

**Am I canceled?**

**A Study of Cancel Culture discourse within the United States**

**By**

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**Submitted to the Board of Study in Sociology**

**School of Natural and Social Sciences**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements**

**for the degree of Bachelor of Arts**

**Purchase College**

**State University of New York**

**May 2020**

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## **Introduction**

Cancel culture had a surge of popularity in 2018, particularly through the platform of Twitter. In its most generalized form (as there is currently no standardized definition), it's been demonstrated on social media by one person blocking the other, and/or making a note through a public declaration of some sort that the person is indeed "canceled" for saying something taboo or engaging in behaviors deemed unacceptable by a given forum or group. Cancel culture is important to understand because it speaks largely to the way we as humans have begun to engage in conflict management and necessary discourse. (Many people have decided not to engage at all, and to actually play ignorant to others). There is no peer-reviewed literature on this exact concept because it is so recent, but there are many pieces that touch upon social media identity performance, free speech on social media, and the influence of public opinion, to help contextualize why people were being canceled in 2018, and why they continue to be now with more urgency, in 2020.

My research question is: what exactly is cancel culture, how do we talk about it, and why (or how) do we as a society partake? My argument is that those who engage in discourse regarding canceling do not understand the concept directly, and speak of it in the abstract as to relay responsibility in deciding its meaning. Because of everything unknown about cancel culture, there is a great deal of fear that surrounds it and its unpredictability, which propels its popularity through a sense of panic within influencers, celebrities, and everyday people alike. In my doing this research and discovering more about cancel culture, I hope to mitigate this fear and create a conversation that is imperative to diffusing the power that canceling holds.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Life on Social Media: Interactions on social media are different from interactions in real life***

Social media is a booming networking platform that has become so immersive to our on-the-go lifestyles, that has seamlessly integrated itself into the primary form of communication we look forward to on a daily basis. For many, social media has become the only way of navigating “genuine” connection, conversation, and expression apart from the communities they may be living in. This is especially true for adolescents and young adults between the ages of 18 and 29, as they are the leading age group in use of all dominant social media platforms (Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook) as of 2018, especially Youtube and Twitter (Smith, 2019). Ironically, though, it has been proven that social media has generally reduced social interaction with peers, and therefore a positive correlation to increased feelings of loneliness in adolescents who use it more often to interact with celebrities rather than friends (Kim, 2019).

Additionally, our understanding of real-life, juxtaposed to social media realism, has shifted drastically throughout the years. Some sources have used Goffman’s Theory of Dramaturgy to reinforce how social media has shifted what performance looks like, naming social media an “exhibitionist” platform wherein artifacts (data recorded and then presented after real-time) are presented and then commented on in a public forum. Regular interpersonal interaction can be more associated with a “situation” in which two or more people are interacting in real-time. Therefore a situation could be recorded, and then posted to the internet, where it becomes an artifact (Hogan, 2010). In both environments, there is a “frontstage” and “backstage” in which Goffman believes we manage our authentic selves (the version of ourselves that we are without social influence or witness) to become more palatable, becoming our “social selves”

which directly influence the situations and exhibitions we take part in. Schwartz also speaks to our social self as the spatial self, describing how identity is location-based and will shift on that basis, including digitally such as checking into a certain location online or posting an artifact at a certain location (Schwartz, 2014).

***Media is changing how we speak on what we care about***

With our shifting understanding of impression management also comes a shift in our conversations, particularly on these exhibitionist platforms. The increased reach of social media has resulted in greater access to conflicting opinions, and therefore conflict, especially in a democratic state such as the U.S. (Beck, 2015). Conflict is also reinforced by computer-mediated conversations, as there is much that could get lost in the perception of text in comparison to interpersonal interaction (Ishii, 2010).

Reader also speaks to conflict in ideology and how it is confronted by anonymous and non-anonymous users, making the claim that anonymous users feel less fear when sharing their honest opinions, as they do not risk their reputation if their opinion isn't favored, insinuating that anonymity reinforces the sanctity of free speech on social media. Reader's content analysis, while highlighting the concepts of fear and truth, also speaks to how others (particularly in the fourth estate) resent anonymity and the lack of accountability the user faces for their words (Reader, 2012). Either way, use of social media platforms gives space for users to engage in discourse using their own identity, or one that they can create for themselves, which influences the level of responsibility a user has when interacting with others (or possibly canceling them).

A more specific example of what non-anonymous interaction looks like on the platform known for canceling (Twitter) comes from an ethnographic study done with 3 teenagers over the span of multiple years, which allowed Gleason to discover specific forms of exhibitionist performance that influence the way teens interact on the app: mimicking each others' vernacular and posting structure (mirroring), posting general updates about activities (lifetweeting), and posting consistently specific updates about one aspect of the subject's life (lifeblogging) (Gleason, 2016). Some Twitter users do also have political motivations on Twitter, Park asserts: those who are opinion leaders, or have a natural influence that allows others to listen, find themselves politically motivated in their Twitter use, based on online surveys (Park, 2013). Much of political discourse now is identity-based, as most pressing issues in the U.S. involve racial identity, gender identity, or class roles.

### ***Social Media discourse and social isolation***

It's become so easy to block, mute, or ignore someone using technology, especially if your only contact with a user is behind a screen or a keyboard. But before technology being as accessible as it is now, did we as a society silence people? Neumann seems to believe silencing opinions is nothing new, based on their theory of the spiral of silence. In this theory, the public majority is conditioned to silence the public minority, an objective that was particularly effective during WWII in Nazi Germany, as compliance (silence) was a matter of life or death. The theory relies on the idea that humans are inherently social creatures and fear isolation as an aspect of their nature (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). As shown in Neumann's analysis of their theory, there are some instances in which being silenced can guarantee ones' safety or livelihood, but how well

does their point translate into 2020? Where is the line between conversations that are uncomfortable and conversations that are genuinely unsafe to take part in?

Particularly when speaking to identity or identity politics, that line becomes increasingly blurred. Doing a broader form of content analysis to find meaning in identity discourse revolving around cancel culture is really the goal, in order to reduce the blur. It's possible that the concept of canceling retains no true influence and has become something we've all just picked up on taking part in because it's catchy, or because other people are engaging in it. I find it hard to believe that it carries absolutely no social significance, as it is a term that has gone viral.

My argument regarding cancel culture as a concept is that it does not maintain any influence through the action of canceling others, but instead is now being used in common discussion as a social coping mechanism rooted in fear, acting as a form of impression management, this form being identified as confrontation aversion or conflict avoidance.

## **Methodology**

For my research, I focused on U.S. bred podcasts that are actively discussing cancellation culture in the span of the last year. My selection was done through purposive sampling on Youtube when searching the keywords "cancel culture podcast" in that order. Purposive sampling is the most optimal strategy when collecting this data through content analysis, as there is only a niche demographic engaging in longer conversations through podcasts about cancel culture as a concept, and targeting this demographic has led me to the most information I could find regarding expanded discourse revolving around cancel culture specifically. I've transcribed and coded 6 podcasts, between 30 minutes and 75 minutes in length, that have been recorded in

the last year: this is because cancel culture as a concept erupted in 2018 and flowed into 2019, but has not been seen to maintain any “virality” in social media or in the news before 2018. These podcasts are of a free-flowing format in which multiple hosts engage in a guided conversation about different themes. There will be no filter as to what genre the podcast is (comedy, informational, etc.) nor what perspective (liberal, conservative, moderate) as I am looking to understand the conversations being had as a whole, not from a particular ethnic or political group.

In my research, my goal was to analyze the language used when discussing “canceling” and “cancel culture” to contextualize its meaning in social media and political discourse revolving around identity and power in the U.S. I’ve progressively coded both deductively and inductively as I transcribed my research: I used deductive coding to search for and assertions of being for or against cancel culture as well as mention of celebrities, and I maintained an inductive mindset revolving around any other themes that presented themselves, such as fear, forgiveness, and representation. The reasoning behind opinion toward cancel culture and celebrity stems from the context in which many tabloids and social media participants have mentioned canceling, as it has almost always revolved around a celebrity who has been accused of controversial actions that are gaining attention (for example, Bill Cosby after his sexual assault accusations, or Kanye West after his decision to support Donald Trump).

Content analysis can sometimes be more generalized, or lack historical context if done in a more focused way, but I chose this strategy because this is a conversation that is new, that itself is somewhat generalized and lacks historical context in terms of exactly why it started. This method makes the most sense for a concept that is only now in its early phases of development.

The goal of this research is to contribute to filling in those gaps, to seek purpose and motivation in why we have decided to cancel people.

## **Findings and Analysis**

So what is Cancel Culture, really? It's tough to say. None of the videos that have been observed and transcribed provide any concrete definition as to what cancel culture is, though they all acknowledge it as a concept and express an opinion regarding it in the abstract. There are multiple other concepts that were mentioned in the videos that were acknowledged, such as fear, virality, and forgiveness, all of which will be analyzed in further detail to illustrate how people are talking about these concepts.

In looking into these conversations, I asked myself: who is represented here? Who is canceling, or being canceled? Interestingly enough, in 4 out of 6 of the videos, the people acknowledging and commenting on cancel culture were people outside of the sphere of original conflict (they were neither canceled nor canceling anyone). The two exceptions to this, The Sum Sum Podcast and Kanye West's interview with BigBoy, are both commentaries from the perspective of the canceled. The perspective that is not directly represented is that of those who do the canceling, but one could argue that the third party who is retelling the story of what happened between the canceled and cancelers is vaguely providing the context of the canceler's opinion. My curiosity has been peaked, though, and a gap that I would love to fill is whether or not those who do the canceling actually engage in discourse as to why? Or are chances for those who are pro-cancel very limited, as the act of canceling does not provide space for it?



### ***The Fear of Cancellation***

Should being canceled be a fear that those working in media internalize? Or should the fear surrounding it be made null by ignoring the risk factors? There is no clear answer, as only 4 of the 6 transcribed videos mention fear, and all in varying ways.

Three of the four videos that mention fear speak against being fearful of being canceled. Kanye West's interview, The Rubin Report, and The Sum Sum Podcast's videos are all vaguely anti-fear, with slight differences as to how fear was mentioned. The Rubin Report's guest speaker, Clay Travis, speaks to the fear of loss and cancel culture:

“C: That fear is always there because we live in this Cancel Culture, that somebody Wants to believe they're going to ‘cancel’ you, so it's... I guess I wish there were more people who wanted to speak out- but if you're employed solely by a major corporation today I totally understand the fear of ‘I got kids, y’know, and a mortgage payment, I got my kids’ college funds that I’m worried about and everything else’ and frankly the way I think about it too is that leaves me a huge area to own, right, where there are a lot of people who may agree with me which proves, y’know the audience responds to it, but others are afraid to say what I’m saying even if they agree with it...”

The What Does She Know Podcast speaks to the fear of speaking out on campus and ones' voice not being heard, only to realize your “marginalized” opinion is one that many also share:

“B: I feel like I've had conversations with people in private and I'm like, throwing out these ideas that I'm like ‘oh my god people are gonna think that I'm so crazy, like they're gonna think I... that they're gonna cancel me, that I'm some racist, that I'm y'know, bigoted or whatever, and then as soon as I open up that space everyone that I've had this conversation have been like ‘I feel the same exact way.’ Campus feels suffocating at times and it feels terrifying to say something that goes out of this larger agenda of what it means to be a person of color on this campus.

C: ...it's possible to be not at all fringe in an American context but be absolutely fringe in your local context and feel sort of smothered because of it. And when I hear stories like that, a pro-choice kid at a Christian university, my instinct and my heart goes out to those people that are trying to have a conversation about an issue that really does have two sides.”

Both the Rubin Report and What Does She Know podcasts touch upon the idea that the public opinions that may be ostracized or canceled, have a private audience that approves of the message being communicated. This audience lives in the fear of experiencing the same backlash and harassment that those who speak out may already be experiencing.

One host of the SumSum Podcast speaks to hesitation in expression because of cancel culture (H), whereas the host who claims he has been canceled (A) claims to have no fear when it comes to speaking his mind:

“C: Do you ever feel any hesitation about speaking on any of these subjects because-

H: Hell yeah! No matter what you say-

A: I’m not-

H:-somebody might be like (tssk) mmhm

A: I’m not

H: Well see there’s your chauvinism showing

A: You know what I got called- fuck no! No, fuck that we gon talk about this shit, we gon talk about this shit, we gon talk about this shit because I got fucking called a fuckin sexist, I’ve gotten called- I mean just within like, a month (laughs) just recently, I got called like a chauvinist, a sexist, and we need to discuss that shit.”

BigBoy asks Kanye if he’s afraid, to which he expresses his only fear lies with God:

“B: Are you afraid of losing your audience, Ye?

K: I told you I’m only afraid of God! I’m only afraid of my daddy, God. I done been fifteen years I’m telling you, God is showing that you can have your own thoughts bro. I been canceled before there was cancel culture. Who told you that my career would be over? The same people that are telling you that you can’t have a right to say who you would vote for, those people would be soon to take Jesus out the schools.”

Both Kanye and the host of the Sum Sum Podcast clearly express feeling no fear whatsoever when receiving public backlash or being “canceled,” which reinforces the idea that the individual who is being canceled may feel impervious to the comments of the outspoken and resentful public, while the private audience that the previous two podcasts mention watch and support them behind closed doors.

### ***The Swell of Cancellation on Media***

Canceling has become more prevalent since its appearance in 2018, as 5 of the 6 videos transcribed are from 2019 and 1 from 2020. But how do we determine popularity? How many people engaged with each of the 6 videos?

Video Title	Number of Views	Number of Comments
Couple of Issues: Cancel Culture	14,284	57
Everyone is Cancelled: SmoshCast	151,726	419
Kanye West on 'Jesus is King', Being Canceled, Finding God + A Lot More	3,566,284	32,702
Stop Living in Fear of Cancel Culture: Rubin Report	58,415	308
Identity Politics, Cancel Culture, & Racism on College Campuses with Coleman Hughes	3,817	56
The Sum Sum Podcast Episode 1: Cancel Culture	368	18

Where else are people engaging in Cancel Culture, and in what ways? Twitter and Youtube are the top two answers to that question. 4 of the 6 videos mentioned one of these

platforms, either through acknowledgment of subscribers or followers or through acknowledging the service directly. It seems more convenient that Youtube as a platform is mentioned, as all of the videos were posted on Youtube, but Twitter is mentioned more explicitly than Youtube-- this could be due to the cultural implications of being a Youtuber and having a channel/creating videos, there may be no need to explicitly acknowledge Youtube with a capital 'Y' in the way that it's spoken about. Mentions of Youtube are implied in the words "subscriber" or "views," as those are the two variables on the platform that generates revenue for creators, and would be imperative to a creator's career.

Clay Travis of the Rubin Report mentions Twitter explicitly by citing a statistic that emphasizes the idea of a cultural minority monopolizing the platform:

"There's a great stat that's out right now that I saw where it's something like 20 percent of people are on Twitter let's use as an example and of that 20 percent 80 percent of all tweets are sent by like 10 percent of the overall population right and we know that Twitter leans far left we know that you've been in your own battles over this the social media company as if those competent lead far-left enough already they're also magnifying those voices right that reflect the culture by which they wish were more popular and so you're allowing ultimately you know something like 2 or 3 percent of the population that isn't at all reflective of the universe to dictate decisions that you make."

Kanye West communicates his closeness to the owner of Twitter to BigBoy:

"B: Do you care about what white Twitter say?

K: I'm happy that that's a term! Yes and matter fact I do, I love Jack Dorsey, the owner of Twitter, that comes over to my house, and gives me business advice, looks at contracts, respects me, honors me- he is my favorite founder. "

The SmoshCast's Courtney Miller mentions both Twitter and Youtube, both increasing in use and profit (AdSense) as conflict escalates in a public space. Later on, host Shayne Topp also

implicitly mentions Youtube through views and subscriptions and Jake Paul's entrepreneurial gain from being canceled:

"I've had people who were like in a digital space who have wronged me, and I'm like, you have the option to not be able to work through it on your own and be okay or you can get it off your chest in this kind of immature way which is announcing it to the world, which is like a feast for all websites. Everyone goes to Twitter to see what's up, everyone's just feasting on it and gaining AdSense from everything, it's crazy."

"S: But this is the thing, even though it looks, it appears as though it blew up in Jake Paul's face, Jake Paul is gonna get more views from this. That video got so many views it works, it works every time.

S: I don't know, there was probably someone forever ago who got canceled but it really is more now because we follow people-

C: -the power of the internet

S: We used to kinda just watch video by video, but now people subscribe to someone, so when something happens there's a lot of power there in going 'oh I can unsubscribe to you, and destroy you'"

The Couple of Issues Podcast hosts mention Youtube implicitly when speaking to how many subscribers James Charles has lost following his controversy:

M: ...three million subscribers gone? That's like, nuts.

C: Isn't that insane? I know. That's three million people clicking a button, like taking time to click a button--

M: I feel like once it went past 100,000 people were like 'oh I wanna be a part of this now,' like let's just keep watching it drop.

So who are these celebrities whose names were mentioned in each podcast, and why are they relevant to the context of Cancel Culture? What controversies have they faced that allow them to be publicly scrutinized, and possibly exiled? Attached is a chart that lists each name

mentioned in each podcast and the “scandal,” “controversy,” or “accusation” that has warranted them being someone to talk about. I did conduct some additional research to gain some more descriptive information, as many of the podcasts would generally mention the name of the celebrity and continue with an opinion, implying that the viewer is aware of the events that have taken place before watching.

Celebrity Named as “Canceled”	Why Were They Canceled?
Logan Paul	When visiting the Aokigahara “suicide” forest in Japan in Dec. 2017, Logan filmed a body he’d discovered as dead and posted it to the internet, included in his vlog posted in Jan. 2018. (via <a href="https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8xb9x5/logan-paul-and-the-myth-of-cancel-culture">https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8xb9x5/logan-paul-and-the-myth-of-cancel-culture</a> )
Jake Paul	Former Disney actor, Jake documents himself as a public nuisance (setting fire to furniture in the pool of his home, releasing his home address so his fans can “visit” his home, among other shenanigans), is known for antagonizing other Youtubers for the sake of popularity. (via <a href="https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/07/jake-paul-disney-bizaardvark-neighbors-controversy">https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/07/jake-paul-disney-bizaardvark-neighbors-controversy</a> )
Joe Biden	Former Vice President of the US, Joe Biden is accused of sexual assault by Tara Reade in 2019. (via <a href="https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/05/07/a-time-line-of-tara-reades-sexual-assault-allegations-against-joe-biden/#131e2c2279d1">https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/05/07/a-time-line-of-tara-reades-sexual-assault-allegations-against-joe-biden/#131e2c2279d1</a> )
Toby Turner	Youtuber Toby Turner was accused in 2016 of drugging and raping his ex-girlfriend while they were dating in 2013- it was also implied that he may have a drug addiction. (via <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toby_Turner#Sexual_assault_allegations">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toby_Turner#Sexual_assault_allegations</a> )

Shay Carl	Family vlogger Shay Carl was accused of cheating on his wife online via text and video, it was also confirmed he is an alcoholic. (via <a href="https://metro.co.uk/2018/03/21/shaytards-stop-making-videos-happened-7403719/">https://metro.co.uk/2018/03/21/shaytards-stop-making-videos-happened-7403719/</a> )
James Charles	Beauty Youtuber James Charles was confronted by peer Tati Westbrook for partnering with a competing company. Tati also accused James of sexual coercion, attempting to “turn straight boys gay.” (via <a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/style/james-charles-makeup-artist-youtube.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/style/james-charles-makeup-artist-youtube.html</a> )
Kevin Hart	Comedian Kevin Hart was confronted about homophobic jokes and tweets upon being selected as the host for the 2019 Oscars, an opportunity he later lost. (via <a href="https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/oscars/8492982/kevin-hart-oscar-hosting-controversy-timeline">https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/oscars/8492982/kevin-hart-oscar-hosting-controversy-timeline</a> )
R. Kelly	Singer R.Kelly has perpetually been accused of statutory rape, as well as being physically and mentally abusive to young women. The more publicized current information became, the public decided to cancel him. (via <a href="https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/10/entertainment/r-kelly-timeline/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/10/entertainment/r-kelly-timeline/index.html</a> )
Lizzo	Lizzo received public backlash for wearing a dress that exposed her bare behind at an NBA while twerking on camera. (via <a href="https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/10/entertainment/lizzo-thong-trnd/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/10/entertainment/lizzo-thong-trnd/index.html</a> )
Kanye West	Kanye West has faced multiple controversies over the years, but the most pivotal of his career was the backlash for his avid support of President Trump, which sparked the debate of whether or not his music should be streamed any longer. (via <a href="https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/marcusjones/kanye-west-controversies-timeline">https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/marcusjones/kanye-west-controversies-timeline</a> )

An interesting commonality between many of these celebrities is the sexual component of their accusations: 6 of the 10 celebrities being targeted for sexual misconduct, sexual assault, or “inappropriate” expressions of sexuality. The Paul brothers, known on Youtube for causing unnecessary conflict, are 2 of the exceptions to this rule. Kevin Hart is the other exception to this rule, as his discriminatory jokes about homosexuality do not imply sexual misconduct, though him and Kanye West (the 4th exception) have both been accused of bigotry against different minority communities, West’s support of Donald Trump being perceived as a betrayal to the black community.

### ***Excommunication of the perceived minority***

When a person is canceled, they are singled out from the forum bunch and are placed on public display as an example of antisocial, unacceptable behavior. They are excommunicated from the community in which they were once accepted by those within it, almost as a warning to those who hold the same opinion that any actions or perceptions in a similar vein, or support of those actions, will never be tolerated. What is seen as the “minority” opinion, as the person who is canceled seems sorely outnumbered, is removed from the forum. Does this mean that the minority opinion no longer exists, or does it only force it into hiding, limiting any possible discourse on the subject? As only 2 of the 6 of the podcasts touch upon this concept specifically, there is no conclusive, unanimous answer to this question. Both the Rubin Report and the What Does She Know Podcast though, show that the opinions are still there, only hiding behind closed doors in fear of exile.



Clay Travis with the Rubin Report speaks from personal experience, claiming the opinion exists if he has an audience that resonates with it in anonymity instead of speaking up:

“there are a lot of people who may agree with me which proves, y’know the audience responds to it, but others are afraid to say what I’m saying even if they agree with it...”

What Does She Know guest Coleman Hughes speaks to what he believes the process of canceling, or calling out, aspires to achieve:

“The analogy here is that when someone gets quote on quote cancelled for having a belief on campus, the point of that cancellation is to inspire fear in all of the other people who think similarly, but the fear is actually unjustified. The point of being so public, the point of callout culture is to give the rest of the people who agree with the person who was called out, an irrational fear of what will happen to them if they speak. And so what happens is that you get this massive distance between what people actually believe privately, and what people say they believe publicly.

### ***The Cancel Effect: Legit or Myth?***

So, after all of this detail regarding how to cancel someone, does it work? Does canceling actually exist? Conceptually one could argue that acknowledging cancel culture and its effects, even in disagreement, can solidify its existence in the abstract. But are there concrete effects that canceling causes? For some yes, but it seems as though the effects are never long-term.

James Charles lost 3 million subscribers as a result of being canceled, but still maintains a Youtube audience of 19 million subscribers, an Instagram following of 17.9 million, and a Twitter following of 5.5 million, his primary source of income his Youtube channel and makeup line.

Kanye West claims no effect from cancel culture in BigBoy, arguing that he is still as rich, if not more, and still pursuing/achieving his dream:

“I’m not even on Instagram and Yeezy is the number one Google searched brand on the

planet, above Louis Vuitton, above Nike, above Adidas- Yeezy! And I'm not even a part of the culture, I'm canceled, I'm canceled, I don't have no 'gram, I'm not on the 'gram, and it's the number one searched brand! Last valuation I got was three billion dollars and there's people trying to buy it so it must be worth six!

K: I done been killed so many times on social media and I'm still here, look at me!"

Kevin Hart lost an opportunity to host the Oscars, but still maintains a career as both an actor and comedian. Every Youtuber and singer mentioned still earns comfortable income from their careers, despite attempts to cancel. Joe Biden remains in the running for the 2020 presidential race. The temporary setback of being canceled cannot inhibit fans from making the choice to support despite accusations or actions, as much as the fear of being canceled allows the risk to seem so much larger. Knowing this, should we forgive those who have been canceled for their actions? None of the other podcasts mention forgiveness or rehabilitation, an act that would seemingly counteract the canceling that may take place, but the host of the Sum Sum Podcast speaks to how people change, grow, and learn:

“So if we cancel him (R.Kelly) though, you're basically saying that you... Like nothing that he can do, he can never be rehabilitated, throw him on into jail. If you think that, and you think that that is the case, then okay, I get why you believe in cancel culture, but personally for me, I believe that a good majority of people can be rehabilitated. I think that things can be altered and changed.”

The host of the Sum Sum Podcast who speaks above, Aloww, is also one of the only people (with the exception of Kanye West) in any of the 6 podcasts who mentions receiving any internet backlash, or feeling “canceled,” for comments they made regarding Lizzo's body. It's possible their perspective comes from understanding the feeling of being ostracized on social media (particularly Facebook). Is there space for empathy within cancel culture?

## **Conclusion**

In a climate of uncertainty, this research was an attempt to gain some clarification on a concept that though seemingly omnipotent, instilling fear in its potential targets, has less long-term impact than previously believed. Cancel culture gives the impression that being denied

or bullied by a public forum, or cast away by what seems like the public majority is a permanent sentence, but the lives that those who have been canceled continue to lead shows us otherwise. There are those within the silent audience, supporting their idols unconditionally, which allows the careers of those who are deemed social delinquents to continue, somewhat unscathed. This begs the question: is cancel culture real? Is it legitimate in the way we've been conditioned to believe it is- as a means to hold perpetrators and abusers accountable, or is it only a scapegoat for engaging in difficult conversations that would help us learn more as a society?

My research is only the tip of a very large iceberg we have yet to fully encounter. The more we as a people continue to give multi-dimensional beings single-dimensional first (and last) chances, the less we help each other learn and grow. Social media is a breeding ground for both learning, and learned ignorance, and because of this our conversations are more antagonistic and less mindful, if not careful with our words. It is the decision of the individual to see if they will disengage, or make space within themselves to accept new ideas and choices, and for what reasons-- the impact of that decision is not singular, though. Cancel culture is still somewhat of a mystery, as the discourse researched could not provide us with a concrete definition as to what it truly is, nor the particular mechanisms of it, but we do know it is deliberate, and to some it is scary. If I were to conduct this research on a larger scale, I think there would have been some standardized uses of language that could provide us with that context, but without the time nor the help available to conduct such a large study, it was not optimal.

In some cases cancel culture begs the ethical question of who is worthy of help, forgiveness, or rehabilitation? And are we as a society responsible for providing such help? Based on the state of the U.S.'s larger systems, such as medical care, the prison-industrial

complex, and even our schools, we still struggle with this question everyday. Cancel culture is only one facet of a larger cultural issue we need to come face-to-face with. If you gain anything from reading my work, I ask that you question yourselves, question others, and stay around long enough to listen for the answer.

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1. Beck, B., McDonnell, C., Patterson, S., Ramirez, D. N., Ravenelle, A., Sun, Y., &

Thomas, T. A. (2015). American democracy: From toqueville to town halls to twitter.

*Contemporary Sociology*, 44(2), 292. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0094306115570273>

This review of an original text acts as a very well-put summation of the work of Andrew Perrin, who wrote in-depth about the shifting role of cultural democracy (in comparison to institutional democracy) and how the progression of social media has led to significantly greater access to conflict, especially political conflict. Perrin also speaks to public opinion and its importance in what he considers to be the “democratic ladder,” several rungs of which include private life, traditional media, technology, and policy responsiveness. This article will not form the basis for my research but it will be useful for helping contextualize the concepts of democracy, public opinion, civility, and conflict within the idea of cancel culture, and how that may influence conflict management.

2. Hogan, B. (2010). The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(6), 377–386. doi: 10.1177/0270467610385893

Hogan's general question is: how does Goffman's theory of dramaturgy apply to social media? He answers his own question using content analysis of other academic journals, demonstrating the use of Goffman's theory of dramaturgy to juxtapose the significance of an online presence/performance versus live performance. Hogan cites social media platforms as exhibitionist platforms in which artifacts are placed and viewed after the point of production. This changes the value of the performance, as well as its impact, being that it can be removed from the context in which it was originally made. Hogan did a great job of analyzing and cross-examining multiple sources under a dramaturgical lens, but there seems to be a gap in what a live stream (a video displayed on social media that is being made in real-time) may count as in terms of exhibition or staged performance. It's possible that the label of a live stream may change if it is being watched live or if it is being replayed at a later date. It's likely that's the only mode of production on an exhibitionist platform that can initially be counted as a live performance. This piece contributes to the larger canon of literature revolving around social media by providing greater definition as to what a "friend" is, as well as This piece relates to my research and hypothesis in the way that it provides a new perspective on social media and impression management on social media that may explain why cancellation culture is so apparent on an exhibitionist platform in comparison to in-person situations, or even performances.

3. Gleason, B. W. (2016). *The world of teenage twitter: New literacies, identity work, and humanizing pedagogy* (Order No. 10144339). Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1811665687?accountid=14171>

This ethnographic study involved three adolescent participants that Gleason examined over the span of multiple years, particularly in regard to their interaction on social media and the influence that engaging in Twitter may have had on their identity. Gleason defines three major concepts as his primary results: mirroring, lifetweeting, and lifeblogging. He defines mirroring as an imitation of common social media trends or practices, lifetweeting as the communication of an action or “life event” through Twitter (which Schwartz and Halegoua may consider an assertion of the ‘spatial self’), and lifeblogging as lifetweeting that maintains a consistent lens on only one aspect of the subject’s life. Understanding these concepts helps me as a researcher better understand possible influences as to why Twitter became the platform most-known for canceling.

4. Ishii, K. (2010). Conflict management in online relationships. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 13(4), 365-370.  
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2009.0272>

Through surveying university students, Ishii discovered a trend in increased conflict due to CMC, or Computer-Mediated Communication in contrast to in-person communication. In terms of managing those conflicts, it was shown that most university students use “cooperative management styles” such as integrating, compromising, or obliging. One criticism I would make of this research is that those that participated in the survey were disproportionately women-identifying, which may have an influence on the results. Ishii’s research is useful in the way that it highlights online conflict and displays the means by which a majority of the university students surveyed, all of which fit into the below 30 demographic from the statistical

evidence in Smith's research (shown later). This may directly contradict or reinforce my hypothesis, depending on the perspective-- students may be using canceling as a means by which to avoid conflict management or maybe not participating as much in canceling as expected, as avoiding is not a cooperative management style. A sample of 156 people is also not extremely large and cannot speak to the general temperament of social media platforms at large.

5. Kim, J., Kim, J., & Yang, H. (2019). Loneliness and the use of social media to follow celebrities: A moderating role of social presence. *Social Science Journal*, 56(1), 21.  
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2018.12.007>

Through online survey, Kim Kim and Yang search for a correlation between followers' loneliness and their engagement with celebrities on social media. They find that those who more actively engage with celebrities do feel more loneliness than those who do not engage as frequently. In their research, they also reinforce the point that it has been previously proven that those who engage in social media more as a whole, do feel greater levels of loneliness-- this aspect is only magnified when examining the digital pseudo-relationships that survey subjects have with online celebrities. This article will not form the basis for my research but it will be useful for understanding why celebrities and politicians, or those with greater overall social media following/engagement become susceptible to being canceled, despite most of their engagement being positive engagement.

6. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The spiral of silence : public opinion, our social skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The spiral of silence theory, as developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, is a Political Science theory developed in Germany immediately after WWII and the Holocaust, a travesty the country did not seem capable of until it happened. This theory delves into the opinion of the majority versus the opinion of the minority, and how the suppression of minority opinions develops when the majority is conditioned to believe and enforce one opinion. The assumption that this theory thrives on is that humans inherently fear social isolation, and will work at any cost to prevent social isolation, even suppressing their own opinion and withholding individual expression. This ties into impression management and group interaction, which relates closely to cancel culture and why we as a collective may decide to cancel people. An integral aspect of this theory is the influence of mass media in the conditioning and suppressing of individual opinion, which was extremely effective during WWII and debatably, is extremely prevalent now. A criticism of Noelle-Neumann's theory often involves the outliers: what about those who do not feel that same fear of isolation, though they are the minority? More often than not those people will still speak out, but I wouldn't say these outliers negate the value of the theory itself. This theory will form the basis for my research and it will be useful to further contextualize the motivations of canceling and the influence of a majority opinion within social media as a form of mass media.

7. Park, C. S. (2013). Does twitter motivate involvement in politics? tweeting, opinion leadership, and political engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1641-1648.  
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.01.044>

Through a web-based survey, Park investigates the role that opinion leaders, or those with a natural inclination to have an impact on their immediate environment when asserting their



opinion, have on Twitter in a political context. Park finds that opinion leaders find themselves more motivated and being engaged on Twitter does motivate their personal political actions, but for those who do not consider themselves opinion leaders, engaging in Twitter does not influence their political engagement. This study is from 2013, though, and therefore is somewhat outdated, as Twitter has progressed monumentally from 2013 until 2019. This article will not form the basis for my research but will be useful for understanding some of the roles that identity politics may or may not play in the engagement within cancel culture.

8. Reader, B. (2012). Free Press vs. Free Speech? The Rhetoric of “Civility” in Regard to Anonymous Online Comments. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89(3), 495–513. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699012447923>

This text investigates the concept of civility and free speech in anonymous comments and uses content analysis to compare and contrast the opinions of the fourth estate (journalistic media) versus the opinions of those who make anonymous comments and/or perceive anonymity as a means of expressing and accessing freedom. Reader discusses hegemonic concordance (the idea that the two most dominant opinions in a controversial argument are those two that most oppose each other), and the impact that it has on peoples’ willingness to share their opinions alongside their identities. Reader also highlights the fear that people feel of sharing their identity alongside their honest opinions, as it may result in them feeling socially excluded or silenced. Being that this is a literary analysis, it would be interesting to see what opinions would have been communicated through a different method of data collection, such as an interview or a survey (one anonymous, one non-anonymous). Reader’s data helps us contextualize impression

management online while engaging in controversial discourse, and implies that there is a certain level of freedom in anonymity that may assist in collective action, which begs the question: is cancel culture a form of collective action propelled by anonymity? And why do we do it? My research will hopefully help answer that question.

9. Schwartz, R., & Halegoua, G. R. (2014). The spatial self: Location-based identity performance on social media. *New Media & Society*, 17(10), 1643–1660. doi: 10.1177/1461444814531364

Schwartz and Halegoua use content analysis to identify and form what they consider to be the spatial self, or the human being and their body performing and recording an action (online or offline) within a particular space as a means to perform a particular aspect of their identity. Examples that they provide of this on social media are presenting videos or photos of oneself, and “checking in” to a particular GPS location through platforms like Facebook. Both speak to the issue of privacy in this context, which is not my priority in terms of my research, but they also speak to the performance of the spatial self in the context of a location being manipulated by said location or audience, which helps further display possible motivations for canceling others, which is why it becomes important to my own research. This article will not form the basis of my research but will be useful for understanding how canceling others may be a version of location-based spatial self-performance.

10. Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2019, April 17). Social Media Use 2018: Demographics and Statistics. Retrieved December 12, 2019, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>.

A compilation of surveys processed by the Pew Research shows that the most prominent demographics on all major social media platforms (such as Snapchat, Youtube, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook), are under the age of 30 and that those using some major social media platforms also use Youtube if they use any other social media platform. Youtube acts as the common thread between the major social media platforms, which highlights why finding podcasts on Youtube compared to another streaming site is important to finding a variety of opinions when coding about discourse. This article will not act as the basis of my research but is useful in the way that it helps us understand the age groups that may be taking part in cancel culture, and which demographic is most motivated by cancel culture, and for possibly what reasons. This article helps adjust the focus to those who are under 30 that may be “canceling” others, generally speaking-- this does not mean that those under 30 are the only people who are getting canceled though, as that information will hopefully be discovered with further research.