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#Cancelled

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Cancel Culture in the YouTube Beauty Community

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ABSTRACT

A new form of social activism, known as cancel culture, is emerging online. This concept originally referred to forms of calling out others to educate them on the inappropriateness of certain statements and behaviors, but it is now often criticized for being too extreme and unforgiving. In this study we investigated the overt and covert motivations drama and commentary channels provide to discuss the cancellation of five high-profile YouTubers within the beauty community (i.e., James Charles, Tati Westbrook, Nikita Dragun, Jeffree Star and Shane Dawson), one of the largest and most competitive communities on YouTube. For each cancelled beauty guru, we selected the 10 most-watched videos discussing the cancellation. These videos were uploaded by commentator channels and the cancelled beauty influencers themselves. Because some videos discussed multiple cancellations in one video, a total of 41 videos were analyzed through thorough textual reading. This analysis demonstrated that beauty gurus are called out for issues with the products they are selling, as well as for more serious allegations of homophobia, racism and sexual misconduct. However, we also found that there was often an underlying motivation of jealousy, conflicting business interests or simply not liking a person for calling them out. We conclude that although cancellations are often presented as a means to achieve social justice, the truth is also that influencers stir up drama out of jealousy or commercial interest.

Keywords: cancel culture, celebrity bashing, online influencers, social activism

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#Cancelled: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Cancel Culture

in the YouTube Beauty Community

Introduction

Digital media has many advantages and potential for the democratization, activism and social justice in our society. Platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and TikTok are profiled as the channels that can give everyone a voice (Bouvier, 2020). This laid the basis for new forms of social activism, known as cancel culture. The origins of cancel culture and cancelling can be traced back to Black Twitter and Black cultural practices of dissing and calling out others, practices that mix jokiness and entertainment with critique and political activism to educate others on the inappropriateness of certain statements and actions (Clark, 2020; Felaco et al., 2022; Ng, 2022; Tandoc et al., 2022). In a way, the practice resembles political correctness, or actively avoiding offense by monitoring language and actions to strive for social justice (Felaco et al., 2022). Many consider cancel culture as a positive trend, giving minorities a voice, holding individuals accountable for their misconduct, educating the public about issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia, and calling for reform (Tandoc et al., 2022).

Despite the good intentions, concerns and questions are being voiced about cancel culture being too extreme and bordering on bullying (Felaco et al., 2022; Ng, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2022). Some have even likened it to ‘moral terrorism’ (Heffer, 2020). Recently, research showed that while some see canceling as a way to respect others’ rights, others see it as a radicalization of political correctness and a form of censorship (Felaco et al., 2022). It has also been argued that canceling action may inadvertently take the focus away from the broader societal issues that underlie the cancelation (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia), by focusing on anger and outrage at one or a few individuals (Bouvier, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021). It has been argued that cancel culture uses apathic and hostile strategies, such as public shaming, naming and denouncing, boycotting, calling advertisers, doxing (i.e., sharing private

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information, such as addresses and phone numbers) and stimulating to massively unfollow resulting in serious income loss (Wong, 2021). It has also been argued that individuals are increasingly called out and canceled for doing or saying ‘trivial’ things (e.g., photo adaptations) or for old posts (Duffy et al., in press).

This study tries to add to the discussion on the validity of canceling important social media figures by investigating the overt and covert motivations for cancelling five popular YouTube beauty influencers in 2020. We focus on the YouTube beauty community, as this is one of the largest and most competitive communities (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017), which seems to be regularly captivated by extreme cancellations with serious consequences for the YouTuber (Mulroney, 2021). We will delve into the explicit and implicit motivations behind five cases of cancellation in 2020, to better understand the balance between social activism and bullying within cancel culture. Thereby we will focus on videos shared by popular opinion leaders on YouTube who were not directly involved in the cancellation (i.e., drama and commentary channels) as well as the cancelled beauty influencers themselves, to understand the motivations underlying a cancellation of popular beauty influencers.

Literature Overview

Online Social Activism and Cancel Culture

The internet, and especially social media, has opened new opportunities for social activism, which are often grouped together under the umbrella of ‘cancel culture’. Clark (2020) described cancel culture as ‘an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone whose values, (in)action or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with presence, time and money’. Cancel culture originated from social activism on the social media platform Twitter (Felaco et al., 2022; Ng, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2022). It first appeared within the context of Black Twitter, and became more mainstream with the adoption of hashtags as part of the Twitter algorithm (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2022). Around the same time, it

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was also picked up by fandoms and fan communities, to organize around concerns related to media representation of minorities (Ng, 2022). These first uses focused on digital resistance and accountability, often within the context of racism and sexism (Bouvier, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Clark, 2020; Felaco et al., 2022; Ng, 2022). If media figures act in ways that are deemed problematic, fans scrutinize these behaviors and can quickly withdraw support, resulting in significant financial repercussions (Christin & Lewis, 2021; Lewis & Christin, 2022; Ng, 2022). There seem to be two important predictors of endorsing cancel culture: Believing that people should apologize immediately when they are attacked for saying something inappropriate, and finding it acceptable to dig into a person's past when they hold social status (Mueller, 2021). However, the more acceptable individuals find it to dig into a person's past, the less likely they are to forgive people for their past behavior when they are trying to grow and learn from their mistakes (Mueller, 2021). Those who are more willing to forgive are also more likely to feel the need to know more about a person's character before making a judgment, and wanting open debate between perspectives (Mueller, 2021). Nevertheless, the root of a cancellation is to hold high social status individuals accountable, sanction bad behavior and demand an apology and change in behavior (Lewis & Christin, 2022; Mueller, 2021; Ng, 2022)

At first sight, cancel culture thus appears to be a positive undertaking with good intentions. However, some believe that this social activism has increasingly been pushed to the extreme and is used as a tool to limit freedom of expression (Felaco et al., 2022). Some have even called it 'toxic' and 'petty', and warn that it can 'easily destroy one's life by condemning targets for something done in the past' (Tandoc et al., 2022, p. 7). For example, it appears that some famous individuals are called out for the slightest mistakes or decisions they make, and in some cases, this can take extreme forms of celebrity bashing, such as spreading adapted videos and pictures, and stalking and hacking the celebrity (Ouvrein et al., 2018). In addition,

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while cancellations can result from fans critically assessing the media content they consume and calling out content creators and celebrities whose behavior they deem inappropriate or concerning, there are also anti-fans who enjoy sharing negative opinions about content they love to hate (Ng, 2022).

An important gap in our current understanding that this study aims to address is that research on cancel culture mainly focuses on Twitter (Bouvier, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Felaco et al., 2022). Research shows that social activists mainly engage on Twitter because the platform is the ideal tool to fight against injustice and achieve social equality (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Nevertheless, researchers have called for more research on other platforms (Felaco et al., 2022), and it appears that TikTok and YouTube are also increasingly used for cancellation practices (Mulrone, 2021; Rembiszewska, 2020), though academic research on cancel culture is very limited, as only a handful of studies have specifically focused on this platform (Christin & Lewis, 2021; Lee & Abidin, 2021; Lewis et al., 2021; Lewis & Christin, 2022).

Cancellation on these platforms might take different forms, due to the different features and prevailing norms on the platforms (Bouvier, 2020; Felaco et al., 2022). For instance, it has been argued that Twitter's focus on brief, rapid and emotional messages leaves little room for reflection on the sensitive topics that individuals are called out for (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Felaco et al., 2022). In contrast, YouTube offers the option to create in-depth exposes on influencers to be cancelled, rather than having to condense one's criticisms to 280 characters. The option to create and present in-depth analyses in long-form can better represent underlying power structures and inequality and creates the opportunity for content creators to use visuals and so-called 'receipts' (i.e., proof of misconduct) to deliberately frame issues in a specific narrative that serves their own purpose.

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In addition, while conversations on Twitter can be understood as many-to-many conversations, with many different voices sharing their opinions using hashtags and retweets to organize around a specific topic (Draucker & Collister, 2015; Oltmann et al., 2020), the YouTube algorithm makes it so that only a few select voices are heard on YouTube with a flow of communication from influencer-creators to audiences (Arthurs et al., 2018; Christin & Lewis, 2021; Lewis et al., 2021). There are specific YouTube channels, which aim to keep others accountable by calling them out or cancelling them (Lewis & Christin, 2022). These drama and commentary channels do investigative work online and report on and comment about scandals involving YouTube celebrities (Lewis & Christin, 2022). Many see themselves as ‘truth-tellers, in the tradition of watchdog journalists’ (Lewis & Christin, 2022, p. 1642), and hope to professionalize as television or radio journalists in the future (Lewis & Christin, 2022). A select few of these drama and commentary channels with a large following are the opinion leaders who set the tone for discussions surrounding cancellations (Christin & Lewis, 2021). Therefore, in order to expand our understanding of how cancel culture can take form on different platforms, this study will focus on cancel culture on YouTube instead of Twitter. This will help us improve our understanding of the validity of the criticisms that cancel culture is potentially toxic, oversensitive, and being misused (Tandoc et al., 2022).

Cancel Culture in the YouTube Beauty Community

A second contribution of our study is its focus on a specific community on YouTube: The beauty community. There are dozens of communities on YouTube (e.g., the gaming community, the book community, the technology community) and it is not yet clear from the literature whether there is a difference in how cancel culture manifests when comparing these communities. The goal of the present study is not to examine the distinctions between these communities, but rather to add to the knowledge by offering more insight into one specific community, namely the beauty community. According to Cunningham and Craig (2017), this

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community currently contains more than 1.3 million channels, making it one of the largest communities on the platform.

In the beauty community, YouTubers are mainly concerned with testing new makeup products, new makeup looks and tutorials (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017). These beauty influencers, or the YouTubers in the beauty community, are gaining a high status and enjoying a long-lasting popularity compared to more fleeting online trends or viral videos. In contrast to traditional celebrities, for whom social media is just another platform on which they need to be active, influencers develop their fame through their social media content and use the specific features of the platforms, such as likes, private messages and giveaways, to develop intimate conversations and close relationships with the audience (Abidin, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). They develop trust among the audience by being authentic and offering them behind the scenes looks and ‘real’ reviews and information (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021). With this status and the increasing skepticism towards official institutions and experts, influencers soon became attractive spokespersons for online marketing initiatives (cfr. Influencer marketing) (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017; Mcquarrie et al., 2013). Some even link influencers to the trend of democratization of information whereby there is more room for competing voices from different social groups (van de Ven & van Gemert, 2022).

Together, these elements ensure that the beauty community is a highly competitive environment, which creates a context that might potentially stimulate and reinforce cancelling behavior. News reports seem to support this claim, as numerous articles discuss the latest beauty guru cancellations (e.g., James Charles, Jacklyn Hill, Laura Lee etc.) (e.g., Mulroney, 2021) and the consequences for the involved targets. These implications can potentially be far-reaching. Though very little scientific research has been conducted on the impact of cancel culture on the cancelled influencers, journalists have argued that these influencers may suffer

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emotional (e.g., mental health issues, loneliness, suicidal tendencies, anxiety) and professional consequences (e.g., losing social media following, ruined reputations etc.) (Palomares et al., 2022).

This study

Although the YouTube beauty community and the popular press are seemingly flooded by articles, videos and hashtags related to cancellation (e.g., NBC News published more than 800 articles tagged ‘cancel culture’ in the past 14 months; InformOverload, 2020; Mulroney, 2021; Rembiszewska, 2020), academic research on this issue is still limited. This study aims to increase the insights on the manifestation of cancel culture in the YouTube beauty community by focusing on the question: **(RQ1)** ‘What are the overt and covert motivations for cancelling popular influencers in YouTube’s beauty community?’. This question will be answered by specifying the reasons for the cancellation that YouTubers discuss and push forward when calling each other out. This will help us to better understand the motives behind cancellation practices. In other words, we aim to understand *why* beauty gurus are being called out, and which reasons and motivations the commentary channels and beauty influencers involved in the cancellation provide to justify the cancellation. This will be done by means of a thorough textual of YouTube videos uploaded by YouTube opinion leaders discussing popular beauty gurus that got cancelled. Increasing the knowledge on these concrete manifestations is necessary to better understand how social activism develops in the 21st century.

Method

To answer our research question, we conducted a thorough textual reading using the guidelines for thematic inductive analysis of 41 YouTube videos about cancelled beauty gurus. These videos were either shared by influencers within the beauty community who were part of the cancellation, or by drama and commentary channels outside of the beauty community who commented on the cancellation. The videos were uploaded on YouTube between 2019 and

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2021. The goal of our sampling strategy was to select the five most popular beauty influencers that were cancelled in 2020. The videos from the year 2019 provide more context for the videos from the year 2020 and the videos from 2021 then give an idea of the further course of the situation. The five YouTubers selected for our study were James Charles (24.3 million subscribers), Tati Westbrook (8.66 million subscribers), Shane Dawson (19.9 million subscribers), Jeffree Star (16.1 million subscribers) and Nikita Dragun (3.6 million subscribers). Multiple popular internet sources indicate that they are in the top ten cancelled YouTubers in the year 2020 (Gutierrez, 2020; InformOverload, 2020; Mulroney, 2021). In addition, these are well-known YouTubers who have a high status within the beauty community as they each have over a million subscribers.

We aimed to select and analyze ten videos per cancelled YouTuber, but because some videos discussed several influencers simultaneously in the same video, this resulted in a total of 41 analyzed videos. These videos discuss the situation in which the beauty influencers were cancelled, and were all created by influencers and opinions leaders with a wide following. The selected videos are both videos created by the cancelled YouTubers, as well as by commentary and drama channels outside of the beauty community. We used the keywords ‘cancel’ and ‘cancelled’ in combination with the name of the YouTuber under consideration to find the videos. We sorted the videos by view count, to ensure that the most popular videos would be presented to us first, and then selected the first 10 videos per case. We used this sorting strategy to focus on the most influential voices, who are most likely to be watched by a wide audience. Because some of the videos discussed multiple cases, this resulted in a total set of 41 videos included in our analyses. Each of the videos came from a channel with at least 500,000 subscribers and each video had at least 50,000 views. These amounts of subscribers and views also show that these videos are being watched by other users in order to stay informed about the cancelled YouTubers.

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After the data collection, the videos were transcribed verbatim to qualitatively and inductively analyze the arguments and themes presented in these videos to find out why and how these YouTubers were cancelled. The coding was done by hand on hard-copy data, without the use of software by the first and last author independently. To analyze the data, we conducted a thorough textual reading of the transcripts following Braun and Clarke's (2012) guidelines for thematic analysis, whereby recurring themes that emerged from the transcripts were identified and related to each other. Thematic analysis is a six-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2012): first, the researchers familiarize themselves with the data by carefully reading the transcripts. Second, they generate initial codes by describing the data (i.e., semantic codes) and interpreting the data (i.e., latent codes). Some examples of these initial codes in our dataset were "bad role model", "inappropriate sexual comments", "blackface" and "bad product". Third, the researchers search for themes in the codes by reviewing the coded data and identifying areas of overlap and similarity. For example, codes such as "inappropriate sexual behavior involving minors" or "sexual harassment" were placed under the overarching theme of "sexual misconduct". Fourth, the researchers review their potential themes in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset to refine them, and potentially discard superfluous themes. Fifth, researchers define and name their themes to tell the story of the data. In our dataset, three major themes were identified: product issues, serious allegations, and petty drama. An additional theme focusing more on the 'how' than the 'why' of the cancellation was identified as well (see Appendix A for a code tree). The final step is to produce the report and write the paper. This study was exempt from ethical approval.

Results

Our data revealed three major drives or motivations for cancelling YouTube Beauty Gurus: product issues, serious allegations related to social justice and digital activism, and petty drama. Whereas the product issues and serious allegations are the more overt motivations for

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cancellations, the petty drama is a more covert motivation underlying many of the videos. As we will discuss in more detail below, much of this petty drama is stirred up to attract attention, and resultantly, monetary gain, and seems to be the real motive for many of the cancellations.

Product Disappointment and the Beauty Guru as a Business Owner

A first reason for calling out beauty gurus are **issues with the products they are selling**. Almost all major beauty influencers make a living from both the videos they create, and their own branded product lines they sell. Some of these products are of lower quality than expected, or are falsely advertised, creating expectations that cannot be met by the actual product, resulting in disappointed fans. For example, Nikita Dragun is called out for ‘photoshopping this image to try and show off that the product can “cover tattoos”’, and for having ‘malfunctioning products’ such as a setting spray that ‘has all these particles’. The ‘community is not liking her products’, because they are ‘overpriced’, ‘not universal’, ‘make darker skin tones look ashy’, ‘cheap and chalky’, and ‘in shade: Donald Trump’. As her fans point out: ‘Honestly we expected more from Nikita.’ Nevertheless, these product issues are usually not the main reason for calling out influencers.

Serious Allegations and Cancelling as Social Activism

More serious reasons for cancelling beauty gurus involve **criminal and discriminatory behavior**. A behavior that was repeatedly called out across several cancelled influencers was **racism**, especially black fishing, blackface, using slurs and cultural appropriation. Racist behavior was called out in almost half the videos. Beauty gurus were called for ‘profiting off of racist stereotypes’, ‘being widely known for being a blackfisher’, ‘having done more blackface than actual makeup looks’ or ‘pioneering the art of minstrelsy on YouTube’. They were also called out for racist language by ‘making super racist comments’, ‘throwing slurs around publicly at people’, ‘using racist terms’, ‘calling them [women of color] rats and

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gorillas’, ‘saying things like you want to bleach their skin’ and condoning the use of the n-word. Racism was one of the most often cited serious reasons for cancelling a YouTuber.

Homophobia was another discriminatory behavior that was called out, albeit less frequently. Although homophobia was mentioned in five videos (two by the same creator), only two YouTubers were explicitly called out for their homophobia, and usually not much time was spent discussing this issue. Perhaps the reason that this was not a common issue in the beauty community, is the prevalence of queer influencers: Four of the five cancelled beauty gurus were part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

“A little bit more of biphobia sprinkled in there. Believe it or not, Nikita, people can like both. Like you think she’d be more accepting of that considering she’s transgender, but I guess the fuck not.”

Luke Alexander calling out Nikita Dragun

A final serious allegation that almost all the cancelled beauty gurus were called out for, was **sexual misconduct**. A range of different sexual behaviors were called out, such as unwanted sexual advances by ‘sliding into others’ DM’s’, making inappropriate sexual comments by ‘talking in detail about things you wanted to do’ and ‘talking explicitly about sex’, and sexual manipulation such as ‘tricking straight men into thinking they’re gay’ and ‘telling somebody their sexuality’. More serious allegations such as sexual assault and harassment were discussed as well.

“Grayson is going on camera shortly to finally tell the world how you tried to molest him and touch him in his sleep and made him uncomfortable for months, you sick motherfucker. Next Zach will be going on camera to tell how twisted and sick you were. Trying to get him to like you and then make him feel bad what he didn’t want to send you photos back. Then Sam from Seattle will be joining me and Cameron to talk about you trapping him in his hotel room. You need to be locked in prison for a very long time. You need the internet taken away from you. You are a danger to society.”

Jeffree Star calling out James Charles

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One YouTuber was even called out for bestiality. The allegations include ‘sexually harassing animals’, ‘sexually molesting his cat’, and ‘a lot of Instagram posts of him implying that he wants to or just finished having sexual relations with his pets’. The same YouTuber is also called out for sexualizing children, inappropriate sexual behavior involving children and inappropriate sexual comments about minors.

“They wrote this character [an 8-year old puppet girl] to be constantly sexually abused and unaware of sexual innuendos that she was putting out. That was the entire concept of the show.”

“On multiple occasions he would have them [an 8-year-old puppet girl character and the adult content creator] simulate sexual actions even going on to joke that it was for the benefit of the child molesters who were watching him.”

“The worst part for me personally was just all the all the photos and videos that involve him actually touching these kids or like looking at them inappropriately.”

“But again, children can’t consent. We’re not talking about 18-year-olds, 16- or 17-year-olds. She said she was 12. A 12-year-old can’t consent to what Shane Dawson was asking of them.”

“Jaden tweeted out in all caps: SHANE DAWSON, I AM DISGUSTED BY YOU. YOU SEXUALIZING AN 11 YEAR OLD GIRL WHO HAPPENS TO BE MY SISTER!!!!!! IS THE FURTHEST THING FROM FUNNY AND NOT OK IN THE SLIGHTEST BIT.”

D’Angelo Wallace calling out Shane Dawson

Beyond Social Activism: Petty Drama and Underlying Motives for Cancelling

Interestingly, many of these serious allegations and legitimate concerns did not appear to be the actual reason for calling out and cancelling the content creators. Instead, when a cancellation starts, people start digging through this person’s history to bring up dirt to prove that the person in question really needs to be cancelled. It is often these older issues that are discussed in these call-out-videos. Videos and tweets from as far back as the early 2000s resurface and are discussed to create a narrative of problematic behavior. In doing so, many behaviors are decontextualized and recontextualized to make them appear worse than intended.

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Sometimes only parts of the original clips are shown, the context in which things were said or done is omitted or things are reconsidered from a more modern and ‘woke’ perspective to prove a point.

“The podcast, I mean, there’s so many clips that people are bringing up. So, there’s a clip that has been going around again. A few years ago is when it came out. And they cut out all the parts where I said, you know, pedophilia is disgusting. And they put it together and it made it seem like I was, you know, talking about how it’s normal. So gross. I would never say that.”

Shane Dawson defending himself

“After that, this greedy, unremorseful predator narrative was all it really took for people to start recontextualizing every single thing that James Charles had ever done. Now all of a sudden, his relationships with his fellow teenage friends were predatory. Now, all of a sudden, the collaborations that he did with real life celebrities were motivated by greed. Suddenly, everyone was justified in finding him annoying.”

D’Angelo Wallace calling out Tati Westbrook

“At the time, these videos were well received. Though as the American culture began to shift, fans began to criticize Shane’s work and he was forced to remove many of his offensive videos.”

NextGen calling out Shane Dawson

There are three things that really seem to lie at the basis of the call to cancel these influencers: the blurring of friendship and business, business reasons, and unpleasant personalities. First, there is the **blurring of friendship and business**. Beauty gurus and other social media influencers derive their income from their social media presence, the content they create and the products they sell. Their name is their brand and their brand is their business. These beauty influencers are each other’s competition, but at the same time, they form personal relations and friendships off screen. Four of the scandals seem to result from one bad decision by one of the cancelled influencers: James Charles promoted a brand that was a competitor of his friend’s, Tati Westbrook. Thereby, according to Tati Westbrook, he chose money over friendship. As a result, Tati Westbrook spread false accusations about him, partially because she felt betrayed, and partially because she was misled and egged on by Jeffree Star and Shane

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Dawson. Following these accusations, the audience first went after James Charles and then, when they learned the truth, they went after Tati Westbrook, who shifted the blame to Jeffree Star and Shane Dawson, dragging them down with her. It seems like, if Tati Westbrook and James Charles had only been business acquaintances, chances are that none of these cancellations had happened.

“This is me having someone that I mentor. Uhm, someone that I cared for. Really not care for me and exhibit that.”

“Obviously so many of you guys understand that this is more than just a sponsored post, it has layers, there is so much going on with James Charles right now that I do not support. I do not agree with.”

“Like, I’m crushed because this person was family to me and this person is someone that I absolutely loved and cared for and would have... spent all of the time in the world protecting.”

Tati Westbrook calling out James Charles

Relatedly, because these influencers know each other personally, the private and public sphere become blurred, and instead of resolving personal issues privately, they are played out on the internet for millions to watch and comment on. So whereas the blurring of friendship and business is more about *why* individuals get cancelled, the blurring of the private and public sphere is about *how* they get cancelled. Stories about what was said at the dinner table or during birthday parties are shared publicly to demonstrate each other’s flaws and mistakes. Private messages are screenshotted and shared to prove a point and private conversations are one-sidedly retold.

“I need to speak on a few things that would have been handled better privately, but we’re public and just like Gabriel said in his video I started this public, bad on me, but I am an influencer, creator or whatever we wanna call it. And I do live a portion of my life online so what you guys saw on that Instagram story that happens.”

Tati Westbrook calling out James Charles

“In Tati’s video she discusses many of the different reasons as to why she was choosing to close a chapter in her life that I was heavily involved in.”

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Making many of our private issues very very very public and now millions and millions of people have weighed in with their opinions and speculations on subjects that they honestly know absolutely nothing about.”

James Charles defending himself

A second underlying reason that several of the commentator channels and some of the people involved in the controversies draw attention to, is the idea that the public discrediting of competing beauty influencers is done out of ‘**jealousy** or for **business reasons**’. ‘Smear campaigns’ are set up to deliberately defame and destroy the competition and to ‘ruin careers’. The beauty gurus that were cancelled in 2020 and are examined in this study were ‘in competition to see who was going to be the biggest beauty guru’ and they are ‘excited to see competitors fall’. This jealousy is simultaneously a potential motive to call out and try to cancel others, and a reason to be cancelled yourself when ‘the smear campaign backfires’ and is seen as ‘bullying’ and ‘mass manipulating’ the audience.

“It’s now my opinion that Jeffree and Shane were both bitterly jealous of James Charles’ success. Jeffree resented that so much of his business was centered around his biggest rival and Shane did not like that James Charles wanted to make a documentary.”

Tati Westbrook defending herself

“He tried to ruin James Charles and then he tried to ruin Tati. He just ruined Tati by ruining James Charles... or James Charles by ruining Tati. I mean either way they were like... pawns in his game. Now we have Shane Dawson.”

Angelika Oles calling out Jeffree Star and Shane Dawson

Furthermore, influencers are called out for **capitalizing off of the drama** that is associated with a cancellation. Interestingly, and perhaps hypocritically, they are also called out by the drama channels who directly profit from the controversies. These YouTubers are called out for instigating drama in their own community and then stirring up the drama for profit and entertainment. They lie and spread misinformation to remain interesting or for monetary gain. For some, drama seems to be good for business, as it results in attention and increased income.

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Drama equals viewership, and viewership equals money. It would seem they live by the saying that there is no such thing as bad publicity.

“Jeffree Star, ladies and gentlemen, is the common denominator amongst not one, not two, but three major Dramagedons and several dramas scattered in between.”

“He capitalizes off of drama. He uses it to his advantage. He uses it to his advantage by clickbaiting videos, by getting views, by selling products. He always creates dramas before he has a launch.”

Luke Alexander calling out Jeffree Star

“So, why did Shane all of a sudden decide to publicly speak out, despite being sick of all the drama of course? Because it was probably having an effect on the sales of his Conspiracy Collection relaunch which launched 14 hours ago.”

Drama Investigator calling out Shane Dawson

Both the jealousy and the fondness of drama and controversy can be seen in light of a third and bigger issue influencers are called out for: they have **unpleasant or ‘toxic’ personalities**. They use their friends for personal gain or as ‘a way to further their career’, lie to and manipulate their audience, and don’t take responsibility for their actions. They bully others by sending out ‘brutal tweets’ and ‘vicious text messages’. They gossip and spread rumors by ‘talking about each other behind their back’, ‘talking shit’ about each other and ‘making fun’ of each other. They are accused of abusing their ‘fame, power and money to get what they want’ or having become entitled. Some are even accused of blackmail, as Tati Westbrook calls out Jeffree Star: “I believe that he actually held blackmail material on many people and was capable of destroying the entire community.” Two of the videos in our sample were compilation videos of clips in which Nikita Dragun was mean to others, with very little additional commentary of the video creators. In these videos, she mocks her guests and makes them visibly uncomfortable.

Part of their unpleasantness that they are called out for is **hypocrisy**. They call out others for behaviors they themselves engage in as well, or endorse the same problematic behavior in

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one person but not another. Sometimes they ‘flop back and forth between calling someone a menace and publicly showing support for them’. In some cases, they backtrack their accusations when they receive a negative response, and go as far as claiming they never said those things in the first place.

Related to the hypocrisy, these influencers are also called out for their **inauthenticity**. The stories they tell ‘don’t line up’ and their online persona is not in line with their actual personality. They fake their experiences and mannerism, and others warn that ‘you can’t really trust anything about this person’. One influencer is even accused of being an inauthentic beauty guru, and using the beauty community to gain fast money without really investing in it. He ‘dragged the community for having certain characteristics like being narcissistic, toxic, and lying’.

“Shane was quickly accused of manipulating the beauty community to make money. This is because Shane had teamed up with Jeffree Star to create a conspiracy themed makeup palette. Though Shane Dawson virtually never wears makeup. As soon as he was finished selling his product, fans alleged that he immediately turned on the community and began calling out many of YouTube’s top beauty creators.”

NextGen calling out Shane Dawson

Finally, and very specific for our current time, is the irresponsible pandemic behavior. While everyone else was in full lockdown, these influencers were called out for ‘partying during the quarantine’, not wearing facemasks and ignoring social distancing guidelines. They are called out for their being ‘careless, ‘irresponsible’ and ‘selfish’ and pretending the rules don’t apply to them, which make them **bad role models**.

“I love Larray to death, but what the fuck was Nikita and him thinking? California cases just passed New York and that’s literally such an issue. And then there’s a huge party with no one wearing a mask. Setting great examples for all your fans. It’s really not OK. Think shit through.”

Spill calling out Nikita Dragun

Final Remarks on the Context of Cancellations within the YouTube Beauty Community

The fact that these cancelled YouTubers are role models with a large following, seems to be partly responsible for the traction that these cancel-calls receive. These are important content creators in their community with a large following, who call each other out and lash out at each other in emotional response to issues within their community. Fans of one influencer ‘team up against’ the other involved influencers, and everyone is encouraged to ‘choose a side’. Commentator and drama channels even ask their followers ‘what side of the camp’ their followers are on. Everyone is encouraged to have an opinion and share their opinion, with video creators encouraging their followers to ‘let me know in the comments’ what they think of the situation. User engagement in the form of views, likes and comments are an important metric by which drama and commentary channels assert their own status and authority as popular opinion leaders (Christin & Lewis, 2021). Moreover, by encouraging their followers to engage with their channel, these channels aim to establish a community and build meaningful connections with their followers (Christin & Lewis, 2021). This community building and assertion of popularity and authority are important for YouTube content creators, as they directly translate into advertising revenue and income (Christin & Lewis, 2021).

Almost all of the videos also include tweets, Instagram posts and opinions from others, bringing the drama from one platform to another. It is striking that even though the situations are complex and confusing, many influencers and regular people share their unnuanced opinions without fully understanding the situation. Commentator channels who try to give an overview of the ongoing issues assert that when looking into it and trying to get to the bottom of the controversies ‘the whole thing makes even less sense’ and situations are ‘very confusing and complex’, and ‘hard to keep up with’ because ‘there’s a lot going on and everybody is far too loud’.

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Part of the complexity comes from the fact that many of the called out influencers are entangled in several dramas simultaneously or because they have been able to get away with problematic behavior in the past. The latest controversy is then the straw that breaks the camel's back. In addition, because people dig into these influencers' past to prove their point that they should be cancelled, several behaviors are often called out simultaneously and past behaviors are reframed as a problem to support the call to cancel. As Pewdiepie put it: 'People are fine with this [their behavior] until it became a big deal'. In addition, many of the accusations are vague or even downright false. People allude to problems without going into detail, and others start speculating about what is going on. Many of the claims are made with the words 'it's been speculated that', 'apparently', or 'my guess is that', and some content creators even share conspiracy theories they have come up with. Others jump on these speculations and vague accusations, creating a situation where 'millions and millions of people weigh in with their opinions and speculations on subjects that they honestly know absolutely nothing about', because 'the truth really does not matter, it's the feelings that do'. It seems that people enjoy the drama that is involved with a cancellation, and many do not care about the people being cancelled. The internet is 'thrilled' when drama unfolds and 'everyone is like "HAHA! Unsubscribe! HAHA!"'. The drama is 'entertaining' and 'fun to watch' or to 'dip in into the situation and see what's happening'.

"And the fact that a lot of people are celebrating this as something positive because yes, it's fun to drag someone online. It's very troubling to me how this sort of behavior gets rewarded online. This is 24 million views."

Pewdiepie discussing the James Charles/Tati Westbrook situation

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how cancel culture manifests in the beauty community on YouTube. Our results lead us to several conclusions about the nature of cancel culture on this under-studied platform. In particular, our results not only shed light on the overt

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and covert motivations for cancelling beauty influencers, but also on the dynamics of social media, and YouTube in particular, for these cancellation practices.

Motivations Underlying Cancellations in the YouTube Beauty Community

First, with regard to the underlying motivations of a cancellation, it has been proposed that cancel culture can be a way to seek accountability and social justice, and raise awareness on social and societal issues (Tandoc et al., 2022). We find that this is indeed how many of these videos are presented to the audience: beauty influencers get called out because others no longer condone their problematic behavior, and the drama and commentary channels use their platform to spread the word about these influencers' wrongdoings. In line with what has been found by research on psychological mechanisms underlying endorsement of cancel culture (Mueller, 2021), content creators seemingly want to hold these influencers accountable and want an apology and change in behavior. Several serious allegations were made in the call-out videos, including racism and sexual misconduct, and these are often presented as the main issue they want to address. Nevertheless, it seems that many of the controversies and cancellations do not truly start because of the person's misconduct. The beauty community is a highly competitive environment (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017), and several of the cancellations seemingly started over jealousy and competing business interests. It can thus be assumed that status and success play a crucial role in cancel culture, whereby high-status influential content creators with many followers are most vulnerable to fall victim to cancellation, because others are jealous of their success. Of course, this conclusion merits further research considering that we deliberately focused on high-profile popular beauty gurus in our analyses.

In addition, it is also clear that cancellations are a form of entertainment, not only for the audience, but also for the commentator channels, and even for some of the beauty influencers involved. It is known that celebrity gossip, and especially the negative variant of it,

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is mostly inspired by a search for entertainment (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). This is also what is observed in our analyses, as many content creators point out the fun they have with the drama, and how much they enjoy watching an influencer lose status. A concept that has been linked to this is *schadenfreude*, which refers to how people enjoy the misfortunes of famous people, because it makes them feel morally upright and better about their own lives (Bouvier, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Cross & Littler, 2010; Ng, 2020). The internet users unite against the cancelled YouTuber and feel better about themselves because they point out their mistakes on social media. There is fun, engagement and action to be had in social media cancelling.

Furthermore, money seems to be a driving factor behind many of the cancellations. Not only do beauty influencers get cancelled over competing business interests, but the results of our study indicate that some influencers are aware of the commercial potential of drama on their profiles, and sometimes consciously keep this alive as a marketing strategy. This is twofold: on the one hand, we observe drama and feuds between the beauty influencers, who call each other out to generate interest in their own channel and products. On the other hand, is there a business model with real money behind the drama and commentary channels who report on the scandals and call for the cancellation of influencers. All of these content creators – the beauty influencers and the drama and commentary channels – create income for themselves by drawing viewers to their channels: They are not only motivated by feelings of responsibility to hold powerful influencers accountable, but also by the money in their bank accounts (Christin & Lewis, 2021; Lewis & Christin, 2022). As such, we must conclude that cancel culture is not only about striving for social equality and justice, but also about enjoying the drama and generating income.

Social Media Dynamics Underlying Cancellation Practices

Second, we observe that a changing media landscape equals changing relationships between famous people and their audiences. Celebrity scandals are not new, but the way they are spread has changed (Hinerman, 2006). Celebrities and influencers' online presence has increased audience's access to private information about them, including information about problematic behavior conducted in their private spheres. Influencers in particular open up about their private lives and opinions and thus actively provide audiences with more private content, which can help with developing closer relations (Jin et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021), but can also be used for spotting problematic behavior. Before social media, celebrities could almost only be caught by journalists who were following them around. Today, millions of online users can spot wrong behavior and spread the scandal online, which can then again be shared by millions of online users (Meyers, 2010).

This also relates to the rise of social media influencers who have made it their jobs to cancel other influencers, and whom we have focused on in this paper. These call-out channels seem to see themselves as someone with a watchdog function, and prior research found these channels to describe themselves as 'truth-tellers', and 'there to keep influencers accountable' (Christin & Lewis, 2021, p. 1642). In the literature, watchdog journalism is typically considered a type of quality and investigative journalism, whereby journalists gather information about wrongdoings of people in power, and share this information with the general public so society can understand the problem and stop the wrongdoings (Norris, 2014). Similarly, these drama and commentary channels often conduct meticulous research, scrutinizing influencers' online behaviors to find evidence of wrongdoings, which can then be shared with the audience (Christin & Lewis, 2021).

Nevertheless, when critically examining the cancellations in the YouTube beauty community, we see a closer resemblance to gossip journalism rather than true watchdog

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journalism. Especially the so-called drama or ‘tea’ channels can be compared to sensational news channels such as TMZ, which pounce on gossip and intimate information about Hollywood celebrities. Although many of the content creators calling out the beauty gurus seemingly conduct their own research into the situation, many of their videos are fraught with rumors, speculation and personal opinions, and not liking a content creator’s personality can be enough reason to try and cancel them. Moreover, as these drama and commentary channels depend on their viewership for their income, they are unlikely to go against the prevailing opinion about a specific influencer and sometimes uncritically stir up their audience with claims about said influencer without necessarily checking whether what they are reporting on is real, or even manufacturing more drama to attract attention (Christin & Lewis, 2021).

Indeed, we observed that when beauty gurus were cancelled, the content creators who call them out dig deep into their personal lives and often disclose very personal and intimate information about them, such as private text messages or private conversations. These private messages are often shared by other influencers involved in the scandal, to prove their own innocence or call out their competitors. In addition, when looking at the serious allegations, not all of the called-out behaviors are recent, and many are dug up from old videos, tweets and other social media posts. This not only demonstrates the permanence of social media content, but also how audience members make use of the features of social media to openly call influencers out for their problematic behavior and use their own words against them. This is also in line with the proposition that individuals who condone cancellations typically also find it acceptable to dig into a person’s past (Mueller, 2021).

However, because drama and commentary channels want to make other internet users aware of the problematic behavior of the beauty gurus by providing as much damning information as possible, several of the allegations against the cancelled beauty gurus were false and based on speculation without any evidence. In addition, much of the information is

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provided without context or reinterpreted in light of the scandal that is being reported. From a journalism ethics perspective, this can be problematic, considering that the decontextualization of information can misrepresent the situation and is sometimes considered deceptive misinformation (Chen et al., 2015; Hameleers et al., 2021; Sarikakis & Winter, 2021). On the other hand, celebrities and influencers do sometimes make statements about their own misconduct that are seemingly innocent or playful at the time, but which, in hindsight, when more information or a better understanding of the situation is available, are clearly problematic or can be considered an admission of guilt (Bainbridge, 2020).

Furthermore, scandals often unfold and escalate before all information is available due to the nature of social media. One influencer with a large following posts a vague frustration or accusation online, and thousands of followers immediately start sharing their opinions and speculating about what is going on. Information is rapidly shared across multiple platforms, and people start digging into the influencers' past to make sense of what is going on. The rapid dissemination of negative information can create a filter bubble around the scandal, which can amplify the voices and behaviors of fans or other observers. What is more, once the drama starts unfolding, fans do not have to passively wait and watch, but can actively join in on the drama or choose to defend their favorite celebrity or influencer against critics and abusers. In that way, cancel culture has been likened to a 'mob mentality' (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Clark, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2022). Our results are in line with this, showing that individuals are actively encouraged to share their opinions and choose a side to defend or attack, resulting in many videos by content creators and fans in which they share their opinion about the scandal and possibly cite new (personal) information. It seems clear that with these cancellations of high-status influencers, a 'bandwagon' effect is at play, whereby everyone gives their opinion because others do too and because social media have made it easy to share any opinion with the world, and these opinions are heavily influenced by other content creators' opinions.

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Clearly, the opinions of others and the perception that one is not alone with their opinion plays a crucial role in cancel culture, as in most of the videos we analyzed, references were made to “others” and what they have to say about the situation.

Limitations

Although this research can provide an answer to the proposed research question, there is an important limitation to keep in mind concerning the external validity of the study. The external validity examines to what extent the results and conclusions of the study apply to other persons or situations that have not been studied in this research (Smaling, 2009). In particular, in this study, we only focused on five high-status influencers within the beauty community on YouTube in 2020. It is possible that other motivations for calling out influencers are at play in different communities, on different platforms, or in different years. For this reason, it is recommended to conduct additional research into the expression and effects of cancel culture on YouTube and other platforms to test whether our findings also apply to other communities.

Conclusion

Cancelling an influencer or celebrity can be a powerful practice to effectively point public figures to their responsibilities and challenge them to work on bettering themselves. Moreover, cancellations can help open up the discussion on certain topics and give people a voice that did not have one before. However, the wrong application of cancellation might hinder or even work counterproductive for the progress concerning social justice and democratization in our (online) society (Bouvier, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021). We find that, within the beauty community on YouTube, there are three major drives for calling out an influencer: product issues, social justice reasons related to allegations of misconduct, and pretty drama. While many videos present themselves as a way to hold public figures accountable, it seems that cancellations often start over jealousy and competing business interests. Moreover, cancelations are a form of entertainment and stirring up drama generates income, both for those

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directly involved in the drama and for the YouTube channels reporting on them. Thus, our research revealed a tension between accountability and monetized drama for entertainment, that needs to be further explored as social media influencers dedicating their platform to cancel culture grow in importance in the public discourse.

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