youtube and found that "users' video perceptions (likes and dislikes) are indeed influenced by the dispersion of valuable and inferior comments" (p. 659). If a YouTuber consistently receives dislikes on their videos, it may turn away potential viewers from subscribing or clicking on more of the YouTuber's videos, shift or disband supporting cultures, and it could scare off brands that were considering working with the content creator.

Canceling YouTubers

It has become common for public figures to be held accountable for their wrongful actions and behaviors on social media through cancel culture, and YouTubers have become a part of that growing culture.

"Cancelations" on YouTube function as ambivalent short-term episodes occurring within a never-ending cycle of highly visible conflicts between drama creators, celebrities, audiences, YouTube, and traditional media organizations—a configuration

we analyze as “platform drama.” Cases of “cancelation” are moments where the contradictions of “platform drama” come to a head: They are moments of accountability and spectacle, interpersonal and political conflict, individual and shared meaning-making. They become rituals in that accountability is publicly performed, bringing its share of entertainment to online audiences, even as none of these contradictions are ultimately resolved (Lewis & Christin, 2022b, pp. 1650-1651).

YouTubers are called to be canceled for social justice and awareness purposes. Verga, Irene, and Parani (2021) found that cancel culture can be used as a tool to build social awareness in a community, and subscribers and viewers can exercise social control over YouTubers by calling to cancel them in their comments and unsubscribing from their channel (p. 219). Thus, it can be implied that one of the motivating factors that users in YouTube communities share in cancel culture is the desire to unite against YouTubers who have acted wrongfully in hopes to bring social awareness to YouTubers’ morally wrong transgressions, and an idea that was explored in this thesis by analyzing the comments section of Paul and Mongeau’s apology videos.

Apology Videos

This thesis focuses specifically on YouTubers who were called to be canceled and issued apology videos, Paul and Mongeau.

From beauty influencers to gamers, many prominent YouTubers are demonstrating a new way to handle crisis communication through a new genre of YouTube content known as the YouTube apology video. In this video, a YouTuber offers a public apology for their offense or scandal through their YouTube channel (Choi & Mitchell, 2022, p. 1).

Apology videos serve as a way for public figures to connect with their target audiences, the culture that supports them and anyone who they may have hurt in the scandal, in an attempt to maintain their status with their supporting culture. Sandlin and Gracyalny (2020) analyzed how audience characteristics and attitudes relate to their perceptions of sincerity and forgiveness of public figures' YouTube apologies and found that "audience fandom and perceived reputation and attractiveness of the public figure were related to perceptions of sincerity and forgiveness; and perceptions of sincerity and forgiveness were related to intentions of future support" (p. 1). Thus, the better the reputation and stronger fanbase the public figure had prior to the scandal, it is possible that the public figure might be more likely to survive a call to be canceled or perhaps make a comeback after the scandal, that is implying it is possible to come back after there was a call to cancel someone, as there is no evidence one can actually be canceled from the internet is unable to return to an online space, unless they remove themselves and never return.

Most importantly, once an apology video is uploaded and the public figure left the comments section for the apology video turned on, viewers will discuss their opinion of the apology video and if they still push for the public figure and its supporting culture to be canceled in the comments section, and potentially decide what to do with the supporting culture. It is important to note that an apology video could end up having the opposite effect intended because not only can fans reject the apology, but what is perceived to be a bad apology video by a group of users could entice the fan culture even more to purge the content creator from their community. For example, if a YouTuber says racist things in one YouTube video that results in a call to cancel the YouTuber from an online group, if the YouTuber in returns uploads an apology video where they continue to use racist language in, the community may view this apology as

double ammunition to cancel the celebrity from their online space. Additionally, it is important to consider that if a public figure who has committed a perceived wrongdoing uploads an apology video, it may make the fan culture feel more powerful. For instance, if the culture is strong enough to get the celebrity to apologize for hurting their feelings, the culture must hold a strong significance. This sense of group power could further entice the culture to engage in cancel culture and strengthen their community. Therefore, apology videos can turn into a tricky situation, and it is important to analyze the comments section of them to get a better understanding of the culture that calls for cancelation. Thus, the comments section of Paul and Mongeau's apology videos were a new analysis of cancel culture that is studied in this thesis to help contribute to scholarly and industry knowledge of cancel culture.

New Analysis of Cancel Culture

There has been little scholarly research on cancel culture in the YouTube Community. Scholars have examined similar research topics, such as Wilson (2021) whose study's purpose "was to determine how YouTube users participated in cancel culture with the comments they post to a creator's videos and how long they perpetuate that person's cancellation on their channel" (p. 51), but this thesis is unique because no one has studied cancelation on the same platform the original transgression occurred on or considered how cancel culture impacts the supporting culture. Specifically, I studied the culture that calls to cancel public figures and the threat to the culture posed by the potential loss of the public figure in the culture. Therefore, it was essential to study cancel culture further as the internet and technology are constantly evolving and social media are serving as the platform for cancel culture to primarily function on in the twenty-first century.

Summary

In Chapter 2 I provided a literature review that included information such as the history of and existing research on cancel culture in social media. A few of the topics that were explored include cancel culture as an aspect of culture, social media influencers and their influence, and the importance of the public's perspectives. Next, the methods section in Chapter 3 further explained what was researched and how the data was collected. Burke's (1970) cycle was further explored, and I discussed how I applied this cycle in my analysis of Paul and Mongeau's apology videos' comments sections.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

My thesis is analyzing the cultural basis of the cancel culture phenomenon. In RQ3, I asked if users in their responses to perceived violations of the online group's norms and values discuss the culture (e.g., its shared values, rules, and norms); indicate community building and reinforcement; and suggest a shift within the community as much as they participate in the call to cancel the public figure. My argument is that the culture from which the call to cancel comes, is a significant element in the overall process, and that those who make calls for cancelation within a specific online community are seeking to purify and reenforce the culture of that online community. Also, by studying the culture calling for cancelation in online spaces, my thesis will contribute to a better understanding of cancel culture by providing insight on who is actively participating in cancel culture and why.

As discussed in the literature review in the previous chapter, past scholars have looked at public figures who have received calls for cancelation for perceived wrong doings in a number of ways. For example, some scholars have studied the types of transgressions that lead to calls for cancelation, while others have analyzed the increase in calls over the past decade that suggested that the United States is a "cancel culture." My project focuses on the cultural aspects of these calls for cancelation; I argue that one of the significant reasons for cancelation is because the online users have a desire to purge their online community of wrongdoers.

In Chapter 2, I outlined how past researchers have focused on the concept of cancel culture as a set of actions: online users call to cancel public figures who have committed perceived wrongdoings to be banished from the spotlight. In this chapter, I am outlining the steps I am using to explore the cultural aspect of cancel culture: how cancelation takes place in a

defined online space, such as a fandom community, and how cancelation is often used as a way to strengthen and support that community.

The goal of this thesis is to use Burke's (1970) order-guilt-purification-redemption cycle to understand modern-day cancel culture, by analyzing whether online users of a social media community operate on this cycle protect their online community. This cycle occurs when an online community wants to purge itself of a perceived wrong-doer that violates the values, rules, and norms expected of all members.

Burke's cycle relates to modern cancel culture because Burke's cycle begins with order (step one) that suggests that humans are always working toward feeling secure. In this order, there is a sense of a status quo. People are thought to be either on the top or bottom of this social hierarchy. Burke argues that this order always leads to guilt (step two) that people feel on both tiers. This guilt makes people uncomfortable, and Burke believes the best way to purge these guilty feelings is through a process of purification (step three): either people purify the culture by punishing themselves or removing themselves from the culture, or people identify a scapegoat to shift guilt onto, and purge the scapegoat from the culture. If the act of purification matches the guilt the culture felt, then redemption can occur (step four). After the offender is removed, the culture can start a new order to begin the process all over again.

I use Burke's cycle in this thesis by using it as a lens to study YouTubers Logan Paul's and Tana Mongeau's online fan cultures. Paul was called to be canceled after he uploaded a YouTube video that he filmed in the Japan "suicide forest" that contained blurred footage of a presumably dead body. Mongeau was called to be canceled after a series of racist tweets surfaced and fans doubled down on the tweets and previous unacceptable YouTube apology videos. As a result, Paul and Mongeau uploaded an apology video to YouTube, and I am analyzing the

comments responding to those videos. Also, by working through Burke's cycle with modern day cancel culture examples, I am able to provide a clearer distinction between the terms: cancel culture, calls for cancelation, and canceled. There are several steps in Burke's (1970) cycle, but my thesis specifically focuses on the purification step as that is where the cancelation calls come from.

Paul and Mongeau's online communities reflect the stages of Burke's cycle, as I have indicated in Figure 1. Beginning with Paul, his order is that he uploads vlogs where he creates content for views in relation to doing something to an extreme (e.g., pulls pranks, takes risks, spends a lot of money), and his culture engages with his content and each other by interacting with the channel in ways such as: liking the video, commenting, subscribing to his channel, and buying his merchandise. However, users on both top and bottom of the social hierarchy feel guilt. Paul may feel guilty he has the platform that he does (e.g., perhaps he feels guilty he has to risk his life for views), while his supporting culture may feel guilty that they are supporting someone who risks their life for views. (Or they might recognize that this content and creator they are fans of isn't "the best." For example, their content may not reflect the broader United States values). Regardless, this is the order that everyone in this community follows, and the culture shares similar values such as that they want to support Paul as long as he does not do something too extreme (e.g., he uploads content that is too insensitive to the culture, such as the suicide forest footage). Then, when Paul uploads content that breaks the order and goes against the culture's shared values, the culture must decide how to handle their guilt. They can either go through the process of mortification and punish themselves or remove themselves from the culture, or they can push their guilt onto Paul and make him the scapegoat that needs to be cleansed from the community. In order to purge Paul, calls for cancelation must form in order to

get enough members of the culture on board to purge (cancel) Paul from the community. If enough members comment and unsubscribe from Paul's channel to the point where he leaves the platform either temporarily or permanently, then the culture's attempt to purge was successful. Lastly, if the purification of the scapegoat is equal to the feeling of the burden of guilt the culture felt, then redemption can occur, and the culture can shift their support to a new content creator and start Burke's cycle all over again.

Similarly with Mongeau, her order is that she uploads vlogs where she shares stories and shows clips of her life (e.g., extreme partying, collaborating with other content creators) and her culture engages with her content and each other by interacting with the channel in ways such as: liking the video, commenting, subscribing to her channel, and buying her merchandise. However, users on both top and bottom of the social hierarchy feel guilty. Mongeau may feel guilty she has the platform that she does (e.g., perhaps she feels guilty she has to party for views), while her supporting culture may feel guilty that they are supporting someone who parties for views. Regardless, this is the order that everyone in this community follows, and the culture shares similar values such as that they want to support Mongeau as long as she does not do something too extreme (e.g., does or says something racist). Then, when Mongeau uploads content that breaks the order and goes against the culture's shared values, the culture must decide how to handle their guilt. They can either go through the process of mortification and punish themselves or remove themselves from the culture, or they can push their guilt onto Mongeau and make her the scapegoat that needs to be cleansed from the community. In order to purge Mongeau, calls for cancelation must form in order to get enough members of the culture on board to purge (cancel) Mongeau from the community. If enough members comment and unsubscribe from Mongeau's channel to the point where she leaves the platform either

temporarily or permanently, then the culture's attempt to purge was successful. Lastly, if the purification of the scapegoat is equal to the feeling of the burden of guilt the culture felt, then redemption can occur. This allows the culture to shift their support to a new content creator and start Burke's cycle all over again.

Lastly, in order to study the online culture calling for cancelation through YouTubers who have received calls to be canceled on YouTube, it was important for me to choose examples of YouTubers who received calls for cancelation on the same platform where their perceived wrongdoing occurred. Cancel culture creates a potentially destructive dynamic when content creators who make a living on a social media space are called to be canceled from that space, as they could be forced to exit the platform where they make an income. By studying a celebrity who received a call to be canceled in the same space where they upload content and have an online community supporting them, it sets up the idea that Burke's cycle could be at play as the online group could be seeking to purge the offender from the shared space. Further, calls for cancelation could be an act of power from the online community as this is all the influence the online group really has. For example, online users can encourage brands to pull sponsorships from a public figure, but this thesis is focusing on Burke's cycle, and these online groups who can get a public figure kicked out of the community (the social media space where that culture "lives") are a big part of the cancelation process.

The Analyzed Comments Sections

In order to study modern day cancel culture in the same space where a perceived wrongdoing occurred, I have chosen to study two YouTubers who have millions of subscribers on the same platform where their transgression occurred and as a result uploaded an apology video. Approaching the study this way enables me to analyze the YouTube cancel culture

process as a series of steps. I am looking in this thesis at the process of sin and redemption as it plays out in a social media space. If the sin is committed in the space, then the redemption happens in that space too. Thus, this process plays out in a series of steps in a social media space, such as YouTube.

To begin this cancelation process, a YouTuber films YouTube videos and uploads them to their YouTube channel. Next, online users begin watching the videos, enjoying the content, and a fandom group emerges of other followers in the comments sections of the YouTube videos. Although the comments sections of videos are sometimes directed at the content creator, comments left by online users on comments sections are often directed toward other fans to discuss things such as the content creation and their shared adoration for the YouTuber; it is through this process that the fandom group emerges. Then, as the YouTuber grows in popularity, so does its fandom group both on the YouTube platform and by gaining traction on other social media platforms as well (e.g., the YouTuber gains followers and attention and the fandom has conversations about the content creator on other platforms). The next step in the cancelation process is when the YouTuber uploads a YouTube video that is controversial. This transgression is then followed by a negative reaction from the fandom; they leave comments on the offending video, followers drop their subscriptions, and eventually calls to cancel the YouTuber from the platform form. As a result of the negative reaction from the fandom, the YouTuber tries to make amends with the online community by uploading an apology video for their perceived wrongdoing. Lastly, the followers react to the apology video in a number of possible ways, such as: forgiving the YouTuber and accepting the apology, suggesting the apology “isn’t enough,” or arguing that the apology only makes things worse and doubling down on the call for cancelation.

Thus, Paul and Mongeau's apology videos' comments sections are analyzed in this thesis as it was the best way to get a better understanding of how an online culture operates in modern day cancel culture on the same platform where the transgression occurred. Next, the culture must choose to accept the content creator's apology or purge them from their online community, such as explained in Burke's (1970) cycle. Also, by studying modern day cancel culture in an online space, the comments provided insight on if the calls to cancel a public figure are just as much about enforcing a sense of community reinforcement and building just as much as the call to remove a perceived wrongdoer from their online space.

The Transgressions

On December 31, 2017, popular YouTube content creator Logan Paul uploaded a YouTube video that contained footage from when he visited the famed "suicide forest" in Japan (BBC, 2018). In the video, he showed a blurred body of someone who presumably had committed suicide in the forest and joked about what he had found. Before the video was deleted, it received approximately six million views (Russell, 2018). Many online users were outraged, and calls for cancelation began. As a result of the backlash, Paul issued an apology video to YouTube on January 2, 2018 titled, "So Sorry." The video has received more than 62 million views and has more than 1.2 million comments (Paul, 2023), that outnumbered the views of the original video. Data was extracted from the comments section of this apology video on January 31, 2023.

Paul's YouTube apology video is an excellent text to study in this thesis for a number of reasons. First, I am expecting to find that the comments to the apology video serve as a great example of online vigilantism: The offense was posted as a YouTube video- that isn't illegal, so law enforcement cannot step in and punish Paul, but the fandom can for violating their trust in

him only to do something so awful. Thus, a call for cancelation is created, as the punishment is that Paul should not be able to make offensive videos anymore. Specifically, what is really important from a fandom perspective is that in addition to piling on Paul, the commenters are really trying to cleanse themselves. For example, the mindset of an online user may be, ‘Wow, I am a fan of Paul, but this is what he decides to upload? What does that say about me?’ Fans likely felt guilty about supporting a YouTuber who uploads this kind of content. Second, when this situation is applied to Burke’s (1970) guilt-purification-redemption cycle perspective, Paul becomes the scapegoat, so that guilty online users can pile their guilt onto Paul and purge him from their online community. Thus, the online users do not have to deal with their dark thoughts and feelings internally.

A second case of cancelation on YouTube involves YouTuber Tana Mongeau. This content creator was called to be canceled after a series of self-inflicted events were dug up and analyzed by online users. First, several racial and microaggressive tweets from Mongeau’s Twitter account resurfaced from years prior. As a response to the resurfaced tweets and the criticism she faced, Mongeau issued a YouTube apology video where she apologized for both her wrongful tweets and for other apology videos for other scandals she had made in the past that were not perceived well by her viewers. However, the fan culture doubled down on the apology video as another offense Mongeau had committed. Now, fans were upset because she took so long to apologize, and it did not seem sincere because the apology video was overly edited. For example, the online users had a certain set of expectations (e.g., this is how Mongeau should have apologized; authentic and sincere), and because Mongeau’s video was overly-edited, it did not meet the community’s expectations and many users found the apology video to be offensive. Thus, this apology video needed to be further explored because it is both an example of modern

day cancel culture, but also serves as an example of how fan cultures can double down on offenses as motivation to try to cancel a public figure on social media. Mongeau issued an apology video to YouTube on September 4, 2020 titled, “a long overdue apology.” The video has received more than 2 million views and has more than 33 thousand comments (Mongeau, 2023). Data was extracted from the comments section of this apology video on January 31, 2023.

How the Data was Analyzed Based on Burke’s Cycle

Data sets were pulled from Paul and Mongeau’s apology videos with the use of the data collection tool Netlytic to help narrow down Paul’s 1.2 million and Mongeau’s 33,000 comments. The software allowed these two data sets to each contain 10,000 random comments, and separate time frames were chosen to help understand the enduring nature of online communities that exist in social media spaces and to understand how these groups play into the whole “cancelation” process. Mongeau’s comments were pulled September 6, 2020 (two days after the video’s upload time) as a way to analyze the culture in an immediate time frame through January 31, 2023. I wanted to look at how Mongeau’s fans responded immediately to her apology video because it indicates how invested they are in her as a part of their online community; they are jumping to judgment because cleaning the community of this offender is essential to them. The second case, Paul’s comments were pulled from August 25, 2020 (approximately 2.5 years after the video’s upload time) as a way to analyze the culture through “after the fact” comments through January 31, 2023. Online cultures are enduring because people are both watching this apology video years after it was uploaded and commenting on it too. There is a sense that the online community can endure without Paul; they are using the comments section as an opportunity to talk to each other about the video, such as where the

online community's status is at years later. Thus, because the platform still allows his apology video to be viewed, online users are revisiting the video to comment, and should be explored.

Also, these time frames are important when applying Burke's (1970) cycle because the viewers who were quick to watch and respond to the apology or participate in a discussion about canceling the YouTuber years later are both likely to be involved in cancel culture and potentially want to purify the content creator from their online culture in comparison to viewers who do not comment at all. These quick-to-respond users are immediately feeling guilty for supporting this content creator. Thus, they immediately issue cancelation calls in an attempt to quickly push their guilt onto the content creator (scapegoating) and purge them from the culture.

The data was pulled with a quantitative approach to selecting comments to help understand how the cancel culture process operates more than different time spans and because it would not be possible for me to filter through all of the more than one million comments in a timely manner. After the initial data extraction, I was able to set up a rhetorical analysis by using a keyword search as a starting point to start with analyzing the call for cancelation. In order to study the call for cancelation, it was essential to figure out what comments would not be considered a part of the call I was trying to study. Thus, I decided I would disregard any comments that appeared to be "trolling" or "spamming" the comments section, as that was not what I was trying to study.

After figuring out what I needed to avoid, I was then able to engage in an iterative process; once a handful of key terms were applied, I was able to look through the comments that were pulled up using those terms. For example, I began with the key terms from a feature on Netlytic provided of the top ten keywords from each of the datasets (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

Throughout this initial search however, I could see other terms that people were using that I had not considered.

Figure 2

Paul's Top 10 Keywords

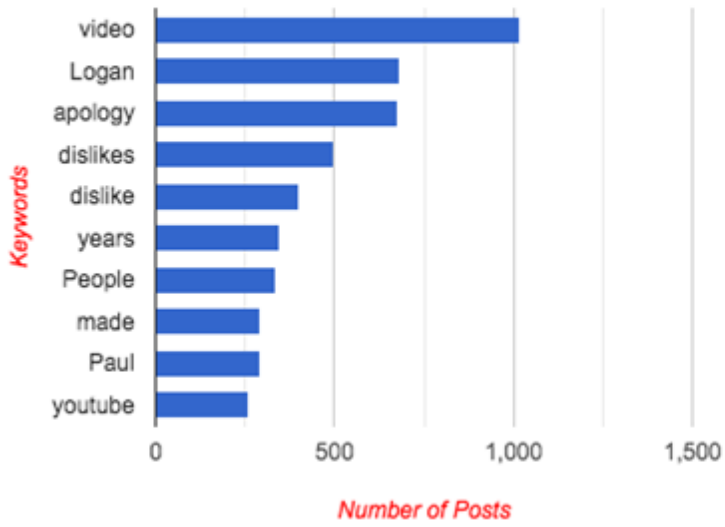
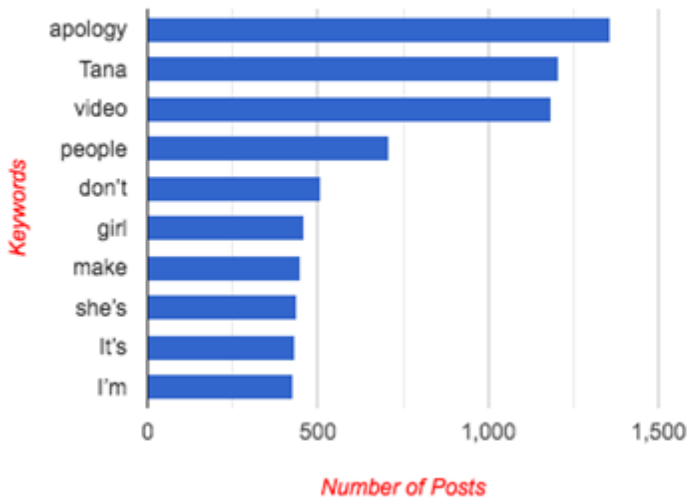


Figure 3

Mongeau's Top 10 Keywords



Meanwhile, I was also looking for patterns relating to Burke's (1970) cycle. First, I analyzed the comments as specific calls for cancelation to get a further understanding on the cancel culture process in both an immediate and delayed time frame. Since Paul deleted his initial YouTube video, it was possible that his call for cancelation would double down on the apology video if it was perceived wrongfully, even after a time lapse. Similarly with Mongeau, since she was accused of multiple offenses and people had been doubling down on her offenses on Twitter, it was also possible that her call for cancelation would resume in the comments too, especially since her data was extracted from an immediate time frame from the video upload time. Key terms I searched to further analyze the call for cancelation were: Cancel, cancelation, call, deplatform, and unsubscribe, as they related to cancel culture.

After analyzing these terms, this led me back to conduct a second search with new key terms, such as: forgive, button, apologize, judgment, continuous, accidentally, fans, defending, disgusting, respect, sponsored, channel, platform, racist, and accountability, as they were terms I discovered after my initial search were prominent and could help explain more about the culture calling for cancelation.

Next, I focused on how the key terms were reflecting in a way that people were calling for cancelation. Specifically, I wanted to understand if there were certain people (ringleaders) who were calling for cancelation, or if calls for cancelation were accumulating by people responding to others. As a starting point, Netlytic provided me with the top 10 posters per data set with percentages that indicate who the top posters were within the top 10 selected (See Figure 3 and 4 below). It was important to identify the difference between online users responding to Paul and Mongeau and online users responding to other users in the comments section.

Figure 4

Paul's Top 10 Posters

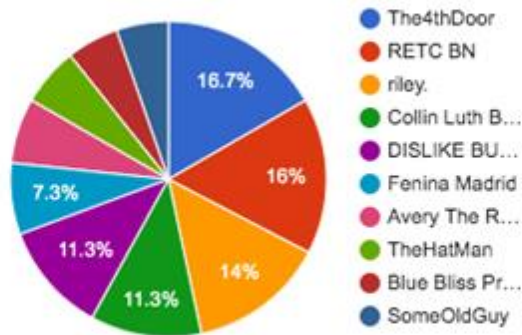
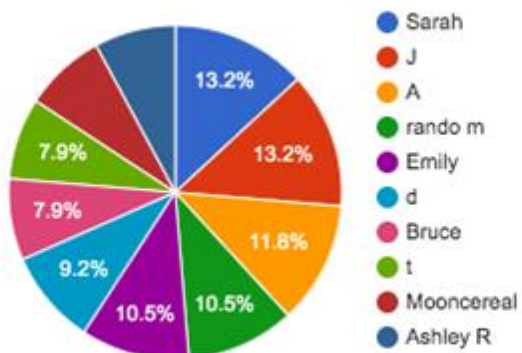


Figure 5

Mongeau's Top 10 Posters



After I identified the top 10 posters per data set, in order to study the online culture though, I first needed to analyze who the comments were directed towards- either the content creator or other online users. I disregarded the comments directed at the content creator because they did not support the application of Burke's (1970) cycle as there would need to be a sense of a group effort to call to cancel the public figure, not just one person. An example of a comment directed at one of the content creators is from a user named clipper on September 6, 2020, "dude your channel is SATURATED in issues, mistakes and apology videos, just leave! this one is particularly disastrous," and an example of a comment directed at other online users in the community is from a user named cassie on September 6, 2020, "can we cancel her already? Thank you." These findings are two examples that assured me that there was a difference between comments directed toward both the content creator and comments directed at other online users, and helped me pinpoint that there was a need to focus on the comments I analyzed were directed towards other online users about Mongeau or Paul, not to Mongeau or Paul. I also went a step further and analyzed users who were being displayed at the top of the apology videos' comments sections as YouTube filters comments to indicate some of the top comments (received a lot of attention through the like button and responses from other users) to further discover ringleaders and ringleader behaviors in the cancel culture process in a social media space.

Next, I looked to see how users' comments create and reinforce a sense of culture, such as calling to cancel the public figure in a way that will strengthen the community, by focusing on the key terms "community" and "culture" in a key term search. An example of a community reinforcement comment is from the user philodoxable on September 6, 2020,

Not sure why the YouTube community expects anything more than this. She's a 22 year old white woman who has been granted all the privilege and attention life can give. Why do we keep watching these apology videos from the most vain, narcissistic, irresponsible, poor-judgement minded people of the internet. Like they're going to suddenly say something profound and out of character. Like they're not trying to protect their own individual brand so you'll keep buying their merch and mystery boxes. I bet you your own friends are smarter, kinder, and more relatable than these socially-inept YouTubers. Look up to people in your life. You have more to offer the world than your looks, than your influence, than your nice cars and fancy outfits. All these people will be irrelevant soon enough. Go outside and make an actual difference.

Among these community building and reinforcement comments, I also searched for a sense of power from the users calling for cancelation to get the cancelation to happen by searching for the key terms: nobody, bye, done, we, and leave. An example of a user exercising their opportunity to issue a cancelation call of a content creator in the comments sections is from user Kate Medcalf on September 6, 2020, "We love a apology written by ur team." This comment serves as an example of online users speaking out that they are unhappy with the YouTuber and suggests that they want them to be removed from the platform.

Summary

In Chapter 3 I provided a brief review of the YouTubers and their apology videos' comments sections that were analyzed. I also revisited Burke's (1970) cycle and explained how the comments would be analyzed using the cycle as a lens. Next, the data findings in Chapter 4 further explained what was discovered, such as what comments were disregarded, such as trolling comments, the significance of the online culture that was prominent, and what the calls

for cancelation entailed both in an immediate and delayed time frame. These findings are then discussed as to why they are important to scholarly and industry knowledge of cancel culture.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

In order to get a better understanding of how cancel culture operates in social media spaces, in this chapter, I analyze the data I extracted from YouTubers Logan Paul and Tana Mongeau's apology videos' comments sections. These comments help me discover the calls for cancelation and the culture calling for cancelation. On social media, users view their fandom group as an online community that they are passionate about and protective of. When someone the fandom is centered on commits a perceived wrongdoing, the online community will create a cancelation call to eliminate the wrongdoer from their community. Specifically on YouTube, cancel culture often occurs when a YouTuber uploads a video to their channel that gets them in trouble with their online community. This will lead to a call to cancel the YouTuber from their fandom group because the fandom no longer wants to center their online group around someone who has committed a wrongfully perceived act.

Both Paul and Mongeau are being studied because they uploaded YouTube videos that were considered offensive by the online community and received major backlash online. As a result, they both issued apology videos to YouTube and left their public comments section turned on. Online users then left comments on their apology videos to decide what to do with the YouTubers based on their apology by discussing whether or not they should be removed from their online supporting culture.

In order to study this cancel culture process, I applied Burke's (1970) cycle as a model for the progression of an online community's process of canceling someone from it. In an online community, such as a YouTube community, there is an order the content creator and followers must follow. This order can be thought of as step one of the cycle (See Figure 1). Everyone must stick to the status quo. If a YouTube content creator with millions of subscribers/followers

commits what is perceived to be a wrongdoing by the followers, the creator is breaking the order. The online users may feel guilty they are supporting a YouTuber who does such “bad” things, while the content creator may feel unworthy of such support, particularly after having committed this offense. This sense of guilt becomes step two of the cycle. As a way to redeem themselves of the guilt, the online fandom may decide to push their guilt onto a scapegoat (e.g., the YouTuber) and look to other users in the online community to gain support to purge the YouTuber from their social hierarchy (e.g., the YouTube community or platform entirely). This purging stage becomes step three of the cycle. If the online culture is successful (e.g., the YouTuber is canceled and leaves the space either temporarily or permanently), then the online users at the bottom of the social hierarchy will have their online community redeemed because they purified their group of the wrongdoer. This redemption is step four of the cycle. Therefore, in this thesis, Paul and Mongeau serve as the people on top of the social hierarchy (e.g., YouTube) and their online viewers serve as the people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. After the cycle is complete, a new cycle can start over again.

With the help of the software Netlytic, I was able to extract 10,000 comments per apology video. Mongeau’s data was pulled with an immediate time frame (e.g., within days of her video upload time) to get a better understanding of the immediate calls for cancelation and the culture engaging in cancel culture in an urgent matter. Paul’s data was pulled from a later time frame (e.g., years later) as online users are still returning to his apology video to comment on the topic and discuss canceling him after sufficient time has passed. Thus, each data set was specifically chosen with these timeframes in mind to help me narrow down the over 1 million comments. I am analyzing smaller data sets because it will help me get a better understanding of the calls for cancelation and how the culture calling for cancelation operates in both an

immediate and later time frame. Therefore, these comparisons will help me better understand cancel culture on a social media space as a whole.

Cycle and Comments Sorting

When I began analyzing data, I needed to first narrow down what I wanted to focus on in my thesis that speaks to the concept of an online culture and how it functions in YouTube spaces. In order to do this though, I needed to figure out the comments I would not discuss in my thesis because they do not contribute to my study of cancel culture in any significant way. Although most of the comments in both videos were discussing the content creator, apology video, the online culture, or cancel culture, there were some comments that were “trolling” or “spamming” that I needed to sort through. According to GCF Global (2023), a troll is anyone who tries to create conflict in an online social community, such as YouTube video comments sections. “Trolling can occur anywhere that has an open area where people can freely post their thoughts and opinions” (para. 2). Therefore, it would not be helpful to analyze trolling comments when trying to study cancel culture because trolls can leave trolling comments anywhere; they are likely not a part of the community itself, and therefore are not operating with the intent of cleansing the community from a perceived wrongdoer in a way that the rest of the community would be.

Similarly, spam comments are, “unsolicited usually commercial messages (such as emails, text messages, or Internet postings) sent to a large number of recipients or posted in a large number of places” (Merriam-Webster, 2023, para. 1). Thus, spamming comments are common, but do not contribute to the purpose of this thesis and therefore do not need to be analyzed. The overall idea of “trolling” and “spamming” comments in these data sets indicate the idea that people are trying to be funny or say things to draw attention to themselves and have no

relation to the apology video or the part of the online supporting culture calling for cancelation. For example, one comment from a user named Eftie on October 16, 2021 said, “logan paul is not forklift certified,” that simply has no use for this thesis. However, it is important to note that these kinds of comments are still a part of the social media experience as people try to draw attention to themselves. Other examples of comments that were not analyzed in this thesis as they were considered “spamming” or “trolling” comments include: user Rio Rincon on June 5, 2021 who said, “Will smith:Yaaaaaa is rewind time Logang paul:NOOOOOOO,” user Bandit on March 17, 2021 who said, “logan paul more like logan drauool,” and user Leo Ogle on March 9, 2021 who said, “The tana mongeau concert.”

Thus, these “spamming” and “trolling” comments were filtered out because they did not relate to cancel culture, the calls to cancel a YouTuber, provide insight on the culture calling for cancelation or who the ringleaders calling for cancelation may be, indicate if the online comments relating to cancel culture were also a way to indicate community building or reinforcement, or showcase anything else of topic essential to the discovery and exploration of cancel culture for this thesis. While these comments are not pertinent to what I am doing in this thesis, they are a part of the social media conversations and are worthy of an analysis. However, a further analysis of “trolling” and “spamming” comments would be an effort that is considered beyond the script of this project.

Paul and Mongeau’s YouTube Communities (Order)

The order in Paul’s fandom group revolves around the types of content that he posts and fans’ positive reactions to his content. In Paul’s order, he uploads vlogs where he creates extreme content and his culture engages with his content (e.g., like button, commenting). However, users on both top and bottom of the social hierarchy feel guilty. Paul may feel guilty he has his

platform (e.g., he is just doing pranks for views), while his supporting culture may feel guilty that they are supporting someone who pranks people for part of their career. Regardless, this is the order that everyone in this culture willingly follows, and the culture shares similar values such as that they will support Paul as long as he follows the order. When Paul uploads content that breaks the order, the culture must decide how to proceed with their guilt. They can either go through the process of mortification and punish themselves or remove themselves from the fandom, or they can push their guilt onto Paul and make him a scapegoat to be cleansed from the community. In order to purge Paul, calls for cancelation must form in order to get enough group support to purge Paul from the community. If enough members express unhappiness to the point where Paul leaves the culture either temporarily or permanently, then the culture's attempt to purge was successful. Lastly, if the purification of Paul is equal to the feeling of the culture's guilt, then redemption can occur, and the culture can shift their support to a new YouTuber and start Burke's cycle all over again.

In Mongeau's case, the order comes from the content she tends to upload, which includes vlogs and "story times," and her culture engages with her content in support (e.g., buying merch and subscribing to her channel). However, users on both top and bottom of this social hierarchy feel guilty. Mongeau may feel guilty she has the platform that she does (e.g., perhaps she feels guilty she has to party for views), while her supporting culture may feel guilty that they are supporting someone who parties for views. Regardless, this is the order that everyone in this community follows, and the culture shares similar values such as that they want to support Mongeau if she follows the order. Then, when Mongeau uploads content that breaks the order and goes against the culture's shared values, the culture must decide how to handle their guilt. They can either go through the process of mortification and punish themselves or

remove themselves from the culture, or they can push their guilt onto Mongeau and make her the scapegoat that needs to be cleansed from the community. In order to purge Mongeau, calls for cancelation must form in order to get enough members of the culture on board to purge Mongeau from the community. If enough members get on board publicly to the point where she leaves the platform either temporarily or permanently, then the culture's attempt to purge was successful. Lastly, if the purification of Mongeau is equal to the feeling of the burden of guilt the culture felt, then redemption can occur. Then the culture can shift their support to a new content creator and start Burke's cycle all over again.

Also, it is important to include that there is a sense of mystery in the cycle that can be recognized as guilt. Part of the guilt felt from the culture may come from the audience feeling as if they are too lazy themselves to be a content creator. The mystery is recognizing that this content creator is a regular person just like me, and that it's hard sometimes to recognize and understand just how they managed to "blow up" into the sensations that they have become. However, content creators may not understand that because they are so high up on their platform that they feel guilty in different ways. Thus, there is a sense of mystery here in the social hierarchy. (e.g., I feel guilty, but I do not understand your guilt). Then when the cycle concludes and the culture shifts their support to a new content creator, it enables the mystery to continue.

"We" Versus "They" (Order)

A sense of a "we" versus "they" in the online community is an aspect of what I found in the analysis. Online users are either on board with canceling the public figure or not. While it may not be easy to convince an entire community that is centered around a particular content creator to shift their support elsewhere or disband completely, the culture pushing for cancelation will try to get others on board with the cancelation in various ways in the comments section (e.g.,

harassment, shame). The online users who are hesitating or not agreeing to cancel a public figure may feel as if there will not be a community left if the content creator is canceled, and that could be contributing to how they view and decide to go about the cancelation process. Inevitably, because there will be people who do not agree with the cancelation call, part of the purging process is going to be directed at other members of the online community as well; the culture calling for cancelation will call them out for not contributing to the cancelation of the perceived wrongdoer from their culture and perhaps kick them out of the space as well.

Users who comment to others to denote the difference of the culture's current state are working to clarify the group's order. Because Paul and Mongeau disrupted the order, the culture has to work through the cycle due to the amount of guilt felt by the community. The order for their channel is the status quo for actions and behaviors. When the order is broken, it is considered offensive to the community.

Paul and Mongeau's Transgressions (Guilt)

Paul's initial audience included millions of subscribers on the YouTube platform. In 2018, he uploaded a YouTube video that contained blurred footage of a body he found in the Japanese "suicide forest." Although the video has since been deleted, he received a call to be canceled from his supporting community on YouTube, so he uploaded an apology video as a response. The comments on Paul's 2019 apology video were chosen to be analyzed because online users were still commenting regarding his cancelation status years later. This time frame helps to explain the cancel culture process over a period of time because online cultures revisit old topics in the present day to discuss whether or not a public figure should be removed from their online space, regardless of how much time has passed.

It is interesting that online users are still going back to Paul's apology video to comment years later. This action implies there is more going on in the comments section because the users are talking to one another; Paul is likely not going back to his old apology video to read through and reply to comments. Thus, this idea that online users go back to comment on old apology videos supports the idea that online users use the comments section to reinforce their online supporting culture, even after significant time has passed.

Mongeau also had a large following on the YouTube platform and before she was called to be canceled over more than one offense (the online culture was "doubling down" on offenses): past racist tweets resurfaced on Twitter and previous apology videos she had uploaded to YouTube were viewed as unacceptable due to the amount of time that had passed before she apologized and due to the overediting in her videos. Combining the two apology videos in my study enables me to look at the immediate and emotional calls for cancelation to purge a creator from the community, and also the long term efforts to keep the creator canceled to maintain the purity of the culture.

Spam Comments (Guilt)

The last theme I found was a comment that I initially disregarded as I viewed it as a spamming comment. These types of comments are actually a form of anarchy – an attempt to disrupt the order. Part of the "order" at all levels of society is the expectation to engage in reasonable conversation and discussion. This is something spammers attempt to disrupt. There is also a sense that spammers can often be attempting to establish their own notoriety. At least some of the spammers are trying to step in where Paul and Mongeau have been eliminated to have something else for the community to focus on. For example, one comment was posted 25

times on the same date by user The4thDoor. Their comment was a word-for-word transcription of Paul's apology video on November 12, 2020,

I made a severe and continuous lapse in my judgement, and I don't expect to be forgiven. I'm simply here to apologize. What we came across that day in the forums was obviously unplanned. The reactions you saw on my replies were raw; they were unfiltered. None of us knew how to react or how to feel. I should have never posted the images. I should have put the mouse down and stopped typing out what we were doing. There's a lot of things I should have done differently but I didn't. And for that, from the bottom of my heart, I am sorry. I want to apologize to the internet. I want to apologize to anyone who has seen the the post. I want to apologize to anyone who has been affected or touched by mental illness, or depression, or (game end). But most importantly I want to apologize to the victim and his family. For my fans who are defending my actions, please don't. I don't deserve to be defended. The goal with my content is always to entertain; to push the boundaries, to be a big funny. In the world I live in, I share almost everything I do. The intent is never to be heartless, cruel, or malicious. Like I said I made a huge mistake. I don't expect to be forgiven, I'm just here to apologize. I'm ashamed of myself. I'm disappointed in myself. And I promise to be better. I will be better. Thank you.

Although this comment being reposted 24 other times makes the reposts spamming comments, the initial comment by The4thDoor that posted the transcript is interesting because it indicates to other users that there is not any point in watching the actual video because the community's time is too important to waste on apology videos like this. Thus, online users can read the transcription and move on; reducing Paul to his own words as a form of cancelation on its own.

Thus, these comments serve as an example of how calls for cancelation operate in an immediate time frame on a social media space; people on the bottom of a social hierarchy publicly reach out for group support to bring awareness to wrongful actions of people on top and purge them from the space. The online users feel guilty they are supporting these YouTubers who have committed perceived wrongdoings so the community feels guilty they are supporting these content creators, so they want to remove their guilt by pushing it onto the YouTubers and purge them from their community by canceling them, so their community can be redeemed of guilt and wrongdoings immediately. Sometimes these cancelation calls are directly stated (e.g., comment by user Gretel Zelaya) and other times these calls for disregard are indirect (e.g., comment by user The4thDoor).

Online Community Pressure (Guilt)

Additionally, another theme I found from the second key term search was that the online users were publicly bashing other users who still supported the YouTuber (e.g., commenting acceptance of the video, hit the like button, or refrained from unsubscribing to their channel). For example comments that indicated that the online community needed to participate in cancel culture (group think) are: user Brian Melesio who commented on October 8, 2020, “Logan Paul fans are so delusional,” user GelyEys who commented on November 9, 2020, “Those who liked this video are this douchebags stupid souless awful fans lmao,” and user Haley who commented on September 10, 2020, “Can people stop supporting her already? I know her fans are already just middle and high schoolers, but for gods sake. Why does someone like her have supporters.” Therefore, online users in both immediate and delayed time frames were openly discussing how people supporting the perceived wrongdoers were also in the wrong and

perhaps did not belong in their online community either immediately or after significant time had passed.

Communicate Unhappiness with Content Creator (Purification)

Another theme I discovered that supports the idea that online users comment as a way to reinforce and protect their online community reinforcement is that sometimes online users comment to the content creator to let them know that their online community is unhappy with them. For example, user Shelbs commented on September 10, 2020, “Tana we aren’t dumb. You make more money being naked on OnlyFans than you do connecting with the community who made you, YouTube,” and user ElvenoutcastOW who commented on September 9, 2020, “‘accountability’ is something so thrown around by the youtube community lately. this is a trend, there’s no truth or remorse behind them except from jenna marbles’ apology because her actions spoke multitudes louder than her apology video...” Therefore, online users are using the comments sections to reinforce their online community by expressing their disapproval with the content creator. These types of comments also serve to encourage other online users who will read the comments and potentially agree with the unhappy users and possibly join them in a call to cancel the content creator, as these comments also serve as community reinforcement.

Thus, these community building and reinforcement themes through the suggestion of canceling the YouTuber (e.g., purging them from their online space) or simply expressing their disapproval with supporting YouTubers who have committed perceived wrongdoings supports the idea that cancel culture in online spaces plays out as Burke’s (1970) cycle. For example, once the YouTuber commits a perceived wrongdoing and gets a reaction from the community who is unhappy that they are supporting someone who acts so wrongfully, the online culture will go to the comment sections on apology videos to express their unhappiness and often attempt to

banister group support to cancel the YouTuber from their social media space to strengthen and reinforce their online community.

Online Communities' Sense of Power (Purification)

Additionally, while searching for community building and reinforcement comments, I also searched for a sense of power from the users calling for cancelation to get the cancelation to happen by searching for the key terms: nobody, bye, done, we, and leave. In this search I did analyze both comments directed at Paul and Mongeau and other users, as I believed they both served as ways the online culture were trying to exert a sense of power through engaging in the cancelation process. Online users who are calling for cancelation are trying to do a form of online policing to hold a public figure accountable when they break their community's order. In modern day, purging a content creator from a social media space after they commit a wrongdoing that breaks online group's order is deemed as the acceptable punishment for offending the community. These online users are powerful because they can grow a content creator's channel and give them a status, but they can just as easily revoke an earned status when deemed necessary.

Communicate Removal (Purification)

One theme I found from online users commenting to showcase their power is that online users were commenting directly at the YouTuber telling them that the online community no longer wants the YouTuber in their online space. This power is expressed in two ways. First, the commenter is reminding the content creator that he or she must keep the audience happy in order to maintain the cultural order of the group. Second, the commenter is claiming individual power by speaking for the entire fandom. For example, user Sslarmacorn 123 commented on October 28, 2020, "Nobody forgives you, you irrisonible man words can't describe how

disgusting this is please quit YouTube,” and Mark Morgan who commented on August 21, 2021, “Nobody will forgive you.” Therefore, these are examples of online users directly commenting to the content creators to let them know that the online community does not support them or accept their apology while also suggesting that they need to leave the space; cancel culture in full effect. Even if a YouTuber only leaves the platform on a temporary hiatus, any form of banishment as curated by an online community serves as an example of a successful call to cancel a public figure from a social media space.

When users are commenting to the wrongdoer that they are wanting them to be removed from the platform, it is serving to help purify the culture. If the person receiving these cancelation calls leaves the platform, then purification has happened. Therefore, the more users who comment they wish the wrongdoer would leave, it is more likely that purification will happen.

Individuals Exerting the Full Community’s Power (Purification)

Another theme I found where users are exerting their power by engaging in cancel culture is by speaking for the entire online community. For example, user derpysnake commented on August 25, 2020, “we all know he doesnt mean anything he says in this video,” user needyeverytime commented on September 10, 2020, “We still don’t forgive him,” and a hence of sarcasm by user What’s the Niche? who commented on September 6, 2020, “I zoned out at minute 3. We see through the bullshit. You know that right?” Thus, these are examples of online users exercising their perceived power at the heart of the cancel culture process by speaking for the entire online community. By online users commenting in a way that they are speaking for the whole community, they may be applying more pressure with their words that may make the YouTuber feel more threatened by the backlash and motivate them more towards

disappearing from the social media space either temporarily or permanently, that would result in a successful call for cancelation from an online community.

Therefore, this idea of online users commenting to exercise the power that is their ability to engage in cancel culture supports my original idea that online users are acting as vigilantes and using cancel culture to punish and purge the wrongdoers from their online community as explained in Burke's (1970) cycle. The online users at the bottom of a social hierarchy (the YouTube community) do not want to support YouTubers on top of the community who commit perceived wrongdoings; the online users will feel guilty they are giving their attention, likes, and views to a wrongdoer. Thus, calls for cancelation are generated and sometimes executed as a way to purge the wrongdoer from their community and redeem the online culture.

Online users use functions on social media platforms to claim a form of power. In relation to Burke's cycle, the comments section has serves as a way for users to exercise their power and call for cancelation. If the wrong-doer leaves the platform after the users exercised their power, purification has occurred.

Calls for Cancelation (Purification)

Past research with comment sections on social media platforms have established that online comments tend to take one of a few different forms, such as "trolling" or "spamming." These comments are made by online users trying to draw attention to themselves, not commenting on anything that is necessarily related to the apology video or the YouTube community. Other common comments that tend to appear in social media space are comments directed towards content creators (e.g., in my thesis would be directed to either Paul or Mongeau) while other comments would be directed at the online community (e.g., other viewers

and commenters) Finally, the other common type of comments would be the ones that would directly call for the content creator to be canceled from the platform. Some users may have called out the YouTuber directly to disappear, but I am most interested in this thesis to see if the commenters are interacting with each other, and if ringleaders are trying to drum up support for cancellation.

After getting through the comments that were either trolling or spamming Paul and Mongeau's apology videos, my next step was to analyze the direct call to cancel the YouTuber. To begin studying the call for cancellation, it was essential to look for patterns or themes of online users attempting to band together to purge the content creator from their community. In order to look for patterns and themes in the calls for cancellation, I first analyzed the top 10 terms that appeared most often in the 10,000 comments I analyzed for each apology video. Paul's top 10 key terms are: video, Logan, apology dislikes, dislike, years, people, made, Paul, and YouTube. Tana's top 10 key terms are: apology, Tana, video, people, don't, girl, make, she's, It's, and I'm. Additional key terms I searched to further analyze the call for cancellation were: Cancel, cancellation, call, deplatform, and unsubscribe, as they related to cancel culture. It would appear that calls for cancellation (at least explicit cancellation calls) are not the most common thing going on in the comments; but that does not invalidate my hypothesis. What I am finding is that the pressure to participate in cancel culture and the calls for cancellation are not always happening in an explicit way. Therefore, I needed to look at the actual comments rather than approaching this quantitatively. However, there also are explicit calls for cancellation occurring in these spaces, and I want to look at those comments too, thus the reason to search the additional key terms. It is important to look at both sets of comments because they both function as a way to convince the rest of the culture to become a part of the call for cancellation.

In this section, users are either participating in the scapegoat-purging step or the end of the cycle; new cycle step. The scapegoating-purging step plays out as people expressing their guilt through a comment (e.g., call for cancelation). The end of the cycle; new cycle step plays out as people actually shifting their support to a new content creator and joining their culture.

The Time Factor (Purification)

One theme I found from the top 10 key term list was regarding cancel culture and the time span with Paul. Although his video was uploaded in January 2019, online users were still returning over a year and a half later to comment and bring negative attention to the video. For example, user Creamy Ice Cream commented on August 30, 2020, “Came here to dislike.” The keyword dislike is referring to the dislike button on a YouTube video, that at the time of this video’s upload time and this comment, the video’s dislike button count was made public. However, in 2021, YouTube changed their platform to still include the dislike button, but now only content creators can view the number of dislikes each of their videos has received (Suciu, 2021). The visible dislike feature on a YouTube video was important because users would see a high number of dislikes on a video and feel either an invitation or pressure to also dislike the video. This action is the first step of the cancelation cycle. My thesis is built on the premise that cancelation happens in social media spaces by gathering the support of others in the community to band together and cancel a perceived wrongdoer from the community. One user who is personally offended by a content creator (e.g., Paul or Mongeau) may love to see the YouTuber canceled but cannot achieve this on their own. Therefore, the user can take action into their own hands by posting cancelation comments to the community. One member of the community cannot cancel someone on their own, but they will feel more confident in their effort to cancel someone if they know more than two million other users in the community already dislike the

apology video. At this point, the cancelation cycle begins to form, and more users jump on the bandwagon to express their unhappiness with a YouTube video. These comments then become further fuel for calls to cancel the YouTuber to generate and for the community to potentially achieve canceling someone from their social media space.

Users are looking to make content creators a scapegoat, and these results indicate that this happens in both an immediate and delayed time frame. If enough people immediately comment their unhappiness, a content creator may be more likely to be canceled in a quick time frame. However, even if users go back to comment on a video years later, that is still an extension of them pushing their guilt onto the creator, in hopes of maybe still being able to purge them from the community years later.

A New Dislike Button (Purification)

Thus, this theme of comments serving as a new dislike button indicates that calls for cancelation can occur at any time after a transgression is made public; online users in Paul's YouTube community are actively revisiting and commenting on the apology videos after significant time has passed since the event. If the online users feel guilty even with a delayed response time, they will revisit old events to try to bring awareness to others in the community to what they do not support to try to gain support to remove the wrongdoer on top of the social hierarchy from the community. Other examples of comments with this theme from this key term list help explain that online users on the bottom of a social hierarchy issue calls for cancelation on YouTube even after years have passed. User MontyEAG who commented on March 20, 2022, "before YouTube removed the dislike button this was at 2,609,461 dislikes." Also, users are trying to create group support for a comment that serves as a dislike button by a comment's ability to receive likes and dislikes. This is likely a theme that emerged after YouTube removed

the dislike feature from a video. One example of this theme is by user Nimma City who commented on December 20, 2021, “Click here for *DISLIKE*.” Thus, users are trying to bypass the new YouTube policy by making the dislike feature available in the comments section. Although this action may not be an explicit call for cancelation, it is an effort toward demonstrating the culture’s shared sentiment about the apology video as the first step toward cancelation

Also, I searched the key term “years” to analyze if online users were acknowledging calls for cancelation after significant time had passed and was successful in my search. For example, user orangecat commented on January 11, 2021, “Doesn’t matter if this was three years ago. It’s still fucked up and nobody can excuse this.” Thus, these comments about Paul occurring even years after the apology video was uploaded function as part of the overall cancelation process. Although this comment is not an explicit call for cancelation, it is a call for people to come together in agreement about how messed up the transgression still is years later. These types of comments can also act as a reminder to the community not to engage in these kinds of acts within the culture and perhaps to act similarly when other Youtubers in this culture post similar offensive content.

The commenting of a “dislike button” serves as one of the comments in relation to the scapegoat and purging step of the cycle. People in the culture are looking for group support to shift their guilt onto the content creator. If enough people participate in this step, the content creator will leave the platform either permanently or temporarily (e.g., successfully been purged; canceled).

The Culture Calling for Cancellation (Purification)

Next, I conducted a second search based on other key terms I had not initially searched but were prominent in my initial search. Key terms in this search were: forgive, button, apologize, judgment, continuous, accidentally, fans, defending, disgusting, respect, sponsored, channel, platform, racist, and accountability, and they helped me get a further understanding of the culture calling for cancellation. One theme I found was online users were actively discussing YouTubers who deserved to get removed from a space (through being canceled) after they committed perceived wrongdoings because the community believed the YouTubers did not deserve their platform. Examples of comments with this theme are: user rach el who commented on September 6, 2020, “normally im not for cancel culture but so many YouTubers are awful people who don't deserve platforms. tana is one of them,” and user Maddie Kelley who commented on September 11, 2020, “fun game: cancel culture 2020, we like actually cancel her and get this racist off the internet.” Thus, online users were trying to gain group support to purge Mongeau either from the YouTube platform or the internet entirely in an immediate time frame after the apology video was uploaded because they did not believe she deserved to be on top of the social hierarchy of their online community anymore. Further, “we” is used in user Maddie Kelley’s comment as a way to point out that the supporting culture is symbolically separated from “they” (e.g., the content creator being scapegoated and purged from the online community.)

Paul and Mongeau’s cultures have a specific order set in place, that is part of their fan culture’s shared values. Paul’s culture, the “Logang” consists of younger fans, (e.g., pre-teens and teenagers), who support him (Koerber, 2018). Paul’s order exists in a way that his fandom expects him to upload extreme content, but when he uploads offensive content (e.g., the suicide

forest video), it breaks the order. Mongeau's culture, although they do not have a fandom name for themselves, are likely a younger audience who would be interested in watching content of a young girl partying and showing her makeup routine. Similarly with Mongeau's order, her fandom expects her to upload vlogs and "story times," so when she has to break the order to do things such as constantly upload apology videos (e.g., especially ones that are being viewed as getting "worse and worse"), her fandom will be unhappy with her as well.

Ringleaders Calling for Cancellation (Purification)

Another theme I found in the comments were specific commenters calling explicitly for cancellation, such as a ringleader. A ringleader is, "a person who leads others, especially in opposition to authority, law, etc." (Dictionary.com, 2023, para. 1). Specifically, I am curious to see if these individual members of the community exercise power and influence by trying to convince others in the community to support the call for cancellation. The quality of a ringleader for this thesis will be someone whose comments get significantly more replies than others' comments in the comments section; that suggests that their comment is viewed by others in the community that it is worth replying to. Some trolls may be looking to respond to some of the most replied-to comments, but other users may suggest that this person is getting the most attention because they are the most respected, such as a ringleader. Further, I wanted to analyze the ringleaders' calls for cancellation; some cancellation calls will be initial comments, and some will be responses to others' comments. For example, Netlytic provided me with the top 10 posters per data set. Paul's top 10 posters are: The4thDoor, RETC BN, riley., Collin Luth Boath, DISLIKE BUTTON, Fernina Madrid, Avery The Rockgod, TheHatMan, Blue Bliss Productions, and SomeOldGuy. Mongeau's top 10 posters are: Sarah, J, A, rando m, Emily, d, Bruce, t, Mooncereal, and Ashley R.

I started by analyzing these comments to see if these were the people calling to cancel the content creator, or if they were just listed as the top 10 posters because they commented frequently on the video, either posting their own thoughts initially, spamming, or responding to other people's comments. I also made sure to disregard the comments directed at the content creator because they did not support the application of Burke's (1970) cycle as there would need to be a sense of a group effort to call to cancel the public figure, not just one person for this theme. However, once I started analyzing these posters, I realized that not all of these users were ranked in the top 10 because they were actively trying to cancel the content creator. For example, user The4thDoor was in Paul's Top 10 Posters because in the data set they had posted and reposted the transcript from Paul's apology video 24 other times. Thus, the reposts are an example of a Top 10 Poster spamming the comments section and did not support this idea of a ringleader calling to cancel a public figure after they committed a perceived wrongdoing. At this point, I knew I would have to analyze any potential ringleaders in a different way; by going to YouTube to analyze the top posters and most replies to their comments myself.

I began by analyzing Mongeau's top posters by going to her YouTube apology video's comments section on February 15, 2023. YouTube filters the comments on videos to display some of the comments with the most responses at the top of the comments section. The top comment on Mongeau's video was by user deangelowallace who commented over 2 years ago that, "This episode of Black Mirror doesn't sit right with me... poor acting I guess," and that comment had received over 30,000 likes and 340 replies. I then began to analyze the responses to see how and why the online community was reacting to this comment; the comments indicated that deangelowallace was going to make a video about Mongeau's apology. After discovering this, I went to user deangelowallace's YouTube page and found out that this user had over 2

million followers and made videos where they commented on distasteful things other famous YouTubers had done. This created a whole new layer to the ringleader theme: other users on top of a smaller social hierarchy may be on the bottom of others (e.g., Mongeau is bigger than user deangelowallace in her community as she has over 5 million subscribers, but in user deangelowallace's online community, he is on top of his social hierarchy as he has 2 million subscribers). Thus, some ringleaders calling for cancelation are on the bottom of a more niche community and may feel guilty about it, so they call to cancel bigger public figures on top of bigger social hierarchies. These calls for cancelation from more niche community ringleaders may serve as a way to purge the online community from a perceived wrongdoer and potentially grow their own community encouraging the wrongdoer's culture to shift their support to their own channel. Also, it is an indication that the online culture is a series of bigger and bigger communities. For example, there is a Logan Paul culture within a broader YouTube culture, such as fans who support both Paul brothers (Logan and Jake). Therefore, user deangelowallace is an example of a ringleader encouraging others to cancel Mongeau as a way of bolstering their own community, but the banishing from YouTube is also a cleansing of the broader YouTube culture, an act that will benefit all other creators. If online users will give Mongeau millions of subscribers (and dollars), if Mongeau is canceled, maybe her supporting culture would shift their user deangelowallace's channel in a similar way.

Next, I wanted to see how Paul's comments would line up with the idea that there are ringleaders calling to cancel the YouTuber in a comments section of an apology video, and if there were any similarities or differences in comparison to Mongeau's alleged top ringleader, user deangelowallace on February 15, 2023. Paul's top comment was from user Warpz, who commented two months ago, "It's been 4 years and this video is still an international treasure,"

and received over 3,500 likes and 59 responses. Although the user does not create videos or have any subscribers, this comment still indicates ringleader behaviors because it shows that online users are still revisiting and commenting on an apology video that was uploaded over five years ago. By online users revisiting this video to comment, it supports the idea that calls for cancelation can and do occur from people going back to bring up old news, as these comments are likely pushing to create a conversation in an online community about the event. Further, this comment from user Warpz would have been around the timeframe that WWE announced that Paul would be returning to the WWE post injury from the 2022 season (Turo, 2023). Thus, these type of ringleader comments who return to videos have significant time has passed since the apology video was uploaded indicates that a ringleader behavior is to bring up old news from the past in an attempt to purge the person on top of a social hierarchy from an online space because the online users at the bottom of the social hierarchy feel guilty that someone who has committed perceived wrongdoings gets to go on to achieve other things in their life after negative events.

When users become ringleaders to call for cancelation, they are participating in the scapegoat – purging process. In fact, users who initiate these cancelation calls are the ones who begin this step. Thus, ringleaders can be credited for pushing the cycle forward.

Online Community Building and Reinforcement (Redemption)

In the process of looking at the direct calls for cancelation and studying the culture in the comments section, I discovered the key terms “community” and “culture” frequently used, so I decided to do a search on the key term to see online users used when trying to promote an idea of a community either in a community building aspect or in a way that the online culture needed to be protected. Sometimes, it was necessary in this search to analyze comments that were made both at the content creator and other online users.

Strengthen the Culture (Redemption)

One theme I discovered that supports the idea that online users comment as a way to build and strengthen their online community when a YouTuber commits a perceived wrongdoing. For example, user aditya commented on September 6, 2020, “It's part of culture to dislike every apology video.” There is an awareness of an online culture happening in this space; aditya is speaking directly to this idea of a community, and a pattern of behaviors that make up a culture. This idea that an online culture will dislike every apology video implies that the online users may never be satisfied with the content creator either because of their perceived wrongdoings, the number of inadequate apology videos from the YouTuber that they feel obligated to dislike the latest video, or perhaps they feel guilty that they are on the bottom of the social hierarchy. Further, user jessica straub commented on September 6, 2020, “If ANYONE deserves “cancel culture” it’s this bitch!” The use of quotation marks around cancel culture in user jessica straub’s comment suggests that they may not truly believe in the cancel culture concept. However, the comment is also acknowledging the power the online communities feel when they are able to apply cancelation pressure to those on top of the social hierarchy that the community deems to be unworthy of their fandom and attention; they can act as online vigilantes by canceling someone from a social media space. Thus, online users are using the comments section as a way to strengthen their community through cancel culture.

When users comment and engage in cancelation to purify their culture of the perceived wrong-doer, they are often also making comments that serve as a way to strengthen and reinforce the community. Once the wrongdoer is purged, the community can be redeemed if the burden of the guilt is equal to purification. Then the culture can grow stronger in their shared values (e.g., we meet on this platform because of the order; people who break the order are purged).

Shifting Support (End of Cycle; New Cycle Begins)

Another theme I found was that online users were commenting on Mongeau's video in an immediate time frame declaring that she did not deserve her platform while also encouraging others to shift their online support to other content creators. When users shift their support from one content creator to another as a result of a perceived wrongdoing, that shift in support functions as a part of the cancellation process. Only the social media platform itself has the power to banish someone from the space, so if the supporting culture shifts their support to other creators and leaves the content creator without viewers, the loss of subscribers and views will impact the content creator's ability to obtain sponsorships and earn advertisement revenue.

Examples of comments with this shifting support theme from the key term list that help explain the calls for cancellation are from user Gretel Zelaya who commented on September 6, 2020, "It feels really good unsubscribing. Better and funnier people deserve what u have," and user Taisaly López Quintana who commented on September 6, 2020, "It seems like she's reading...I'm getting sick with YouTubers (people) doing whatever they like and then making a stupid apology video and expecting the world to forget. Again, they're people but they have a huge platform and millions of young kids looking after them." These comments function as part of the cancellation process. They are not actively or directly calling for cancellation. Instead, these comments are at least inviting other online users to rethink their support of Mongeau by stating that she is one of the content creators who do not deserve their platform.

Once the culture shifts their support to a new content creator, the cycle with the original content creator is over. The cycle starts over again with the person on top of the social hierarchy being the new content creator the culture is focusing on. Therefore, a culture shifting their support is a representation of the end of a cycle.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I analyzed the data that was pulled from Logan Paul's and Tana Mongeau's apology videos' comments sections. The findings include insight on calls for cancelation in both an immediate and delayed time frame, the culture calling for cancelation in an online space, ringleaders calling for cancelation, cancel culture comments also serving as a way to build and reinforce the online community, and explaining how the cancel culture process plays out as described in Burke's (1970) cycle. Next in Chapter 5, I discuss the limitations and future directions of this type of study and the overall conclusion of this thesis.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In this chapter I will discuss the significance and implications of my thesis findings and explore future considerations for similar types of research. My thesis is studying the cultural components of the cancel culture phenomenon and contributes to industry and scholarly knowledge. My thesis is among the first to study cancel culture in social media spaces while applying Burke's (1970) guilt-redemption-purification cycle. For example, it accompanies Gondringer's (2020) research study that specifically applies a Burkean idea to explain cancel culture. The social media platform in focus is YouTube because YouTubers often receive calls to be canceled after they upload videos that their viewers find problematic. The comments section of YouTube videos provides an opportunity for online users to voice their opinion, such as when they want to remove the YouTuber from their community space. While these kinds of comments sections do exist in other social media spaces, my thesis specifically focuses on YouTube.

The YouTubers in focus are Logan Paul and Tana Mongeau. Paul was called to be canceled after he uploaded a YouTube video where he visited and made jokes about the Japanese "suicide forest," and made his supporting culture unhappy. He issued an apology video in January 2018, but online users were still going back to his apology video in 2023 to comment. One way I explored cancel culture in this thesis was by looking at how calls for cancelation can endure across several years; the phenomenon is a continual and on-going process. Paul and Mongeau provided an opportunity to consider cancelation calls as an immediate reaction to a perceived wrongdoing, but also these calls happening many years after the offense too. Mongeau had already uploaded apology videos for past wrongdoings, and some of her fandom were not happy with those apologies. Then after her a new wrongdoing were racial accusations and old tweets resurfaced, Mongeau issued a new apology video that gave the fan culture an opportunity

to “double down” (call her out for both the recent apology video and also for the insincerity of her previous apology videos). The comments from that apology video are analyzed in this thesis. Thus, another thing I am learning about cancel culture is that it can be an immediate reaction to a single offense, or a prolonged process based on an accumulation of offenses.

I analyzed the data from the software Netlytic that allowed me to extract 10,000 comments per video in both the desired immediate and delayed response timeframes. While analyzing the comments, I sought to see how cancel culture plays out as described in Burke’s (1970) cycle. Mongeau and Paul serve as the public figures on top of their social hierarchy on their YouTube platforms. Their online culture (e.g., the users who view, like, and comment on their videos and subscribe to their channel) are on the bottom of the social hierarchy because they gather online to support the Youtubers. However, when a YouTuber commits a perceived wrongdoing (e.g., uploads a YouTube video that upsets their supporting community) the community issues calls to cancel the YouTuber from their online space. If enough support is gathered, the community is successful in their attempt to purify the culture by purging the YouTuber from their space; this is how cancel culture functions in these online spaces. The community will then likely search for another YouTuber to shift their support to and put on top of their social hierarchy, that also means that Burke’s (1970) cycle and the cancel culture process can start over and eventually play out again.

While analyzing data to help explain how the cancel culture process plays out as described in Burke’s (1970) cycle, I also looked for insight into the calls for cancelation in both an immediate and delayed time frame, the culture calling for cancelation in a social media space, ringleaders issuing cancelation calls, and cancel culture comments that also serve as a way to build and reinforce the online community. These themes helped me to better understand the

cultural components of the cancel culture phenomenon and the calls for cancelation. My findings have significance to the study of cancel culture and also help to explain the difference between someone being canceled or receiving calls for cancelation and cancel culture as a whole.

The Burkean approach can be used to make sense of other cancel culture examples, such as James Charles. In Charles's cycle, the order exists where he creates makeup-related videos because he is a self-created makeup artist. His fandom interacts with his content to support him, and the entire social hierarchy shares the values of treating others respectfully. When Charles's does things that go against the order (e.g., gets accused of grooming minors), it breaks the order and offends the supporting culture. In this situation, one of his supporters happens to be a fellow YouTuber, Tati Westbrook. When Westbrook uploaded her video accusing Charles, it serves as a way to initiate a call for cancelation as Charles becomes a scapegoat the culture pushes their guilt onto and needs to purge from the platform. Then users go to Charles's apology video to comment their support in canceling Charles. Thus, by leaving the platform temporarily, Charles was canceled by his supporting culture. Charles's culture was purified from his absence, and it can be assumed that redemption occurred. Then when his supporting culture shifted their support to Westbrook, the cycle had ended, and the new platform allows the cycle to start again.

It is important to note that this cycle is not always completed in every case of calls for cancelation. As noted in the literature review, in some cases, the first few steps of the cycle were engaged, but the cycle was not completed (e.g., Adam Levine). In other cases, as discussed in the literature review, including Ellen DeGeneres, Chris Harrison, Shane Dawson, and Lea Michele, the entire cycle was enacted. Determining why the cycle is completed in some cases and not in

others provides rich opportunities for additional study into cancel culture, but is beyond the scope of this study.

Therefore, this thesis uses Burke's (1970) cycle as a way to help explain and understand the cancel culture phenomenon. Although scholars have begun to apply Burke to social media research, there is room for more application. Thus, future social media research studies could apply Burkean ideas to help scholars better understand social media phenomena.

Additional Considerations on Cancel Culture

As the accessibility to technology and social media expands, so do social media platforms and their online users. Among these spaces are cultures that have proven to emerge, such as supporting fandom cultures that center around and support a public figure until they commit a perceived wrongdoing, as shown in this thesis. Part of the guilt in Burke's (1970) cycle is the guilt people feel when powerless; in cancel culture, it is the relationship between a social media influencer and a fan. In this situation, the social media influencer is on the top of the social media hierarchy and therefore has legitimate power. However, if ringleaders are effective at getting other members of the fan group to join in on the call for cancelation, they can sometimes succeed in getting the influencer removed from the platform (or at least convince the social media influencer to leave the platform). This occurrence is going to cause the online followers to have a sense of power. At the same time, there may be a sense of guilt that this use of power may have been misapplied in some ways. Purging the content creator at the top of the hierarchy leaves a group of fans who relate to each other as a fandom, but no longer have a figure to be a fan of. Therefore, the expression of this power is going to drive the community to a new social media influencer. The culture then shifts to a new content creator, thus, setting up both the future

ability to feel influence over this new figurehead, but also a comfortable sense of being a supporter in this recreated fandom.

Once canceled, public figures may shift the focus of their career and have small victories in other spaces. Paul still uploads videos to his YouTube channel, but as of 2023 he has started a podcast and joined the WWE. Mongeau still uploads YouTube videos, but has also started a podcast and filmed a television show for MTV. Thus, the cancelation culture has impacted the YouTubers. Other public figures have received cancelation calls and later shifted their presence on social media platforms, such as actress and singer Lea Michele. Michele deleted her Twitter account after receiving cancelation calls in 2020, but later joined TikTok in 2022 after making her announcement that she would be starring in a Broadway production. Therefore, cancelation cultures are influential enough to get public figures to leave some spaces both temporarily and sometimes permanently, and these changes will impact their careers.

It is possible for online users to create a call for cancelation in other social media spaces. As shown in this thesis, user deangelowallace was able to encourage some of Mongeau's supporting culture to view his video on reasons to cancel Mongeau on his channel. This shows that some users will create YouTube videos just to call out the offender, and that these videos may be created just to call for cancelation. As user deangelowallace's comment on Mongeau's apology video had gathered enough support and attention to be displayed as the most relevant comment on Mongeau's video; this indicates that it is possible for online users (especially ringleaders) to create a call to cancel someone in another space. In these situations, a ringleader gets two forms of power. First, user deangelowallace exerts influence by having encouraged the fan culture to turn on Mongeau; second, this individual will gain an even greater sense of power in claiming at least some of Mongeau's fans to become their own. Therefore, the cancel culture

process is not just people at the bottom taking out the people on the top and then looking for new people at the top; transcending the old fandom by creating a new fandom around a new content creator.

Cancel culture impacts not only public figures on social media, but they also function in organizations as a way for people on the lower part of the social hierarchy to have their voices be heard (e.g., consumers). In 2022, there was an LGBTQ attack to a student on Illinois State University's campus. At the time, the University president was Terri Goss Kinzy, and students were unhappy with her response (Vidette News Staff, 2023). There was a march protesting on campus, and people took to social media to express their outrage. The reason for Kinzy's mid-semester abrupt departure has not been announced, but the news did break not long after a survey was sent out among the University asking for opinions on Kinzy's performance. Therefore, although it cannot be said for certain that Kinzy left ISU in relation to the unhappiness the students felt with her and her performance, it shows that cancelation can function in organizations because lower-level voices can impact a top figure's personal decision to leave an organization (e.g., ISU culture).

Future Research and Considerations

In addition to its other findings, this thesis creates a number of directions that future researchers could take in their own cancel culture and social media research studies. Future scholars could expand on this study by analyzing a call for cancelation in the entirety of the process across several years, from the moment the first call was issued until the discussion that tends to occur after a public figure has left the social media space. Future considerations of this type of research could also use Burke's (1970) cycle and this thesis as a lens to analyze the cancelation culture in other spaces, such as other social media platforms or media productions.

Also, future research could explore organizations' decisions to drop public figures who are issued cancellation calls to provide insight on how cancel culture impacts public figures' brand deals, contracts, and other financial or media affiliations.

One of the biggest takeaways from this thesis is that cancel culture can in fact be studied as a culture. Online users who band around a public figure and vocalize unhappiness by wishing to remove someone from a space has become a group norm; part of a culture (e.g., cancel culture). It has become inevitable that the cancel culture phenomenon will keep occurring and social media provide the opportunity to make these movements possible and probable. For example, if someone comments on an online apology video that has millions of views, by commenting, it gives online users the influence to potentially reach millions of other users. Therefore, the comments section creates opportunities for the average online user that only unique situations like social media platforms can provide; a situation that has only been made possible with the advancement of modern technology.

My thesis provides insight that as human beings seek groups to belong to, they often shift to cultures where they feel the most supported by others. In modern day, society often pushes for equality. It is possible that people like this idea of being a part of a society that does not tolerate disrespect and is why people want to belong to groups that advocate for change; a cancel culture. Thus, Burke's (1970) cycle is an important element to explaining how online groups function, especially in social media spaces. When people on the bottom of a social hierarchy begin to feel guilty they are supporting someone on top of a social hierarchy (e.g., a content creator on a social media space), they act on their guilt and speak out to band group support to purge the perceived wrongdoer from the community and redeem their culture. People at the bottom of the social hierarchy can feel guilty for both supporting the top people who have

proven themselves unworthy, but also because they feel guilty for not accomplishing what the people on top have accomplished. People at the bottom are influenced to follow self-made public figures when the content creator can be viewed as an average person, and that is a big reason why people follow them to begin with. However, when these “just like me” content creators fail, the followers are going to feel guilty they supported someone who has succeeded in content creation while the users on the bottom have failed to create a platform themselves. Thus, the users on the bottom need to respond to this guilt; they could either put in a ton of effort to try and match the content creator’s success, or they could try to erase them from the online community so they do not have to think about the content creator anymore.

This communication from online users regarding the need to purge someone from the community serves as a way online users act in vigilante spirit; taking matters into their own hands when they believe a culture needs to be redeemed. Perhaps, online users act as vigilantes when they feel it is up to the community to remove someone from their sacred space. In order to be a part of an equal society, online users cannot tolerate public figures who are disrespectful to others, and thus feel the need to comment on public discourse to gain support to remove the wrongdoer so that the community. If the vigilantes are successful, the culture will be changed for the better, and thus creates the need for online users to comment on public discourse and band group support for a public figure purge.

Future research could use interview groups to collect data to get insight on participants’ experiences with cancel culture directly instead of using a data extracting tool. Although data scraping tools can be useful, Netlytic was unable to filter out comments I did not need, so that is a limitation of the technology. Also, I was only able to keep my data for 30 days

after collection because I was using a free version of the software, so the use of an interview group could have helped in the situation of if I wanted to go back in and look at my datasets.

Implications

This thesis sought to provide a clearer distinction between the concept “cancel culture” and its umbrella term “canceled” and suggest a new term to help define the cancel culture process: “calls for cancelation.” Cancel culture is a process that can be explained by Burke’s (1970) cycle to purge perceived wrongdoers from the top of a social hierarchy by a community of people on the bottom of the hierarchy to redeem the community from guilt they may feel from supporting wrongdoers. There is a cancelation culture that lives in social media spaces that engages in the cancel culture process; although they once supported a public figure, they take power into their own hands to attempt to remove the public figures from the space when they determine action needs to be taken to punish them for a perceived wrongdoing. This cancelation process of successfully removing a public figure from a space cleanses the community. Calls for cancelation are issued by a cancelation culture when they engage in the cancel culture process. These calls are looking for group support to remove the public figure from the space and can also serve as a way to reinforce and build a sense of an online community.

Whenever an online community evolves (one person at the top of a social platform with online supporters at the bottom) calls for cancelation become inevitable. The general approach to understanding cancel culture is that calls for cancelation are something that come out of a cancel culture; we live in a cancel culture because in the United States people continue to call for cancelation. Ultimately, calls for cancelation become the product of cancel culture. When applying Burke’s (1970) cycle, I found that calls for cancelation are almost inevitable in situations where strong cultures develop and create situations where the cycle plays out

continuously as a result in a cancel culture. Thus, the difference between “cancel culture” is a social movement and “a cancel culture” refers to a specific group of people. Cancel culture is a social media phenomenon where people hold public figures accountable for their non-illegal actions. A cancel culture is a specific online fandom that attempts to purge their centered public figure from their online space after a perceived wrongful action.

Sometimes these cancellation calls are issued by ringleaders who can help to get the cancellation process started. If someone successfully leaves a space, either temporarily or permanently, they have successfully been canceled. However, if someone received cancellation calls, but never actually left the platform, the cancellation process was unsuccessful. These terms and explicit distinction will help to distinguish cancel culture behaviors in the future and for both industry and scholarly knowledge of cancel culture, social media, and the values and functions of online communities. As shown through the example of user deangelowallace, once the user commented on Mongeau’s apology video, users of Mongeau’s community could relate to them because they also went to the comments section to discuss canceling Mongeau with other members of the culture. Then user deangelowallace’s comment (which suggested the culture could check out their video on canceling Mongeau on their channel) creates an opportunity for the online fandom to shift their support to user deangelowallace’s YouTube page because the fandom needs someone they can relate and look up to, especially if Mongeau is canceled by the online community. Therefore, because user denagelowallace comments on Mongeau’s videos too, it makes them more relatable to some online users, and creates an opportunity for Mongeau’s fans to want to support someone new who is likable and isn’t getting canceled like Mongeau.

Sometimes the cancel culture process pushes a perceived wrongdoer to appear in a new space, and this outcome can put the public figure in a better position than before (e.g., more sponsorships, better job title). This is perhaps one of the negative outcomes of social media and cancel culture for an online culture; without actual illegal acts that can be punished by law, online cancelation of a public figure may not ever be able to be “complete.” Therefore, the idea that, “all publicity is good publicity,” may be true for some public figures who find themselves affiliated with cancel culture and frustrate the once-supporting culture as their attempted cancelation acts may be unsuccessful.

Conclusion

The chapters of the thesis explore the phenomenon of cancel culture in the YouTube social media space. Chapter 2 consisted of a literature review that served as the framework for the thesis. Among the topics I explored in this chapter are: Social media, YouTubers, and the origins of cancel culture. Chapter 3 contains the methods section that explains why Paul and Mongeau’s apology videos’ comments sections were researched and how the data was collected through the software Netlytic. I explained Burke’s (1970) cycle further and discussed how I applied this cycle in my analysis of the comments. Chapter 4 consists of a data analysis and results. In this chapter, I analyze the comments to Paul and Mongeau’s apology videos for a way the cancelation calls are curated and to study the cancelation culture. Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses the significance of the findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research. In this final chapter, I provide practical terminology for public relations practitioners, consultants, and scholars working in and researching crisis communication and social media.

My thesis helps to explain the phenomenon of cancel culture by providing insight on the cancelation process and working towards better understanding the ever growing animals that are

social media. By studying the cultural components of the cancel culture phenomenon, I theorized that because modern day society wants equality for all, that creates the vigilante spirit found in cancelation cultures. Perhaps, cancel culture could make us better human beings by advocating for change, but sometimes the cancelation calls further promote the public figure and therefore backfires as the public figure grows in status and the online supporting group diminishes or is shifted elsewhere. Therefore, cancel culture may help us to think through why cancelation calls are important in 2023, while also inviting us to think twice before joining a call to cancel a public figure. Perhaps, cancel culture will help us to temper our behaviors as a part of a broader culture to do better and advocate for change because both you and an entire community could be affected.

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