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CANCEL CULTURE ONLINE:

Digitisation's influence on public shaming



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Abstract

This paper investigates online participatory cultures of public shaming: namely, cancel culture. Prior to the emergence of the World Wide Web, public scandal largely revolved around various public figures. However, as Hermes (2006) has argued, the increased visibility afforded by the Internet has led the public to curate news rather than receiving news alone. Social media platforms especially have permitted rapid distribution of information and opinion while also facilitating – and even encouraging – open debate. Consequently, social media platforms may be used to call attention to those who members of the public feel have violated social values through public shaming and ‘cancelling’. To cancel someone is to disinvest in them by withdrawing financial and/or personal support (Clark, 2020). This paper explores public participation in cancel culture through consideration of one recent incident in particular: musician Megan Thee Stallion accusing fellow musician Tory Lanez of shooting her in the foot. I will begin by offering a brief overview and history of cancel culture, framing the Internet as a public sphere wherein critical discussion of societal norms and values may occur. Then, attention is given to the Stallion v Lanez incident through consideration of (approximately 150) scraped public tweets showcasing the wide variety of fan – and in some cases, anti-fan – responses. I conclude that cancel culture may be considered an attempt at civic justice. This attempt is notably valuable for marginalised groups such as Black women, serving as a means for amplifying their voices in diverse digital spaces. At the same time, I recognise the consequences of cancel culture, including boycotts, aggressive cyber mobs, and legal repercussions. As the manifestations of cancel culture vary from offender to offender, this paper ponders how race and gender influence the extent and ilk of moral outrage online and off.

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Introduction

If an individual's actions violate social norms and values, they may be put on trial and punished in front of a public audience. From the Middle Ages onwards, punishments to induce shame ranged from “the pillory” to “public nakedness”, taking place in front of spectators (Wettlaufer 2012: 51). As time has continued, traditional media such as newspapers have played a crucial role in public shaming by targeting those in power and revealing their transgressions (Detel, 2013). While audiences have always engaged with media through the process of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980; Shaw, 2017), the role they would hold in public shaming was intrinsically passive. The press held the position as a “minority of speakers” while the public were the “majority of listeners” (Rasmussen, 2014: 1316). Previously, individuals were only able to discuss scandals they had read in newspapers with people they knew, or by submitting a letter to the editor (Detel, 2013). Whereas the introduction of Web 2.0 generated new opportunities for the public to “talk back” to transgressors by addressing any grievances online (van Dijck, 2009: 43; Clark, 2020).

Online forms of public shaming have existed in many forms, occurring “for almost as long as the existence of the internet itself” (Muir et al, 2021: 2). However, cancel culture is a relatively new term that emerged on Twitter, now adopted by mainstream society (Clark, 2020). To cancel someone is to disinvest in them to various degrees, such as withdrawing financial or personal support (Clark, 2020). Like public shaming, cancelling occurs when a public figures transgression has been shared, often resulting in a cyber mob who shame the transgressor on social media platforms (Billingham and Parr, 2019). Not only is it possible to share evidence of a transgression (e.g., a video recording) with a vast audience within seconds, but social media platforms even facilitate the discussion about such transgressions (Detel, 2013). This dissertation argues that digitisation has led to a new manifestation of public shaming into cancel culture.

Existing literature surrounding popular culture aims to praise (Clark, 2020) or condemn (Hermes, 2006 and Chiou, 2020) the phenomenon of cancel culture. Alternatively, I aim to research the topic of cancel culture for what audiences perceive it to be. This dissertation explores how audiences interact with cancel culture on social media sites, focusing on Twitter. Additionally, I investigate why some individuals who have committed objectionable offences have managed to escape being ostracised by society. I achieve this by focusing my research on Tory Lanez, a musician briefly subject to cancel culture after fellow musician Megan Thee Stallion accused him of shooting her in the foot (BBC, 2020b). Initially, Megan had told the police that she had cut her foot on a piece of glass. She admits that she did so out of fear that the police would begin firing if they knew a gun was involved. This was due to the racial tension between the police and Black people, following years of police brutality which led to the Black Lives Matter movement (Mundt et al., 2018). However, following false speculation of the shooting (2020), Megan named Tory as her alleged shooter on an Instagram live video on August 20 (Kyraa Z, 2020). Tory Lanez then withdrew from social media, addressing the incident for the first time in his *Daystar* (2020) album, released September 25. In the album, he referenced the incident on multiple occasions including the lyrics, "Megan people tryna frame me" and "How the f*** you get shot in your foot, don't hit no bones or tendons?". As hip-hop idols, the Stallion v Lanez case is particularly useful to explore participatory practices within Black popular culture, namely cancel culture. The situation is still ongoing, with celebrities and fans alike who have come forward online to publicly condemn Tory for his actions (Gee, 2020). A few musicians have even gone as far as to remove him from their records such as singers Kehlani and Jojo. Despite the negative commentary online, Tory (2020) took to Twitter and declared that he had not been cancelled.

Since cancel culture is a new phenomenon, there is a lack of research into this area, especially research that focuses on Black popular culture. Hall (1993) argues that we should not reduce popular cultures to binaries like "Black versus White", however, the role of race within cancel culture is undeniable. This is true especially in the case of Stallion v Lanez. Not

only did the alleged crime involve two Black rappers, but race has also played a significant role in the debate of Tory's innocence online.

Literature Review

The digitised public sphere

The term 'public' has a multiplicity of meanings. In this dissertation, 'public' will refer to ordinary members within the general community (private individuals) and shared spaces open to all. When members of the public gather to discuss inclusive, critical debate, they form a social space which Habermas defined as a 'public sphere' (1989). The Habermasian public sphere emerged in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989). He believed that discussion within the public sphere helped identify the problems in society, drawing attention to those in power to bring forth change. By gathering as a collective, the public sphere acts as a mediator between "the state and the private individual" (Crossley and Roberts, 2004: 2). Throughout history, the media, such as the press and television shows, have played an integral role in maintaining the public sphere (Detel, 2013). The digital revolution, from the 1980s onwards, brought "the advancement of technology from analog electronic and mechanical devices to the digital technology available today" (Techopedia, 2006). The development of technology such as mobile phones and computers further developed our means of communication (Dahlgren, 2015). Technological changes on the internet changed the web into a "platform for applications" described as Web 2.0 (Allen, 2012: 264). Murugesan (2F007) argues that Web 2.0 created online networks between individuals with the possibility to connect and share updates with friends and family. Additionally, social media platforms on the web are heavily dependent on user-generated content (Murthy, 2011). Users are often encouraged to share their personal thoughts and feelings, as seen with Twitter's question "What's Happening?" (Murthy, 2011: 779; Deller, 2011). Thus, van Dijck (2009) argues that the development of digital media has produced new ways for the public to curate and distribute content, which was formerly exclusive to traditional forms of media. Now thoughts and opinions that users express online have the potential to reach entities outside of the user's network, with the use of hashtags to address specific topics. In their study of Twitter use during major events, Bruns and Burgess (2011)

found that users engage with hashtags to turn tweets into public announcements. When Queensland was hit by catastrophic floods, Twitter was used as a tool to facilitate discussion among online communities. The developments in communication brought about by social media have led social scientists such as Jenkins (2006) and Negroponte (1995) to believe that citizens have far more freedom of expression and influence over their cultural and political environments. For instance, social media has played an important role in activism over the last 15 years. Social media platforms have been utilised to raise awareness, organise protests and fundraise for causes. During the Egyptian uprisings in Tahrir Square, for example, Facebook played a significant role in distributing information and mobilising protestors (Mundt et al., 2018). Now more than ever, individuals can express their opinions across the internet through posts, likes, and comments. Therefore, social media platforms provide a boundless resource for the "analysis of audience's views and opinions" (Hastall and Sukalla, 2014: 178). For this reason, I trust that scraping tweets based on cancel culture will provide a snapshot of the practices within the phenomenon, like, the consequences for cancelled celebrities and their art (Hermes, 2006).

Sceptical views of the public sphere and public opinion are like the fears of cancel culture, in that the public sphere could be a hindrance to free speech (Gripsrud, 2009). The concept of the public sphere has been criticised as it historically excluded the voice of women and those from other marginalised groups (Dahlgren, 2006). The bourgeoisie public sphere that Habermas (1989) described excluded various demographics from the public debate. Men who did not own property, women, and ethnic minorities were not permitted access to the bourgeoisie public sphere (Fraser, 1990). As time has progressed, barriers to the public sphere based on social status have lessened. However, it is idealistic to assume that those with privilege in society (White/middle-class/men) hold the same power as marginalised demographics (ethnic minorities/working-class/women/) (Fraser, 1990). In her recent book *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (2020: 132), Francesca Sobande argues while the internet can be a site for abuse, it simultaneously provides a sense of "collective

experience" for Black women. Therefore, there is a lack of a single public sphere like Habermas describes (1989), as the internet exists with multiple spheres creating what Bohman (2004: 137) defines as a "global public sphere". The global public sphere operates as a less homogeneous and more diverse space, creating a larger debate among its members. Hence this paper asks: how do different spheres and demographics perceive and engage with cancel culture practices?

According to Detel (2013: 78), the development of the internet and technology has "changed the scope of visibility" of the individual. Since the introduction of smartphones, we can capture any moment visually, audibly and through written text (Meikle, 2016; Thompson, 2005). In turn, we have the prospect to share these moments with our inner circles or the entire world. The evolution of technology has dissolved our geographical and temporal boundaries, leading to "audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets and crowds" comprising of the same people (Livingstone, 2005). Nevertheless, the speed, simplicity and "solitariness" of new media have lead scholars to be sceptical about the significance of the internet to the public sphere (Rasmussen, 2014: 1321). For instance, Barber (2003) argues that the internet cannot be considered a mature democracy as it depends on information rather than knowledge. In contrast, Benkler (2006) argues that the networked information economy (NIE) benefits the public sphere. NIEs are characterised as a "technological-economic feasibility space" produced as media production methods become more socially accessible. Benkler (2006) argues that the NIE has allowed the public to become real participants in public debate where they can offer their own insight, which they were unable to do within the mass media. With the distribution capabilities afforded by modern-day technology, anyone can disclose or become the topic of a scandal (Detel, 2013; Trottier, 2018). Hermes (2006) supports this argument, as she argues that the public has become both the face and producer of news. With almost 4.2bn active social media users (Kemp, 2021) each platform has become an archive of user activity both online and off.

Thus, this dissertation argues that the internet has led to the most inclusive form of public sphere to date.

Public shaming and cancel culture

Journalists are known for reporting on incidents of wrongdoing to evoke a strong public response, known as a scandal (Petley, 2013). According to Thompson (2000), a scandal consists of five characteristics. Firstly, a scandal includes an action that breaks the rules of social norms and values. Next, Thompson identifies actions that have occurred in private, becoming known to one or more people. Third, the actions revealed will evoke feelings of offence or outrage. Subsequently, the transgression is disclosed to the public as individuals express their disapproval. Lastly, Thompson (2000) states that the public exposure of the transgression potentially ruins the reputation of a transgressor. Often journalists will disclose scandals under the pretences of public interest. For instance, the BBC Editorial guidelines state that it is their duty to inform the public of deviant behaviours (Petley, 2013: 23). When the media discloses a transgression or scandal, they aim also to express judgment of the transgressor and label their conduct as reprehensible (Rowbottom, 2013; Von Hirsch, 1993). Similarly, when individuals expose the heinous behaviours of others online, such as the sharing of police brutality recordings (Kansara,2020), they convey a message that such behaviour will not be accepted. Kansara (2020) contends that there would have been no global uproar if footage of George Floyd's death had not circulated on social media.

Therefore, the public can use social media to challenge the aspects of society that they wish to change, rather than relying on mass media or those in power. Detel (2013) argues that there are three principles when sharing shaming material on social media. Firstly, those with large social networks can facilitate the spread of information rapidly to other internet users. This can be as simple as posting a tweet. Secondly, the scandal can be distributed through sharing posts or retweets, known as the snowball principle. Finally, Detel (2013: 90) states, "social media sites often work with a self-energising mechanism". For instance, a Twitter search provides an option of 'Top Tweets' where results are "based on the popularity of a

Tweet” (Twitter Hep Centre, 2021). Therefore, tweets that have received many likes, replies or retweets are given greater visibility to attract a wider audience. While scandals can lose momentum, a scandal’s shelf-life can also be extended. The audience can regain their attraction to the outrage when traditional media publishes follow up material (Vera, 2019), as discussed later in reference to R. Kelly, or when further details are published (Detel, 2013).

Despite a long-standing history of public shaming, cancel culture is a newly digitised version that emerged on Black Twitter (Clark 2020). Black Twitter is a “meta-network of culturally linked communities online” (Clark, 2020: 89), a collective that has frequently cancelled celebrities who have committed transgressions. An example of a cancelled celebrity is Chris Brown, a musician convicted of felony assault charges after assailing Rihanna, a fellow artist and his girlfriend at the time (Bain, 2018). Chris Brown lost many fans and was refused a Visa to the UK in 2010 because of the crime (BBC, 2010). Moreover, radio stations briefly refused to play his songs, with some continuing the boycott to this day (Beaumont-Thomas, 2017). However, many have expressed that he managed to “escape” cancel culture, as he has remained successful (Keller, 2020). Detel (2013) states that cancel culture can have a range of repercussions for the targeted person. In the case of Stallion v Lanez, the situation is still ongoing, however, Tory Lanez has already received some backlash for the allegations. Celebrities and fans alike have publicly condemned Tory for his reported actions on social media (Gee, 2020). The accusations against him have also resulted in other musicians removing Tory Lanez from their records (Gee, 2020).

The fast-paced nature of the internet has altered the scandal process outlined by Thompson (2005) as minor norm violations have the potential to transform into a scandal, such as an actor Jodie Comer who was cancelled in 2020 over rumours of dating a Trump supporter. After the rumour spread online, #JodieComerIsOverParty began to trend on Twitter (Apologist, 2020). Detel (2013) also identifies contributing factors that cause a scandal to gain popularity, such as targeting people of importance or revealing absurd actions.

Additionally, audiences may desire audio-visual evidence before engaging with a scandal, as written material can be easily edited to suit an agenda (Detel, 2013). In the case of Stallion v Lanez, she resulted in posting a now-deleted picture of her injuries on Instagram as many demanded to see evidence (Murphy, 2020). As an extension of public shaming, cancelling also involves the disinvestment of an individual by withdrawing personal or financial support (Clark, 2020). Following Megan Thee Stallions accusation against Tory Lanez, Tory's audio streams on music platforms fell by 1.7m (Bossi, 2020). The 8% decline in streams suggests that several fans decided against consuming his music because of the news. Though it may seem easy to disinvest in artists when you do not agree with their problematic behaviour, fans of cancelled celebrities often disagree about how much one should disinvest. In *How to Be a Fan in the Age of Problematic Faves*, Butcher and Chipperfield (2021: 73) discuss "separating the art from the artist". This refers to disinvesting in an artist due to their transgressions while continuing to enjoy their art. Ultimately, the choice to separate art from an artist is down to each individual. Consequently, this essay identifies the decisions that audiences make in the cancelling of public figures.

Scholars and journalists tend to focus on the negative aspects of cancel culture as it's often seen as a form of vigilantism used to judge or reject "anyone who holds a different socio-political viewpoint" (Chiou, 2020: 297). Detel (2013: 91) found that comments within case studies of cyber mobs were "extremely aggressive and used insulting or threatening phrases" and a few individuals would go as far as to make threats of real-life violence towards the transgressor. In some instances, audiences have also turned on those who have revealed or expressed outrage at scandals. When #MeToo (a movement against sexual violence) gained popularity in 2017, creator Tarana Burke found herself in the spotlight (Micheal, 2018). She advocated for the empowerment of sexual assault victims through discussion and breaking silence on abuse. Although many people supported the movement, Burke received death threats and threats of bodily harm from those who opposed her views (Micheal, 2018). Conversely, audiences who participate in cyber mobs

may take a light-hearted approach to shaming by joking about the scandal or making memes (Detel, 2013). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) define memes as “idea[s] presented as a written text, image[s]...or some other unit of cultural ‘stuff’” (p.202) distributed online. For example, a meme featuring Will Smith (Figure 1) emerged after addressing Jada Smith's affair on her online show Red Table Talk (Garel, 2020).



Figure 1, Will Smith on Red Table Talk (Johnson, 2020)

Nevertheless, Clark (2020: 89) emphasises that cancelling is often used as a "last-ditch appeal for justice" against those already in the public eye. For instance, musician R. Kelly had a history of abuse allegations during his rise to fame. From 1994 to 2003, R. Kelly was the subject of abuse allegations and 33 child pornography charges (Chow and Bates, 2019). By 2008, R. Kelly escaped charges by settling out of court and had the child pornography charges dropped due to a technicality, as well as the alleged victim refusing to appear in court. R. Kelly's career remained largely unaffected despite further allegations until *Surviving R. Kelly*, a Lifetime documentary featuring his accusers, aired in January 2019 (Vera, 2019). The documentary led to online commentary on social media, which led to worldwide recognition of the allegations. Members of the public then took to protest online and off, successfully resulting in the removal of R Kelly from RCA records and criminal charges (Tsioulcas and Dwyer, 2019). In this instance, social media users effectively used cancel

culture as a means of public shaming, which led to severe consequences. However, various scholars (Rowbottom, 2013; Frye, 2021) argue that the outcomes of public shaming as well as cancel culture are unpredictable. Some people experience the harshest consequences of cancel culture such as permanent ostracism, while others get off lightly. Louis CK, a comedian who admitted to masturbating in front of female comedians (Ducharme, 2017), is an example of a celebrity who did not experience the full extent of cancel culture. Following his confession, Louis was dropped by his agency. Even with this setback, he managed to sell out five shows on his comeback tour (Hagi, 2019). The sold-out shows illustrate that Louis CK's fans were still willing to support him personally and financially, despite his transgressions. Frye (2021) argues that the disproportionate consequences for offenders are due to the lack of quantifiable methods in measuring cancel culture. Thus, this dissertation will explore how the public expresses their "agency" (Clark, 2020: 88) in cancelling celebrities and what they determine to be a reasonable punishment.

Black women's experiences online

Sobande (2020) argues that the experiences of Black people, and Black women especially, are often excluded within British academia and institutions. While scholars such as Hall (1993) argue that we should not divide literature around popular culture by race, factors such as race and gender play a crucial role in our experiences online. Undoubtedly, anyone can be cancelled or participate in cancel culture; nonetheless, Black people have used cancel culture to draw attention to various social injustices that would have otherwise been ignored. For instance, the name "Karen" has become a meme on the internet, referring to women who "weaponise their relative privilege against people of colour" (Nagesh, 2020). The stereotype rose to fame after multiple encounters were shared on the internet of White women, calling the police on people of colour for minor or fabricated incidents. In the case of one woman who called the police because a Black family were having a barbeque, video evidence was shared online via YouTube (Nagesh, 2020). The video went viral on Twitter, and the "Karen" in question was named "BBQ Becky" (Figure 2), with many people digitally

editing her picture into various scenes. Incidents of this nature would have previously gone unnoticed by the general public; however, they have gained recognition on the internet through the expression of experience (Clark, 2020).



Figure 2, “BBQ Becky” calls the police on a Black family having a BBQ (Snider, M.D., 2018).

Jones (2019) argues that the combination of being a Black person and a woman on open social media platforms creates a vulnerability for Black women, making them targets of both misogyny and racism. Moreover, within the Black community, colourism can lead to the further marginalisation of women with deeper skin tones. Colourism is the “inter-and intra-ethnic prejudice on the basis of skin shade” where lighter skin tones are deemed more desirable (Phoenix, 2014: 98). Colourism emerged from a history of slavery and colonisation, yet it is still prevalent today and seen in discussions on Twitter. As revealed by Phoenix (2014:97), men commonly tweet comments such as “Can't trust most dark skin girls, they lie, steal [sic] and don't practice good hygiene »facts” (copy verbatim). Goff et al. (2000) argue that Black women are often defeminised because of their skin tone. In their study, Goff et al. (2000: 392) recruited 292 predominantly White undergraduates to assess if “intersecting racial and gender identities affect person perception”. The participants categorised and rated pictures and videos of Black and White men and women in terms of their race, gender, and attractiveness. The findings of the study identified that participants were significantly more likely to incorrectly categorise Black women as men than they were to miscategorise any

other group by gender. Furthermore, participants greatly associated “Blackness” with “maleness” amongst Black men/women (Goff et al. 2008:397). As a result, Goff et al. (2008) concluded that the effect of intersecting racial and gender identities on person perception poses unique harm for Black women, as it has the potential to “erase their womanhood”.

Arguably there may have been less outrage towards the Stallion v Lanez incident, as Megan is a dark skin woman. The media will often place a spotlight on favourable victims while dismissing those from marginalised groups; one example of this is called Missing White Woman Syndrome (Stillman, 2007). McIlwain states that “[w]hite women occupy a privileged role as violent crime victims in news media reporting.” (McKelvey, 2013). The tragic disappearance of Sarah Everard and Blessing Olusegun illustrates the disparity in coverage that White and Black women receive (Sinclair, 2021). When Sarah went missing in London on March 3, 2021, images and information about her disappearance spread through social media and national news, sparking a debate on violence against women. Protests and vigils were held throughout the country as the public’s outrage grew. On the contrary, when Blessing went missing in Sussex around the same time, the story did not reach mainstream news, despite the family sharing her photos and information on social media (Sinclair, 2021). Additionally, when the 21-year-old was later found dead on a beach, her death was ruled inconclusive. Therefore, when researching digitisation’s influence on public shaming, we should also consider how a Black woman such as Megan Thee Stallion may experience cancel culture differently than a White woman or man.

Methodology

In my research, I took a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the roles of the public in online cancel culture. This research centres on a case study of an alleged shooting involving Tory Lanez and Megan Thee Stallion. The research consists of two parts. Firstly, I will use a web scraper to collect tweets and data from Twitter surrounding the celebrities. I will use Twitter's advance search to gather tweets that include the terms:

Meg OR Megan OR Megan Thee Stallion OR Meg Thee Stallion OR
Cancelled OR Shoot OR Shot OR Shooting OR Abuse OR Cancel OR
Cancelling AND Tory OR Tory Lanez.

To narrow my scope, I will only search for tweets posted within eight months of the initial incident from; June 12, 2019, to January 12, 2020. I will then use the web scraping software Octoparse to collect raw data from Twitter. The software will collect the contents of the tweets alongside their metrics (Ignatow and Mihalcea, 2018). I decided to use pre-existing software rather than producing my own web scraper, as it has all of the functions necessary for my study. The scraped data will then be exported to Excel, where I will manually clean it by removing any tweets that aren't related to cancel culture as well as tweets that are posted by organisations and not individuals. The scraped tweets will help me to identify the roles the public adopts in public shaming on Twitter.

My second research method is an online survey, which has the potential to identify participants' beliefs and behaviours (Allen, 2017). This survey aims to identify how individuals participate in cancel culture, whether by consuming, interacting with posts, or expressing their own opinions. In addition, by analysing the responses to the cancelling of Tory Lanez, I hope to identify why certain celebrities experience the full extent of cancel culture while others do not. To achieve this, I will use a mix of closed and open-ended

questions. The closed questions will provide quick, snapshot answers that can be analysed swiftly (Alen, 2017). I will then use open-ended questions to probe the participants on the answers that they provide. My sample population will consist of 23 individuals aged 18 and up, of all genders, with no restrictions on geographical locations. The participants for the online survey will be selected via snowball sampling as I will encourage participants to share it with people they know.

Pros and cons

Data collection through web scraping is “inherently nonintrusive” (Courtois and Mechant, 2014: 215) and provides an opportunity for both qualitative and quantitative data collection (Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014). Moreover, much social media research is conducted through Twitter (Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014.), which is also known as the homeland for cancel culture (Moore, 2020). Therefore, scraping is a useful method for investigating the influence of social networks on public shaming. The use of the data analysis software, Nvivo, will enable me to analyse the communication patterns of the users. This information would help me to develop my survey questions and inform the survey data analysis (Wisdom and Creswell, 2013).

I will only be able to collect tweets from users who have public Twitter accounts, which poses issues of representativeness within the sample (Courtois and Mechant, 2014). Arguably, those who tweet about cancel culture from public accounts desire to share their thoughts and feelings within the public sphere. Even so, the online survey will provide an opportunity for those with private accounts to explain how they interact with cancel culture online. Courtois and Mechant (2014) discuss issues of validity around the self-reported data that a web scraper may collect in terms of the users’ names and ages. For instance, underage users may enter a false age to bypass Twitter’s age restrictions. The solution to this ethical obstacle will be discussed below.

Online surveys are an incredibly useful method for analysing a mass online audience (Vicente-Mariño, 2014). This method does not involve any face-to-face interaction, meaning that it is a valuable method to conduct research in light of current COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. As mentioned above, the sample for the online survey will be a result of snowball sampling. Scholars such as Fielding et al. (2017) and Koivula et al., (2019) argue that this could result in a selective bias. Even so, due to the vast reach of my network and contacts, the online survey has the potential to reach participants of all ages, genders and ethnicities.

Data analysis

I will use content analysis to analyse the qualitative data from the Twitter web scraping and the online survey. Content analysis is the “systematic, quantitative process of analysing communication messages by determining the frequency of message characteristics” (Allen, 2017: 240). This method can be used to analyse both written communications such as tweets, and visual communication such as memes and GIFs. Thus, I will formulate a set of codes (recurring themes in the data (Mills et al., 2010)) that will enable me to find reoccurring themes and topics within the data. These themes will be informed by the theories and studies outlined within the literature review, thus taking an inductive approach to analysis (Mills, 2012). Once I have my data codes, I will use Nvivo to code the tweets, helping identify relationships between the data sets. Coding the data will be particularly useful as it highlights the varying audience perspectives and how they interlink.

Ethics

This research faces issues related to informed consent and confidentiality (Hastall and Sukalla, 2014). Whether accessible online data such as tweets are public and can therefore be used within research is still inconclusive (Hastall and Sukalla, 2014). Users may be unaware that their data is legally accessible and may consider their tweets to be an extension of their private thoughts. However, Twitter is a platform where individuals can

access public tweets without registration. Thus, informed consent is arguably unrequired when scraping data on this platform (Hastall and Sukalla, 2014). Nonetheless, Twitter has a minimum age restriction of 13. Therefore, there is a chance that children (who cannot provide informed consent) will potentially contribute to the data collection. Since Twitter does not explicitly provide access to a user's date of birth, I will mitigate any harm as much as possible by anonymising the data and the results. To achieve this, I will use pseudonyms to identify tweets and discuss all data in a dignified manner.

The participants who carry out the online survey will be greeted with a participant information message before the survey begins to provide all the information necessary to make an informed decision about participating in the study. The introductory message will also notify potential contributors that they must be aged 18 and over to participate in the research. This research will briefly cover the case study of a violent incident that has been speculated as domestic abuse. Therefore, I will provide a warning about the violent content within the participant information message. Furthermore, I will not describe the violent incident in-depth in the survey to avoid causing distress. To mitigate against any harm, I will also clarify that the participants can withdraw at any point, for any reason (including after completing the questionnaire). As the data are anonymous, participants will be asked to choose a 'passphrase' to identify their data. If participants choose to withdraw from the study after completing the survey, they will have to email their request, including their 'passphrase' before August 31, 2021. If the participants experience any distress, they can refer to the provided contact details for domestic abuse helplines such as the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.

Evolution of the study

Naturally, over the course of writing this dissertation, the study had evolved. Due to the immense amount of data produced in the data scrape, I decided against analysing their metrics. Ultimately, I decided that the content of the tweets provided more insight into the

public discourse within cancel culture compared to the number of likes and shares. Furthermore, while I had anticipated a reasonable level of diversity among survey participants, 95% of responses were between the ages of 18 – 25. While the survey results cannot be generalised to all age groups, I am confident that the data, when combined with the data from the data scrape, will provide insight into cancel culture practices.

Findings

The data scrape collected over 600 tweets, which I manually cleaned to remove any data unrelated to cancel culture. Six themes emerged from the data: Participatory practices in cancel culture, support for the alleged transgressor, support for the alleged victim, gender, race, and comparisons. I have provided pseudonyms for each participant to remain anonymous. Each tweet is identified by an ID number, ranging from 1 to 150. Similarly, each survey respondent is identified by their respondent number, ranging from 1 to 23.

Participatory practices in cancel culture

This theme explores the various ways the participants engaged with cancel culture. Participants explained how they interact with cancel culture, such as explaining their reasons for cancelling public figures. Contributors to the study also explored how they engage in cancel culture such as sharing or creating posts on social media. Finally, it is debated whether cancel culture should exist at all.

Methods of cancelling

Tweet 5 defines cancel culture as “using social leverage to financially/socially bankrupt Narcissistic celebrities”. Their assertion is supported by various other tweets that describe how they disinvest in cancelled public figures. Several Twitter users explained that they would avoid listening to music produced by problematic celebrities such as Tory Lanez and R. Kelly. However, tweet 129 states that despite their “love” for Megan Thee Stallion, they refuse to cancel Tory. Similarly, while six survey respondents advocated for boycotting art produced by cancelled celebrities, others argued for the separation of the artist from their art. Respondent 11 explains their stance using Kanye West as an example:

I think depending on the circumstances, it's okay to separate the artist from the person. For example, Kanye West has been extremely controversial but that doesn't take away from the fact that his music is great.

Additionally, participants discussed the offences they believed were deserving of cancelling. The data scrape included 20 tweets who felt that Tory Lanez deserved to be cancelled if he had shot Megan Thee Stallion. Participants would often justify their stances on the Stallion v Lanez incident by comparing the situation to other scandals. Within these comparisons, participants would often question why the public become outraged by certain offences but not others. For instance, four tweets compared the Stallion v Lanez incident to Chris Brown who assaulted Rihanna in 2009 (Bain, 2018). Tweets 137 and 143 expressed confusions surrounding the continued support of convicted Chris Brown while subjecting Tory to public shaming as the allegation is still speculation. On the contrary, tweets 6 argued that the public's response to Stallion v Lanez reminded them of the support Chris Brown received after his incident. Several Twitter users argued that Tory should be cancelled as others had been for less serious offences. To illustrate, tweet 7 uses the example of JT, a member of a hip-hop duo, City girls. In 2020 some of JT's old problematic tweets from three years prior resurfaced, and many individuals attempted to cancel her (Williams, 2020). On the other hand, some tweets would use an example of celebrities who had not been cancelled for their actions to advocate for Tory Lanez:

I hereby recant all my previous slander about Tory Lanez, because a female rapper just shot her man in the head and these women cracking jokes now lol
[.] #FreeTory He ain't do nothing. (Tweet 90)

This user expresses frustration at the varied level of outrage towards similar incidents. This frustration subsequently led them to show support for Tory, despite speaking negatively of him previously. Likewise, tweets 96, 106 and 130 all believed that Tory had shot Megan but

continued to support Tory, even using the #FreeTory. They reasoned that Megan had “snitched”, with tweet 130 arguing that Megan should be cancelled for doing so.

Both Twitter and survey respondents discussed the possibility of forgiving cancelled celebrities. Within the data scrape, tweet 148 argued that the public is capable of forgiving “a lil [sic] hitting” but questioned how Tory would gain forgiveness after shooting Megan. Conversely, tweet 17 argued that Tory had been forgiven by the public too quickly. Within the survey, respondents explained their deciding factors in forgiving a cancelled celebrity. Respondents 11, 17 and 21 stated that a public apology would make them more inclined to forgive a celebrity for their transgression. Respondent 11 uses the example of Shawn Mendes, who mistakenly referred to Sam Smith as "him" after Sam had changed their pronoun to "they" (Young, 2020). Subsequently, Shawn Mendes apologised and has not made the same mistake since. In respondent 11’s opinion, this has made Shawn Mendes worthy of forgiveness as he has acknowledged what he had done wrong. Similarly, respondent 17 emphasised that anyone can make mistakes, and everyone should have the opportunity to learn from theirs.

The role of social media in cancel culture

Survey respondents described the various ways they used social media to interact with cancel culture. Within the survey, 60.9% of the respondents had prior knowledge of the Stallion v Lanez incident. Each respondent within the 60.9% reported that they found out about the incident on social media, including Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. When asked about their interactions with cancel culture online, 78.2% said they would use social media to find out more information about an incident or a cancelled individual. Likewise, users selected in the data scrape conveyed an expectation that Tory Lanez should have used his social media platform to shed light on the situation like Megan had (tweet 70, 74, 81 and 147).

Survey respondents (39.1%) also noted that they would share the information and posts that they had found about cancelled individuals on social media. Most respondents said they would then discuss the information they found on social media in conversations with friends. Within the data scrape, almost all tweets were a reply (comment) to another tweet. Two of the tweets were conversations between friends discussing the Stallion v Lanez incident. Tweet 47 asks for his friend's opinion on the incident, to which tweet 25 responds that the situation makes him laugh. Other respondents mentioned that they interact with social media content that discusses cancelled celebrities through likes and comments. However, only two participants said they would create social media content such as memes, Instagram/Snapchat stories, tweets about a cancelled celebrity.

Jokes

Within the data scrape, many people used their platform to make jokes about both Tory and Megan. The jokes about Tory did not paint him in a negative light due to the allegations, instead, they would focus on his height. This is illustrated by tweet 118 that said, "Don't date a female [Megan] that's 2x [times] bigger than you fellas that n**** short AF of course he gone pull out sumn [something] if they get into it... She stronger than his tiny ahh [ass]". The jokes about Megan however were twofold: describing her as a transgender woman or joking about her celebrity persona. Three separate tweets (19, 30 and 56) switched Megan's name to male names that began with 'M' such as 'Marcus' and 'Marvin'. Two further tweets (112 and 115) directly accused Megan of having surgery to become a woman. Jokes based on Megan Thee Stallion's persona quoted lyrics from her songs such as tweet 50 that stated, "What happened to all that gangsta [sic] hot girl s****" and tweet 113 who said: "Thought she was a savage". Some Twitter users also used memes to add a comedic element to their tweets. For instance, tweet 43 captioned Figure 3 with "Unless Megan pulled a gun on that n**** [Tory Lanez], he can kick rocks".



Figure 3, Unless Megan pulled a gun on that n****, he can kick rocks (DJSunstone, 2020).

Debating cancel culture

Some of the tweets collected expressed disapproval of cancel culture. Many tweets stated that they were against the cancelling of Tory Lanez due to a lack of evidence. While Megan Thee Stallion had shared her version of events on social media, a few users believed that people should remain neutral until Tory Lanez explained his side of the story in its entirety. Tweet 85 expressed that they had begun to feel sorry for Megan, but had grown frustrated by the public's advocacy for Tory's arrest, stating:

Now I don't even care for shorty [Megan] nomo [anymore, I] could[n't] care
less if she even ended up dead now #FreeTory

Within the data scrape, 5% of tweets accused Megan Thee Stallion of lying about the incident. While most tweets did not explain why they believed she was lying, two users reference the later released *WAP* (2020) music video where Megan "twerks" (a form of dancing). Another user (tweet 109) questioned various aspects of Megan's accusation stating:

Wise one explain, how she [Megan Thee Stallion] knew he [Tory Lanez] was the one who fired at her if she was walking away? Why did she get back in the car with him after the incident? Why is he saying he didn't? If he was guilty would he drop a whole album on the issue?

Many users argued that Megan Thee Stallion had only told half-truths. Other Twitter users called for photographic evidence of Megan's wound or a guilty verdict in court to support Megan's accusations. Similarly, survey respondents indicated that they would need clear evidence before cancelling any individual. Many respondents were wary of false accusations, with respondent 9 noting, "The media can paint a very different and sometimes exaggerated picture of what celebrities have done and lies can be spread".

Granted that there is sufficient evidence behind claims, many of the survey respondents were in favour of cancel culture. Respondent 7 argued that influencers are role models and should be shamed for deviant behaviour to prevent others from thinking the behaviour is acceptable. Some respondents felt that other influencers should use their platforms to support the victims of cancelled celebrities. Moreover, respondents reasoned that they would participate in cancel culture by boycotting celebrities as they would not want them to profit from immoral behaviour.

Intersectional identities

This theme explores the impact of intersectionality on cancel culture. Discussions of gender and race were prominent within the data collected from Twitter. The majority of tweets that discussed gender expressed a divide between women and men. The rift was initially caused by tweet 60 that asserted:

Why are y'all so quick to write him [Tory Lanez] off. Y'all don't know s*** but what Megan wants y'all to know. He's not even given the opportunity to clear his name but Megan can run to ig [Instagram] and tell her story and everyone eats it up. STICK WITH OUR BLACK MEN!!!

In response, many comments referenced a need to protect women. Similarly, survey respondents also believed that women needed safeguarding. Respondent 11 asserts that, "women tend to be silenced in situations of violence or abuse". They then say that they would therefore believe Megan's accusations against Tory Lanez until proven to be false. It is also argued by respondent 22 that female artists such as Kehlani should show support for Megan to demonstrate disapproval of Tory's alleged actions. A few tweets also alluded to an ongoing problem of Black men causing harm to Black women (tweet 28, 65, 76). For instance, tweet 65, states, "protecting your Black men is hard to do when they use their women as shields."

The debate around Tory's innocence also included discussions of race. Many tweets focusing on the protection of men and women would use the word "Black" before mentioning either gender. These tweets suggest that race influences cancel culture practices. One user suggested that the attention around the Stallion v Lanez would have been amplified had the victim been a White woman. Tweet 11 asserts that if Kylie Jenner had been the victim, the situation would have garnered greater media attention. Tweet 120 supports tweet 11's claim, as they said that they would understand the outrage towards Tory Lanez, had Taylor Swift been shot. They continued stating, "Megan talks the hardest she deserved everything she got". Three additional tweets alluded that Megan was to blame for the incident.

Some individuals agreed with tweet 60 and argued that Black men needed protection from those who hold privilege within society. This sentiment was echoed by tweet 104, which stated that Black men were "all alone in this wor[ld]". Various other users suggested that

Black men are easy targets of cancel culture. For instance, tweet 134 asserts, “Did he [Tory Lanez] really shoot Meg[an] or we just cancel[ing] him easy because he’s a Black man?”.

Discussion

This section will critically engage the research findings with the pre-existing literature around the public sphere, digitisation, and public shaming. Firstly, we will discuss the process of cancel culture from the disclosure of a misdeed to the audience role in public shaming. Then we will analyse the effect of intersectionality on both the victims and offenders involved in cancel culture. Later, the potential outcomes of cancel culture will be deliberated, including the possibility of redemption for cancelled individuals. Finally, as the manifestations of cancel culture vary from offender to offender, we will navigate the grey area between being beloved and being cancelled.

Post, like, tweet, repeat.

While the literature on cancel culture is relatively sparse (Clark, 2020), previous research into older forms of public shaming offer great insight into the phenomenon. When Thompson (2000) identified the five characteristics of a scandal, he did so in reference to scandals exposed within mainstream media. Nevertheless, Thompson's theory is still applicable today regarding cancel culture. In order to be cancelled an individual has to commit an act that violates societies moral codes. In *Stallion v Lanez* (BBC, 2020b), Tory had become the subject of a scandal as Megan accused him of shooting her. As suggested in Thompson's (2000) theory, the transgression initially occurred in private. Police officers were aware of the shooting and had charged Tory with carrying a concealed weapon (BBC, 2020a), but only those involved knew the details of the incident. As discussed previously, journalists would reveal the scandals committed by public figures (Petley, 2013). By contrast, scandals in cancel culture are usually revealed online by the public, such as Megan Thee Stallion using social media to discuss her shooting, identifying Tory Lanez as her attacker (Kyraa, 2020). As Hermes (2006) states, social media has provided individuals with the opportunity to be both the subject and producer of news. Like many other victims, Megan used her platform to raise awareness of a situation that she herself was involved in, which produced a news

story. In doing so, Megan accomplished two main goals in public shaming: informing the public of a deviant act and expressing disapproval of inappropriate behaviour (Rowbottom, 2013; Von Hirsch, 1993). Aligning again with Thompson's (2000) theory, the disclosure of Tory's alleged transgression spurred indignation amongst audiences. It is incredibly difficult to categorise what constitutes a transgression, as acts that may offend one group in society may not offend another. Arguably, this is because each public sphere within the global sphere has different social norms and values (Bohman, 2004). Offences such as acts of violence or sexual assault are known for producing strong emotional reactions from audiences. These offences are more likely to result in an angry audience or cyber mob as they break the law while causing harm, directly going against the norms and values of most public spheres. Other offences like "BBQ Becky" (Nagesh, 2020) are likely to cause a mixed reaction amongst audiences. Those that experienced both overt and covert racism would have seen the White woman's actions as a violation of moral codes. Members of society who were not exposed to these experiences, personally or vicariously, may argue that the woman called the police to report a crime. Consequently, Chiou's (2020) view that cancel culture only aims to shame individuals with differing views is reductionist. Rather than being a hindrance to free speech (Gripsrud, 2009), the affordances made by social media has widened the scope of individuals who can define what indiscretion constitutes as (Trottier, 2018). In choosing whether to be outraged, participants in both the data scrape and survey required "sufficient" evidence of Tory's alleged transgression. Prior to Megan sharing photographs of her gunshot wounds online, multiple Twitter users had requested to see photographic evidence to support her claims (Murphy, 2020). This is not uncommon within cancel culture as audience members often seek audio-visual evidence to support the claims made in scandals (Detel, 2013). As illustrated in the survey, many individuals are concerned by the possibility of false or exaggerated accusations. Therefore, it becomes the victim's responsibility to prove that the transgressor is guilty, rather than the transgressor proving their innocence.

Once a transgression has been revealed online, the information has the potential to spread rapidly. In *Stallion v Lanez*, Megan was able to facilitate the spread of information through her 24m Instagram followers (Detel, 2013). The user-generated nature of the social media platform (Murthy, 2011) encouraged users who watched live to discuss their views on the event through Instagram live story comments and likes. As Detel (2013) explains with the Snowball principle, the disclosure of shaming material can potentially reach thousands of people as it is shared both within and across social media sites. Our increased level of visibility means that updates we have chosen to share with friends or family (Murugesan, 2007) have the potential to go beyond our private network as each moment can be captured audio-visually or through text (Meikle, 2016; Thompson, 2005). For example, technological developments have led to a screen recorder, which user Kyraa Z (2020) used to record Megan Thee Stallion's Instagram live video before uploading the video to YouTube. When asked how they learned about the *Stallion v Lanez* incident, all survey participants said it was through social media platforms including Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. The survey results also indicated that reports made by the public on social media platforms are often used as the main source of information when cancel culture occurs. As media production methods become more accessible, users can produce content based on cancel culture. Users can also add their own insight to situations, which would vary massively to the commentary offered by the mass media, as discussed by Benkler (2006). For instance, individuals can create memes (see Figures 1,2 and 3) to add a comedic element to their views and opinions.

According to Bruns and Burgess (2011), social media users can use hashtags to turn their tweets into public announcements. The implementation of hashtags is evident in various instances of cancel culture, such as the *#JodieComerIsOverParty* (Apologist, 2020), *#FreeTory*, and most famously, *#MeToo* (Micheal 2018). Hashtags provide greater visibility for trending topics, promoting the discussion of topics among the public, which is essential in maintaining the public sphere, as stated by Habermas (1989). The facilitation of public

debate on the internet supports the theory that audience members have taken on the role previously held by journalists (Petley, 2013; Thompson, 2005; van Dijck, 2009) as they report on and popularise talk of deviant behaviour. Despite the vast majority of the tweets in the data scrape having no direct connection to each other, they would contribute their own insight to the event by replying to each other's tweets. Contrarily, only two survey respondents noted that they had previously made social media content about cancelled public figures. Nevertheless, respondents said that they would share the content that they found online with their social media followers. As a result, even if users do not actively voice their views online, they will engage in public shaming by alerting others of their offences or sharing similar opinions to their own. The more shares and interactions (likes and comments) a social media post receives, the more popular it becomes as social media platforms operate with a "self-energising" mechanism" (Detel, 2013: 90). That being said, with the fast-paced nature of the internet, a scandal naturally loses momentum and popularity over time.

"Protect Black women" v "Stick with our Black men"

Social classifications such as race, class, and gender have an immense impact on cancel culture. Initially, marginalised populations were excluded from the bourgeoisie public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Dahlgren, 2006; Fraser, 1990). Therefore, important issues that concerned marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities and women, would not enter the public realm of debate. The experiences of Black people, and Black women particularly, are often ignored both within academia (Sobande, 2020) and the press (Stillman, 2007). Therefore, online spaces such as Black Twitter (Clark, 2020) allow individuals connected by culture to share their experiences and opinions on matters that affect them (Sobande, 2020). As she mentioned previously, the colour of her skin, coupled with the history of police brutality in the US, meant that Megan Thee Stallion felt uncomfortable telling the police and doctors that she was suffering from a gunshot wound (BBC, 2020b). Megan also states that she had chosen not to discuss the confrontation until false accusations of her hitting Tory

Lanez began to circulate (Onibade, 2020). It is unsurprising that Megan Thee Stallion chose Instagram as her platform to reveal Tory's alleged actions. Like many other Black women, Megan used her platform to express her feelings towards the situation to an audience who would understand her experience. The data scrape included a variety of tweets that demonstrated solidarity for Megan Thee Stallion. As illustrated by survey respondent 11, some women would be more likely to believe a female victim in cancel culture as "women tend to be silenced in situations of violence or abuse".

Unfortunately, as much as the internet can be a haven for Black women, it can also be a site of abuse (Sobande, 2020). In being Black and a woman, two identities associated with lower status, Black women are often targets of both sexism and racism (Jones, 2019). While cyber mobs are described in literature as extremely aggressive and insulting (Detel, 2013), more tweets in the data scrape insulted Megan, the alleged victim, than Tory, the alleged aggressor. Arguably, this is because Megan is a dark-skinned Black woman. While White women are often portrayed as innocent victims of violent crime (McKelvey, 2013) who can harness the attention of the mass media and the general public, Black women do not have the same privilege. Tweet 11 supports this theory as they state:

Saw a post where if it were Kylie Jenner instead of Meg in the situation, the situation would get much more attention and backlash towards Tory. But instead, we have #FreeTory and ya'll [sic] are calling Meg a snitch. Disgusting.

As explored by Goff et al. (2008), darker-skinned Black women are commonly defeminised by other groups. Their defeminisation is a result of colourism that is rife both within the Black community and outside. The association of "Blackness" with "maleness" (Goff et al. 2008: 397) eradicates Black women's womanhood, which in turn can erase their status as a victim within cancel culture. Not only did tweets within the data scrape refer to Megan as a man

(19, 30 and 56), but they also believed she was to blame for the incident. One example is tweet 120 that asserted, “If he [Tory Lanez] shot Taylor Swift I could understand, but Megan talks the hardest she deserved everything she got #freetory”. Both Taylor Swift and Megan Thee Stallion personas portray an independent woman. Thus, this tweet implies that Taylor needs protection as a White woman, whereas Megan does not. The association between Black skin and manliness causes individuals to affiliate Black women with masculine characteristics such as strength and aggression. The defeminisation of Black women is further demonstrated by tweet 50 that said, “What happened to all that gangsta [sic] hot girl shit”. Therefore, I argue that the intersection of race and gender places Black women on the lowest pedestal in a society where they are expected to be strong and receive minimal support from the public. Hence, Hall’s (1993) assertion that research should not focus on Black popular culture is flawed, as race inherently affects our experiences and worldview.

Despite the fact, Tory Lanez was charged with concealing a weapon and assault with a firearm (BBC, 2020b; BBC, 2020c) and photographic evidence of Megan's injury (Murphy 2020), some Twitter users believe Megan is lying. Tweet 109 asked, “Why is he [Tory Lanez] saying he didn't [shoot Megan]? If he was guilty would he drop a whole album on the issue?”. This tweet demonstrates that males have a higher status than women in society since Tory's denial of the incident is accepted as fact, but Megan's proof is dismissed. The data scrape revealed a schism between Black men and women, as both genders indicated that they had suffered harm at the hands of the other gender as well as wider society. Due to a history of racism within the US, tweets 104 and 134 argued that Tory Lanez had been cancelled as he is a Black man. Likewise, the sentiment that Black men are victimised was echoed by tweet 60, who argued that the support for Megan was unjust, as Tory has not yet defended himself on social media. While Tory Lanez should be allowed to clear his name, tweet 60's statement did not call for a fair public trial. Rather, tweet 60's statement, “STICK WITH OUR BLACK MEN!!!” indicated that they were already inclined to support Tory Lanez as Tory is a man. Contrariwise, Megan's supporters called for the “protection’ of Black

women”, inferring a longstanding history of the abuse of Black women inflicted by Black men. While the cancelling of Tory Lanez did not result in social change like other movements such as #MeToo (Micheal, 2018-) have, the Stallion v Lanez incident has generated a platform for discussion about gender and race. In sharing that she was too scared to tell the police that a gun was involved, Megan communicated the fear and experiences that Black people face every day in the US. Moreover, the incident incited discussions from both Black men and women about the challenges they face in society. Therefore, the functions of public shaming via cancel culture extends past simply shaming individuals as cancel culture also establishes an opportunity for social change through open discussion (Jenkins, 2006; Negoonte; 1998).

So, you've been cancelled?

The final characteristic of a scandal that Thompson (2005) identifies is damage to a public figure's reputation. Therefore, this section of the dissertation will explore the variety of potential consequences cancel culture can have on a shamed public figure.

While cyber mobs are known to be extremely aggressive (Detel, 2013), the tweets that called for the cancelling of Tory within the data scrape were inherently non-hostile. In discussing how they would disinvest in a cancelled artist, participants from both the data scrape and the survey mentioned that they would boycott content that the artist has produced. The aim of boycotting a public figures art is to “financially bankrupt” (tweet 5) the public figure and prevent them from profiting from immoral behaviour. Despite Tory Lanez's (2020) assertion that he had not been cancelled, in the week following Megan's accusation, his streams dropped by 1.7m (Bossi, 2020). The large fall in users listening to his music suggests that up to 8% of fans had decided to disinvest in Tory Lanez at that time. Butcher and Chipperfield (2021) propose the idea that fans may disagree with the shameful actions of their favourite celebrity but continue to consume their content. The concept of “separating the art from the artist” (Butcher and Chipperfield, 2021: 73) was demonstrated by tweet 129,

who despite being a fan of Megan Thee Stallion, continues to listen to Tory Lanez's music. Several respondents in the survey justified the separation of the artist from their art by claiming that problematic behaviour does not reduce the quality of the art produced. The decision to reduce consumption of a cancelled celebrities art is ultimately up to the individual. Other members of the public may choose to disinvest in other ways.

When a scandal has is revealed, audiences may expect notable public figures such as celebrities, businesses, and even the criminal justice system to demonstrate their support for the victims of the wrongdoers. In the case of Stallion v Lanez the police were already in the process of charging Tory (BBC, 2020c), and the public could not advocate for his removal from his record label as he owns it. Instead, fans asked singers Kehlani and Jojo to remove Tory Lanez from their records (Gee, 2020). Both celebrities happily obliged in solidarity to Megan Thee Stallion while shaming Tory Lanez for his action. Survey respondent 22 supported Kehlani and JoJo's decisions as she felt that women should support other women. Other respondents also supported the idea of influencers using their platforms to shame deviant behaviour to demonstrate that such behaviour is unacceptable. In the case of R. Kelly, the stir caused by Surviving R. Kelly (Vera, 2019) resulted in his removal from RCA Records and criminal charges (Tsioulcas and Dwyer, 2019). The repercussions that R. Kelly faced demonstrates the internet's ability to maintain the public sphere. In this case, social media was utilised as a mediator between "the state and the private individual" (Crossley and Roberts, 2004: 2). Nonetheless, since Tory and R. Kelly's crimes are still under investigation, I cannot argue that their punishments have been proportionate to their alleged actions.

Despite getting cancelled, several public figures have managed to reintegrate into society. Because the event involving Chris Brown (Bain, 2018) occurred over ten years ago, the public has already observed the public shaming and, to some extent, the forgiveness of Chris. While he was initially ostracised, banned from the UK and radio stations (Beaumont-

Thomas, 2017), tweets 137 and 143 argued that Chris Brown had continued support from fans. According to survey respondents 11, 17, and 21, cancelled celebrities may be forgiven by society as long as they apologise and exhibit change. Therefore, it could be argued that Chris Brown was forgiven by society since he has apologised to Rihanna and the public (The Guardian, 2009). Even with the public's ability to "forgive a lil [sic] hitting", as tweet 148 put it, it is uncertain whether the public will ever forgive Tory if found guilty.

Black, white or grey

Rowbottom (2013) and Frye (2021) argue that the consequences of cancel culture are often unpredictable or disproportionate to the offence. Since the global public sphere (Bohman, 2004) is not as homogeneous as the bourgeoisie public sphere (Habermas, 1989), individuals may disagree on what behaviours should be shamed, and what the appropriate punishments should be. Other than in extreme cases, it appears that celebrities are never truly cancelled. Instead, those that have been publicly shamed will experience consequences for their actions for a set period, during which some support from fans will remain. Over time, the public will begin to forgive (or forget) the indiscretions made by the individual, which could take years or months. For instance, R. Kelly continued to rise to fame despite an exhaustive list of sexual abuse allegations from 1994 to 2003 (Chow and Bates, 2019). While R Kelly had not been 'cancelled' in the 2000s, journalists had reported on the allegations to inform the public and to shame R. Kelly. Many fans and celebrities alike, turned a blind eye to these allegations until he was subject to cancel culture in 2019 (Vera, 2019). Similarly, though Louis CK's agency had chosen to support his victims, many of the comedian's fans continued to support him, both personally and financially (Hagi, 2019). Even inside the data scape, users had difficulty determining whether or not a prominent figure had been cancelled, with users reporting that Chris Brown had (tweet 6) and had not (tweet 137 and 147) been cancelled.

The extent to which the public has chosen to disinvest in Tory is still unclear as the situation is ongoing. Numerous tweets in the data scraped condemned Tory Lanez's alleged actions, however, there were almost as many tweets that spoke positively about him. Tory has yet to discuss the incident, following the release of his album *Daystar* (2020) last year. Tweets 70, 74, 81, and 147 anticipated that the musician would clear his name through social media, but reports indicate that Tory has received a court order prohibiting him from discussing the incident (TMZ, 2021). As a result, many fans are waiting for the *Stallion v Lanez* trial before engaging in the cancelling of Tory. This negates Chiou's (2020) assumption that cancel culture is a form of vigilantism as many audience members make rational and informed decisions before cancelling someone. The support of some fans, on the other hand, can be completely unwavering. Various tweets (96, 106 and 130) stated that they continued to support Tory despite believing he was guilty. Supporting Detel's (2013) belief that cyber mobs have the potential to turn on who have revealed scandals, various tweets spoke negatively of Megan Thee Stallion. Milder tweets included 96, 106 and 130 who stated that Megan should be cancelled for whistleblowing. Tweet 85 took a more aggressive approach, asserting that they did not care if Megan Thee Stallion ended up dead since he disagreed with the opinions of her supporters. The lack of an objective, quantifiable method makes it incredibly difficult to determine whether a public figure has been 'cancelled' (Frye, 2021). There are numerous components to be considered within cancel culture and in public shaming as a whole. Furthermore, the significance that audiences attach to cancel culture differs from member to member, and participant perspectives in this study merely provide a snapshot into this public discourse. Thus, I argue that all 'cancelled' public figures sit somewhere on a spectrum between 'favourable' and 'cancelled'.

Conclusion

To summarise, digitisation has had a significant impact on how society engages in public shaming. The advancement of technology, from mobile phones (Dahlgren, 2015), to accessible production methods (Benkler, 2006), has enabled the public to generate their own content. Similarly, the online platforms developed in Web 2.0 promoted user-generated content (Muthy, 2011) while also supporting the rapid distribution of this material (van Dijck, 2009). As Hermes (2006) has argued, the increased visibility of an individual online has resulted in audiences becoming both the face and producer of news. Illustrated by the Stallion v Lanez incident, individuals can use their platforms to shame other members of the public, calling attention to their perceived offences. In doing so, they open a forum for debate and discussion as a global public sphere (Bohman, 2004). As the global public sphere is more fragmented than the Habermasian public sphere (1989), it is difficult to determine what actions will cause a public reaction.

As a marginalised group, Black women will often use social media to discuss collective experiences (Sobande, 2020) and amplify their voice in diverse digital spaces. This is a result of mainstream media disregarding their plight as Black women are viewed as unfavourable victims compared to their White counterparts (McKelvey, 2013).

Even so, as Jones (2019) accurately states, the increased visibility afforded by the internet poses a risk to Black women. In sharing their experiences online, Black women expose themselves to sexism, racism, and colourism from Black men and other women. Though Megan Thee Stallion had only intended to shame Tory and inform the public of his actions, she sparked a debate about the intersectionality of race and gender in the twenty-first century. Megan was not only allegedly shot by a Black man, but she also felt forced to lie about her injuries to avoid being shot by police (BBC, 2020b). Following the incident, Megan Thee Stallion was accused of lying about her injury and who assaulted her. Moreover,

tweets in the scrape insinuated that Megan was to blame for the incident, and others made various jokes about her gender identity and injuries.

Both the data scrape and survey conducted provided an insight into the public discourse occurring in cancel culture. Despite the stereotype of angry cyber mobs (Detel, 2013), the majority of participants sought evidence prior to engaging in the cancelling of other people. Evidence accepted by the participants ranged from audio-visual material (Detel, 2013), like the picture Megan posted of her wound (Murphy, 2020), to criminal convictions. Survey respondents indicated they were most likely to seek evidence or further information about an alleged transgression on social media. This implies that the relationship between audiences and journalists has changed, as audiences assume the role of reporting on scandals (Petley, 2013; Thompson, 2005; van Dijck, 2009). When a public figure is labelled problematic, a fan usually makes one of three choices, as indicated by the data. First, a fan might choose to withdraw personal and financial support (Clark, 2020), through the boycotting of the public figure's art. Second, an individual may decide to separate the artist from their art (Butcher and Chipperfield, 2021), continuing to consume content while still withholding personal support. Finally, a fan may remain a fan of the celebrity despite their wrongdoings.

Ultimately, the consequences of cancel culture are incredibly unpredictable (Frye, 2021). This is mostly due to the fact that even more people can define what a transgression is (Trottier, 2018). Eventually, the public begins to forgive the indiscretions made by the individuals, as demonstrated by Chris Brown, or they may simply forget their wrongdoings, seen with R. Kelly (Vera, 2019). As many Tory Lanez fans indicated that they were waiting for further evidence either in a statement or a conviction, only time will tell if he'll continue to sway towards the more 'favourable' side of the spectrum or the 'cancelled' side.

Finally, while I believe this research has offered insight into the processes and meanings (Hastall and Sukalla, 2014) that audiences attach to cancel culture, it does not address all of

the potential outcomes in cancel culture. Thus, I propose the need for further research into the manifestation of cancel culture as a form of civic justice.

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Appendix

Participants information sheet

Cancel culture on social media

You are being invited to take part in a research project based on cancel culture. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Email me19qkv@leeds.ac.uk if anything is unclear or if you need more information.

This survey will look at audience participation within cancel culture online. It will take between 5-10 minutes to complete.

A couple of questions will include themes of violence, that may be of domestic nature. This may cause slight discomfort or distress. If so, there are helplines that can provide support such as Samaritans (116 123) and the National Domestic Abuse helpline (08082000247).

To take part you have to be aged 18 and over. You are not obliged to take part; the decision is yours. If you choose to take part, you are also able to withdraw at any point.

All data is anonymous. You have until August 31st 2021 to remove any responses you have provided. If you chose to do so, you will have to email your request to me19qkv@leeds.ac.uk and provide your 'passphrase'.

Thank you.

Consent form

I consent to taking part in this research *

Yes

As all data is anonymous, you will need to provide this 'passphrase' if you later wish to withdraw your responses:

Short-answer text

Survey:

1. As all data is anonymous, you will need to provide this 'passphrase' if you later wish to withdraw your responses:
2. Age:
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 26-30
 - c. 31-35
 - d. 36+
3. Gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Nonbinary
 - d. Other- Please specify
 - e. Prefer not to say

Cancel culture refers to the popular practice of withdrawing support for (cancelling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive.

4. Had you heard the term 'Cancel culture' before?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. If a celebrity had been accused of doing something wrong or offensive, would you:
 - a. Look to social media for more information
 - b. Share information about the incident on social media
 - c. Avoid consuming their art (e.g., Music, films etc.)
 - d. Do nothing
 - e. Other – Please specify
6. Would you continue to support a celebrity after they had done something wrong or offensive if you were a fan?

- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. It depends on the situation
 - d. Unsure
7. Why?
8. Cancel culture often occurs on social media – have you participated in any of the following:
- a. Creating content (memes, Instagram/snapchat stories, tweets etc.) about a cancelled celebrity
 - b. Interacted with content discussing a cancelled celebrity (e.g., commenting, liking etc.)
 - c. Shared posts about a cancelled celebrity with followers and friends
 - d. Discussed information you have found about a cancelled celebrity on social media, with people in casual and/or professional conversations
9. Cancel culture can affect public figures for years, but in other instances it can die out quickly. Why do you think this happens?

Last year musician Megan Thee Stallion accused another musician Tory Lanez of shooting her in the foot.

10. Had you heard about this incident before?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
11. If yes, how did you find out about this incident?
12. Does knowing this information change whether you would start or continue to listen to Tory Lanez's music?
13. Does knowing this information change whether you would start or continue to listen to Megan Thee Stallion's music?

14. Celebrities such as Jojo and Kehlani removed Tory Lanez from their songs after Tory Lanez was accused of shooting Megan Thee Stallion. What's your opinion on other celebrities publicly showing or withdrawing support around alleged incidents?

Data scrape codebook

Name	Description
Against cancel culture	Views against cancel culture.
For Cancel Culture	Views that supported cancel culture.
Jokes	Jokes made about the situation.
Meme	Memes posted by users.
Method of cancelling	How they participate in cancel culture.
Cancelling Tory	Tweets that publicly shamed Tory Lanez.
Tory Guilty	Tweets that believed Tory was guilty of shooting Megan Thee Stallion.
Comparisons	Comparisons of Stallion v Lanez to other celebrity/cancel culture incidents.
Disinterested	Expressed a disinterest in Stallion v Lanez.
Gender	Tweets that discussed gender.
Transgender	Tweets referring to Megan Thee Stallion as transgender.
Race	Tweets that discussed race.
Response to a tweet	Tweets that were created in response to another tweet.
Interacting with friends	Tweets between friends.

Name	Description
Seeking evidence	Sought evidence for the Stallion v Lanez incident
Supporting Tory	Tweets that expressed support for Tory Lanez.
Innocent	Tweets that believed Tory Lanez is innocent.
Megan is to blame	Tweets that believe Tory Lanez shot Megan Thee Stallion, but it was Megan's fault.
Questioning Megan	Tweets that believe Megan Thee Stallion is lying/ withholding the truth.

Survey codebook

Name	Description
Against CC	Opinions that express a disapproval of cancel culture.
Does not participate	Participants who do not engage with cancel culture.
For CC	Opinions that express an approval of cancel culture.
Forgiveness	Answers that discuss the concept of forgiving transgressors.
Heard about the incident on Social media	Found out about the Stallion v Lanez incident on social media.
Participating in CC	How the participants engage with cancel culture.
Avoid consuming content	Avoid consuming content produced by perpetrators after gaining knowledge of a transgression.
Created cc content	Created cancel culture content such as memes and social media posts.

Name	Description
Discussing with friends	Discussed a cancelled celebrity/ incident with friends.
Interacting with CC content	Interacts (likes, comments, etc.) with cancel culture content on social media
Share posts on social media	Shares posts about a cancelled celebrity/ incidents on social media.
Using social media to find info	Uses social media to find out more information about alleged incidents.
Seeks clear evidence	Looks for clear evidence before cancelling a celebrity
Depends on details	Cancels a celebrity based on the details of their transgression
Separate artist from the music	Continues to consume a cancelled celebrity's content despite disapproving of their action.