A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF CANCEL CULTURE AMONG PUBLIC FIGURES AND PRIVATE FIGURES

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Introduction

Shortly after the Coronavirus pandemic provoked a global lockdown in 2020, I started to notice an ongoing trend on social media whereby users would call attention to others’ mistakes or socially unacceptable actions among their own networks, and sometimes even beyond. At that time, I recalled the #MeToo movement, where many social media users have amplified attention to the misdeeds of Hollywood executives like Harvey Weinstein, and other publicly known individuals like singer R. Kelly, and actor Bill Cosby. So much public attention devastates the professional careers of these once-powerful men, and the phenomenon came to be known as ‘cancel culture.’ Lisa Nakamura states:

It’s a cultural boycott, […] It’s an agreement not to amplify, signal boost, give money to. People talk about the attention economy – when you deprive someone of your attention, you’re depriving them of a livelihood (Nakamura in Bromwich, 2018, para. 1).

Cancel culture had been around prior to the pandemic, and it most frequently impacted public figures. It was only when private figures, consisting of regular, everyday citizens like myself, started to get cancelled as well that I decided to dig a little deeper into the matter.

Cancel culture finds its roots in ‘callout culture’, which has been used for decades, and recently during the #MeToo movement in 2014. Callout culture has proven effective in certain circumstances, such as Kelly’s arrest in 2019, when he was federally charged with possessing child pornography and sex trafficking. The movement called for Kelly to be canceled on a sociocultural level; since then, playing his music has been
frowned upon. Weinstein’s highly publicized cancelation was also at the center of the #MeToo movement, which encouraged and empowered survivors of sexual assault and violence to speak out against their perpetrators. Many high-profile executives who were implicated in similar situations, or connected to Weinstein, were fired as a result of this. We can see from this that cancel culture embraces the act of calling out, allowing marginalized individuals to seek accountability and justice when the legal system fails to prevail. Depending on the situation, complainants might not have felt satisfied with the punishment deserved or may even be afraid to get the legal system involved – this can be because of other influences such as ones’ immigration status in the United States as well.

Cancel culture uses similar techniques as cyberbullying. However, many seem to be more tolerant of cancel culture because it is deemed to be a form of social activism. 

*Stopbullying.gov* defines cyberbullying as

Bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. […] cyberbullying includes sending, posting or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation (Stopbullying.gov, n.d.).

Seeing cancel culture uses similar techniques as cyberbullying, the use of targeted humiliation and sharing of personal information, such as an individual’s workplace, can be a safety concern. Though the use of these techniques are usually initiated and developed online, they have ramifications that can be harmful to one’s offline reality as well.
As social media users continue to consume and produce media on social platforms, it seems that many unimpacted do not realize the ramifications dealt by those who have been publicly canceled, even for those that may have been wrongfully canceled. Due to the popularity of social platforms and heightened media coverage such as Twitter among users, posts attempting to detract social and financial support for an individual can easily be disseminated across the internet. Removing one’s social and financial support can come in different forms – the loss of a job and career, or even the opportunity to attend an educational institution. Individuals targeted often find themselves ostracized by their peers, and communities they once called their own. While one may not be impacted by cancel culture themselves, this phenomenon may hurt a friend or a loved one, which may lead to mental stress and financial burden for those involved in the matter.

Cancel culture can be both good and bad, depending on the situation. While it can be used in a way to seek justice from those who may deserve their punishment, some may not have deserved the consequences they faced as well. It is possible that we will have to accept that cancel culture may be around for the long-term, especially on social media. One way to contend with this new reality suggested by my research and analysis in this proposal is to encourage the use of “calling in” instead of “calling out”. The Macmillan Dictionary describes ‘calling out’ as an act “to criticize someone about something they have said or done and challenge them to explain it” (Macmillan Dictionary, n.d.). The New York Times editor at large Jessica Bennett states, “Calling out may be described as a sister to dragging, cousin to problematic, and one of the many things that can add up to cancellation” (Bennett, 2020). Instead, visiting professor at Smith College, Loretta J.
Ross, challenges the culture and encourages having uncomfortable conversations with those who may have performed transgressive acts (calling-in)(2020). This solution emerges from the finding that it allows people to learn in an encouraging and kind environment, instead of social support systems from those around them. It is important because it allows us room to make mistakes and learn from them. Humans are inherently imperfect beings and are bound to make mistakes all the time. However, that does not mean to say that those canceled should not face consequences for their actions.

Cancel culture piqued my interest due to the prevalence of the term used in the recent years, especially with the rise of social media platforms and smart phones. Additionally, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has also caused many to turn to social media as their main source of entertainment and communication with others, and ultimately as a news source as well. As a 24-year-old Malaysian Chinese woman, born and raised in Malaysia, I have personally witnessed the rise of cancel culture on social media platforms over a period of 6 years studying abroad in the United States. This issue stuck with me during an incident that occurred when the Trump administration announced an order prohibiting international students like myself, from continuing to live in the United States while taking classes online. Since it was at the height of the pandemic, many universities across the country were forced to hold their classes online to curb the spread of the uncertain virus.

As I voiced my concerns and disapproval of the situation, I was confronted with multiple students online who did not share the same views and experienced what appeared to be mob-like behavior environment online. Though what I had experienced was only a very surface-level confrontation, it was nowhere near the impact of those
canceled. This topic on canceling others ultimately piqued my interest in cancel culture. Due to the nature of the incident, I felt disappointed that they were not able to see my point of view, while I could empathize with them. Typed texts can read differently than spoken words, so perhaps a platform that would allow users to form a speaking discussion about the matter would have been a better form of communication.

For this study, I focused my attention on social media users on Twitter because I have noted ongoing participation in cancel culture on this platform. As I studied their users, I looked into a cursory developmental history of the platforms to understand their creators’ original intentions, and how they have evolved over time. These findings led my research closer to finding how they dovetail with cancel culture as well. However, it is important to note that though cancel culture mainly stems from social media, it could arise among groups not on social media as well. Though social media have been commonly used to amplify voices in movements, it is possible for movements pertaining to cancel culture to move beyond these platforms. While I have personally witnessed cancel culture in action on multiple occasions, to help keep my biases in check, I would like to emphasize that I understand that this social matter may be influenced by cultural, geographical and socioeconomic factors such as where participants of cancel culture were raised, their family backgrounds, and their personal experiences.

In the following section, I will proceed with a literature review, followed by methods used in my case study and analyses. Afterward, I will present my research findings, and finally, end my work with a discussion and conclusion. To aid my research in this area, I have prepared research questions to help keep my work in alignment:
• What are some outcomes of cancel culture for both the targeted individual or group and those carrying out the cancelation?
• Where is the line between what is considered to be hate speech and something protected by free speech?
• What benefits are reaped from cancel culture?
• Who benefits from cancel culture?

I will be using these questions as guide points in my review of 25 scholarly works, employing the research methods of textual analysis to ground my inquiry within five main themes: Social Rewards, Spiral of Silence, and the Dramatization of Media for Capitalistic Gain; The Dilemma of Free Speech vs. Hate Speech; Humor, Sarcasm, and Irony; Counterspeech; and lastly, Performative Allyship. When searching for relevant articles to support and supplement my work, some of the key phrases and terms I used were “cancel culture”, “callout culture”, “cancelled”, “cyberbullying”, “free speech”, “hate speech”, among others.

The remainder of this literature review will serve as an overview of the main concepts I have found in the scholarly works examined, in order to better comprehend how social media users, contend with cancel culture through their participation and consumption of social media on Twitter.
Literature Review

Social Rewards, Spiral of Silence, and the Dramatization of Media for Capitalistic Gain

Social interaction and engagement are important aspects of our health and well-being as humans. We maintain a support system in our lives through interacting with family members, classmates, and colleagues on a daily basis. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow us to maintain relationships or “stay in touch” with others in our social circles. Gastil states, “As members of groups, we permit a part of our identity and goals to exist as part of a small collective, and the convergence of these parts of our individual lives gives the group a coherent meaning, boundary, purpose, structure, and norms” (Gastil, n.d., p. 455). Social media acts as a platform for individuals, both public and private, to engage and share with their networks, even in a virtual group setting. For instance, users may join a Facebook group to stay informed on a particular topic, or to connect with others with a common interest or background. These groups can be geographically-based, or interest-based, with topics ranging from “All Things Costco Bay Area” to “UCLA Transfer Students”. To better understand this, it is vital to touch upon the construction evolution of social media platforms. According to Hoffman et al., who cites The Zuckerberg Files, early Facebook “wasn’t to make a huge community site, it was to make something where you could type in someone’s name and find out a bunch of information about them” (Hoffman et al., 2018, p. 204). As time passed, Facebook started developing itself into a social network, and started shifting its user-agenda to “incorporate celebrities, sparking a further recasting of individual users as ‘fans’ or
‘followers’” (p. 210). From this rhetoric, we can start to see the use of a fandom to promote a sense of popularity. Hoffman et al. also states,

Zuckerberg creates a kind of cosmology that places the users, commercial actors, and Facebook shoulder to shoulder – a view that flattens and obfuscates the incomprehensibly large differences in power between these different players. In this way, our work extends and adds another layer of nuance to previous work in this area – for example, it shows how Facebook not only gives users, as Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) argue, the appearance of control by simplifying and diversifying tools for managing content, but also rhetorically positioning users on the same plane as would-be content exploiters (p. 214).

This ability to create content on their own, just as those higher in power can, ignites a sense of power – and also the possibility for them to exploit content for their own social rewards as well.

Social media can also be compared to a popularity contest. Stock states, “Shares and likes do not need much cognitive effort; they are just one click, a touch of a button” (Stock, 2017, p. 500). Alhabash et al. argues that the virality of a piece of content “signals persuasion by providing cues about the quality of the message, and thus will lead to better persuasion outcomes” (Alhabash et al., 2003, p. 179). Virality here refers to the amount of engagement and reach a content has gained during the time it has been posted online. This shows us that if a post has gone viral, people are more likely to be persuaded as these likes and shares signal a sense of trust from other users, and therefore, increases its credibility. Terms such as “likes”, “shares”, and “retweets” are not unfamiliar to avid social media users, so much so that they carry their own social rewards and are seen as a
form of social currency for those actively participating on the platform. Statistician Edward Tufte, who was also a guest on *The Social Dilemma*, a Netflix documentary, found an interesting observation whereby “There are only two industries that call their customers ‘users’: illegal drugs and software” (Tufte, 2020). CEO of Social Capital, Chamath Palihapitaya, also stated in the same documentary,

> We curate our lives around this perceived sense of perfection because we get rewarded in these short-term signals: hearts, likes, thumbs up and we conflate that with value, and we conflate it with truth. And instead, what it is fake brittle popularity that’s short term and leaves you even more, and admit it, vacant and empty before you did it. Because that enforces you into a vicious cycle where you’re like what’s the next thing that I need to do now, because I need it back” (Palihapitaya, 2020).

Chasing after these social rewards may also bring forth a sense of addiction for users who make content in hopes of gaining more “likes” and “shares”. The idea is that the more likes you have, the more you are “liked” in reality, thus making one more popular socially as well. This concept can also be linked to the term “clout”, which is what one attains as a result of popularity. Harper states,

> Gossip and rumors are a type of social currency that are used at the expense of cyber victims(s). [...] Social currency is often gathered and manipulated by cyberbullies and sometimes cyber bystanders in order to directly target one or more cyber victims – indicating that social currency can be ammunition.

Therefore, the status or standing in relation to the social hierarchy, comes from the interactions youth have with others within their culture and are directly based
on the social currency that is existence in the online domain (Harper, 2017, pp. 76-77).

Evidently, the use of this platform structural design is not necessarily a reflection of a company’s ethos of social responsibility, but one of their business models. Oftentimes, social media users can interject an event with their opinions on these platforms within seconds, leaving little to no room for any confirmation to take place.

Not only are those posting responsible for the spread of this culture, but so are cyber bystanders. Cyber bystanders add to canceling of others without much thought, they are able to develop a sense of rapport with those they are in agreement without bearing any responsibility for starting the movement to cancel someone. As for those are may not be in support of those being canceled, Kien quotes Noelle-Neumann's work explaining that "The Spiral of Silence theory explains that individuals are less likely to express their opinions if they are the minority" (Kien, 2019, p. 126). He added, "This is because they fear rejection and isolation by the majority for their difference of opinion. It can be hard to guess if one is in the minority without the contextual cues of physical world communication. Thus, the default option is silence, rather than seeking further contextual clarifications" (pp. 126-127). With little pushback from those in fear of their own social rejection, if they spoke out against the masses, it is very easy to create an echo chamber of perceptions and opinions similar to their own.

Users may also consume and share news posts on social platforms that relay an underlying agenda based on the verbiage. Oftentimes, people don’t realize their biases and they may translate similarly when they create a social media post. According to Bormann,
The result of sharing dramatizing messages is a *group fantasy*; the content of the dramatizing message that sparks the chain of reactions and feelings is called a *fantasy theme*. Even as participant-observers, members of groups often get so caught up in their fantasies that they cannot analyze them (Bormann, 1975, p. 131).

As a result, the wording of the post or tweet asking for an individual to be canceled will be exaggerated, which will in turn rile up anger and emotional feelings. Participants of cancel culture may feel strongly against the individual in question to the extent where their influenced perceptions may prevent them from properly analyzing the issue for themselves, causing them to form a symbolic convergence against the individual.

Bormann goes on to explain that,

> When a number of people come to share a cluster of fantasy themes and types, they may integrate them into a coherent rhetorical vision of some aspect of their social reality. A rhetorical vision is a unified putting-together of the various scripts that gives the participants a broader view of things (p. 133).

Similarly, since most news pieces are produced by humans as well, actions and mistake by others can be written with a dramatized effect to create buzz and boost engagement – ultimately increasing shares, and as a byproduct, income as well. Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer’s classical view of the media and morality posed that

> The media were purveyors of bourgeois and capitalist values which promoted the dominant ideology, constructing viewers as passive consumers of dominant norms and consumer behavior. On Adorno and Horkheimer’s model of the cultural industries, the standardized formats of mass-produced media genres imposed
predictable experiences on audiences and helped produced a homogenized mass consciousness and society (Kellner, 2004, p. 2).

In our current times, these capitalistic views may stem from both the corporate and political field.

While media conglomerates and politics may work together to create a narrative that may seem to be pressing, it may divert our attention away from other issues to their advantage. Kellner also explains that “[…] these media conglomerates express the corporate point of view and advance the agendas of the organization that own them and the politicians who they support and in turn who pursue the interests of the media conglomerates in governmental institutions” (p. 12). This is one of the reasons why news channels such as CNN and FOX News can present similar news pieces, but with a whole different narrative based on their own agendas. Kellner also emphasizes that, “[…] in an era of globalization, one must be aware of the global networks that produce and distribute culture in the interests of profit and corporate hegemony” (pp. 11-12). Because “Time Warner, Disney, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, Viacom, and other global conglomerates control ever more domains of production and distribution in culture”, they have the ability to decide which cultures they should capitalize on in order for them to maximize their profits, which in turn allows them to shape and commodify cultures within our society (p. 11). Additionally, Debord explains how “The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having – human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed” (Debord, 2002, p. 3). Cancel culture had initially fought and sought justice for those who did them injustice. However, cancel culture has turned into one that involved
participants on social media and beyond; though the accused might not have done anything to others besides the other individual involved, those who join in on canceling the unjust may fulfill their own satisfactions by stripping away their being, taking from them their power and in a way, taking that power on themselves.

While an individual continues to generate content using social currency, the more likely they are to be viewed by others as higher-status on the online social hierarchy because they have ‘clout’ and the power to call for actions to be done. Harper writes, “Arguably, the online social circle now holds more meaning and power in determining the ‘social hierarchy’ in the ‘real world’ than the way you interact and exist offline” (Harper, 2017, p. 70). Those who are not in agreement may silence themselves and refrain from speaking out against the majority, leaving enough room for the echo chamber to create a mob mentality. The phrase mob mentality can be better illustrated by splitting up the term. The word ‘mob’ describes “a large and disorderly crowd of people”, whereas ‘mentality’ refers to “the particular attitude or way of thinking of a person or a group” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.; Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, n.d.). Whitson quotes Chiou’s work, stating “The desire for a reward leads to continuous participation, regardless if later events still align with the socio-political beliefs of the individual (Whitson, 2021, p. 8). In the event that this phenomenon lasts, we may find harmful consequences on both parties where one may feel a sense of wrongful authority and power, while the other bears the brunt as the target of cancel culture.

The livelihoods of those canceled are usually the actual targets of cancel culture. Cancel culture participants looking to cancel an individual would usually look to any form of affiliation one might have that has the authority to take away one’s career and
financial means. Not only does this affect the livelihood of the targeted, but also those who are dependent on them, this could be their children, their elderly parents, or their spouses. The question here is: Why is it that social media users who participate in cancel culture first look to having the livelihoods of those targeted taken away from them? The reason is that power relations exist when media and society are involved because technology “carries the value of capitalism and of a consumer society” (Hanks, 2020, p. 447). In his work, Hanks also explains how the term “culture industry” signifies the process of the industrialization and commercialization of mass-produced culture, creating “distractions and the semblance of freedom” (p. 447). During earlier introductions of social media, people used to think they have the option to choose between whichever social platforms they would like to use, but the very instance that we have to use social networking platforms at all comes to show that we did not have the freedom to decide in the first place. At times, not having social media can also come with a cost. A study on LinkedIn as a professional networking platform found that “Active participation, that is, posting updates or writing contribution in groups (in the case of LinkedIn and Facebook), can also increase the informational benefits people receive” (Utz, 2016, p. 2689). These informational benefits can be in the form of job opportunities and job referrals.

In addition to that, with latest news and stories being published and disseminated through the media, individuals may be seen as “out of touch” as they are not informed with ongoing news without access to social media. While newspapers and television news provide recent updates on happenings around the world, social media allows each individual to be a creator on different social platforms and is able to instantaneously reach a wide audience. Aside from the idea that no viable alternatives exists in the culture
industry, social media also “serves to distract people from the careful reflections on the conditions of their lives” by introducing tools and products that “commodify and mechanize everyday life, and that consumers of popular culture accept the pre-given ends of their culture and worry about how to organize their lives to acquire as many of these goods as possible” (Hanks, 2020, p. 447). While big media corporations are behind cancel culture, they look to influence those who will buy in on mass-produced culture, increasing their profitability. Hence cancel culture is used by the culture industry to capitalize on users’ emotions and reactionary outcomes.

Users are distracted by cancel culture, to the point where we don’t realize how it is affecting the quality of our society, in which anger and intolerance has caused us to turn our backs on one another. Hanks also states, “so long as instrumental reasoning is the dominant mode of thinking in Western culture, then human liberation will be blocked” (p. 447). Instrumental reasoning here refers to a form of “rationality which focuses on effective means to an end and not, as other forms of practical rationality do, on improving living conditions, promoting reasonable agreement, or human understanding” (Maura, 2013). Thus, self-actualization and freedom will not be achieved as long as we do not come to terms with the societal awareness that this intolerance is setting us up for a huge divide.

The Dilemma of Free Speech vs. Hate Speech

Depending on the situation, and more often than not, hate speech can be a byproduct of cancel culture. When someone participating in cancel culture decides to target another individual on social media and some follow suit, this is a form of sovereign power attributed to hate speech said to deprive “us of rights and liberties” (Butler, 2021,
Looking at it from the lens of cancel culture, sovereign power can be seen as popularity in the social media space or ‘clout’ as mentioned earlier. Those who have this authority can incite and call for action from others as well. Butler states, “The power attributed to hate speech is a power of absolute and efficacious agency, performativity, and transitivity at one” (p. 77). While it allows one to show that they are actively and performatively participating in taking action against what they view as an injustice, hate speech gives one the ability to rationalize hate and aggression based on the idea that the targeted deserve it – which is largely connected to how cancel culture seeks accountability. Butler also references Foucault’s argument that ‘sovereignty’, “as a dominant mode of thinking power, restricts our view of power to prevailing conceptions of the subject, making us unable to think about the problem of domination” (p. 79).

Recanting Bormann, quoted in the earlier section, dramatizing messages can cloud or judgment, even as participant-observers.

In the same light, cancel culture participants are caught up in the idea of targeting another, disallowing ample space for other possible perspectives and competing arguments. Hate speech in cancel culture can come in the form of tweets, private messages, and even spoken words - but some may argue that this is free speech instead. The Constitution of the United States of America states that the First Amendment is defined as such “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (U.S. Const. amend. I).
However, how society defines and differentiates the First Amendment (free speech) from hate speech may differ greatly based on every individual. According to Walker, “Almost every country prohibits hate speech directed at racial, religious, or ethnic groups. The United States, by contrast, has developed a strong tradition of free speech that protects even the most offensive form of expression” (Walker, 1994, p. 1). It is hard to define and pinpoint what exactly hate speech is because “‘Hate speech’ is an emotive concept, and there is no universally accepted definition of it in international human rights law” (Martins et al., 2018, p. 61). Thus, for the sake of this paper, I will take from Martins et al.’s proposed definition of hate speech as:

Any emotional expression imparting opinions or ideas – bringing a subjective opinion or idea to an external audience - with discriminatory purposes. It can take many forms: written, non-verbal, visual, artistic, and may be disseminated through any media, including internet, print, radio, or television (p. 61).

Based on the United States’ Civil Rights Act of 1964, Martins et al. refers to discrimination is based on identity and/or immutable characteristics such as one’s race, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender, religion, age, and disability (The Civil Rights Act (1964)). While it is important to grasp the concept of hate speech, it is also essential that we understand what the First Amendment does not protect. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), “[…] freedom of speech does not prevent punishing conduct that intimidates, harasses, or threatens another person, even if words are used. Threatening phone calls, for example, are not constitutionally protected” (www.aclu.org).
Humor, Sarcasm, and Irony

There are many different types of humor, including ones that are composed of sarcasm and irony. According to Kien, "Shuster (2011) demonstrates semiotically that 'bi-paradigmatic irony' is a unique type of sign that operates in postmodern texts. The result of this evolution of irony is no less than six different types of irony a message can play upon. This leaves a huge opening for multiple interpretations of the same text" (Kien, 2019, p. 124). Chow finds that Chappelle has a very distinct sense of humor in which he is known to present harsh truths and stereotypes in a comedic manner (Chow, 2021). This can be connected to his use of bi-paradigmatic irony to get both his humor and points across to his audiences. The bi-paradigmatic irony is not exclusive to Chappelle, or even stand-up comedy, but it is also prevalent in adult comedic television. Kien states, "There is an abundance of comedy programming such as Family Guy, American Dad, Robot Chicken, South Park, and many others that use bi-paradigmatic irony to appeal to a variety of audience members' tastes by employing ironic racism" (Kien, 2019, p. 124). In the case of Chappelle's Netflix comedy special, The Closer, it was heavily publicized and placed on one of the most, and if not, the most widely used streaming platform. It is inevitable that people of different walks of life and preferences utilize the platform.

Though Netflix employees might all use and work on the streaming platform, it does not mean that they necessarily agree with the choices of their executives. Similarly, they might also not agree or agree with what is acceptable or unacceptable to be put on the platform itself. Kien writes, "Particularly with new group members who have not yet acquired enough familiarity with the group culture and other group members, irony and sarcasm can easily be misunderstood as offensive and out of place" (p. 126).
was released on a platform used by people who have different views and beliefs, comics and comedy-enthusiasts might not be familiar with the culture of irony within their own out-groups. Using irony on such a public platform may not bode well for those not part of the in-group, further allowing space for literal interpretations that might not have been intended the way they saw it. Stuart Hall’s discursive model also theorizes that “audience members play an active role in decoding messages by relying on their own social contexts and understanding (Hall, 1973, p. 2). People will produce their messages, and it is solely up to the receivers to decode the message using the background knowledge and experiences they’ve held over their course of life.

**Counterspeech**

Social media has proved to be a communication platform for many internet users. While one may participate in a friendly discussion with an acquaintance or close friend, some might encounter heated debates or hate speech from complete strangers as well. Cancel culture demonstrates the ability for social media users to participate in a targeting of someone they might not know at all. One may find the target’s actions inexcusable and call for others to cancel them because it is not within their own standards of acceptability. Hooks states,

*Cancel culture bespeaks a growing inability to negotiate across the boundaries of race, sex, and gender: indicating a rising totalitarian disposition that dictates that certain behaviors and actions should be ‘canceled’ as opposed to negotiated with. [...] It is a paradigm not situated within notions of correcting behavior but, in fact, dealing out death and judgment (Hooks, 2020, pp. 33-34).*
This totalitarian ideal in cancel culture shows to other audience members in a subtle way that intolerance is fine, normalizing this behavior to future generations. The perpetuation of this intolerance may only grow over time, and if so, audience members may feel numb to apologies and feelings of distrust within society may occur.

Within the context of cancel culture, apologies often go unheard as it does not perpetuate the narrative both corporate and entertainment media wants. Media corporations want to generate interest among their users to stay engaged with their content, and in order to do so, dramatic events are often highlighted as opposed to resolutions. In order to overcome cancel culture, counterspeech has been used as a way to defend and respond to hate speech. The Dangerous Speech Project defines counterspeech as “any direct response to hateful or harmful speech which seeks to undermine it” (Dangerous Speech Project, dangerousspeech.org). According to English,

Counterspeech has been the preferred method to regulate hate speech in America. In First Amendment jurisprudence, the chosen remedy is to rely on conventional First Amendment principles of punishing conduct, not speech, and fighting offensive speech with counterspeech and education, rather than excluding hate speech from free debate. [...] This developed into the theory that the remedy for ‘bad speech’ is ‘more speech’ rather than suppressing ‘bad speech’ (English, 2021, p. 14).

However, Kien found that “Godwin’s Law is found in what it proved about viral online content, rather than in what it states. Godwin’s experiment demonstrated that it might be possible to deploy ‘counter-memes’ intended to correct online oppressions and inaccuracies” (Kien, 2019, p. 4). To summarize, Godwin’s law, theorized by Mike
Godwin, a cyberspace rights attorney, asserted that “As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one” (King, 2013). It was later found that the “proposed solution did not rectify the problem he was trying to address” (Kien, 2019, p. 4). Similarly, English states that “the allure of counterspeech may have faded almost 15 years later when the Court later acknowledged that an ‘individual’s reputation cannot easily be repaired by counterspeech’” (English, 2021, p. 15).

Beauty YouTuber, James Charles Dickinson (goes by James Charles) released a video detailing an apology after a number of underage boys, ranging from 15-17 years old, accused him of sending unsolicited nude photos and pressured them into ‘sexting’ with him despite knowing their age. Though he initially denied the accusations and claimed he was unaware of their age, he later posted a 14-minute YouTube video apologizing for the incident. Despite his video, Charles was let go of his sponsorship with Morphe Cosmetics, temporarily demonetized on YouTube, and lost an upwards of 100,000 subscribers, and was canceled online.

In 2016, singer-songwriter Taylor Swift was also the target of cancel culture when reality TV star Kim Kardashian “exposed” the former with a phone recording after she had expressed that Kardashian’s then-husband, Kanye West did not seek her consent when he used her name degradingly in his song, Famous from the album, The Life of Pablo. What people didn’t know was that the recording Kardashian released was doctored, to make Swift look bad and sound like she was lying. Some of Swift’s fans defended her, while others, both former fan or not, sought to cancel Swift.
Several years later, as a form of counterspeech, Swift released a statement online regarding the incident, defending her position in which she stated that Kardashian’s recording is doctored, and provided the entire recording as proof. However, since it happened a number of years later, people have already moved on from the situation and the statement and full recording hardly remained in the limelight. In her 2020 Netflix documentary film, *Miss Americana*, Swift recounted the ordeal and found that her reputation did not recover quickly following the incident - but instead, it took years to come back to where she was, enduring ramifications from online hate and cancel culture.

**Performative Allyship**

Social media has allowed its users to create their own identity online, whether it is on an anonymous platform or one that allows you to create an unlimited number of accounts for your own persona. With much of our lives documented and archived on social media, it is only inevitable that people post things that they care about, with the assumption that they are people, and not hackers or bots. It is important to note that for the bulk of it, posting any form of content on social media is free of charge monetarily, but in exchange, users have to allow these platforms access to their personal information and data collected. While social media fuels cancel culture, cancel culture also fuels social media profits. It is a symbiotic relationship whereby social media companies benefit from their users tremendously.

Who ultimately benefits from cancel culture? Social networking platforms use our data to show us ads and “things that may interest us” behind the veil of a “curated feed”. Their algorithm is used to find out what types of content we react to and may potentially cause us to engage more with their platform. In a similar fashion, social media platforms
also show us targeted ads and content that are tailored to our interest hence gaining a portion of the profit when we click on the ad and/or buy the product advertised to us.

Social media movements allow users to participate online without much thought. Kien writes, “For the average audience member, the current conflicts in the Arab world pass through social media feeds as isolated incidences. They act as symbolic cues for talking points in various online communities that begin and end as quickly as the latest Twitter trend” (Kien, 2019, p. 160). On Twitter, ‘re-tweeting’ another user’s tweet can be done in a second. With such convenience, users are able to signal their stance in a movement easily with little to no time commitment. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement saw many black squares posted on Instagram, usually unaccompanied by captions, or at most, a hashtag to show their support.

However, Wutz and Nugteren finds that “these numbers and other Social Media activities can be misleading as they do not show a real commitment to the cause but are implications of mostly so-called slackers” (Wutz & Nugteren, 2018). This type of support is understood as performative allyship. According to Kalina, “Performative allyship refers to someone from a nonmarginalized group professing support and solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful. Worse yet, the allyship is done in a way that may actually be harmful to ‘the cause’” (Kalina, 2020, p. 478). The lack of time commitment needed in order to show support online can influence allies to think that this is all that needs to be done to support the movement when nothing concrete has been done just yet.
Methodology

Case Study

To develop a qualitative research study on the phenomenon of cancel culture, I conducted a comparative case study using elements of three data collection methods: historical analysis, discourse analysis, and textual analysis. These studies allowed me to find the outcomes and experiences of cancel culture, who cancel culture benefits, and what exactly its enforcers and participants gain. In my case study, I explored four incidences of cancel culture situations involving both public and private figures. The private figures I studied are PR executive Justine Sacco, and student Mimi Groves. The two public figures are namely stand-up comedian Dave Chappelle, and American commentator Joe Rogan. According to Creswell and Poth,

The entire culture-sharing group in ethnography may be considered a case, but the intent in ethnography is to determine how the culture works rather than to either develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 135).

Using this method, both outcomes will be accounted for. For the sake of this research paper, “private citizens” will refer to ordinary individuals who are not in the recognized under the limelight. Contrary to that, “public figures” will refer to individuals of significant influence and possess a social position within the public sphere. The latter include but are not limited to celebrities, politicians, social media influencers, corporate leaders. Daymon and Holloway has stated that a case study “involves intensive and holistic examination – using multiple sources of evidence – of a single phenomenon within its social context, which is bounded by time and place (Daymon & Holloway,
2011, p. 115). I have found that the methods I have listed will allow me to accomplish the necessary examination within its intended context, as well as understand and examine the situation from perspectives besides my own to develop a deeper level of comprehension.

Data Collection

Historical Analysis

Participants of cancel culture look into the past and present of an individual when determining why they should be canceled. However, actions and words said in the past may have been acceptable then, but not in the present context. In order to comprehend and analyze cancel culture within its context, I used some elements of historical analysis to look into the historical past of the cases I studied and traced its journey. Daymon and Holloway defines the method as:

A discrete or complementary approach whereby you either carry out a standalone historical study using historical research techniques to trace the role of communication in past contexts or you complement this with research methods that enable you to compare and contrast the historical study with findings that relate to contemporary events and settings (p. 189).

Moreover, Daymon and Holloway also find that historians in the public relations and marketing communications area usually conduct their research with a case study approach, which will work well with my exploration between the four cases (p. 189). To conduct the analysis, I used the California State University, East Bay library database, as well as Google Scholar to gather relevant and reputable scholarly works. Additionally, I also used primary sources encompassing news articles, tweets, and announcements from the corporations affiliated with the public figures studied.
Discourse Analysis

In my thesis, I will also be using elements of discourse analysis as another form of research method in my work. To fully understand the situation and why an individual is being canceled, it is important to research why and how participants of cancel culture cancel others. Using discourse analysis, I will primarily look at the “language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view”, allowing me to understand and interpret the message as intended by the messenger (Fairclough, 1995, p. 56). Furthermore, Creswell and Poth states that this method “would examine the storytellers’ narrative for such elements as the sequence of utterances, the pitch of the voice, and the intonation” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 244). Daymon and Holloway describes this method to be “mainly concerned with text and talk in the process of interaction among people and also people and organizations. It aims to show how concepts are constructed in communication” (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 166). In this discourse analysis, the comments section of both past and recent, relevant Twitter threads will serve as a conversation for me to analyze. Because large movements such as #MeToo were started on social platforms such as Twitter, collecting data on the platform will allow me to act as an observer immersed in the situation akin to my subjects.

Textual Analysis

For my research, I employed textual analysis methodologies to look at Twitter tweets and threads within the topic of my case studies, as well as supplementary news articles surrounding these incidents to aid my study. Allen states that this method “involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life
experiences” (Allen, 2017, p. 1754). In this study, this includes Twitter tweets and threads about Justine Sacco, Joe Rogan, Dave Chappelle, Mimi Groves, Spotify (affiliated with Rogan), and Netflix (affiliated with Chappelle). According to McKee, textual analysis allows insight to the “variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret reality” (McKee, 2003, p. 8). In order to employ this method, I looked into how the cases studied produced different meanings from its origin to its audiences, and how the left and the right on the political spectrum view cancel culture.

**Findings and Discussion**

This qualitative research study has allowed me further insights into the outcomes and experiences surrounding cancel culture, as well as more clarity as to who benefits from cancel culture, and what exactly its enforcers and participants gain from it. One thing Sacco, Rogan, and Chappelle had in common was the use of their respective styles of humor that did not bode well with its audiences. While Groves’ case did not cover the theme of humor and sarcasm as much, they all were met with an audience that posed as a virtual mob. The virtual mob usually consists of those participating in cancel culture. Using a combination of elements from historical and discourse analyses, and textual analysis, I was able to explore and gain a better understanding of its course of development. In the sections that follow, I will present findings from my study, and discussion to align with my research questions.

**Virtual Collective Consciousness and Ideological Rigidity**

The internet has brought many together, but at the same time, caused us to divide and conquer when people don’t agree with one another. However, with the limitations of
language and tonality in text, especially on social media, different interpretations can cause uproar and chaos online. My first case revolved around former PR executive at InterActiveCorp, Justine Sacco, who was an early victim to cancel culture when she had infamously tweeted, “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”, prior to boarding her 11-hour flight from London’s Heathrow Airport to Cape Town.

When she landed, Sacco was immediately bombarded with texts and calls from her friends and family back home asking her to remove the tweet, while some expressed how sorry they felt for her situation. It turned out that while Sacco was on board the international flight, Sam Biddle, a technology journalist at Gawker had picked up her tweet and made it go viral among his followers. It was not long after that the tweet blown up on the platform and the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet started trending worldwide. Sacco was met with backlash from Twitter users all over the world, including threatening and violent tweets directed at her. However, in an interview with Ronson, Sacco states, “To me it was so insane of a comment for anyone to make. I thought there was no way that anyone could possibly think it was literal” (Ronson, 2015). Sacco’s statement illustrates how she did not intend for her tweet to be taken literally, and with a sense of irony. In contrast, when Ronson had asked Biddle how he felt when he called out Sacco on Twitter, he responded that “It felt delicious” (2015).

For this portion of my analysis, I looked to Twitter, the platform where Sacco’s incident unraveled in order to examine its discourse. One Twitter user, @andamaqanda tweeted, “Someone please borrow me a Gun, I need to shoot --→ RT @JustineSacco: Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!” (Melby, 2013). While another Twitter user, @Phislash, tweeted, “Somebody (HIV+) must rape this bitch and
we’ll see if her skin colour can protect her from AIDS RT @JustineSacco” (Melby, 2013).

While Sacco’s tweets were not commendable, the responses from Twitter users ignited a mob of violence and threats. The ruthless public threats she received were seen as deserved because at the time, the mob seemed to be united in a virtual collective consciousness against Sacco. How does the collective group know what they are all working towards if they are all in a virtual setting? Littlejohn et al. finds that “Symbolic interactionism asserts that meanings arise in and through the processes of social interaction” (Littlejohn et al., 2009, p. 946). Within the context of cancel culture, this significant symbolic behavior refers to the collective action to cancel an individual. Brunsting and Postmes describes the term *collective action* as “actions undertaken by individuals or groups for a collective purpose, such as the advancement of a particular ideology or idea or the political struggle with another group” (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002, p. 527). Different societies and communities form their own ideologies and decide on what is socially acceptable or not. In connection with cancel culture, those seeking to cancel someone understand their objectives and goals as a group. As the target moves from one to another, the virtual consciousness takes on their own role in enforcing the punishments they wish to see carried out. This can come in a variety of forms, such as bombarding the targeted individual’s workplace to fire them, expose their personal information like where they live, and even harassing their family members as well. Brunsting and Postmes states:

[...] the Internet is likely to affect the nature of collective action. The very same factors that enable strategic behavior toward an out-group and that make the
shared social identity more salient are also likely to affect people’s ideas about collective action, about what is normative within the group, and about intentions for future action (p. 531).

They may observe and learn from the actions of others within the same collective group, and identify with the same social stances, further forming a sense of connection with those in agreement with them.

One might argue that those sending threats her way may also use the same defense as Sacco – that being their comments could be seen as so outlandish that they thought it was obvious it was meant sarcastically. However, if we take Sacco’s explanation of her tweet at face value, her initial tweet was meant to invoke a sense of irony. Kien describes irony as a:

[...] social adhesive that helps stabilize daily routines and maintain relations through playfulness, sarcasm, and keeping conversations lively. ‘Getting’ someone’s sarcasm shows intimate familiarity with his or her true thoughts about something, while deploying sarcasm among friends demonstrates trust and playfulness [...] This is all fine and well if we consider everyone participating to be part of the same in-group. However, irony is a poor choice of frame (method of presenting information) for community building, because it allows—and in some cases forces—those not “in” on the joke to make literal interpretations” (Kien, 2019, p. 126).

Similarly, Sacco’s situation can be viewed as a form of sarcasm and irony which could only be understood by those within the same in-group. As Sacco remained under public scrutiny, the death and rape threats she received did not seem to be a concern of those
targeting her. Though Twitter is widely used as a social media platform, that does not mean to say that all social media users are able to go through each and every tweet on the platform. As the call for her cancelation piled on from many who found her actions transgressive, it seemed that those targeting her were solely focused on Sacco’s punishment and did not seem to be concerned about the threats she had received.

Research on this mob behavior dates back to nineteenth-century France where research on crowd behavior began. John Drury states that “accounts of the inherent irrationality and atavism of the crowd reflected the ideology of the nineteenth century ruling class, which sought to discredit and undermine working class organization” (Drury, 2002, p. 42). This correlation seems to imply a connection with cancel culture. Using their collective power as a group, the crowd’s mentality debilitated the position of the working class. Drury also adds that commentators looking at the irrationality of the crowd referred to the phenomena as the “lynch mob mentality”, which explains that the “psychological nature of the collective is inherently less civilized than that of the lone individual” (p. 49). This suggests that when people are in a group setting, and in this case, online, they are more likely to act in an irrational manner, as opposed to when they are alone.

Hardaker and McGlashan quotes Siegel et al. who states that, “Anonymity can foster a sense of impunity, loss of self-awareness, attitudinal polarization, and a likelihood of acting upon normally inhibited impulses—an effect known as deindividuation” (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016). This seems to show an individual may experience detachment from their own morals and values, and the decision to pick up the stances and wants of the group they would like to associate with. This mob mentality can further invoke “moral panic” among those in the collective group, which are characterized by rumors, mass
hysteria, and collective delusion (Drury, 2002, p. 50). Kien describes moral panic as a phenomenon that,

[…] occurs when a group of people from the general public raise concern over a shock or perceived threat to cultural norms and sensitivities. The amount of fear and panic over the issue gets exaggerated, facts distorted, the issue misrepresented, and the entire situation prone to embellishments and mischaracterizations (Kien, 2019, p.78).

From these quotes, it appears to show that moral panic may group members to act in an uncivilized manner, and even possibly influencing those who join the group later to behave similarly. In Brunsting and Postmes’ study on social movement participation online, they found that social influence remains strong despite group members being separated. According to the authors, this “implies that social influence is not merely exerted by the presence or direct influence of others in the immediate environment” (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002, p. 529). However, there is a difference between the experience of offline gatherings and the and online virtual communities in terms of physical participation, and with that, time commitment as well. Based on findings in the literature review, the convenience of social media highlights the ease of canceling a target. Twitter users can make a comment, retweet, or quote another tweet in a matter of seconds.

As the saying goes, history repeats itself. Biddle, who first picked up and brought the viral attention to Sacco’s tweet in the first place, made another article on Gawker’s sister-site, Valleywag. This time, he shamed Sacco publicly again after she picked up a new role at HOTorNOT, since she had been fired from her previous role at
InterActiveCorp six month before – citing that both Sacco and HOTorNOT, an online social network created in 2000, where its users uploaded photos of themselves to be rated on the internet, were “two lousy has-beens, gunning for a comeback together” (Biddle, 2014). About a year from the initial incident, Biddle himself was canceled by Twitter users after he tweeted that video gamers should “Bring Back Bullying” to “counter the rising tide of web militancy” (2014). In a similar light, not many knew the intent behind Biddle’s tweet, misinterpreting that he was actually advocating for bullying. Ironically, Biddle finds himself in a very similar situation whereby hundreds of people tweeted and emailed the technology journalist himself, as well as his editors, asking for Biddle to be fired. While this illustrates that no one is exempt from being canceled by the masses, it also shows how it is in human nature to digest words the way each individual personally wants to. Ng states, “[…] platforms such as Twitter can foster ideological rigidity and lack of nuance due to the typical textual brevity of any individual post, the speed with which posts are disseminated, and the rapidity of online exchanges, which militate against considered responses” (Ng, 2020, p. 623). Twitter limits each tweet to 280 characters, and this may cause users to often abbreviate and leave out meaningful and accurate information. Just like text messages can be read in different tones, so can tweets – leaving Twitter users to discern messages they come across based on their own interpretation and understanding.

It is easy for people to only see the rewards for the collective, especially when they do not know the repercussions faced on the other side of the screen for those canceled. Those who canceled Sacco, like Biddle, found satisfaction among their collective group when they find that their work has served moral justice. As they see the
downfall of those they have deemed wrong, they find themselves in a position of power over others and a feel for what it is like to successfully seek vengeance.

**Anonymity and Pseudonymity on Social Platforms Foster Cyberbullying**

One major difference between the online world and offline reality is that the former allows for anonymity, while the latter does not. Anonymity here refers “the state of being not identifiable within a set of subjects” (Pfitzmann & Köhntopp, 2001, p. 2). As people start to fear that they may lose their careers, and social networks due to things they may have said online like Sacco, anonymity on social media allows them a mask to hide from repercussions they may face if they had said or say anything that could be deemed offensive. From the examples of tweets in the previous section, you may notice that both Twitter users had an unidentifiable Twitter handle (e.g., @andamaqanda, @Phislash) that does not explicitly state their names. This is because social media platforms like Twitter allow its users to change their names as and when they like.

Users are also not required to use their real names/identities when setting up an account on Twitter, nor is there an identity verification process besides the user’s email. Kabay defines anonymity as “being without a name or with an unknown name” (Kabay, 1998, p. 7). This anonymity opens up the potential for elements of cyberbullying, allowing cancel culture enforcers and participants to hide behind a pseudonym while engaging with deviant behavior online. The ability to use another name besides your given name in an online setting refers to the use of a pseudonym. According to Pfitzmann and Köhntopp, “Pseudonymity is the use of pseudonyms as IDs” (Pfitzmann & Köhntopp, 2001, p. 4). Brunsting and Postmes quote Lea, Spears, and de Groot (2001) and Sassenberg and Postmes (2002), whose research found that there is potential for
“strong social attraction to the group when its members are isolated and anonymous” (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002, p. 528). Trumbull also found that in an overcrowded (high number of users) anonymous environment, opportunities for criminal behavior increase (Trumbull, 1989, p. 9). This depicts the vast number of deviant behaviors online is directly related to the abundance of existing and new users added to the platform every day. Lowry et al. cites Danzinger, who states that “anonymity makes identification of criminal suspects more difficult;” thus, crime rates in large cities tend to be higher because of the reduced apprehension of perpetrators” (Lowry et al., 2016, p. 9). Thus, much of these behaviors go under the radar not only because there are simply too many anonymous individuals to track down, but the lack of concern from perpetrators may lead authorities to think that it is not worth the work.

Findings also suggest that while humanistic intent play an important part in cancel culture, anonymity comes at a cost that may contribute to cyberbullying. Lowry et al.’s study revealed that when cyberbullying is paired with heavy social media usage and the concept of anonymity, it exacerbates the problem as it supports the social learning process of cyberbullying on social networking platforms (p. 22). According to Rainie et al., “Anonymity, a key affordance of the early internet, is an element that many in this canvassing attributed to enabling bad behavior and facilitating “uncivil discourse” in shared online spaces” (Rainie et al., 2017). John Cato, a senior software engineer interviewed by Rainie et al. adds that:

Trolling for arguments has been an internet tradition since Usenet. Some services may be able to mitigate the problem slightly by forcing people to use their real
identities, but whenever you have anonymity you will have people who are there just
to make other people angry (2017).

Intrigued by Cato’s statement, I looked into USENET as well. USENET is an online
discussion forum platform for almost any topic, in which users are able to join others in a
community of shared interests. Users on USENET were able to read and write posts, also
known as ‘articles’ on the website, anonymously. Similar to Twitter, as mentioned
earlier, and other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, USENET did
not set much restrictions and verifications as to who owns a specific username. Kabay
states,

Some moderated USENET groups and e-mail-based mailing lists require a “real”
name but there is little effort or even possibility, as things currently stand, for
authentication of such names. Unmoderated groups, by definition, do not require real
names at all; these allow postings by anyone (Kabay, 1998, p. 13).

Anonymity, as well as the ability to use a pseudonym, is viewed as a person’s rights to
privacy. However, with too much freedom and the affordance of privacy on the internet,
which is in itself one of the trickiest places to regulate and keep control over, abuses
occur, and society ends up paying a price for it. Cancel culture participants may find it
easy to create multiple anonymous accounts aimed at targeting those they wish to cancel
and may choose to harass or threaten them using the accounts. Since the barriers to
creating a user profile on social media platforms are rather low, users may easily dispose
of their fake accounts and create many others down the line to avoid any repercussions
they may face.
Moreover, anonymity also allows users to engage with other users who may participate in deviant behaviors, whom they may not otherwise interact with offline due in part to social constraints, potential embarrassment, or lack of direct access (Lowry et al., 2016). That is not to say that only websites that are known for its anonymity (such as Reddit) are the only social platforms involved; Lowry et al.’s study also found that anonymity on social networking platforms “allow for ‘lurking’ behaviors in which one can observe offensive behaviors online committed by others without public or social responsibility to speak out against them” (p. 11). In other words, social media users are not obligated to report any form of offensive behavior online. Contrary to an online setting, the bystander effect exists in the offline world in a more involved manner. Social psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané coined the term after they carried out an experiment where an emergency situation is staged and they measured the time taken for participants to intervene, which was inspired by the murder of Kitty Genovese (Darley & Latané, 1968). This effect takes place when a witness of an incident does not step in or offer any form of help to a victim, though they were present. Studies found that “the greater the number of people present in the situation the smaller should be the individual probability of intervening” (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002, p. 855). The difference here is that in the offline world, witnesses are usually required to provide a statement regarding what they witnessed, forfeiting their right to anonymity. Moreover, they might also join in on the canceling to signal their stances without much commitment to the issue. This disconnect may enable cyberbystanders to feel little to no responsibility for remaining silent or join cyberbullies in participating in cancel culture. Kazerooni et al. defines cyberbystanders as “online bystanders” who “represent third-party participants who may
be uniquely poised to detect and intervene in cyberbullying” (Kazerooni et al., 2018, pp. 146-147). However, being a cyberbystander doesn’t necessarily mean the person is not for or against the cancelation of the individual itself. Earlier in this section, it is mentioned that some of Sacco’s friends and family had reached out to her after the incident to express their sympathy for her. This indicates that they may have seen the unraveling of the incident online, but at that point in time, did not step in to defend their friend or family member. This finding aligns with previous research whereby Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence Theory explains that individuals may not speak out against the masses about their opinions if they are in the minority.

In an almost exact situation, all but one of Sacco’s friends did not speak out against her cancelation. It is unclear if they might have agreed with the consequences of her actions. In an article on Forbes, Sacco’s friend, Jeff Bercovici, former Forbes social and digital media reporter, came to her defense about 10 days after the incident, citing that he himself interpreted the tweet as a self-deprecating joke about white guilt and Western privilege, just like Sacco had intended for the tweet to be about. One important point he made was that “Others have told me they read it much the same way, even without knowing the author” (Bercovici, 2013). After searching Twitter for tweets in December 2013 in regard to defending Sacco, I was unable to find any. There were, however, a number of tweets defending Sacco from the recent years. One thread in particular stood out to me:

@DRMacIver: Do you think people you know would dislike your political beliefs if they knew all of them?
@simontegg: To nitpick, you can get cancelled when only some people dislike your beliefs.

@DRMacIver: This is true

@czrobertson: And I would add that they don’t even have to be people who know you. It wasn’t Justine Sacco’s friends or colleagues who had a problem with her making a joke. Cancelling happens when the people who know you don’t want to confront the wrath of the mob. (@DRMacIver, @simontegg, @czrobertson, 2020).

This depicts that though a cyber bystander might be against your cancelation, it does not necessarily mean that they will voice their opinions those seeking to cancel the targeted individual.

Furthermore, anonymity also makes it more difficult for people to pinpoint exactly where violent threats may be coming from. The ability to be and remain anonymous and one’s physical separation of cyberspace allows anyone with internet connection to create alternate identities for themselves, ones they can hardly be traced to by fellow social network users (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016). Hardaker and McGlashan adds that

Whilst anonymity enables individuals to freely exchange ideas and opinions that expressed otherwise, could irrevocably damage their reputation or cause them personal harm, it can also be used as a shield from behind which to offend, attack, defame, and harass others, whilst protecting the assailant from easy identification and subsequent social or legal reprisals 2016).
This enables users to experiment different identities and negative behavior on social platforms, using the veil of social media as a mask to hide their identifiable identities hence a low chance of them getting caught and facing legal repercussions. One might ask, why don’t people just alert the authorities about sexual harassment threats? According to Sweeney:

[… there are a handful of ways victims can address their attackers through the legal system, both civilly and criminally. Unfortunately, many of them are costly and invasive, and combined with a lack of education and precedent, these channels don’t always offer the justice people are seeking (Sweeney, 2014). The high barrier of cost and the ability to dedicate time to the process can be rather invasive and hence many may not be able to afford it. In such cases, the receiver of the threats may have to deal with a threatening environment over a longer period of time. With that, threats of death and rape can often bode traumatic outcomes on its receivers. Haskell and Randall states,

In experiences of extreme threat, such as a rape or torture, it can feel like a threat to one’s ability to survive […] Traumatic events are not necessarily violent, though they violate a person’s sense of self and security. Trauma is subjective; what is traumatic to one person might not be to another (Haskell & Randall, 2019, p. 12).

In the case of a situation like Sacco’s, she received countless death and rape threats publicly on Twitter and triggered a sense of danger due to the threatening nature of these tweets. In an interview with Ronson, this threatening verbiage translated into one that Sacco described to be “incredibly traumatic” (Ronson, 2015). In this regard, Sacco felt a
similar feeling as described by Haskell and Randall in their study on the impact of trauma. At the time of her cancelation, Sacco was targeted online, and in her offline reality as well. While she had received death and rape threats online, she also lost her job, which may have impacted her financial stability. Sacco had felt a sense of trauma in which she was able to fully discern was extremely traumatic for her. A human being’s nervous system is at full alert when it comes to traumatic moments like these and will continue to monitor and evaluate one’s surrounding environment to see if they are in a situation where their safety is at risk. What does this mean for the individual in danger? The activation of the brains defense circuitry may result in the impairment of one’s prefrontal cortex, thus affecting one’s memory. (Haskell & Randall, 2019, pp. 13-19). Upon most traumatic incidents, this is why the receiver may have trouble remembering specific details, or what had happened. Findings also suggest that not only do private figures face violent threats, but so do public figures as well:

@EzeffJames: I PRAY GOD KILLS #JOEROGAN DEAD
I PRAY HE KILLS HIM AND HIS WHOLE FAMILY DEAD ! #BBB
OH #EMMANUEL HEAR ME CRY (@EzeffJames, 2022).

However, it is worth noting the difference between the death threat sent to Sacco and Rogan. In the death threat to Sacco listed earlier, it seems that the tweet author put himself in the position of the killer stating that “I (he) need to kill her”. However, in the threat to Rogan, the tweet looked to ‘God’ to kill Rogan, but not taking on the act of killing on himself.
**Deplatforming**

For my next case study, I researched American commentator, comedian, and podcaster, Joseph “Joe” Rogan who recently became the subject of controversy in 2022 for hosting physicians on his podcast who provided misinformation on COVID-19. In order to understand the full context behind the situation, I looked to study how his podcast began, and how it led to this controversy unfolding. In this section, I use the terms ‘platform’ to describe “the type of computer system” one uses, while ‘deplatforming’ to refer to “the action or practice of preventing someone holding views regarded as unacceptable or offensive from contributing to a forum or debate, especially by blocking them on a particular website” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Lexico, n.d.).

In a podcast interview with host Josh Wolf, Brian Redban, comedian and Rogan’s original producer shared that he moved out to California around 2003-2004 to work with Rogan on his podcast (Redban & Wolf, 2016). Rogan’s production, which at the time was not yet named *The Joe Rogan Experience* until several years later, was started on his website, in video format. Years later, Rogan launched its first video podcast episode on December 24, 2009 on Ustream, with Redban as his co-host. They went on to release live weekly broadcasts and used the audio of the video stream for an audio podcast. In their August 10, 2010 episode, they picked up the name *The Joe Rogan Experience*. In January 2013, the podcast began posting their videos on the online video sharing platform, YouTube, under the username “PowerfulJRE” (Rogan, 2013). On May 19, 2020, Rogan took to Twitter to announce that the podcast would be available on Spotify starting September 2020 after signing an exclusive licensing deal worth at least $200 million with the Swedish audio streaming platform (Rosman et al., 2022). Rogan, who identifies as a
libertarian, has been dismissive about the coronavirus vaccination, “suggesting on his podcast that young healthy people” did not need to get them before catching the virus himself (Lukpat, 2021). On December 30, 2021, Rogan had invited Dr. Robert Malone, MD on his podcast episode #1757 to discuss claims and theories regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination (Rogan, 2021). Dr. Malone, known to be a vaccine skeptic himself, along with Rogan, made multiple false arguments on the podcast (Qiu, 2022). Bond states, “Malone made baseless and disproven claims, including falsely stating that getting vaccinated puts people who already have had COVID-19 at higher risk” (Bond, 2022). This situation prompted medical and scientific experts, as well as musicians and podcasters on Spotify’s platform to rally against Rogan and the audio streaming giant (Qiu, 2022; Bond, 2022). In an interview with Bond, Katrine Wallace, an epidemiologist at the University of Illinois Chicago’s School of Public Health shared that the episode raised concerns for her and many other experts in the health sector because of his ability to reach wide audiences (Bond, 2022). Rogan has a large fanbase of an estimated 11 million listeners per episode, especially since he had garnered a huge following ever since he started his successful career as a stand-up comedian in 1988 (Dickson, 2022; Zaino III, 2008). The petition letter shared among Wallace and other medical experts were not advocating for Rogan’s removal from the platform, nor were they asking for the episode involving Malone to be taken down—but instead, they wanted Spotify to be more transparent about its rules, do more to moderate misinformation and make it easier to flag these kinds of baseless claims” (Bond, 2022; Dickson, 2022). This motivated me to look at Spotify’s own policies on misinformation on their platform. As of January 12, 2022, Spotify did not have clear policies and guidelines prohibiting misinformation (Dickson,
According to Hsu and Tracy, “iHeart, Spotify, Apple and many similar audio companies have done little to rein in what radio hosts and podcasters say about the virus and vaccination efforts” (Hsu & Tracy, 2021). On January 25, 2022, Spotify had removed Neil Young’s music on their platform after the artist published an open letter saying the music streaming platform needed to either deal with vaccine misinformation on Joe Rogan’s podcast or remove his music.

This ultimately spurred the hashtag #DeleteSpotify and several other similar variants on Twitter, seeing users divided on their stances about the situation. Spotify user, @GalwayGirl2505 tweeted “I deleted Spotify on my phone, will you do the same? Let’s stand with Mr. Neil Young. Who the hell is Joe Rogan anyway? Shame on Spotify! #BoycottSpotify @johncusack” (@GalwayGirl2505, 2022). While some have canceled their Spotify accounts and/or subscriptions, opposers have shown their support for Joe Rogan and against cancel culture by upgrading their Spotify from basic to premium accounts, which includes a monthly subscription charge. One Spotify supporter, @lowfreqfilms tweeted, “Suck on that cancel culture wierdos. #JoeRogan #DeleteSpotify #cancelspotify #BoycottSpotify #deletedspotify (@lowfreqfilms, 2022)” along with a picture of a subscription receipt as a way to prove a point to those seeking to cancel Spotify and Rogan. A word that stood out between these tweets is found in the hashtag, #BoycottSpotify. Earlier in this paper, I had mentioned Lisa Nakamura’s explanation on cancel culture, stating that it is “a cultural boycott”, which in this case is evident in the tweets targeting Rogan and Spotify (Nakamura in Bromwich, 2018, para. 1).

Additionally, though one may not support the movement, they may use the trending hashtags in order to gain visibility from other users interested in the topic. From the two
sample tweets above, we can see that users are divided for and against Rogan. While some believe that his actions were unjustifiable and wrong, others perceive his actions in a positive light and find that he should be able to remain on Spotify’s platform.

Daniel Ek, CEO of the audio streaming platform, has since released a blog post linking to their platforms new rules, citing that Spotify will prohibit “content that promotes dangerous false or dangerous deceptive medical information that may cause offline harm or poses a direct threat to public health” (Spotify, 2022). To date, content revolving around COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation on Rogan’s podcast still remain on the platform. Nonetheless, a myriad of petitions asking for the removal of Rogan from the platform (deplatforming) has begun, with some garnering over 100,000 signatures (Woodbury, 2022; Thomas, 2022; Flynner, 2022). To carry out discourse analysis on this case on Twitter, I found a number of tweets:

@OhJustTalk: Spotify remove Joe Rogan from your platform now! Joe Must Go!!! (@OhJustTalk, 2022).

@dagr8ful1: @Spotify CEO’s declaration to not silence @joerogan is inconsistent with the action it took to remove other episodes. This is about what your company stands for, against and holding talent accountable when they fail to meet that standard. #DeleteSpotify (@dagr8ful1, 2022).

@CindyAndNadine: Joe Rogan makes MONEY being outrageous and walking back his walk backs! I believe in free speech but NOT when it is a damage to the good of the world!!End Of Story. (@CindyAndNadine, 2022).

While Rogan is responsible for the vaccine and coronavirus misinformation on his personal platform, Spotify too has their own rules to uphold as the platform in which this
podcast is broadcasted. In Ek’s letter, the audio streaming company’s CEO states, “I do not believe that silencing Joe is the answer. We should have clear lines around content and take action when they are crossed, but canceling voices is a very slippery slope” (Ek, 2022). Though they may not necessarily agree with what Rogan is allowing on his podcast, some still find that it is still within his rights to be able to speak freely:

@Shawn_Farash: Joe Rogan isn’t worth fighting for. Free speech is. We should stop worrying about an over-apologetic flip-flopping Bernie Bro and focus on what matters IMHO (@Shawn_Farash, 2022).

@JoeTheAltGamer: He has many views I do and do not agree with and I love how he asks questions and will sit down with pretty much anymore. He may not be making the best choices currently but I’m not ready to abandon him. Joe is an ally to the anti authoritarian crap we see today. (@JoeTheAltGamer, 2022).

These findings are supported by previous research included in the literature review that found that the concept of free speech may differ greatly among individuals. Bazelon states, “It’s an article of faith in the United States that more speech is better and that the government should regulate it as little as possible” (Bazelon, 2020). Being that the government abstains from deciding on what grounds free speech entail exactly, it is only inevitable that people fill in the blanks for themselves. Since the government has little power over the internet, who then rules over it? The answer: Internet governs itself. “In many ways, social media sites today function as the public square. But legally speaking, internet platforms can restrict free speech far more than the government can” (2020). Government officials can be removed from Twitter. For instance, former President of the
United States, Donald Trump was suspended on Twitter for tweeting about the alleged fraud in the 2020 election and attack at the Capitol. He was later permanently barred from Twitter for potentially causing violence during the January 6, 2021 insurrection.

In Dave Chappelle’s case, a specific subset of transgendered individuals felt his commentary on the Netflix comedy special, *The Closer*, was offensive and hateful, but many also think otherwise. As described by Chow in previous literature, Chappelle’s style of comedy encompasses “delivering jokes that offend or tell uncomfortable truths” (Chow, 2021). A group of Netflix employees publicly criticized Netflix’s decision to release stand-up the comedian’s latest special due to remarks he made on the film they found to be transphobic—particularly one which involved him defending world famous author of *Harry Potter*, Joanne Rowling, otherwise known as J.K. Rowling. Weprin writes that, “Chappelle mocked the concept of gender identity and identified himself as ‘team TERF,’ a reference to trans-exclusionary radical feminists” (Weprin, 2021). Rowling had previously been canceled after tweeting a series of controversial posts on Twitter that were deemed anti-transgendered. However, Chappelle’s history with transgender and gay activist communities started even before the 2021 Netflix transgender employee walkout at their Los Angeles office. Terra Field, an openly transgender senior software engineer at Netflix, and two other employees were suspended after they had allegedly attended a meeting with their top executives unauthorized to speak out against the release of Chappelle’s special. Upon finding that there was no ill-intent in their attending the meeting, the company later reinstated the employees (Field, 2021). On October 20, 2021, hundreds of Netflix employees and allies of the transgender community staged a walkout at their Los Angeles office.
As the incident unfolded, Chappelle spoke out saying that though he was willing to meet with members of the trans community to discuss the situation, they had to meet under certain conditions, most notably including the condition in which they must watch his special from the beginning to end (Shafer, 2021). It is also important to note that Netflix’s executives have stood in support of Chappelle over the controversy. The online subscription streaming platform’s Chief Content Officer, Ted Sarandos has shown Chappelle his support publicly, and stood by his decision to launch and keep the special on the platform as he believes “the inclusion of the special on Netflix is consistent with our comedy offering” (Chan, 2021).

Since the company decided to support Chappelle in this case, I have found that the company was less affected by cancel culture as opposed to the comedian himself. On Twitter, cancel culture enforcers used #canceldavechappelle as their main hashtag to garner support and voice their stance about the situation. However, in relation to the company itself, the only hashtags that existed surrounding the incident seemed to be used were #netflix and #NetflixWalkout. Comparatively, the two latter hashtags (Netflix-related) did not allude to much canceling as opposed to the former (individual-oriented), which directly mentions the words ‘cancel’ and Chappelle’s name. This could allude to cancel culture’s previous experiencing in successfully canceling powerful individuals, instead of large organizations. However, the movement to cancel Chappelle was found to be rather unsuccessful as his specials remain on Netflix, especially with the backing of their company’s executives. Moreover, Chappelle has also been announced to be performing at the company’s stand-up comedy festival, Netflix is a Joke Festival in 2022 (Netflix is a Joke: The Festival, 2022).
In terms of how long it was talked about on Twitter, it seems that most conversation on Chappelle’s cancelation happened around October 2021—the month the incident started catching traction. A few tweets asking to cancel Chappelle was made after October, but it slowly came to halt by December 2021, with just one tweet in February 2022. From that research, I was able to gather that Chappelle’s cancelation seemed to be a short-term event, due in part to Netflix standing in support with the comedian. In Rogan’s case, Spotify had also supported him through the course of cancel culture enforcers looking to cancel him.

Dave Chappelle has had a total of six Netflix comedy specials, with the first launched in 2017. Talks about homophobic content in his works started from the very first special, *The Age of Spin* (2017). While some may perceive Chappelle’s words as hate speech, just like some may argue that Rogan’s misinformed content falls under the umbrella of free speech, “Detractors of ‘cancel culture’ object to this phenomenon on the grounds that it stifles open debates and free speech, promoting ideological conformity and self-censorship” (Sailofsky, 2021). According to Coghlan, “minority speech is not protected only, or even principally, for the sake of the minority. It is protected for the potential audience and society as a whole. It is not simply that the majority may be wrong. Open contestation is the very precondition of the majority’s own opinion” (Coghlan, 2020, p. 1). With every majority opinion, there is always going to be pushback and another perspective to the situation, similar to how calling for someone to be canceled is free speech, so is stating and expressing one’s opinion. How, then, can society differentiate between hate speech and free speech? Where can the line be drawn between both?
Hate speech can only be seen as illegal and criminalized under the existing First Amendment law if it explicitly and directly instigates criminal behavior or involve specific violent threats directed at a person or group (www.aclu.org). In the case of Sacco, though she had received death and rape threats, there were no instances of any reparations, or any evidence that she had sought them. As for free speech, University of Baltimore Professor of Law, Garrett Epps states,

Under U.S. law, many falsehoods—even some deliberate lies—receive the full protection of the First Amendment. That is true even though ‘there is no constitutional value in false statement of facts,’ as Justice Lewis Powell Jr. wrote for the Supreme Court in 1974. Nonetheless, the Court has often refused to allow government to penalize speakers for mistakes, sloppy falsehoods, and lies (Epps, 2016).

However, even until today, society still grapples with this question. For instance, in Houston Community College System v. Wilson, the institution’s Board of Trustees had voted for a resolution to publicly censure Wilson for expressing his disagreement when the school decided to fund a campus in Qatar and concerns that trustees were violating the Board’s bylaws. Though violence can be viewed as one thing, one may argue that cancel culture intimidates, threatens, and harasses the targeted individual or group as well. Having said that, cancel culture itself has not been met with any form of legal action and consequences as of today. This notion of deplatforming someone for expressing their opinions is very aligned with cancel culture and may be viewed as a part of the culture itself. Deplatforming restricts “the ability of individuals and communities to communicate with each other and the public” (Blackburn, Gehl, Etudo, 2021). It is
important to note that, however, this action of deplatforming usually happens when the target individual is using a specific platform. Thus, they will only be restricted from one platform, which in itself comes with additional risks. This includes the possibility of them migrating to an alternative platform and raising their profile as it usually attracts public attention and may end up gaining even more new users and followers (Rogers, 2020, p. 2). Parler, which styles itself as a “free speech-driven” social platform, saw a huge growth in users after Twitter banned President Trump but was later shut down when Amazon decided not to provide web hosting services to the platform (Newhouse, 2021; Shieber, 2021). Despite that, the platform was able to come back online using CloudRoute LLC as its new host later (Bera & Mukherjee, 2021). In early 2022, the conservative media platform also raised $20M in funding (Silberling, 2022).

Additionally, it might also add to group, or their followers’ radicalization over time (Rogers, 2020, p. 2; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2020, p. 1). With many followers growing closer to the same virtual collective consciousness, their mindset can grow more and more alike. Consequently, deplatforming might not be the best way to progress if curbing misinformation is the goal.

Additionally, platforms such as Spotify and Twitter are private companies in the sense that they are not an extension of the government. Therefore, they have the ability to regulate its content according to their own policies and terms of service. According to Phillips,

The First Amendment was designed to prevent Congress or the states from blocking people’s freedom to express themselves. [...] If the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) goes ahead with opening the door to policing
social media companies, it could raise First Amendment issues, like about how the government interferes with a private company. But the reverse – Twitter regulating the president’s tweet – does not (Phillips, 2020).

Thus, the role of the businesses like Twitter and Spotify allow for their users to produce content on their platforms and have the rights to retain or deplatform a user according to their terms of use. While some argue that Spotify is responsible for the spread of misinformation on their platform with Rogan’s podcast, their platform users are made aware that they (users) are “solely responsible for all User Content” that they post. Spotify’s Terms of Use further states, “Spotify is not responsible for what you or others post or share on the Spotify Service. [...] Spotify may, but has no obligation to, monitor or review User Content” (Spotify.com, 2021). Therefore, it seems to appear that Spotify holds no legal responsibility or obligation to regulate their content but could if the company chooses to.

The Dilemma of the Right and the Wrong, the Left and the Right

With the exception of private accounts, Twitter’s platform allows its users to follow accounts of people who may or may not know them. Users may follow public figures and ordinary people so long as the other users makes their accounts available to the public. In the case of following a private user, the account holder would have the ability to either accept or decline the follow request. Additionally, users may also be able to comment and retweet (share) others’ tweets, depending on the privacy settings of the other account, making it quick and convenient for them to share their own opinions on the tweet among their networks. Allowing only 280 characters per tweet, things can very easily head south on Twitter. As opinions get shared with just a click of a button,
messages in a tweet can be passed along to many especially if the account is available for
the public to see. This may increase the possibilities for more misinterpretation and be
taken out of the original, intended context of the tweet. Just like how certain texts can be
mistrusted if it is read without the voice of the original author, so can tweets.

Postmodern theory claims that meaning is fluid and uncertain because assertions
of truths are intrinsically unstable. By that logic, postmodernism argues that life builds
around how we interact with one another as humans. Through the perspective of
postmodernism within the context of cancel culture, humans decide for themselves on
what is considered “right” or “wrong”. Even until today, different societies are divided as
to whether or not smoking marijuana is bad for you, or the other way around. Similarly,
cancel culture has divided many as some see the phenomena as good, while some may
think the opposite. Baudrillard contends that our society has substituted reality as signs
and symbols, implying that simulation informs what becomes our reality (Baudrillard,
2002, p. 167). He adds that however, “simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’
and ‘false’ (p. 168). Each and every individual is unique because we experience and live
in our own personal realities hence shaping our own perception of what reality really is.
Because we experience our own reality and pick up our own knowledge to make meaning
of it, we inherently make our own decisions on what is right and wrong for ourselves.
Cancel culture enforcers and supporters of a particular targeted individual find the
transgression made is socially unacceptable, based on their own thresholds. Everyone’s
perspectives on reality are different, and therefore, one individual’s perception of
acceptable can differ greatly from another’s perspective and vice versa. Denzin suggests
that, “Culture refers to the taken-for-granted and problematic webs of significance and
meaning that humans produce and act on when they do things together” (Denzin, 2003, p. 74). Similarly, cancel culture posits as a learned behavior, taken from plan to action when its enforcers come together. Moreover, Denzin writes that, “These events and their meanings are coded within a system which allows nothing to escape interpretation [...] The result is an overabundance of meaning, an ecstasy of communication which delights in the spectacle itself and finds pleasure in the pornography of excess which flows from the media’s desire to tell everything” (p. 80). Consequently, an overabundance of meaning and information leaves an unsurmountable space for others to make their own interpretations. Hall’s work demonstrates how people form their own interpretations, while postmodernists explain that any time a definition is static it is only through exertion of force or power over others (Hall, 1973, p. 2; Westgate, 2009, 774-775). Therefore, as we continue to change and progress as a society, what is deemed socially unacceptable now can be seen in a very different light in the future.

While some find Chappelle’s humor offensive, it can be argued that Chappelle’s distinct sense of humor is a part of his comedic style in which he utilizes bi-paradigmatic irony as a way to present harsh truths and stereotypes in our society. In previous literature, Kien found that there was many other comedy programming that uses the same method to get their humor across, such as Family Guy and South Park (Kien, 2019, p. 124). Users also brought to Twitter their thoughts on the matter:

@ch0kerliv3: anyways, this is my real shit tweet, this whole
#CancelDaveChappelle is real stupid. yea, his jokes about the trans community were wrong but hes a comedian idk what yall expected, you want things to be
funny and raunchy per se but also want things to be where nobody gets offended (ch0kerliv3, 2019).

Hall’s encoding and decoding model of communication theorizes that “audience members play an active role in decoding messages by relying on their own social contexts and understanding” (Hall, 1973, p.2). Additionally, based on previous literature, Kien found that people unfamiliar with a group’s culture may misunderstand irony and sarcasm as “offensive and out of place” (Kien, 2019, p. 126). With that, those who are familiar with Chappelle’s humor and bi-paradigmatic irony would view the special differently. Thus, those who align more with the transgender community will tend to decode messages in a way that is more in line with their knowledge and experiences they have had. Utilizing irony on a widely used platform like Netflix may not bode positive results for those outside of the in-group, further granting opportunities for literal translations to take place though they were not intended to be viewed in that light.

I have also noticed throughout my research that most on the right of the political spectrum are against cancel culture. Vogels et al. found that conservative Republicans tend to view cancel culture as a form of censorship (Vogels et al., 2021). During former Vice President Mike Pence’s recent speech at Stanford University, he claimed that

We live in a time where the radical left routinely demeans the American founding—wants to push aside the American founders. Today, progressives seek to rewrite our constitution and erode our liberties. Democrats established a commission to pack the Supreme Court, and every day it seems, we see new efforts to silence or cancel those who disagree with a progressive agenda (Pence, 2022).
Contrastingly, majority of the left views cancel culture as a form of action “taken to hold others accountable”, with some even arguing that it does not exist (Vogels et al., 2021). However, not all liberals are in support of cancel culture as well. According to the Pew Research Center,

> Overall, 58% of U.S. adults say in general, calling out others on social media is more likely to hold people accountable, while 38% say it is more likely to punish people who don’t deserve it. But views differ sharply by party. 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 (75% vs. 39%). Conversely, 56% of Republicans—but just 22% of Democrats—believe this type of action generally punishes people who don’t deserve it (2021).

While most Democrats find that cancel culture helps keep society accountable for their actions, some find that it generally punishes others who may not deserve the outcome cancel culture brings with them. Cancel culture not only seeks accountability from those who may have done socially unacceptable things in the present, but also in the past. The power relations between politics and media forces both liberals and conservatives to pick a side, though they may not necessarily agree with everything that it stands for.

**Pressures of Political Correctness**

Cancel culture has become one that seeks to cancel others for things that may have been done in the past. Thus, not only are mistakes in the present up for questioning, but mistakes from years ago can be grounds for cancelation as well. However, with mob mentality and anonymity on social media platform, those deemed unjust by the masses are given less opportunity to explain their original intent due to the overcrowding and
hence overwhelming number of voices already present on the topic, drowning their own voices out. However, the justice system exists to prove that intent does not overrule consequences. One might ask, if cancel culture is inherently cancelling everyone, then why does it exist? Henderson argues that,

“People enjoy coming together against a perpetrator. While reciprocity can increase the status of one’s group an bring members closer together, it also leads to the possibility of failure. Instead, people search for the misdeeds of others because it offers status and social cohesion at little cost (Henderson, 2019).

In a society where one’s higher social status can allow for greater power and influence, it is inevitable that affording this power comes at a cost – even if it means canceling someone they might or might not even personally know. It is easy for people to only see the rewards for the collective, especially when they do not know the repercussions faced on the other side of the screen for those canceled.

In my last case study, I look at an incident in 2016, where Mimi Groves, a white high school student, sent a three-second video saying, “I can drive, nigga”, to a friend on social media platform, Snapchat (Levin, 2020). In the video, Groves, who was still a freshman at the time, had just gotten her learner’s permit. The video circulated among some students but did not cause much alarm until later, when Groves was in her senior year of high school. According to Levin, one of Groves’ friends states that she “had personally apologized for the video long before it went viral” (2020). Groves had already made her decision to attend University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she made the varsity cheer team, when she made a public Instagram post urging those in her social network to be involved and support the Black Lives Matter movement. However, her past
transgression reemerged when Jimmy Galligan, a fellow student at her high school shared the 3-year-old video publicly and garnered negative responses towards Groves. Galligan had claimed that he saved the video during both of their senior years and decided to “post it publicly when the time was right” (2020). Soon after, the video was shared on other social media platforms, where many called for University of Tennessee to revoke Groves’ admissions offer.

Groves was then removed from the cheer team and faced immense pressure from admission officials to withdraw from the school after they had received hundreds of messages from alumni, students, and the public, asking for her removal (2020). Groves was stripped of her present opportunities due to her past mistakes. Lazarsfeld and Katz’s “two-step flow” model depicts how “opinions leaders are the primary influence in determining consumer and political choice, as well as attitudes and values” (Kellner, 2004, p. 3). Galligan and those who called on others to strip Groves of her college admission posed as opinion leaders. Social media users can be opinion leaders offline, especially if they amount to some form of social influence among their personal networks. As opinion leaders, social media users have the power and influence to convince others to target an individual, in light of cancel culture. This illustrates how they have the ability to strip others off of their present opportunities based on socially unacceptable actions an individual may have performed in both the past and the present. Though Groves had initially apologized, even before the viral incident, her counterspeech did not matter as many did not care for it. This aligns with previous literature illustrating that countermeme, though thought to be a solution for online transgressions, was unable to rectify the issue at hand (Kien, 2019, p. 4). Many also found that the withdrawal was
justified in order for her to learn “the meaning of consequences” (@PrettyGirlCase, 2020). Except, does learning from her past years ago warrant her removal from an educational institution?

Being that the typical American student spends around 7 hours in school per day, over the course of 12 or 13 years, children and teenagers are in a learning environment for a non-negligible amount of time. Levin writes:

A report commissioned last year by the school district (Loudoun County school district—where both Groves and Galligan attended) documented a pattern of school leaders ignoring the widespread use of racial slurs by both students and teachers, fostering a ‘growing sense of despair’ among students of color […] School system employees also had a ‘low level of racial consciousness and racial literacy,’ while a lack of repercussions for hurtful language forced students into a ‘hostile learning environment’ (Levin, 2020).

Thus, the report shows that the Loudoun County school district has had a long-standing problem with racial discrimination within their system. As Shin explained, “attending an ethnically diverse public school or university does not necessarily guarantee meaningful interracial interaction” (Shin, 2011, p. 73). Though it has been notably reported in this specific county, it doesn’t mean that this problem ceases to exist in other counties as well. Heitner states, “Students at many predominantly White private high schools and colleges across the United States, and at some public schools, have shared on Instagram examples of racism from other students as well as their teachers” (Heitner, 2021). The author adds that:
Real change requires more than just discipline for the offenders. Schools need to proactively teach anti-racism without doing more harm—which means they need training in the best methods to do so. In addition to incorporating anti-racist teaching into the curriculum, schools must hold young people accountable for racist actions in the immediate setting where they occur and later offer a thoughtfully planned restorative process that offers a chance for students to learn, heal and understand the impact of their actions (Heitner, 2021).

Groves’ actions were not right, and she should be held accountable for her actions. However, the way in which her “lesson” was carried out was not particularly the most effective. Instead of educating her thoughtfully about how her actions have consequences, she was “forced to withdraw or her offer of admission would be rescinded. The case does nothing to change the wider culture of racism on college campuses” (Heitner, 2021). Galligan had also distinctly claimed that he wanted to only use it at a later, “when the time was right” (Levin, 2020). Rather, cancel culture enforcers found that the right approach to educating her was to take away her opportunities in learning. The approach in which Galligan decided to use to “get her where she would understand the severity of that word” also illustrates how he only wanted to address it at a time he felt was convenient, to his advantage (2020). This finding aligns with previous literature suggesting that sharing dramatizing messages ignites reactions and feelings within the group fantasy. As a result, cancel culture enforcers came to feel strongly against Groves, and their perceptions preventing them from analyzing the issue for themselves appropriately. Heitner also suggests that:
A true education in racial inequity would help any teen understand how the word and the system that produced it have destroyed Black lives before things ever got to this point and help them reckon with the both the reality of White privilege and their role in it (Heitner, 2021).

With Heitner’s suggested approach, students will be given the opportunity to have a safe learning space where they can make mistakes and learn from them. Groves had only been a freshman when she made the video she had not intended for a public audience, and 4 years later, was using her social platform to ask for social good.

Though Groves is now able to continue her education at a local community college, the repercussions of cancel culture may come into harm’s way when she finds employment in the future. With the internet, it is easy for names to spread, and look up one’s online history. Future employers may find that her association with the company may bode negative responses, and thus making it harder for her to gain employment in the workforce. This continues to be a common issue for activists in the other direction as well, such as Colin Kaepernick. To summarize, the former football quarterback sat and later, kneeled during the playing of the U.S. national anthem in 2016 as a protest against racial injustice. While some praised him for his protests, his stand against racial injustice did not bode well with those on the right, including former U.S. President Donald Trump. Till today, Kaepernick stands as a free agent and remains unsigned. According to Kyle Wagner, former sports editor at FiveThirtyEight, “It’s obvious Kaepernick is being frozen out for his political opinions [...] No above-average quarterback has been unemployed nearly as long as Kaepernick this offseason” (Wagner, 2017). Not only do students make mistakes or in Kaepernick’s case, an action deemed unjust by some, but
adults as well. As humans, it is only inevitable that we make mistakes. However, people, and especially children, grow and learn over time as they mature.

To avoid being canceled, some argue that society is pressured to be “politically correct” at all times. Bernstein writes,

[...] there is a large body of belief in academia and elsewhere that a cluster of opinions about race, ecology, feminism, culture and foreign policy defines a kind of “correct” attitude toward the problems of the world, a sort of unofficial ideology of the university (Bernstein, 1990).

To look into this topic further, I will first dive into a cursory developmental history of this term. Earlier recants of the phrase “political correctness” revolved around both sides of the political spectrum. According to Yu,

Political correctness was merely a social convention for elites to abide by, not a nationwide topic of debate. [...] Each side felt that being politically correct was beneficial to the society. Neither side ‘owned’ the term, and it was for a time helpful and accepted to be politically correct” (Yu, 2015).

Fast forward to today, political correctness has become what seems to be a rule in most interactions whereby individuals have to ensure that what they say and do must be properly filtered so as to not offend anyone. Yu further states,

The late 1990s saw another shift in the phrase and it was soon ‘used every which way—straight, ironically, satirically, interrogatively.’ Political correctness was no longer a compliment, but a term laced with partisan feeling, owned by the left and despised by the right. Today, ‘political correctness’ is a term best associated with a choice of words” (2015).
Consequently, while those who may have acted politically incorrect could face consequences, those leaning right on the political spectrum may or may not agree with their punishment.

**Conclusion and Implications**

In order to gain insight into how public and private figures contend with cancel culture, especially on Twitter, I explored the following research questions to help shape my study:

- What are some outcomes of cancel culture for both the targeted individual or group and those carrying out the cancelation?
- Where is the line between what is considered to be hate speech and something protected by free speech?
- What benefits are reaped from cancel culture?
- Who benefits from cancel culture?

The findings gathered using the research questions listed above illustrates that though there may be upsides to cancel culture, the approach to canceling others for a transgression may not be the best one. Private individuals are differently impacted by cancel culture as opposed to public figures. Among those private individuals impacted are Justine Sacco, who was fired from her job and canceled by many online after she had tweeted what she thought was a jab at the white, privileged bubble. Sacco received not only backlash from many cancel culture enforcers, but also death and rape threats as well. It is evident through our findings that despite the gravity of seriousness these threats bode, hate speech gives people the power to rationalize the act of sending hateful and
violent threats. This study links the notion of cancel culture to the potential outcome of memory loss. From my research, we can see how violent threats (death or rape threats) may be traumatic to its receivers and may lead to traumatic outcomes such as causing harm to one’s memory.

Sacco’s case also depicts how cancel culture can continue to haunt you, especially in an online world, though time had passed since her initial incident. Moreover, findings also suggest that cancel culture enforcers and instigators are able to gain social rewards using the demise of others. The short-term power one gains is enough to leave them wanting more hence the mob looks for the next individual they could potentially take power from. Moreover, with the internet allowing for anonymity and pseudonymity for a sense of privacy, deviant behavior is only inevitable. Due to the ability to go by a pseudonym in an online community, users may take advantage of their anonymity or pseudonymity online that they do not have to claim responsibility for their actions, which may cause deviant behavior. With the amount of deviant behavior from anonymous accounts, authorities take less action as a result. Users can also experiment with different identities and do things that they wouldn’t necessarily do in a physical setting. This goes on to encourage people to engage with other deviant users online, which leads to the bystander effect and the spiral of silence. Private individual, Sacco found herself in a position where there was little support for her, both online and in the real world. In Sacco’s case, she was let go from her job. Similarly, Mimi Groves, though a student, had her college admission revoked.

Contrastingly, public figures Dave Chappelle and Joe Rogan still have their careers intact. For both of their cases, it is worth noting that both their affiliated
companies, Spotify and Netflix, backed them up and in stood in support of them. Chappelle will also be executive producing a new comedy series titled ‘Chappelle’s Home Team’, which will be available on Netflix on February 28, 2022 (Mulinda, 2022). This study also connects deplatforming to the phenomenon of cancel culture. We can see that deplatforming serves as a short-term solution, and the efforts to ban public figures off a platform may have its own set of consequences as well, such as the migration of users to another platform. As users migrate and form an even larger echo chamber, radicalization may occur. This study also gathered that the First Amendment does protect speech from being prohibited by the government, including misinformation. We found from the latest tweets surrounding the movement to cancel Chappelle that cancel culture has not had much of an effect on his career, especially in the short-term. However, since Rogan’s case is still ongoing, short-term results can only be gathered at a later time. Therefore, these findings indicate that private figures may face more long-term repercussions, as opposed to public figures.

This study also indicates how an individual’s right may be another’s wrong. Humans attach their experiences and knowledge to meanings. Within the context of cancel culture, what some might see as socially unacceptable, others may see as socially acceptable as well. This is largely due to the uniqueness in our own experiences and life which shapes our perception of reality hence are bound to have different perceptions on what is considered “right” or “wrong”. I found the connection between this notion and how conservatives and liberals perceive what is “true” or “false” as well. Most conservatives see cancel culture as a form of silencing and censorship against ideals that liberals may not agree with. Thus, they try to fight cancel culture with the ideals of
freedom of speech. On the other hand, liberals tend to see it as an action to seek accountability from those who have committed transgressions, they have deemed unacceptable. However, it is important to note that liberals can also be against cancel culture as well. Mimi Groves found herself in a situation where many online had asked for her college admissions to be rescinded after a high school friend had leaked a 3-year old video in which she stated the N-word. This led to Groves withdrawing her admission after immense pressure from the university. This idea that Groves can be canceled for something in the past, in the present aligns with the notion of political correctness in our society. Though Groves had already apologized for the situation years back, the story came back to haunt her though she had admitted that she wasn’t well-educated on the matter as a 15-year-old. Since a typical student spends a non-negligible amount of time in school and at home, adults have the responsibility in educating the children they see every day. However, Groves paid for the matter with her future.

Towards the end of my research, I am fully aware that the consequences of their actions, and the repercussions they have faced may be tied to their gender identity. Gender identity plays a huge role in how an individual is perceived by those around them. Because the cases I studied encompassed two male public figures, and two female private figures, I found that this imbalance may lead to inaccuracies in my findings in the field of gender identity. This could be a potential learning for future research in this area.

This study contributes to this field findings for the outcome of cancel culture on social media towards both private and public figures. Prior to this, there was not much research in this specific topic area. This study can help users of social media understand
some implications when cancel culture comes into play, with some repercussions causing more harm than good.

This matter has been a subject area that I have been working on for the past 2 years as I pursued my master’s program. My long-standing interest in pop culture and social media has shaped my exploration in cancel culture. Though I was born and raised in Malaysia, I had grown up watching and learning about American culture online prior to coming to the United States six years ago to pursue college education. However, one barrier I had to overcome during the process of this study was the understanding of United States constitution—especially comprising of the First Amendment, as this was not at all taught in my college years. As an avid user of Twitter, I had participated in cancel culture and supported many movements initially. It was when I faced near-canceling experiences that I realized that there were more implications that I had thought when seeking to cancel others online.

To bring all matters to a resolve, I propose that instead of calling out and canceling individuals on social media, we can seek accountability by “calling-in”. African American academic, feminist, and activist Loretta J. Ross, who teaches a class called “White Supremacy, Human Rights, and Calling In the Calling Out Culture” at Smith College defines “calling in” as the opposite of calling someone out. In a podcast episode with A Word with Jason Johnson, Ross states,

Well, a ‘callout’ is when you publicly shame somebody, throw shade on them, humiliate them for something you think they’ve said, or they’ve done. It’s always done publicly, either with social media or in real life. But the point is to humiliate the person you’re seeking accountability, but you’re doing so usually privately.
And you’re doing it with love and respect. So, a calling in is a callout done with love (Johnson & Ross, 2021).

In order to truly help those who perform unjustifiable actions, people can educate one another while seeking growth. In order to learn from our mistakes, we have to allow room for growth, and for mistakes to happen. It is ultimately up to the law to determine whether the consequences they face are fit for their actions.
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