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Senior Project

Final Paper

#You'reCanceled

Over the years, the more people make technological advances. Society went from creating fire and electricity to cars and radios over the course of thousands of years. The 2000s was the start to a brand new technological era. With the Internet being invented in the 1990s, everything after that was going to be bigger and better. Social networking quickly became a thing, Myspace and Facebook making their appearance before Twitter and Instagram. These networks gave everyone a platform, where they could be themselves and express themselves without a care in the world. As more and more people got access to the Internet, all these websites gained thousands upon thousands of users and made them realize one big thing: the Internet is forever. Although yes, it can be deleted it is never truly gone.

Over the last few years, more people are joining Twitter and following people that they like or admire. However, in today's society, there is one more thing to worry about. Now people have to think about if the person they want to follow has been "canceled." "Cancel culture" has been on the rise for several years, and it all started on Twitter. Cancelling people and holding them accountable, also known as call-out culture, are two completely different things. Cancel culture is not new and has actually been going on for awhile, however it changed directions.

The definition of cancel culture has changed numerous times throughout its existence. Everyone views the phenomenon differently. However, the main definition is that it is a “cultural boycott” that is “an agreement not to amplify, signal boost, give money to” someone (Bromwich), or “It tends to refer to behavior that mostly plays out on the internet when someone has said or done something to which others object. That person is then condemned in a flurry of social media posts” and that the main idea is that “many others (and perhaps the places at which they work) are fed up with them and will have no more to do with them.” (Rueb). Furthermore, just because it is *defined* this way, does not mean that society goes to the same extremes as a whole. Most of the time when a user logs on to Twitter, there is usually a new hashtag trending that someone has been canceled. When a hashtag is trending, it means that there have been thousands of tweets sent out about it over a certain time frame. What is trending usually changes on a daily basis. Cancel culture started a few years back and began on Black Twitter, where people used their platforms “in an attempt to shed light on the abuse of power, to boycott corrupt companies, or to revoke support for problematic authority or celebrity figures” (Roos). A great example is from back in 2013, surrounding chef Paula Deen and her workplace behavior. After none of this got news coverage, “Black Twitter’s online activity around each of them triggered news media systems, demanding coverage” (Clark). A majority of the time, these people in power or these celebrity figures get called out because of behavior that is considered to be racist, homophobic, xenophobic, or even sexist. Twitter makes this easy, the platform allowing you to search for tweets made by someone and even search for certain words within the tweets. In today’s society, it is a super common thing users do to make sure the people they look up to are defined as unproblematic.

A well known example of cancel culture recently was something that happened between beauty gurus Tati Westbrook and James Charles. In the spring of 2019, Tati Westbrook uploaded a 45 minute video to her YouTube channel called “Bye Sister.” This title was referencing something that James Charles usually ended his videos with. In the video, Tati Westbrook goes on to explain that she felt betrayed by James. Over the years, Tati had made vitamins for hair care and had told James about it previously. While at Coachella, James Charles made a post on his Instagram endorsing her rival’s vitamins. She pointed out in her video that her and James were going to sit down and talk about what had transpired, however she found out that he was allegedly giving his side of the story to the drama channels on YouTube. James had contacted Tati way back when he was 17 years old and looked to Tati as a mentor. Tati states in her video that they had a falling out previous to this one, but things had been mended. In a moment of rage, she had said that James had “tried to trick a straight man into thinking he’s gay, yet again” and that it is disgusting to “manipulate someone’s sexuality.” Besides calling out James, she called out another YouTuber for not stepping up with her, and for him not finding an issue with what was said. 28 minutes into the video, she shines some light on the whole vitamins situation, not believing what he had stated at all.

After this video was released Twitter blew up with thousands of tweets, several people tweeting their thoughts and what they believed about the whole situation. Within hours of the video dropping, the users on Twitter decided to cancel James Charles. Partially because of Tati Westbrook’s video, people were now canceling James Charles for being a “sexual predator” and after finding old tweets, people called him racist and transphobic. After losing millions of subscribers, James made an apology video and then made one a few days after that addressing

everything that Tati had said. In this 40 minute video, James talks about what exactly went down at Coachella, even going as far as to share screenshots of messages between him and Tati Westbrook. He broke everything down, including a breakdown of the Coachella music festival in case a viewer was unsure of how it worked. James stated that when he went to Coachella, he and



his friends were getting mobbed and felt unsafe in the situation. To fix this, James texted a friend who had a brand deal and asked if there was a way for him to have the same, that way he could be bumped up to have some more security. He signed a contract with the company and that was that, however this company was Tati's rival. On Monday, he had to post something about Tati's rival's vitamins and texted her before the post went up to give her a heads up. She was clearly upset about the matter and the two continued to text back and forth about the issue. Tati

Westbrook ended up posting on her social media about being betrayed and it was quickly linked to James. James continued to text Tati however he got no reply. He went on to issue a public apology on Instagram and continued to reach out to both Tati and her husband over the course of the following days, but they still did not reply to him. A week went by and they still did not reply to him, so he decided to give them some space. He spent the other half of the video debunking things that she had said, taking clips directly from her video that she posted about him.

James addressed the allegations of him being a predator, saying that “People are treating the hashtag ‘JamesCharlesIsOverParty’ to add to the narrative with lies which is not only harmful to me, but it’s also creating very, very, dangerous stereotypes around the LGBTQ+ community” (Charles).¹ James Charles put some of the text messages on the screen between him and the person he was telling Tati about, everything being completely consensual. Because of Tati’s video, Jeffree Star, another beauty guru on YouTube, sent out multiple tweets and sent several texts calling James a “predator” as well as a “pedophile” (Charles). There was never any investigation into these allegations and nothing has been said since that moment. To some, there was still no question that James was guilty of what he was accused of and he was still canceled. Even though James was “canceled”, his views on his YouTube channel remained incredibly high. Other people listened to his side and changed their perspective. However, this is not the case for everybody.

Natalie Wynn is another YouTuber who is very familiar with cancel culture, and in fact, has been canceled numerous times before. Natalie Wynn is a transgender woman and considers herself to be “a prime target for cancellation, and I have been canceled many, many times”

¹ Since writing this, there have been some new allegations made against James Charles. These allegations accuse James Charles of inappropriately messaging minors through various social media platforms including Snapchat and Instagram.

(Kruger). Wynn goes on to explain and describe how and why she was canceled, providing images from videos as well as some from her social media pages. Before she dives into everything, she prefaces it by stating that “I will apologize where I believe apologies are due. However, where I believe that criticism of me is excessive or unwarranted, I will not apologize.”



The first incident she talks about was when she was canceled for having a transsexual adult entertainer named Buck Angel do a voice over for one of her videos. The way that Natalie Wynn describes it, she was canceled due to being associated with him. Buck Angel came about in the early 2000s as he rose to stardom in the adult film industry. He had said that he “wanted to create more positive trans representation” in the adult film industry and “he became a more general educator and advocate for trans people.” Natalie Wynn first found out about Buck Angel when she was going through some issues surrounding her own gender. Additionally, Wynn says

that Angel had a positive impact on her because she met him and Angel was the first transgender man that she ever met. On top of that, Wynn was working on her previous video titled *Opulence* when she realized she “needed a voice actor to do a line from John Waters' book” and Buck Angel was suggested to her. He ended up doing it, the whole voiceover being only about 10 seconds long. Natalie Wynn goes on to explain why Twitter was not a fan of Buck Angel, saying that there was a debate on the website Tumblr a few years back regarding “true” and “fake” trans people. He was canceled shortly thereafter.

While explaining this situation, Natalie Wynn went on to tell the viewers what she personally disagreed with Buck Angel and said “I don't think Buck's ever actually said that non-binary people aren't valid, but I personally don't like that he seems like he wants to distance himself from them. And that's my disagreement with Buck.” She followed this statement up by saying that the community should come together, and that “because we share most of the same interests, and I think the best way to do that is to build bridges instead of burning them.” She further justified her choice of working with him, saying that she never gave him “a platform to share his opinions.” and instead, “gave him a platform to be a John Waters impersonator.” The trans community on Twitter wanted her to apologize for working with Buck Angel and to criticize and denounce his thoughts and beliefs. She refused to do so because she felt it was not the right thing to do just to uncanceled herself (Kruger). Natalie Wynn understood where they were all coming from, however she did not want to ignore the years of activism Buck Angel did for the community. This situation and the previous one now pose a question: who is cancelable?

The best way to think about this is to picture a pyramid. At the bottom are normal people, those without a major platform. This includes people you interact with in your everyday life and the people you pass on the street. Above this level are the people who have a somewhat larger

platform, the one hit wonders of the television world, and possibly some of the smaller “influencers” (less than 250k) on Instagram. Above them are the “influencers” with more followers, along with some smaller celebrities. These are people that have a lot more people following them than the level below them. And lastly the last level and the smallest, the celebrities with a lot of power and money, the untouchables, if you will. A great example of this is Kanye West who “suggested slavery was a choice” and endorsed President Trump for a little while before deciding to run for presidency himself. Another celebrity, Shania Twain, went on to say that she would “have voted for President Trump were she not a Canadian person” (Bromwich). Although it isn’t often, the normal everyday person can get “canceled” and have their whole lives ruined, meanwhile high profile celebrities like the ones above are still booking jobs and being successful. The latest example is J.K. Rowling who had tweeted something in response to an article that talked about “Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate.” Rowling had tweeted the link to the article, adding her thoughts by saying “‘People who menstruate.’ I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” She was instantly met with people tweeting at her, pointing out that it’s not just cis-gendered women that menstruate. Even though she was canceled, people are still buying her books, however, many will not give her another dollar of their money.

Another question that is brought to light is what is the difference between call-out culture and cancel culture? As mentioned earlier, there is quite a difference between the two. As noticed through a personal analysis, call-out culture is all about wanting people to take accountability for their actions and allowing them to grow from their mistake. It is all about having the individual realizing that what they did was wrong or harmful while simultaneously giving them space to

change and educate themselves. The whole mentality is to acknowledge that people make mistakes and things happen, but letting them grow and learn from the experience. It is pointed out that “Changing culture meaningfully means approaching folks from the standpoint of ‘these harmful ideas you are perpetuating need to go’” (Bromwich). Former President Barack Obama even spoke out on call-out culture, saying that “People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids, and share certain things with you” (Rueb). A good example of call-out culture is #MeToo movement. It started on Black Twitter a few years back and then picked up speed again three years ago when “white feminists on Twitter went viral for exposing film producer Harvey Weinstein’s sexual offenses” (Roos). Since these moments, more and more women and survivors have come forward and shared their unique stories.

Earlier in 2020, something similar happened with the Black Lives Matter movement. Groups went to Twitter in outrage after George Floyd was killed by a police officer who kneeled on his neck for over 8 minutes. This all happened because a store clerk believed George Floyd was using a counterfeit bill. Thousands of people gathered on Twitter to figure out all the names of the officers and to have them fired and charged. Not only were the names of the officers found, but people tweeted helpful information like hotline numbers and emails to contact government officials to have the officers charged. Petitions circulated online, everyone signing any and all petitions they could get their hands on to help make a difference in some way. Of course there were those who did not support the movement and tried to discredit how far people on social media got. There were more peaceful protests, links to more information about other people besides George Floyd that needed help, and there was a big enough impact to get the officer charged and to have the proper charge as well. It’s important to note that this was *not* a

result of Twitter, however it took over the social media platform and got the attention of millions. Nobody on Twitter slept until there was some form of justice.

Cancel culture, on the other hand, is typically not letting go of the mistake that was made, even if the person has shown signs of growth or remorse. This ideal is more so on the fan side of Twitter, these fans are referred to as stans. This nickname comes from the Eminem song, in which a fan obsessed with Eminem gets more and more angry as his letters to him go unnoticed and the song ends with the fan taking his own life. These obsessive fans usually have a profile dedicated to their idol, and they will “violently attack anyone who questions their celebrity” (Roos). In recent times whenever there is a hashtag trending, users have to scroll for ages to find out why someone is canceled. The hashtag is full of things called fancams. These are short and quick edits about the people they like in an attempt to get others scrolling through the tag to like them or to watch the edit for views. These trending hashtags however barely have any sort of effect on the celebrities reputation, the fans willing to go after anyone who disagrees or says something bad about their idols, including any critic. The side that is stan Twitter has changed the platform a lot over the years, and if you have a different opinion, every user in that group goes after you. Barack Obama touched upon this call-out and cancel culture, saying “That’s not activism. That’s not bringing about change” and “If all you’re doing is casting stones, you’re probably not going to get that far. That’s easy to do” (Rueb). Tying this back to Black Lives Matter, several celebrities were canceled for not speaking up on the issue, even the ones who never really used their social media often. Instead of this being about the people of color who needed help, it turned into canceling people and celebrities who did not tweet enough about the matter. Some accounts went as far to say that retweeting tweets was not enough, you had to compose your own tweets. What was discovered in my personal analysis was that this created a

lot of anxiety for people because they either were not the best with words or did not want to say anything wrong, the tweets that they were sharing said exactly what they thought but could not put into their own words. To keep the chaos going, several of the stan accounts had said that if they were following anyone who did not tweet about the BLM movement, they were going to be blocked. A moment that is supposed to be about unity and coming together is torn apart all because the people that are on stan Twitter believe that some people are not doing enough in their mind.

Ultimately, cancel culture has been a blessing and a curse. Over the years, society realized that there is a better way to go about it and that “people themselves can be recovered” (Bromwich). While yes, people say or post things they shouldn’t have, it is our job as a society to help them recognize the mistake and help them change. A lot of people have said that it is not their job to educate someone, and while that is true, the least we can do as a society is point them in the right direction so they can do better down the road. Cancelling someone and not interacting with them at all does not affect them and no one learns anything useful from it. At least if the person is presented with the materials needed to educate themselves, more people will educate themselves too. It will be a positive chain reaction. More people will read things and see things from a different perspective and see things from somebody else’s point of view.

In these cases, James Charles was wrongfully canceled. While yes, Tati Westbrook had text messages between her and James, however that is all she had. When James responded, he showed what Tati included in her video along with some context that was needed to understand what was being talked about. James had also included some texts from the one man he was talking to, everything being completely consensual, and the man being of legal age. While some

of Tati's viewers unsubscribed to James, many realized that James was right and Tati was in the wrong.

When Natalie Wynn was talking about cancel culture and her personal experience, she broke it down into what happens when someone is canceled. First, there is the presumption of guilt, meaning that instead of "innocent until proven guilty," it is the other way around. The next thing that happens is abstraction, which is where "the specific, concrete details of a claim with a more generic statement." Following abstraction is essentialism. Instead of criticizing and going after the *action*, the individual is targeted instead. A generalization is made that this individual is now a bad person. That is followed up with pseudo-moralism or pseudo-intellectualism and then topped off with no forgiveness. Most of the time, if an apology is issued from someone (like James Charles for example), people might "dismiss an apology as insincere" and come up with a reason as to why it is not sincere. However, maybe if it is genuine enough or written well, it is enough to simmer down the situation, but the next time there is another scandal, it is just going to come right back up. The last thing that Natalie Wynn had said was that canceling someone is contagious. If somebody is friends with someone who was canceled, that makes you canceled by association (Kruger).

For my senior project, it is important to show the effects of being canceled or how it affects somebody watching one of their idols get canceled. My goal is to tell a story through several photographs, showing what happens when someone is canceled by society and the reality of what happens in the person's real life. It is important to show the reality of what can happen to relationships with friends, family, or even significant others while all this drama and "exposing" is going on, and it is something that not many think about.

It was fascinating doing research for this topic. After writing the first half of this paper back in November, James Charles managed to find himself in hot water *yet again*. In the early months of 2021, messages were leaked of the 21 year old makeup guru talking inappropriately to minors on multiple different social media platforms including Snapchat, Instagram and even Twitter. More than one individual came forward and there is more coming to light everyday. I have seen people on the social media platform TikTok go to the extent of ruining his makeup palette because they do not want to support someone like him. While I understand why they were doing it, they already spent their money on the product which went right into James' wallet.

I was inspired by a few things for this project and this topic in particular. In 2018, I became friends with someone on Twitter. For the sake of this story, I am going to leave her name out of this. We became close friends because we liked the same baseball team and the same shows. After a few months, I noticed a few people who I followed were making fun of her for how she tweeted about the things that made her happy. They would copy and paste her tweets, basically making a meme out of her. A meme is a form of making fun of someone or something, and then it becomes well known after being spread through social media. A lot of my friend's tweets became memes, and people constantly joked and harassed her because of the way she tweeted. Her tweets often included a photo of her favorite actor or athlete, calling them sweet things like "sunshine" or even saying they were the main reason she made it through the day. Rumors were spread about her and eventually she was bullied so bad that she left Twitter. She has tried to come back on more than one occasion, however people still make it their mission to hunt her down and continue to make fun of her. They came up with horrible nicknames for her and continue to spread these rumors around to this day. In several conversations with her, she had stated that she was tired of experiencing this harassment when she tried to start fresh and

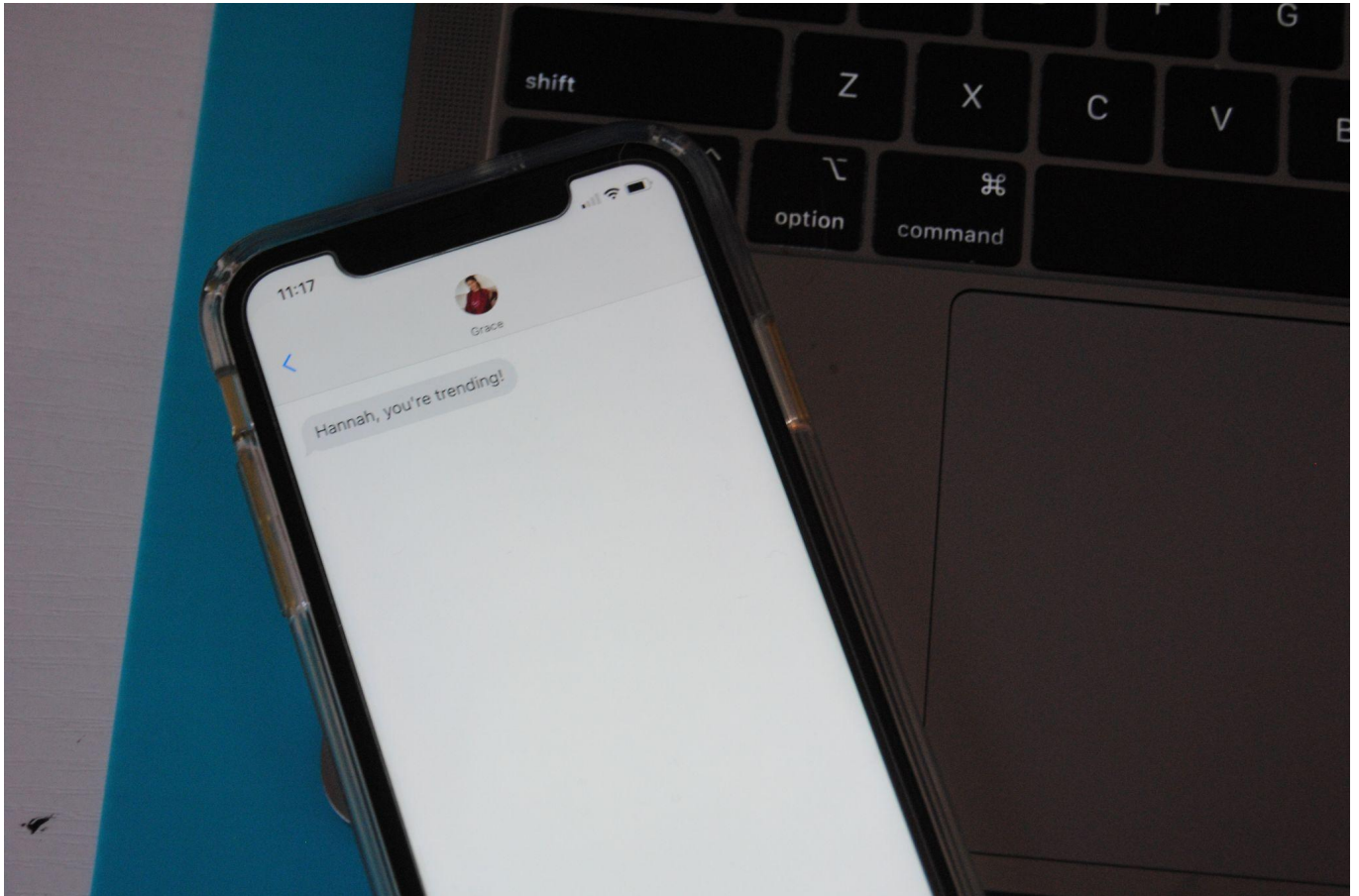
considered giving up on the platform entirely. Over the last 3 years, I've watched her life go through a rollercoaster of emotions. She lost her spark and joy for the sport she grew up loving as well as her passion: photography. I'm happy to report that she recently was able to find that happiness again, but now she keeps to herself. She's still on Twitter, but it's a private account with only her closest friends following her. From what I've noticed, she's happy and is able to tweet about what she loves with no judgement. Her story inspired me to show the toxicity of Twitter. That quickly evolved to cancel culture because it was something that was becoming more and more common to see on social media, especially during the pandemic.

One of the hardest parts of my senior project was figuring out how I wanted to portray this idea of cancel culture. I love photoshop, it is my favorite program to use and it is something I am most familiar with. As tempting as it was to use this, I felt like I needed to challenge myself. One thing I learned about myself during my time at Purchase is that it is okay to go outside your comfort zone, and you can learn a lot more when you do. Once you leave college, I think it is important to go outside your comfort zone so I thought that starting now would be a great start. I like photography and feel like you can tell a lot by one photo, so I came up with an idea. I decided to combine still photos I took while adding some of those graphics I could create on my own. I personally love when movies or television shows show the character's cell phone or texts messages on the screen. It allows the viewer to have an inside look at what is going on in their personal life that others may not know.

When I was taking all the photos, I wanted each one to relate back to the story. Images of the computer are important because the main character, Hannah, spends most of her life on one with her YouTube channel. I also wanted to get a lot of images including the cell phone because a lot of teenagers and young adults spend hours on their phones on a daily basis. My goal as a

creator was to make the photos relatable to some degree. I find myself spending hours on my phone if I can manage to get comfortable. For the second video, I wanted to change things up, so I used what I had around me. I took some beads with letters on them and left a message. I also decided to use the computer screen to my advantage. I opened up my laptop and went on YouTube, opened the Channel Content. I debated for a while on whether or not I should leave some plain, still images here and there, but ultimately decided against it. Another shot I took was one of a messy bed. I felt like it was necessary to show the guilt and the realness of what could happen. One of my favorite shots I took was in the third video. For the photo, I started to Google “*how to not be cancelled*” but decided to let the autocomplete fill in the rest. I feel like all of the options for the autocomplete were accurate for what someone would look up. The last photo is another favorite of mine. It is a photo of the laptop case with a sticker. The sticker has “*Treat people with kindness*” written on it, and I think that is an important message.

We live in a crazy world, especially right now with the pandemic going on. I also noticed that when people are behind a computer screen, they are more inclined to say nasty things. It is so important to remember that what you say online can come back to hurt you, and that the internet is forever. I noticed before I even started this project that during the pandemic more and more teens online are getting their college educations taken away because of the things they have said online. Most of the time, those accused often say that it was a joke or that it was taken out of context, however, most of the time it is exactly what it seems to be. At the end of the day, I think it is important to note that you never truly know what is going on in someone’s life and it is crucial to spread love and kindness.



Besides the still images, I added some of Hannah's text messages onto the screen. Like I had said earlier, it is allowing the viewers to have an inside look at what is happening and going on in Hannah's life. I also think it was important for Hannah to have a friend to bounce things off of. I have several friends that I can do that with and I found myself thinking that if I were in Hannah's shoes, I would want the same thing. This friend is Grace. Throughout the three part series, we see Grace telling Hannah to collaborate with the problematic creator, however after that backfires, we see Grace help her friend get out of trouble. The viewers see a little fight between the two but this was intentional. I included this because I felt like it was important to show the ups and downs of a friendship. Friends can fight with each other but still want the best for each other.

I really wanted some sort of animations going on because sometimes I find it easy to lose interest in things if there is not much movement going on. I had two main goals for my viewers: I wanted them to be able to follow the storyline with ease and for them to not get bored. Besides the animated text messages, I wanted to include tweets of what people would be saying in response to her working with Justin, the problematic creator. These particular Twitter accounts were inspired by a specific part of Twitter. This is called *Stan* Twitter. That term comes from the song performed by Eminem. In this song, Eminem has a fan that writes him letters, follows him around on tour and does everything he can to get Eminem's attention. This fan, named Stan, ends up getting crazed and taking his own life after numerous letters go unanswered. After the song was released, it eventually became slang for a part of Twitter where users have their accounts dedicated to people they admire or look up to. This side of Twitter is where I met my friend I had mentioned earlier. My goal was to mimic that kind of behavior with these tweets. To do that, I made the usernames relating back to the main character Hannah. Just like Twitter, everyone's icons are different just to make things easier to separate everyone. I wanted to include mixed opinions about Hannah being cancelled as well. Whenever someone is cancelled online, most times there is a hashtag with their name that explains what that person did to get cancelled. More often than not, people are split. There are people who are okay with the person being cancelled and then there are people who are completely against it.

One thing that I did struggle with during this time was whether or not to include sound effects or some sort of background music. I really felt like I needed distinct noises and chimes for the different notifications to make it on the realistic side. After editing for a while, I started getting headaches so I would mute the sound effects. I watched it a few times without them and it seemed like it was missing something so I ended up keeping them. I would have included

background music but I felt like it would have taken away from my project and it would have been too much overall.

Another thing I was not completely sure about was whether or not I should state or show why Justin was a problematic person. I ended up not including or showing anything because I think that this works for me because it lets the viewer come up with a reason in their head as to why Justin is a controversial friend and public figure.

On the other hand, one thing that I was really sure about was the ending. From the beginning, I knew that I did not want a clear and precise ending. I did not want Hannah to be immediately forgiven but I did not want her to never be able to move on because that's not how cancel culture always works.

Doing this project really made me step back and reflect on what I think of cancel culture. I believe in call-out culture over cancel culture anyday. I would like people to be held accountable for their actions and I want to see them grow and learn from those mistakes. I find myself thinking about this for the young internet stars that are just coming into the public eye. Does this excuse the wrong behavior? No, but as an individual, I want them to own up to it, apologize and prove that they are changing for the better. However, I am conflicted because there comes a point where people should know better and should be educated enough. An example that comes to mind is country star Morgan Wallen. Back in the beginning of February, a video was leaked of him saying a racial slur. To me, it was clear that it was *not* his first time saying the word, however I could be mistaken. What makes this different from the rising teenage TikToker is that Morgan Wallen is 28 years old. He should be aware of just how hurtful that word is and how it should not be said by someone who is white. He ended up apologizing, but at the end of the day it is not my apology to accept or deny since I am not a member of the community he

offended. However, as my own person, I knew I could not support someone who said something that hurtful. I removed all of his music from my library as a form of disapproval, but what was bizarre was what happened afterwards. It seemed like Twitter was at war. People tweeted their support for Morgan Wallen, telling him how they are not going to stop listening to his music and how “It’s just a word.” Other people tweeted that he was racist and shouldn’t be signed to a record label anymore. Wallen was eventually dropped by his record label but is still supported by thousands. I think being home because of the pandemic made me more aware of the town I live



in, many people in my predominantly white town were tweeting and posting their support for the country singer. It felt shocking and wrong, along with many other mixed feelings I wish I could put into words. We need to do better as a whole.

This project really helped me focus on one subject and made me think as to how I wanted to get my point across. I believe it made me a stronger artist and it really challenged me to do the best I can with what I have right now. As its creator, I am happy with how this all turned out and

my goal is to have my viewer really think about this. How can we go about this in a better way?

Is there a better way to go about all of this? Only time will tell.

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Link to my senior project: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4FKTw_apBo9gKrEDo-sMMw