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THE COLLEGE OF
WOOSTER

#KANCELKULTURE: AN ANALYSIS OF CANCEL CULTURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA
ACTIVISM THROUGH THE LENS OF MINORITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by
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An Independent Study Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Course Requirements for
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Abstract

I am investigating how minority students of color find cancel culture (boycotting a brand or celebrity) to be a beneficial or harmful form of social media activism. I situate social media as a networked public and discuss how consumer activism meets social media activism, specifically on Twitter, to create cancel culture. My study includes results from a combination of a focus group and individual interviews that discuss topics of social media use, participation in cancel culture and activism involvement. This study provides a definition of cancel culture through the perspectives of generation Z social media users and discusses the duality in which cancel culture is a form of social media activism, but also contributes to creating a spiral of silence online.

Keywords: Cancel culture, STOPS Theory, Spiral of Silence, Social media, Twitter, Activism, Consumer culture

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the beginning, the first time I was introduced to cancel culture was when Bill Cosby was arrested. In 2018, CNN's journalists Eric Levenson and Aaron Cooper stated: "Bill Cosby, once known as 'America's Dad,' was sentenced Tuesday to three to 10 years in state prison for drugging and sexually assaulting Andrea Constand at his home 14 years ago." For a moment, I questioned every element of Cosby's existence in my life. I watched reruns of *The Cosby Show* and binge-watched *A Different World*, a show he created, and suddenly I had to stop watching them because it didn't feel right. Every time I saw his name across a screen, I felt like I was contributing to the success of a man who had unapologetically hurt other people. So, at that moment, I canceled him. It did not seem like a difficult task to accomplish. I just stopped actively watching films or tv shows where he was present, but the situation became confusing when my peers told me I had to stop watching everything he produced as well. As a fan of everything that was part of black culture in the 1990s, I found myself having to quit watching *A Different World* simply because Bill Cosby still profited from the show.

The second time I encountered cancel culture was when major R&B artist R Kelly was exposed, yet again, for being involved in romantic and sexual relationships with underage girls. One day I am enjoying his music and the next NPR is stating: "Federal prosecutors in New York and Chicago unsealed sweeping charges against R&B singer R. Kelly on Friday, accusing him of abusing women and girls for nearly two decades, including kidnapping, forced labor and sending child pornography across state lines." So immediately I deleted all of his music from my phone and refused to listen to it at social events. In my mind, I finally found a way to fully practice cancel culture. I ran into an obstacle though, because I was not able to stop listening to Aaliyah,

the late R&B singer whom R Kelly produced for and even married when she was only 15 years old (Tsioulcas).

The third time I stumbled on cancel culture, I decided to study it because this next celebrity to become the focus of f cancel culture hurt the most. In 2018, I was scrolling through Twitter when news went viral that “Kanye [who appeared at the TMZ headquarters](#) where he had this to say: *‘When you hear about slavery for 400 years ... For 400 years? That sounds like a choice.’* The rapper went on to add: *‘You were there for 400 years and it's all of y'all. It's like we're mentally imprisoned’*” (Kaur). It felt like my heart broke in the moment I discovered the news. How can I, a black American woman, be unaffected by this statement. Slavery was the reason for the fact that I do not know who my ancestors were or where I came from and that’s simply information that will not fit in a citation. So, I decided to commit myself to do this work for my independent study. As I began to dedicate time to my topic, everyone I discussed it with appeared to have no idea what cancel culture is. They would recognize the practice of cancel culture, but fail to know what the title of the term was. So, my study attempts to explain it.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to analyze and define cancel culture as a form of social activism. I will specifically investigate how minority students of color at The College of Wooster view how effective cancel culture has been as a recent form of activism.

Rationales

1. My first rationale has scholarly value due to the silencing cancel culture can cause amongst public figures and other social media users. There is a Spiral of Silence effect that cancel culture creates by causing public figures to silence themselves as an attempt to not be canceled, thus causing a lack of honest and effective communication. Scholars

such as Hyegy Lee, Tsuyoshi Oshita, Hyun Jung Oh, Dr. Sherice Gearhart, and Weiwu Zhang have discussed the spiral of silence theory. The spiral of silence theory is based on “a conception of public opinion as social control. In this view, public opinion is a mechanism that enables society to maintain a level of consensus” in order to avoid being isolated by one’s peers (186 Lee et al., Gearhart and Zhang 208). The spiral of silence is also a common theme amongst social media users who feel that their opinion is not similar to the majority opinion, so they opt-out of contributing to the online conversation. This study is the first to discuss how cancel culture has the ability to cause a spiral of silence amongst social media users. I am raising awareness that cancel culture is causing a spiral of silence that is forcing public figures to censor themselves to a point where they can no longer freely express themselves online.

2. The second rationale offers practical value because of the way in which social media activism is culturally relevant and is indeed important because according to Sarah Hagi it facilitates the opportunity for marginalized folks to create a platform for their opinions / overall voice (Time). Falero highlights how the Internet has become a space where all voices have an equal opportunity to be heard, even marginalized ones (125).

Marginalized communities are using cancel culture to use their power as consumers to use social media to publicly state how a company or public figure has lost their support. Cancel culture has recently become a major factor within how brands present themselves to consumers. Xerxes Minocher states “while it is recognized that consumers can challenge companies... how these practices translate online remains unexamined” (622). As a consumer, it is important to understand how brands have the ability to emotionally affect us, but also how we can hurt them in return if they make a decision that is

offensive to us (Thompson et. al 50). A practical rationale for researching cancel culture is realizing how social media can be used to unite people and provoke change (Tatarchevskiy 297). Specifically, cancel culture allows individuals to politically participate in changing how brands ethically operate after they face backlash or a boycott (Zuniga 489). Therefore, this study contributes to the conversation about the effectivity of cancel culture as a means of protesting.

3. Lastly, my research will contribute to previous work that focuses on consumer activism and provide an example of the online practices of activism. Through my research, I have found that there has been a small amount of scholarly research that is specifically focused on cancel culture as a form of social media activism. When searched in the school library, the search “cancel culture” only yields 7 results which all simply use the term “cancel culture” and fail to define it. However, through the combination of Mukherjee Roopali and Sarah Banet-Weiser’s research on “Commodity Activism” and journalists Logan Mahan, Loretta Ross, Semiramis, and Sarah Hagi’s discourse about cancel culture as a cultural phenomenon I am able to further their work through my study.

Definitions

In order to understand my study, it is important to recognize and understand the terms and ideas I am drawing on. Within this section, I will define the following terms: Minority, Activism, Boycott, Consumer, Political Consumerism, convergence culture, call-out culture, and public debate. The most important term for this study is a minority which describes a person or group of people who is/are “the lesser part or smaller number [or amount]; less than half of a total” (Killian 19). This study specifically focuses on how people of color, a minority community, uses cancel culture as a form of activism. Activism is when a person chooses to act

and dedicate time to a specific cause or policy that they agree or disagree with (Marchetti 4). One form of activism is boycotting which is where "... out of protest, people voluntarily abstain from dealing with an organization or country" (Rosendaal and Reitsma 15). A boycott is a popular form of activism used by consumers or people who use a brand (Thompson et. al 50).

Specifically, consumers use political consumerism to boycott or support a specific brand in order to show that they agree or disagree with brands specific policies or practices (Zuniga 490). The relationship that is facilitated through consumers using cancel culture to call out brands and public figures is an example convergence culture which is when "fans are central to how culture operates" (Jenkins 1). An example of how consumers use political consumerism and convergence culture on social media is through call-out culture which is defined to be an act of communication where "people publicly shame each other online" in order to create a space for accountability and facilitate conversation about social justice issues and oppression (Nakamura 107 and Ross). Overall, calling out brands, or even canceling them causes public debate which is a combination of social and problem-solving conversation which involves exchanges of personal values and opinions (Ferreira 228). Within this section, I defined all the terms imperative to understanding my study. Next, I will provide a description of my method.

Description of Method

For this study, I specifically focused on how minority college students attending a predominantly white institution view cancel culture as a form of social activism on Twitter. I conducted one semi-structured focus group with a multicultural College of Wooster students. After I conducted four semi-structured follow up interviews with each of the participants. This combination of interviews observed how my participants use social media and how they personally practice

activism. I also asked them about their opinions about cancel culture and if they find it to be a helpful or harmful form of activism.

Conclusion

This chapter covers the purpose, rationales, definitions, and description of the method. The purpose of this study is to analyze and define cancel culture as a form of social activism where I specifically focus on how minority students of color at The College of Wooster view cancel culture. My study is significant because it contributes to limited previous scholarship on cancel culture and highlights how cancel culture is an example of social media activism, but it can also feed into the spiral of silence theory. This chapter also defined many terms needed to fully comprehend this study. Lastly, this chapter discusses the use of a focus group and interviews as the method for this study. In my study, I talked to minority students at The College of Wooster in order to understand how they view cancel culture as an individual and also how they describe it amongst their peers. The next chapter will discuss previous scholarship and literature that is relevant to understanding my study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focuses on how minority College of Wooster students' views cancel culture as a form of social activism. I will draw on scholarship about publics and the public sphere to examine social media as a networked public (Michael Warner (2002), Stephen Coleman (2010), Alice Marwick (2010), and Ashley Lee (2018)). The concept of publics needs to be thoroughly explained because they allow us to understand social media as a developing public sphere (Lee 4096). I will then discuss social media use, the purpose of Twitter as a social network, and how social media can and has been used for activism. Lastly, I will explain cancel culture as a form of social activism through online consumer activism (Xerxes Minocher) and the cycle of outrage (Russell Blackwell).

Networks and Publics

In order to understand the realm of social media, we must first understand social media as a public because publics consists of people coming together to assign meaning to a particular space (Warner 26, Coleman and Ross 8). Social media executes this idea by creating an online space for people to come together and express themselves. These spaces can either be private or public, meaning that they can range from being open to everyone to being very restricted (Warner 29, boyd 49). Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross find that in order to acknowledge a public space, one must first create it (8). Publics are created and organized by everyday people, and as they summon more people to their public, it gains more attention from other publics (Warner 67,87). For example, the show *Big Brother* considered the voters to be a public because this group of people came together and controlled who was eventually eliminated from the show (Coleman and Ross 9). With the opportunity to attract attention, the publics can create spaces for oppressed voices that can come together and make an impact (Lee 4097). These voices are better

defined as an audience or “a crowd witnessing itself in a visible space” once acknowledged by each other (Warner 66). Social media has recently been defined as an online interactive public because of the way in which it creates a digital space for individuals around the world to connect (Lee 4096). These individuals follow each other and an audience that is often imagined people that make up the “who” of a public because they cannot be visually seen offline (Marwick and boyd 115). For this specific study, I will be observing social media as a networked public and how consumers interact within this public sphere.

With my specific focus on social media, I will need to understand how social media is theorized as a networked public. Matthew Hindman defines the internet as a public, as he describes it is “redistributing political influence; it is broadening the public sphere, increasing political participation...as well as amplifying the voice of the ordinary citizen” (Falero 126). To add to the idea of the Internet as a public, network publics are simply publics that are created and maintained through technologies such as social networks (boyd 39). According to Zizi Papacharissi, a networked public consists of 1. creating a public within a controlled system 2. creating a list of followers to share content with 3. Having visible connections with others. For example, my Instagram account is controlled by the guidelines of the creator of the application. I have a set amount of people that I share content with, and I visibly connect with others through liking or commenting on their posts.

Social media is a networked public because it is visible to all and creates a larger network as it gains more online members (Coleman et al. 26). Networks allow us to consume people’s lifestyles, ideals, perceptions as well as brands products and values (Zuniga 493). With this utilization, these uses create a space for consumerism to be an important element within digitally networked publics such as social media. These enhance regular publics because networked

publics can connect strangers across the globe through the internet (Warner 74). Mizuko Ito describes social media as a networked digital media that begun through the creation of the internet and currently includes social media as a form of mobile phone technology (1). With this ability to connect, social networks can be utilized in many ways such as “for business, for socialization, and for cultural exchange” (Ito 1).

Consumers are public because they draw attention to the specific brands that they are consuming. Brands can also have their own publics established through their consumers acknowledging the brands’ existence on social media through tagging and mentioning them in posts (Minocher 625). Through the creation of brand publics by consumers, these consumers can also directly attack brands as a form of political consumerism when they are upset with brand decisions (Minocher 620). Consumers receive messages from brands but also can create messages for brands as an attempt to better the brand or simply enforce accountability upon a brand (Coleman and Ross 17, Minocher 620). For example, If I go to a fast-food restaurant and they get my order wrong, I can make a comment about it online, tag the restaurant thus creating an interaction between the two of us for their public to see. This is an attempt to hold the brand accountable for a small error through online interaction. Consumers also use their connection to these brands to hold them accountable for larger issues thus performing the action of being an activist through social networks.

Social Networks and Activism

Social media can be used for many facets of social life. Social media are described as “tools that ‘increase our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutional institutions and organizations’ (Shirky 2008, 20f)” (Fuchs 35). Social media can create public spheres or even add to them in a

way that changes how people interact in society (Lee 4096). Gil de Zuinga finds that “social media use mediates the relationship between general Internet use and political consumerism” (501). There are generally four main purposes and uses of social media: consumption, connection, symbolism, and self-expression.

Social media is a visual experience that is heavily consumed and through time, has been brought to our fingertips with the creation of smartphones. Social media, as a social network site, can be seen by all; therefore, it is normalized to have access to the expression of one’s social offline personality online (Fuchs 38). Users are encouraged to become viewers of social media but also creators, which provides a space for further connection through consumption as well as the creation of whatever the viewer desires (Fuchs 54). This visibility allows for others to connect and even harness relationships that allow for personal growth (Tatarchevskiy 297). In fact, these symbolic and realistic connections between mere strangers can be visible to multiple publics through sharing, commenting, or liking others' posts (299). These connections create online communities, defined to be “computer-mediated forums where groups of people communicate” (Kozinets et al. 204). Online communities symbolize users' presentation of self through connecting with those that share the same values and morals as them (Murthy 27).

These connections can also be used for business and “offer ‘manage[ment]’ [of] the reality of modern, fluid social connections by simplifying and facilitating interaction within... a largely non-mediated domain-- intimacy and friendship” (300). This is even more enhanced through users’ ability to share social media and in a sense “spread” it so that it can maintain relevance (Fuchs 53). Lastly, these connections on social media have the ability to encourage self-expression of opinion and collective agreement as well (Chon et al. 4). A prime example of how social media can be used for expressing personal opinions is through social media activism.

Activism involves groups of people who agree on specific social or political ideas that they want to protest by challenging organizations to “change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic” (Chon 2). Social media activism is particularly important because it allows users to participate in activism publicly. For example, in Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Wiser’s book *Commodity Activism*, they explain how social media the ability has to contain “cultural imaginaries of political protest” meaning that movements will always be relevant and accessible once they are put on the internet (4). Social media activism is a useful form of social engagement, but its activist participation can become ineffective through slacktivism. Slacktivism caters to people who half-heartedly want to participate in activism, so they do the bare minimum of online activism to fill their personal quota of political involvement (Fuchs 188). Slacktivism also uses visibility for the individual’s minimal involvement in the movement as opposed to the movement’s progression. Slacktivism sets a negative tone for social movements, which can be highly effective.

Generally, social movements are “a sustained collective articulation of resistance to elite opponents by a plurality of actors with a common purpose” which feeds into the common idea that there is power in numbers (Carty 6). These social movements are made up of four major factors: 1. Allowing informal conversation, 2. Discovering common values across the public sphere, 3. Acting towards problematic issues, 4. Reflecting a participant’s outside life (Diani 7). Informal communication is an interaction that is not expected to follow the norms of formal communication such as the use of proper grammar, sentence structure, or spelling (Rehm and Notten 215). Because social media is originally defined as a social space for the public, the informal communication regularly used on social media is also utilized for social movements in order to create a familiar and relaxed learning environment (Gretry et al 77). Because of the

informal conversational style that social movements thrive on, they also casually make room for peers to discuss their political views and values across a digital space (Carty 178). This can be viewed through online communicative action which involves “dialogue, debate, and information sharing among citizens” all around the digital world (Carty 178). Once common values are identified, social media creates room for discussion and action against problematic issues such as the Occupy Wall Street movement which involved a series of protests against economic inequality in New York City (Murthy 92). This movement utilized Twitter as an online social space to organize a march on Wall Street which allows action towards the issue and also directly reflects online participants outside life (92). The ability to organize protests online and put the protest into action outside of the social media utilized is the main idea that makes social movements effective (Carty 46).

While activism has been used to challenge ideologies for a long time, social media movements have thoroughly influenced the way that people participate in activism. Social media movements have increased activism participation online and offline, especially for students in all parts of the world (Zuinga et al.493, Tatarchivesky 298, Chon et l. 3). For example, The Arab Spring social movements in 2010 across the Middle East and North Africa “highlight the way the digital revolution has greatly expanded the parameters within which groups and individuals can voice concerns, share information, and organize protest activities” (Carty 82). This is also an example of how social media is a networked public because it makes activism in one part of the world visible to the entire world and as a result, encourages others to get engaged in social activism (Tatarchivesky 298). Within social media activism, there are other forms of activism that emerge such as political consumer activism in which “consumers ascribe political meanings to and/ or interpret the political stances of corporate conduct, and they then act collectively to

pressure corporations based on these perceptions” (Chen 1). Another example is how Minocher found that “Change.org successfully challenge[s] company behavior... [and] empowers consumers to take action by signing petitions and sharing their comments within the online space of what can be called an ‘activist public’” (621). In this study, I also view social media activism through the lens of commodity activism, which is defined as “critical insights into both the promise and perils of consumer-based modes of resistance as they take shape within the dynamics of neoliberal power” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2). Publics within social media consume the content of people and brands visually but also interactively, thus demanding the acknowledgment of commodity activism as a result of the public disagreeing with brand decisions.

This worldwide use of communication allows room for James Grunig’s situational theory of publics (STOP) theoretical framework, which focuses on how people’s communication is purposeful in problem-solving for issues such as cancel culture (Chon 5 and Kim 1). This theory is rooted in the idea that humans as a collective are highly motivated to solve problems (Kim and Grunig 123). There are three main concepts that make up STOPs theory: “problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition” (Chen et al. 3). As a consumer of information, “a problem does not exist until we recognize it,” which roots problem recognition in personal perception (Kim and Grunig 128). The second part of the theory is the levels at which an individual becomes involved, placing them in a specific public (Chen et al. 3 and Kim and Grunig 129). There are four levels at which individuals become involved: “active, aware, latent, and non-publics,” and these differ based on how deeply one is connected with the problem (Chen et al. 3). All four publics are different in the ways they balance active communication behavior, with active publics being the highest, and passive behavior, with non-publics being the highest

(Chen et al 3). These publics also differ based on how much they are committed to the last concept, constraint recognition, in which they “perceive that there are obstacles in a situation that limit their ability to do anything about the situation” (Kim and Grunig 130). For example, an active public would be open to sharing their opinion about a social movement online or share posts about the movement frequently as a way to educate others because they have high problem recognition and involvement but low constraint (Chen 4). Aware publics would recognize the issue but possibly not interact online with content about the movement as much as an active public would because they have high problem recognition, involvement, and constraint recognition. Latent publics have low problem recognition and constraint recognition but range from moderate to high involvement. Lastly, non-publics would have low problem recognition, involvement, and constraint recognition (Chen 4). Within social movements, most problem involvement is displayed through communicative action.

Communicative action is one of the easiest forms of activism for youth to participate in given that they can converse within their networked publics and reshare comments that they agree to bring more attention to the issue (Chon 19). This can specifically be found in hot-issue publics which are “active only on a single problem that involves nearly everyone in the population and that has received extensive media coverage” that can lead to “the cultural consumption to challenge, support, and reimagine the political and social dynamics of power”(Kim 2 and Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 3). Twitter is a public platform that makes hot issue topics visible as they become more popular through retweets and likes as an “online protest space” (Minocher 621).

Twitter was launched in 2006 as a micro-blogging social media app that allows users to share short messages, 140 characters in the beginning, with their followers (Murthy2, Fuchs

179). It is often found to be a “personal media” because users have control over the messages they communicate and who they communicate with (Weller et al. 8). Tweets (the short messages) are published instantly for the public to view and can even be directed at other users, to create a “sender-audience” relationship, through the use of the “@” sign (Murthy 2, Fuchs 192, Weller et al. 5). Twitter has been used for “public debate, pop-cultural responses, and academic research” (Weller et al.3). The use of the hashtag or “#” symbol is also relevant in the use of Twitter to symbolize unity or agreeance on a certain topic that the hashtag signifies (Minocher 625). This can often be found in the participation of sociopolitical online activism within Twitter’s public sphere because it “publicizes the personal opinion” (Minocher 625, Murthy 93). With the ability to make one’s personal opinion public, it allows personal ideas to become a part of the larger public conversation. Social media creates a space for “people to have a platform to broadcast their every thought” and for those thoughts to be liked, retweeted, and shared endlessly (DeLucchi 2). The public opinion is hyper-visible within cancel culture as a form of social media activism.

Cancel Culture

The act of publicly shaming a brand or public figure within the popular culture for an offensive act rooted in racism, sexism, transphobia, or any other phobia/ism is titled as call out or cancel culture (Achieng 1, Daum, Romano, Ross). Cancel culture has become so relevant because of how culture has infiltrated the realms of politics and economics through public consumerism and social media (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 9). This relevance of public opinion is maintained by “young marginalized communities” who use their voice on social media to express their opinions on the decisions or statements public figures make (Dennis, Hagi, Ibrahim). Cancel culture consists of consumers publicly boycotting a brand as a form of

“cultural backlash” when a brand or celebrity decides that their consumers fail to agree with (Thompson et. al 50). This decision to boycott consists of prior supporters “no longer morally, financially, and/or digitally supporting people [or brands]” (Semiramis 1). An example would be when consumers choose not to shop with a certain brand anymore because they use sweatshops or discriminate against workers (Zuinga 491). This brand has violated the idea of “ethical consumption” that their consumers agree with; therefore, the brands have to be canceled in order to understand their mistake (Mukherjee and Banet-Warner 9).

Cancel culture is partially generated from the emotional branding tactic that brands use to appeal to the pathos of consumers. This is an attempt to “generate warm feelings of community among brand users” (Thompson et al. 50). Because warm feelings and connections can be created, they can also be destroyed and turn cold when brands offend their consumers. Consumers turned activists are even seen as “co-creators of the relationship between organizations and their publics,” so when they feel represented incorrectly, the emotional branding is reversed into cancel culture as a political and personal response (Chon et al. 3, Thompson et al. 52).

Political consumerism is used here because “people can avoid (i.e. boycott) specific products or brands to punish companies for undesirable policies or business practices” (Zuinga et al. 490). Even though cancel culture is defined as a social movement, it is birthed from call-out culture, which has been used as early as the 1970s where scholar Loretta Ross recalled using call-out culture to educate others on intersectionality and white supremacy (Ross 1). It has continued to be hinted at through pop culture and film which can be seen in *New Jack City* (1991) where actor Wesley Snipes dumps his ex-girlfriend and states “Cancel that bitch. I’ll buy another one” (Romano). This line was then referenced by rap artist Lil Wayne in his song “I’m

Single”, implying that a person, in this case, a romantic partner, can be consumed, discarded, and in the end canceled by another person (Romano). The phrase and idea of being canceled were reinforced by popular figures such as Kim Kardashian and Love and Hip-Hop star Cisco Rosado who used the phrase “canceled” to let the public know that this person no longer had their support (Hagi, Romano). After a while, the hashtag “#Cancelled ... originated [on] Twitter around 2015” and has remained relevant for around five years now (Semiramis 4). This hashtag became an action that consisted of a brand or public figure getting canceled because of their own morals that are embedded in an old statement from years ago or an interview sound bite that can catastrophically affect one’s career or brand (Dennis). For example, actress Roseanne Barr was canceled by the public after making some racist comments on Twitter, which led to the further cancellation of her television show Roseanne (Semiramis 4). This incorporates social media activism using Twitter as a platform where consumers are voicing their political opinion of a brand to their publics (Zuinga et al. 489).

Acts of cancel culture can result in heated arguments over Twitter between users and it can even spill over into everyday conversations in a similar manner that Diani states that social movements are witnessed in everyday life outside of the digital realm (Weller 3). On the other hand, cancel culture feeds into the cycle of outrage that exists to anger consumers in order to draw more attention to the brand (Blackford 219). The cycle of outrage works effectively on consumers because there is a need for involvement recognition, where a consumer sees themselves being directly connected with the brand and its problematic behaviors (Chon et al. 5).

STOPS theory is also applicable to cancel culture because of active publics recognizing affective injustice as an issue and the involvement recognition as a result of problem recognition that Chon discusses as factors of the theory. Affective injustice leads consumers to come

together as a brand public and act against a brand due to the fact that “companies are no longer attacked because of their products, services, or misconduct... but due to their political stances as perceived by various publics”(Chon et al. 7 and Chen 1). Cancel culture consists of an active public that identifies a brand or public figures public decisions, values, and morals to be harmful. For example, companies such as Nordstrom are boycotted because the company supports Donald Trump as a president and consumers who disagree with Donald Trump's decisions or morals choose to retaliate by not shopping at Nordstrom anymore (Chen 1).

Conclusion

Within this chapter, I have laid out the foundational concepts and frameworks that contribute to the understanding of my study. Due to cancel culture being an online social movement, it is important to identify the nature of networks and publics, but also how they intertwine to create an online space where individuals can interact and come together to facilitate conversation. Networked publics consist of consumers because social media was created to be visually consumed and shared (Fuchs 38). As participants use social media, they also utilize it to state their opinions and view the opinions of others. Social media allows a breeding ground for social movements because of the horizontal organization of followers it can gain due to open interaction and sharing of information (Carty 82). Over time, as issues emerge online and, in the world, social media users recognize issues and are situated into four different publics, activists, aware, latent, and nonpublic, based on how they choose to react to the issue. These ideas are rooted in James Grunig's situational theory of public (STOPS) which is used for how I situate cancel culture as an issue and how it is addressed or viewed by the participants of my study. In my next chapter, I will discuss the methods that I used to execute my study.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

In the previous chapter, I examined literature in relation to the creation of networks and the publics, social media and its activism, the STOPS theory, and cancel culture as a cultural movement. The current chapter discusses my method, which combines a focus group and individual interviews to examine cancel culture. David Morgan defines a focus group to be “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (130). In contrast, individual semi-structured interviews consist of only the researcher and the individual participant. In this chapter, I will describe and justify my methods as well as provide the steps I took to execute my study.

Justification of Method

I mainly chose to utilize the focus group method because it allows participants to converse with each other naturally. This is just one of the three main functions of a focus group along with “pedagogy and political effectivity” (Kamberelis et al. 36). Focus groups also allow for participants to feel in control of the conversation since they outnumber the moderator. Lastly, the conversation created in the space of focus groups allows participants to challenge each other to fully explain their points, which generates even more conversation (Morgan 139). Focus group and individual interviews are both very effective methodologies for their own individual reasons but together they can be even more beneficial for understanding participants. This combination of methods is the most frequently used together for an in-depth study (Morgan 133). The use of individual follow up interviews allows for me to witness a more delicate conversation in the sense that the participant feels safer to discuss more “sensitive topics” since we are talking one-on-one (Morgan 139). Because focus groups generate natural discourse and individual interviews provide a deeper conversation, both methods are best used together in order to execute my

method. In relation to my particular study, I used focus groups because cancel culture is a very contemporary topic that is very popular amongst my participants as folks who are apart of generation Z. Business Insider states:

Generation Z (aka Gen Z, iGen, or centennials), refers to the generation that was born between 1996-2010, following millennials. This generation has been raised on the internet and social media, with some the oldest finishing college by 2020 and entering the workforce.

Although all participants are comfortable discussing social media trends as a group, I then proceeded to do follow up interviews so that I could discuss the sensitive topics of political beliefs and the particular movements each individual followed and why. Now I will proceed to describe how I executed my method.

Description of Methods

The first step I took in conducting my interviews was applying and being approved by the Human Subjects Research Committee (HSRC). I then proceeded to recruit my participants. I did this by going to different multicultural groups on campus and asking them if they would allow me to present my study to their members. Once they approved, I would attend the meetings and tell members the purpose of my study and the type of method I would be conducting. After a week of recruitment, I was able to get six participants to come to my initial focus group. Before the focus group was conducted, I had participants fill out a consent form along with a demographic's questionnaire. Based on the demographic's questionnaire, I was able to collect the following information on each participant.

Within my method, I had 6 total participants. Four were African American women and two were men, one African American, and one Asian male. The average age range was between

ages 20- 21. All of the participants are students at The College of Wooster. Participant One is an African American and White female who is between the ages of 20-21. She is currently junior communication studies and sociology double major at the college. Participant Two is an African American female between the ages of 20-21. She is currently a junior art history major. Participant Three is an African American female between the ages of 20-21. She is currently a junior political science and Africana studies double major. Participant Four is an African American female between the ages of 18-19. She is currently a junior communication studies major. Participant Five is a 22-year old Asian male who is currently a senior communication studies major. Participant Six is an African American male between the ages of 20-21. He is currently a junior business economics major. After collecting this data, I began to conduct the focus group.

This focus group was conducted in a collaborative study room in Andrews Library at The College of Wooster. The room was spacious with a combination of plaster and glass walls. I created a circle in the center of the room and provided small snacks on the side at another table. I chose to audio record the focus group due to the video camera failing to properly record. The group interview overall lasted for 47 minutes and 11 seconds. Throughout the interview, I asked participants about their social media use, what celebrities/brands that they follow and why, their views on the separation of art and politics, their participation in activism, and finally their views on cancel culture as a form of social media activism. (include questions and transcripts can be found in my appendix)

After I concluded the interview, I sent a follow-up email to all participants in order to schedule an individual interview. Through this, I was able to schedule and conduct four individual follow up interviews. I was able to meet with Participants One, Three, Four, and Six

for individual interviews. During these interviews, I delved deeper into asking participants about their political views, participation in activism, and their views on using cancel culture in the past and present day. These interviews were also audio-recorded and lasted for 8-10 minutes. All of the interviews were then transcribed on my password-protected laptop and all audio recordings were terminated upon completion. After being transcribed, all interviews were coded through an open coding process which consists of me going through each transcript “line by line and ‘categories a chunk of data on the basis of its coherent meaning” (Lindlof and Taylor 250). All of these questions and interview transcripts can be found in my appendix. In the next section, I will discuss the limitations of my study.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I defined and justified my method of conducting a focus group with follow up with individual interviews. Next, I explicitly explained the execution of my method and how it was recorded for future reference. In my next chapter, I will analyze the main themes that appeared within all the interviews and how they complement or contradict each other.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will provide an analysis of my findings on how my participants view cancel culture as a form of social media activism and how millennial people of color define cancel culture through their personal experiences. There are two key themes that emerged within my study. The first is how participants cancel a public figure and second is how they cancel a brand and how the two processes differ. In order to properly contextualize the emergent themes, I will first) discuss how my participants use social media and how they participate in social media activism. Second, I will discuss the concept of cancel culture and how my participants personally define it and practice it. Lastly, I will discuss the canceling of public figures and brands and how the process for each action differs.

Social Media Purposes and Activism

The first important subject discussed within my focus group is the multiple uses of social media offers. All participants agreed that social media could be used for comedic relief, education, interacting with family and friends, and lastly pop culture and political updates. Participant Four specifically discussed how certain social media platforms are used to consume and interact with different information. For example, they use Twitter and Facebook for political updates, while participant five uses Twitter for comedic purposes. Participant Four also stated they only observe on Twitter as opposed to interacting (what type of participant does this make them according to STOPS theory). Overall, Twitter was the most favored app out of all of the social media platforms participants use. The main consistent idea presented about social media use is how it is used by participants to communicate their opinion on their values or beliefs. This also is reflected through the social media activism they choose to participate in.

None of my participants view themselves as activists but they do consider themselves allies to movements they feel affect them directly or that they morally support. In opposition, while Participant six was passionate about certain movements, they were more concerned with understanding the “most information about them on the left and right side”. I found that some of the issues participants cared about were LGBTQ+ issues, reproductive rights (specifically with black women), climate change, mass incarceration, Black Lives Matter, and the legalization of cannabis. They participate in said allyship through using their networked publics to educate their followers about the movements by sharing posts about them to bring further awareness to the issue at hand. Although this is social media activism, most participants feel like social media activism is a bare minimum form of activism which contributes to the idea of slacktivism presented in my second chapter. To reiterate, slacktivism encompasses the act of individuals' minimal involvement within activism and is associated with social media activism (Fuchs 188). Yet, Participant One made a point that being able to donate monetarily to movements is a privilege some millennials do not have, and social media activism is easier to participate in. Overall, social media activism is still very heavily used across social media platforms; therefore, it is necessary to understand how a cancel culture is a form of social media activism.

The Concept of Cancel Culture

In continuation of describing monetary activism as a privilege that only some people can actively participate in, cancel culture was described by participants one, two, three, and four to be a privilege for others to commit to, particularly in relation to canceling brands. Participants came to this conclusion through the discussion about clothing brands they chose to stop financially supporting them and mentioned how in the long run “I am thinking about employees of those companies who are a part of the working-class community and how we are potentially

impacting them [monetarily]” (Participant Three). Hypothetically, even though canceling a brand is directed at the executives of the company, retail workers for the said brand can also be impacted by getting laid off or possibly earning less money due to the company’s economic loss. The idea of negatively affecting the working class affects how some participants choose to cancel brands or not, but most of them believe in canceling public figures.

In the focus group and individual interviews Participants, One, Two, Three, Four, and Five all believed in practicing cancel culture in relation to public figures. However, Participant Six chose not to participate in cancel culture because they stated:

I think you strongly believe you can separate the artist from their work. Because artists are people just like us, they change and grow. They can make mistakes and come back and be a positive person, that’s just how I feel. Like Kanye, in the past, he was a motivational individual. Then he started going through some stuff [such as] having breakdowns and having all these radical thoughts and statements. After justifying what he was saying that was a good way to come back from his downfall.

This opinion was the only one out of all the participants that were not pro-cancel culture. Aside from my interviews, I find that this participant’s individualized opinion about cancel culture and the setting within which they disclosed it (in our individual interview) is directly linked with the spiral of silence theory, which is a common result of cancel culture. The theory is based on “a conception of public opinion as social control. In this view, public opinion is a mechanism that enables society to maintain a level of consensus” in order to avoid being isolated by one’s peers (186 Lee et al., Gearhart and Zhang 208). During the focus group, Participant Six was very reserved and did not comment on how he personally felt about cancel culture until we were alone. I feel these actions were taken to avoid being ostracized by the rest of the participants who

indeed practice cancel culture. Dr. Sherice Gearhart and Weiwu Zhang found that this theory can also be applied to social media use due to their identification of online silencing effects due to minority opinions being voiced to a networked public (209). Overall, all participants believe that cancel culture does exist, whether they choose to participate in it or not. Through further analysis, I found that the strategies of canceling a brand versus a public figure also differ in action.

Canceling Brands

Because the use of social media is rooted in interaction and consumption, as we exchange information, brands have the ability to interact with consumers on a more personal level. Participants found that they considered canceling a brand if there were blatant or underlying themes of racism, abuse of human rights (specifically through fast fashion), or discrimination towards a particular group of people. Within the focus group brands such as H&M, Walmart, and Nike were three main brands that had put themselves in jeopardy of being canceled by participants. Although they all acknowledged that some brands should be canceled for their actions, it seemed to come down to their personal uses of the brand, economic status, moral foundations, and the “facelessness” of the brand which determined if the brand could be canceled. For example, all participants did not feel the need to express that Gucci was canceled for the “black ‘baklava jumper... [that] featured a partial face mask closely resembled racist blackface costumes” (Resnikoff). The reasoning by Gucci automatically being canceled was because most participants could not afford to buy from the brand in the first place. However, this cancellation implies that if the participants were somehow able to buy Gucci in the future, they would not because of its racial undertones within the clothing it produces. When Walmart was mentioned as a company that participants did not fully morally agree with, for unstated reasons, they were more realistic with

the idea that because of their economic status and the access to basic goods that Walmart can provide at low prices. As I mentioned earlier, the economic factors of other people who are a part of the working class and work for these brands are also heavily considered when deciding if a brand should be canceled.

Through these comments, I've observed that participant's financial decisions are rooted in what is right but also in how our actions can impact others who did not make the executive decisions to release products or make decisions that are offensive to the public. When brands were discussed throughout the entire focus group, participants often described brands as being faceless. For example, when I mentioned the idea of separating a brand from its decisions, participants immediately defended brands by accepting their ability to make mistakes due to the lack of "people of color in the room" and describing the brands decisions as simply "dumb and ignorant" but not intentional (Participant One and Six). Because of this language around offensive brand decisions, it was easier for participants to forgive a brand or never fully cancel them. This naiveté of trusting that brands never purposefully make decisions in order to offend or anger the public goes against the concept of "outrage economy" which literally profits off of creating products that are purposefully targeted at offending individuals and thus unintentionally marketed out of anger (Rothman). This observation just caters to Participant Six's statement comparing cancel culture to a "double-edged sword" because, ". sometimes I am a rational consumer and sometimes I'm not. Although some people say that they are going to cancel a brand, you are actually marketing that brand for them. But if that is the case, I wouldn't respect that because you are taking advantage of people's emotions". This point of view roots brand decisions in their attempt to abuse emotional reaction as a marketing tool and thus contributes to why canceling a brand can be so emotional, because the brand secretly wants it to be emotional. Brands are depending on consumers to be

emotional when it comes to shopping but also unconscious about their decisions. Because clothing is a necessity, participants found that they are more likely to not think about the fact a brand once upset them and lost their support. Participant Two specifically states “I don’t hold myself accountable enough when it comes to canceling brands, because I am not conscious when I am shopping”. However, participants are more conscious and dedicated to not supporting a public figure when they have been canceled.

Canceling of Public Figures

Throughout the focus group, participants identified how and why public figures go from being supported to being canceled. First, as an active public, participants found that they canceled public figures after noticing repetitive behavior that they found to be problematic. Participant One stated “I feel like we have a lot of strikes (for people)” and they believe people deserve second chances. Because public figures and social media users are both alike in being human beings, there is a foundational understanding that people make mistakes. Participant Two finds that in relation to public figures they are not too focused on all the mistakes that are made and states “we could all be canceled about something we say or do”. This level of aware involvement creates room for public figures to make multiple mistakes before they are canceled. However, when too many mistakes have been made, the aware public transitions into an activist public thus leading to the canceling of a public figure. Public figures were mostly canceled by participants because they share different political views from them, or they morally do not agree with the public figures' decisions. For example, in late 2019 actress Gina Rodriguez posted a video of her singing lyrics to the song “Ready or Not” by The Fugees and she clearly said the “N” word, nigga, which was seen as problematic because she does not identify as Black (Trepany). Participant One provided their opinion on Rodriguez’s actions and repetitive behavior

stating “I feel like we have a lot of strikes (for people). But then there are the one-time mistakes. Like if Gina Rodriguez only made a dumbass mistake one time and then worked to fix it, I could forgive her”. Another example that Participants mentioned is artist R. Kelly because of the sexual assault and rape allegations that have been made public. Participant Five stated “I am not one to cancel someone easily because people are human, and they make mistakes. But with R Kelly I was like okay this is repetitive; it’s happening a lot. At some point, you have to draw a line”. In the situations of these two figures, R. Kelly and Gina Rodriguez made many mistakes according to the public, thus they became subjected to going through the process of being canceled by the public.

Participants identified three factors in canceling a person. The first step is to unfollow the public figure on social media. Participant One and Four both stated they do not like Donald Trump, so they do not follow them on social media. Their reasoning was because they feel that Trump is problematic, Participant Four also stated they hold this same idea about Kanye West and members of the Kardashian family. The second element of canceling a public figure is not supporting their products or life achievements. This was mainly implied through how participants found it difficult to stop listening to Kanye West or Michael Jackson’s music. This difficulty feeds into the third element I identified as a part of cancel culture, emotion motivated behavior. All participants agreed with Participants Five and Two when they stated they could not cancel Michael Jackson. Participant Four specifically stated “...I realized I was more hesitant with Michael Jackson because he was a personality that we knew, and his music was such a big part of me growing up. It hurts to cut him out because now I’m taking away this part of myself that I’m used to”. Participants One, Two and Four seemed to hold the same opinion when it came to Kanye West and his older music. Because participants are typically fans of the public

figures that they cancel so it is an emotional decision. I infer this is mainly due to the memory's participants have associated with the public figure or their work in the past. Also, these emotional connection participants feel to the public figures compromises their moral compass that affects their ability to fully cancel or not support the public figure in the future. This emotional baggage leads to participants also bargaining with the public figure and themselves by challenging themselves to separate the art or work of the public figure from their problematic behavior or beliefs. Participant Four stated they feel art and beliefs "are so closely tied because ...what I believe is going to be so closely tied to who am I and that is going to influence the art that I create". All participants also mentioned how artists can be separated in stages, specifically in reference to Kanye West being separated into new and old. This separation references his old music and new music with the idea that his political beliefs changed over time thus defining the idea of "Old Kanye" as the version of him that participants agree with and "New Kanye" with the version of him they have canceled. Cancel culture is rooted in social media users disagreeing with public figure's political statements or ideologies that they make public, for example, Kanye West was canceled when he revealed that he was a Donald Trump supporter. Participant One simplified the standards a public figure crosses in order to be canceled into one statement "If you cross ideological lines, it is like yeah they're [the public figure] probably a bad person anyway because they support these ideas". Once a public figure is canceled, participants agreed that there is a chance at public forgiveness or redemption, but it is very slim, and it takes a lot of work on the need of the public figure. In Participant One's individual interview, they mentioned that if a participant made a good apology, they could be forgiven. When asked what this type of apology would consist of, in relation to Kanye West and Gina Rodriguez as examples, they stated:

Maybe if he got on some rigorous med schedule and stuck to it, and maybe was like he guys I'm really sorry about all of the shit I did and said, it was for attention and y'all were right. I really am embarrassed I said those things. I don't know he's done so much I don't know if he could come back. Let's say Gina Rodriguez apologized for her "N" word thing. It would start with a well-crafted statement, something about "I wasn't thinking, you guys are totally right. I am so sorry for doing something so thoughtless and careless. I will try to be better in the future. I'm working to educate myself on why the word is harmful and the only people who can reclaim it are black people." Then if she started participating in anti-racist charity work that would be cool. I think that would count as a big enough change for me.

The form of apology the participant is inferring to can be found in the method of restorative justice. This is defined by Margarita Zernova, Mark Findlay, and Ralph Henham to be a form of reform of the offender by discussing how they violated the values of a particular community and how they can work to restore themselves (2). However, participants point out that cancel culture does not offer much room for forgiveness of public figures who offend others.

Overall from discussing cancel culture with participants, I find that the process of forgiving a public figure is extremely difficult because it is hard to conceptualize what a genuine apology would look like from public figures who have offended the public. Time is another element that makes a genuine apology difficult. If an apology is issued right after the offense happens, it is easily considered ingenuine. In opposition, if an apology is made after a very long time, the topic is no longer relevant on social media and past supporters of the public figure will most likely expect much more than a statement, as seen through an apology will not suffice as Participant One inferred through their previous statement. Ultimately, the active public holds the power to

cancel a public figure or brand but also has the power to forgive the public figure or brand as well

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I provided an analysis of the four main findings within my focus groups and individual interviews. These findings emerged and provided context for cancel culture through participants' social media use and participation in social media activism. This context allowed for cancel culture to be defined as the act of not monetarily, emotionally, or publicly supporting a brand or public figure due to an offensive comment or act that has been brought to the public's attention. I was also able to identify the differences between participants' motivation and execution of canceling a brand versus a public figure. Lastly, I was able to observe how the sensitivity of public apology, given by the canceled public figure or brand, and public forgiveness which is issued by the active public which committed the act of canceling the public figure or brand. In my next chapter, I will provide my concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This study discusses how minority college students, specifically at The College of Wooster, view and define cancel culture through the lens of social media activism. I framed this study with previous research surrounding networked publics, social media activism, and scholarship that frames cancel culture as a form of social media activism and consumer activism from scholars such as: (Michael Warner (2002), Stephen Coleman (2010), Alice Marwick (2010), Ashley Lee (2018), and Xerxes Minocher (2019)). In order to execute this study, I conducted one focus group with four follow up individual interviews with a current student at the College of Wooster. After conducting my study, I conducted an analysis that focused on participants' social media use, defining cancel culture and different uses of cancel culture. In my final chapter, I will discuss the three major findings of my research, implications, limitations, next steps for further development, and closing reflexive notes.

Major Findings

Within my analysis, I have recognized three major findings: reasons for social media use, perception of social media activism, and the distinct difference between canceling a brand versus a public figure.

Through conducting my focus group, I found that participants declared Twitter to be their favorite social media app to use. In general, they used social media for “funny stuff, comedic relief, political subjects” and posting content from other users that aligned with their beliefs or aesthetics (P4). Users also had no issue with communicating their opinion on social media whether it was their own words or reposting a post they agree with. Even though sharing their thoughts with their publics was important, they also enjoyed social media for entertainment. In relation to social media activism, the participants viewed themselves a bit differently.

I asked participants if they would consider themselves activists and they were quick to deny that title, but when I offered the term ally, someone supporting a cause or person, they agreed much more with that title. A major reason why participants felt this way is because of how social media activism can have a large impact, but sometimes takes a very minimal amount of effort and work. In addition, participants also stated:

P4: Yes, Social media [activism] is very important. I feel like it is criticized because it is so easy, but it is also convenient and more accessible to others. What you're liking and retweeting is also a form of social media activism.

P3: I feel like because it's all so interconnected, it is so easy to be an activist on social media.

P1: It definitely can be argued that retweets or likes are activism but also is it? It's up to you to decide if you aren't actively donating money or time to a cause. Because it can just be a like or a retweet.

P5: It can become a trend at that point.

The social and cultural capital that social media offers to its users can cause participants to view their participation in social media activism as a minimal effort. In opposition, participants understand that participating in social media activism is an option for people who cannot monetarily contribute to movements. Cancel culture allows for social media users to stop monetarily supporting a brand or public figure and voice their opinion about the wrongdoings of the said brand or public figure.

The last major finding of my study focuses on the distinct difference between the participant's method of canceling a brand versus canceling a public figure. Brands were more likely to be canceled for making unethical decisions such as utilizing cheap labor. While these

decisions may be wrong, participants were intrigued by how hard brands work to “come back” and be re-established as a good brand by consumers who previously canceled them (P3). In opposition, public figures are canceled by a strikes system where they can make mistakes in the public's opinion so many times before they are canceled by the public. This cancellation is difficult to come back from due to the sensitivity of apology and the public's reluctance to forgive a public figure because they question their genuine nature. This is surprising because public figures are more singular and human than brands are which are made up of executives who are never really the face of a brand. When asked, participants were unsure of how a public figure could redeem themselves after being canceled.

Implications

Based on my three major findings, there are three important implications that are crucial to take away from my study.

First, my participants are a mere example of how the leading generation, Gen Z, dedicates a lot of their time to social media use and that does not seem to be changing any time soon. Yes, social media is used for connecting with friends and entertainment, but it is also very popular for brands to use in order to connect and understand consumers, and vice versa. As social media becomes more popular, it is crucial that more scholarship is focused on the trends and movements it continuously gives a voice to. This scholarship will allow for advancement in understanding how we as users affect social media and in return how it affects us as human beings. In addition, it is important to continue to contribute to the study of social media movements in relation to the history of activism.

Second, conducting this study allowed me to frame cancel culture as a form of social media activism, but it also revealed how cancel culture can have the harmful side effect of

creating a spiral of silence amongst brands, public figures, and other social media users who support canceled brands or public figures. Spiral of Silence theory mentioned earlier within my rationale and analysis. If a brand or more so public figure gets canceled because of a statement they made, regardless of the reason, the fear of losing the support of all fans can lead victims of cancel culture to silence themselves and not state their honest opinion online out of fear. This can also be seen through online discussions surrounding the public figure or brand getting canceled, because if a social media user agrees with the canceled figure or brand's decision, they may not voice their opinion out of fear of getting bashed by social media users. I am not suggesting that these comments public figures and brands make online is acceptable because the privilege of free speech should not be utilized to make statements rooted in bigotry. I am suggesting that with this knowledge of the spiral of silence that cancel culture creates, hopefully, this study can be used to facilitate discourse about accountability, pedagogy, and growth from mistakes. Cancelling a person or brand often does not immediately allow them to understand the mistake they made but instead often fails to allow room for them to be educated. Statements of ignorance need to be considered as a result of social norms and hierarchies put in place by people of power. Hopefully, this study can inspire solutions for improving the goal of cancel culture.

Third, the observation that brands are more likely than public figures to be un-canceled by the public is extremely important because it forces social media users to question the true purpose of cancel culture. It also forces social media users to question why they are more willing to forgive a brand, a group of people, over a public figure, a singular person, who is more relatable than a large brand. These findings most importantly force social media users, and most importantly humans, to reflect on why they are so harsh on other human beings who are using their platform to voice their opinion, even if it is wrong.

In my next section, I will provide the three limitations of my study.

Limitations

Through self-reflection, I have noticed three limitations within the execution of my study. First, because I chose to conduct a focus group, some of the participants silenced themselves when they had conflicting opinions with the majority of the group. This was even made clear to me when I conducted one of my individual interviews when a participant expressed, they realized they did not share similar opinions with all the other participants. The second limitation was conducting the focus groups and interviews within two weeks of each other. I feel that if I was able to take more time to reflect on the focus group discussion, I would have been able to ask more questions during my individual interviews. Lastly, even though I had six participants in my focus group, I was only able to conduct four individual interviews due to not being able to get in contact with two of the participants to conduct the interview.

Directions for Future Research

For future research, I think there are multiple ways this study can be improved. First, I recommend conducting multiple focus groups and conducting individual interviews with all participants. Second, conduct the study with a wider age range of social media users to discover how cancel culture is perceived generationally. Lastly, conducting focus groups or brainstorms to think of solutions for the spiral of silence that cancel culture causes could be beneficial for all social media users. Because there is such minimal research on cancel culture, there is so much room for expansion on how it is impacting convergence culture.

Final Thoughts: A Reflexive Note

Every senior thesis should read like a good but anticlimactic story. There is a setup of background, a problem to solve, and an ending where the problem is at least fifty percent solved.

Growing up, I thought a nerd was a really smart kid who had no friends and only did homework on the weekends. It was me but it wasn't. I was a skinny black girl who secretly knew all the answers but did not feel like being out as a nerd. This seemed to happen anyway because somehow, I always ended up helping some athlete out with their homework that they thought it was cool not to do. So, imagine my surprise when I come to The College of Wooster and find out that everyone here is a nerd for something. It is now up to me to find out what I am a nerd for and how to actually be good at it.

The first time I attempted to research cancel culture, I was instantly shut down. It was too fresh and new. As if researching it would make it dirty or less mysterious. So, I settled and attempted to find joy in studying hip hop, again, and I simply could not live with that regret. Having the opportunity to conduct this research challenges me to a point where my opinion on cancel culture has fluctuated on a consistent basis over the course of the time, I have spent researching it.

Picking my method was possibly the easiest decision I made throughout this process. I could think of no better way to study cancel culture and its effects than to talk with college students who have been on social media for so long they have seen the birth and growth of cancel culture as an idea. I also have a passion for facilitating conversation so conducting the focus group was exciting for me. My participants were also passionate about my project which helped a lot and I was able to work with participants whose thought process was not similar to mine in terms of how they view cancel culture. These disagreeing schools of thought allowed me to recognize all the factors that went into social media activism such as class status and attempting to understand both sides of a movement. As I concluded my focus group and individual interviews, I found myself digging deeper into more literature and becoming a friend

for reading material. This led me to question my own beliefs on cancel culture and the effectiveness of social media activism.

At first, I strongly believed in cancel culture, especially when it came to public figures offending my identity. As a black woman, I am constantly being degraded by history and cultural norms, except during the times where it is culturally relevant or trendy to do everything black women do. For example, Gina Rodriguez calmly saying the n-word as if it has always been a part of her vocabulary. That word has been a part of my history, as I felt the pain of my ancestors while I watched her let a word used within my community roll off her tongue. She instantly lost my support and I do not think researching cancel culture changes that. However, I find more room for forgiveness and more acceptance of human error. This study challenges me because I wonder when I really began to start shut people out in the same way that cancel culture does I also wonder how long social media has just been a microscope or microphone that amplifies all that we as humans do. Yes, it can be a platform to build others up but cancel culture has reached a point where it tears people down. So, I believe it does exist, it holds relevance, but too much of a good thing can wreak havoc, that's what cancel culture is doing. I find that this research is for all the newspaper articles out there that talk about how cancel culture doesn't exist, because it clearly does.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER

The Views of Cancel Culture Activism by Minority College Students
Principal Investigator: Korri Palmer, Communication Studies Department

Purpose

You are being asked to participate in a research study. We are investigating your views on cancel culture as a form of social media activism and its possible benefits and disadvantages.

Procedures

If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in a focus group interview. You will be asked to answer several questions about yourself, your social media use and how you view cancel culture as a form of activism. Each focus group will last about 1 hour. Participants will also be asked to participate in an individual post- focus group interview that will last 30-45 minutes. The focus groups will be visually recorded, and the individual interviews will be audio recorded for accurate recollection. Only I will have access to these recordings.

Risks

No risks or discomforts are anticipated in this research; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to participate in the study.

Benefits

Although there are no direct benefits to you for your participation, your time is very valuable to the success of this research. You may also receive an indirect benefit of learning more about cancel culture as a form of social activism at the conclusion of this study.

Compensation

Participants will not be compensated for their participation, but your time is an extremely valuable contribution to this research.

Confidentiality

Any information you give will be kept confidential. Transcripts will use alias names that will be stored on a password-protected laptop. All visual files will be destroyed upon completion of this project. Audio recordings will be stored securely on a password-protected computer and destroyed after they have been transcribed. All data will be kept anonymous.

Costs

There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedure described above.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You may refuse to participate in the study. If you decide to participate, you may change your mind about being in the study and withdraw at any point.

Questions

If you have any questions, please ask me. If you have additional questions later, you can contact me by email at kpalmer20@wooster.edu You may also contact my advisor, Nii Nikoi, at nnikoi@wooster.edu.

Consent

Your signature below will indicate that you have decided to volunteer as a research subject, that you have read and understood the information provided above, and that you are at least 18 years of age.

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

You will be provided a copy of this form.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions

1. Do you use social media? What platforms? How do you use social media (comedic relief? conveying a personal message/brand, art, business purposes)?
2. What particular conversations/subjects' interest you on social media platforms? Does it differ depending on the platform?
3. Do you follow any brands or celebrities / public figures on social media? What or Who?
4. Do you participate in social media activism? Do you find it to be helpful?
5. Given that you do (or do not) practice social media activism, do you consider yourself an activist? If so, what movements have you participated in and why?
6. Do you consider boycotting a brand or person to be a form of activism? Do you find it to be more harmful or helpful?

Individual Interview Questions

1. Why are you passionate about the activism you participate in?
2. How do you find your participation in certain forms of activism to be helpful?
3. Have you participated in cancel culture? To what extent?
4. Do you continue to cancel brands/ public figures? If so, who and why?
5. Have you ever reconsidered your decision to cancel and brand or public figure? If so, why?

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: What type of conversations or subjects interest you on social media (or trending topics)?

P4: funny stuff, comedic relief, Twitter and Facebook: Political subjects

P1: I like to retweet things that will give people new knowledge, I like people to know where I stand.

P5: My Twitter is straight comedic because that's what I use it for. For political and news stuff I just go on a news website.

P4: Because I am more of a visual person, I use Instagram more and it's more so my professional page. Snapchat is if I want to share something funny. I don't really use Facebook. On Twitter I only read tweets, I do not really engage a lot.

Moderator: Do you follow certain hashtags?

P4: Yeah, for the Uprising in Sudan, I follow that hashtag so I can stay updated on what's going on with that.

P3: I like to subscribe to stuff on snapchat or to certain pages.

P5: I like the NBC one [snapchat channel].

P6: I don't really watch the news through social media. But as far as personal things, I follow things like memes, I use Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube videos are cool too. To procrastinate in between [implying free time]. Really to learn quick things, hop in, hop out.

P3: I love foodstuff.

Moderator: Do you use Instagram for satisfaction?

P5: I've been favoring Twitter more.

P1: I prefer Twitter too.

P2: I definitely use Twitter the most, just because I think I use Twitter as an online newspaper. I check that and I get all of my information. As far as my professional twitter, I use it for more political things. It's a nice quick way to engage with what is going on around you.

Moderator: Do you follow any specific news channels [on Twitter]?

P2: CNN, NBC, BBC, BBC Africa.

P3: I like to follow NPR [P2 agrees]

P1: I also follow a different variety of politicians which me up to date on as positions on major things that are going on and sometimes, I don't even realize something is going on until I see a tweet about it.

P4: There's also an account called NOWTHIS.

P2: Vice also does a really good job.

Moderator: Does anyone follow any specific celebrities?

P2: Rihanna everywhere.

P6: Kanye [West], J. Cole

P1: I follow Kim [Kardashian] on Instagram

P2: that's loaded...Chrissy Teigen on Twitter

Moderator: Do you follow Celebrities that you do not like?

P1: I tried [to follow Donald Trump] and I can't do it. I still follow Kanye [West]

P4: I don't follow anyone I don't like or is problematic so no on Kanye, no on Trump, and no on a lot of the Kardashians. But from time to time I will go look at their accounts if they are a trending topic.

Moderator: [directed to Participant 6] You like Kanye, right?

P6: I mean Kanye's cool. I like his art rather than his political views. I am a big believer that you can separate your art from what you believe in.

Moderator: Do you guys think you can separate your art from your political views?

P4: No. I feel like they are so closely tied because like what I believe is going to be so closely tied to who I am and that is going to influence.

P1: the art that I create

P4: yeah, and I do understand what you [P6] is saying though because in that sense if I am separating Kanye as a problematic artist and him as visually pleasing

P1: or people sperate Old Kanye and New Kanye

P4: Yeah, I get that part. I just think it is hard to separate those because I think it's hard to separate religious and political beliefs because it can be so closely tied.

P2: Yeah when it comes to Kanye, I definitely find him to be such a loaded topic at this point. I will definitely listen to old Kanye and I struggle with that because he is just so problematic now.... He recently went to Howard (University) Homecoming and his entire basis is off religion and it's so interesting and a pivotal point for his own rebranding after being very pro-Trump. What I've been hearing a lot is if his music and art make you feel good you can separate him from the bad but that also makes you apart of his rebranding plan.

P1: It was easier for me to cut off R Kelly

P5: I just cannot do it.

P2: I found it really hard to cancel Michael Jackson

Moderator: I know the main argument with R. Kelly is that we (as listeners) knew how problematic he was, yet we still continued to listen to him. How do we feel about that?

P3: I just knew he peed on some girl, assuming she was of age, but I didn't know it was a child.

P2: Yeah, it's up to us to cancel him now as the newer generation

P4: For R. Kelly I didn't care because I didn't know him culturally. but I realized I was more hesitant with Michael Jackson because he was a personality that we knew, and his music was such a big part of me growing up. It hurts to cut him out because now I'm taking away this part of myself that I'm used to.

P5: I am not one to cancel someone easily because people are human, and they make mistakes. But with R Kelly I was like okay this is repetitive; it's happening a lot. At some point, you have to draw a line.

P2: I will say it's easier for me to cancel someone if they do something really messed up like R Kelly. My line is more so political as if someone supports Trump and the ideas he stands for, I do not give them a second thought anymore.

P1: If you cross ideological lines, it's like yeah, they're probably a bad person anyway because they support these ideas.

Moderator: I know we discussed separating art from politics, how does that idea transfer to brands?

P1: Well I could never afford Gucci in the first place so that was an easy cancel.

Moderator: What about H&M?

P3: I mean I didn't really shop there anyway because they do not have a lot of plus-sized options. But I love to see a brand try to come back, like Nike. They had this ad that alluded that only white US citizens can be athletes but then they came out with something new that was much more inclusive.

P1: I really believe there were no people of color in the room at H&M when they made that decision to put that boy in that shirt. I don't think it was purposeful, I think it was just ignorant and dumb.

P2: Just like what happened with ELLE Germany. In their newest edition, it featured a white model on the cover and their theme was "Black is Back" in reference to black people instead of the color. Where they proceeded to misname one of the black models in the magazine and then issues a half-ass apology.

P6: A lot of these brands are built from the foundations of the mid-1900's overtime and they lack diversity and consciousness on how you may step on toes when you're marketing to a broad audience, not just white consumers but people from all over the world. Now with the social media age, these brands don't know how to create that connection with their audience, and they don't have the diversity to provide that input.

P5: I think it also depends on what role these brands play in your life. For me with H&M and other fast fashion, I learned to cut off these brands because fast fashion is one of the worst things for the environment, to begin with. I can easily cut that off because I can find an alternative.

Some brands just have such a big impact on some people's lives.

P1: Yeah like I don't like Walmart's views, I don't want to support Walmart but I'm a broke college kid, I have to shop at Walmart. We don't always have the privilege to cut something out.

P6: I think it depends on the quality of the brand, or is it convivence? I don't know.

P1: I think if you're talking about art and artist that yes quality matters. I was never going to listen to Tekashi 6ix9ine because his music was trash. But

Moderator: Do you participate in social media activism? Do you find it to be helpful? To what extent?

P4: Yes, Social media is very important. I feel like it is criticized because it is so easy, but it is also convenient and more accessible to others. What you're liking and retweeting is also a form of social media activism.

P3: I feel like because it's all so interconnected, it is so easy to be an activist on social media.

P1: It definitely can be argued that retweets or likes are activism but also is it? It's up to you to decide if you aren't actively donating money or time to a cause. Because it can just be a like or a retweet.

P5: It can become a trend at that point.

Moderator: What do you do instead?

P1: I like to see if there are any organizations that I can donate to or learn more about. Volunteer or I like to post information that can lead you to find some unbiased information or more stories.

P2: I do think that it's the bare minimum but were in a new age that it's a new way of activism. It's not super impactful but it's about exposure.

P4: We are in a digital age where it helps because that way you are expanding the reach of that post.

P1: Some people don't have money or time to donate, but they have a Twitter account.

Moderator: So, do you consider yourself an activist?

P6: I wouldn't because I feel like there has to be an effort put into place to make a change. I feel like some people's intentions are doing it just to do it but if your intentions are pure it's activism.

P2: I would use the term activism very loosely.

Moderator: So maybe it's considered Ally-ship? What movements do you participate in?

P3: LGBTQ+ issues, abortion, reproductive rights (specifically with black women)

P1: The trans community, black trans women, Revolutions (Chile and Syria)

P4: Climate Change

P2: Mass Incarceration Rates pertaining to people of color, the legalization of cannabis and how black people cannot benefit from it monetarily.

Moderator: Do you consider boycotting a brand or a person to be a form of activism?

All: Yeah, it can be.

Moderator: Do you find it to be more harmful or more helpful in the long run?

P3: I am thinking about employees of those companies who are a part of the working-class community and how we are potentially impacting them.

P2: I don't hold myself accountable enough, when it comes to canceling brands, because I'm not conscious when I'm shopping.

P4: I think it can be hard if you're working for the brand. Because the company pays you and it's difficult to leave the job.

P1: I feel like issues can get so big that it's overwhelming and I cannot pick every battle.

Moderator: What about canceling people?

P1: I feel like we have a lot of strikes (for people). But then there are the one-time mistakes. Like if Gina Rodriguez only made a dumbass mistake one time and then worked to fix it, I could forgive her.

P5: It depends on how close you hold that person to you so when Gina Rodriguez was cancelled, I was like, that's cool. Moving on.

APPENDIX D: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW: Participant 1

Moderator: Why are you passionate about the activism you participate in?

P1: I think making your voice heard is very important. I don't believe in being apolitical because big issues are my issues too.

Moderator: Where do your values about being an activist stem from?

P1: My mom. She's loud, she always lets you know where she stands so I think I got that from her.

Moderator: Do you personally participate in cancel culture?

P1: Occasionally. Sometimes I'll say that something is canceled. Normally I mean it in a joking way *mockingly*. I usually have a really hard time going through completely canceling something. I think people deserve second chances to some extent. Like if I cancel you and you give a really good, sincere apology, and taking steps towards being better, I can give you another chance. I'm not very good at cancel culture.

Moderator: What does a good apology look like?

P1: I don't know, it looks different.

Moderator: If Kanye were to apologize what would that look like?

P1: Maybe if he got on some rigorous med schedule and stuck to it, and maybe was like he guys I'm really sorry about all of the shit I did and said, it was for attention and y'all were right. I really am embarrassed I said those things. I don't know he's done so much I don't know if he could come back. Let's say Gina Rodriguez apologized for her "N" word thing. It would start with a well-crafted statement, something about "I wasn't thinking, you guys are totally right. I am so sorry for doing something so thoughtless and careless. I will try to be better in the future. I'm working to educate myself on why the word is harmful and the only people who can reclaim

it are black people.” Then if she started participating in anti-racist charity work that would be cool. I think that would count as a big enough change for me.

Moderator: Do we give people or brands the space to do that?

P1: Generally, no. People don’t give people the room to grow and change.

APPENDIX E: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW: Participant 2

Moderator: Why are you passionate about the activism you choose to participate in?

P2: I feel like coverage and getting the word out to People of color especially that they need to be aware of what's going on in the world around them.

Moderator: What topics or movements do you find that you drift towards?

P2: Both sides of the #MeToo movement, pro-choice, planned parenthood, black lives matter, incarceration, and cannabis news, and climate change.

Moderator: Have you ever participated in cancel culture? To what extent?

P2: R Kelly, but also cancel culture is a little tricky because it's relative as to how much they were involved in our generation. Also, about not nitpicking at every mistake a person makes. We could all be canceled about something we say or do.

Moderator: Do you continue to cancel brands or public figures?

P2: Public figures are a little easier to cancel some brands. I would say it's kind of relative to how big of a role they play in my life. I will say when I am shopping, I don't stop to think about what's going on.

Moderator: Why do you find it so easy to cancel people over a brand?

P2: I feel like the people you cancel; you don't come across them every day. They aren't an active thing in your life. A lot of the time its celebrities or politicians that we don't cross paths with. With canceling brands, we all; buy clothes and do things so it's a bit more subconscious.

Moderator: Where do you think the line is between separating a person or brand from their art?

P2: I think that its 10x easier to cancel someone over being conservative or a Trump supporter.

APPENDIX F: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW: Participant 3

Moderator: Why are you passionate about the activism you participate in?

P3: Because most of it directly affects me. I am really an advocate for body equality, religion, and race.

Moderator: Do you find your participation to be helpful or could you do more?

P3: I definitely do. I think there are definitely some issues that are too big for me to tackle as one person. I think what I do helps but I could be more proactive in going to different protests and doing more front-line things.

Moderator: Have you participated in cancel culture? To what extent?

P3: I definitely have. Gucci because at a certain point it wasn't an accident. Kanye West, not 100% but I still listen to his old music but that's still me supporting him now. I canceled R Kelly so quickly. I think I'm on the fence about H&M and Old Navy, but I think it's because I knew it wasn't intentional, I figured it's going to be fine.

Moderator: Do you think you will still continue to cancel brands in the future?

P3: Yeah, I think I will. I think a lot of people think that cancel culture is momentary and it's just in this span of a couple of years. I feel like we've had cancel culture for a while, and nobody has put a name to it. Because people have been doing it for a long time.

Moderator: Have you ever uncanceled someone or a brand?

P3: Yeah, I have. With Nike.

Moderator: Do you find it harder or easier to cancel a brand versus a person?

P3: I think I find it easier to cancel a brand because of how big a brand can be versus a person I think it's easier.

APPENDIX: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW: Participant 6

Moderator: Do you participate in any movements or support any movements?

P6: Black Lives Matter, Gun Control, NRA

Moderator: Why do you feel so passionately about these movements?

P6: Because I know the most information about them on the left and right side.

Moderator: Do you find your activism or allyship to be helpful to others?

P6: Yeah definitely, I think Ally ship helps the community and it creates awareness for that serious issue.

Moderator: Have you ever directly participate in cancel culture? To what extent?

P6: No, I don't think so. Because I think you strongly believe you can separate the artist from their work. Because artists are people just like us, they change and grow. They can make mistakes and come back and be a positive person, that's just how I feel. Like Kanye, in the past, he was a motivational individual. Then he started going through some stuff as far as having breakdowns and having all these radical thoughts and statements. After justifying what he was saying that was a good way to come back from his downfall.

Moderator: Why do you think it is easier for people to forgive brands opposed to public figures?

P6: Because it's not the brand, it's more so the executive board. It's a group of collective individuals that lacks diversity. It's easier because you cannot blame one person, but when it's repetitive it is becoming a problem.

Moderator: What about when the outrage economy comes into play? Most people who are making these decisions a lot of marketing research is done, given that they spend this much money and they know what might possibly offend, but they release it anyway, does that change your views?

P6: Well there's a double-edged sword, sometimes I am a rational consumer and sometimes I'm not. Although some people say that they are going to cancel a brand, you are actually marketing that brand for them. But if that is the case I wouldn't respect that because you are taking advantage of people's emotions.