

With(Stan)ding Cancel Culture: Stan Twitter and Reactionary Fandoms

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Abstract

Cancel culture is often regarded as a witch hunt on social media, a way to harass people into silence, an excuse to bully critics - but that was not always the case. This analysis traces the history of cancel culture, its appropriation by stans, and its rebirth as the commonly known petty, polarized behavior on Twitter. Cancel culture began on Black Twitter via callouts directed at public officials or celebrities for being racist, homophobic, sexist, etc. in an attempt to shed light on the abuse of power, to boycott corrupt companies, or to revoke support for problematic authority or celebrity figures. The social justice logic and activism behind cancel culture has been appropriated by Stan Twitter which is an obsessive, overzealous group of pop culture fans. Stans noticed the power that cancel culture had to end careers, twisted the activism into harassment, and restructured cancel culture as an excuse to censor anyone who questions, competes with, or critiques their idols. Today, cancel culture is seen negatively because of the deeply negative effect of Stan Twitter on this originally well-intentioned movement. This current version of cancel culture is almost always seen as an obstacle in the way of real progress in social justice activism. These two phenomena - cancel culture and stan Twitter - are the seeds of polarized behavior that have been planted in social media and that implicitly affect the ways that Twitter users respond to and make sense of the world in general. Polarization is the new normal, it infects everything from politics to entertainment, and it limits productive discourse by marginalizing those who do not immediately align with a dominant ideology.

Introduction

Every day on Twitter there seems to be a new hashtag cancelling some celebrity for some faux pas. Though in the past, cancel culture was rooted in activism and shed light on misconduct of influential individuals, it has recently been appropriated by niche groups of Twitter users, tarnished by their poor reputation, and is now seen as a petty joke. Cancelling via hashtags was originally intended to highlight some of the most powerful people's serious wrongdoings and show solidarity by combating social injustices (Romano, 2019). The hashtags were meant to go viral and create a widespread movement to remove support from a celebrity in order to diminish their personal or professional power. Black Twitter users were the primary creators of these hashtags: one example includes the #MeToo movement. This hashtag was created in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a Black woman who is an activist and survivor of sexual assault. A full decade after Burke started the movement, white feminists on Twitter went viral for exposing film producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual offenses, and that is how the #MeToo movement gained momentum and widespread popularity in 2017. Cancel culture is intended to hold powerful people accountable, but it has been constantly appropriated, and its influence has been diminished because of how frequently people are cancelled for less serious offenses, such as walking the red carpet in an ugly outfit.

Because celebrities on Twitter are seemingly easily accessible (they can be directly tweeted at by anyone at any time), a type of niche consumer culture has emerged. Celebrities are expected to appear authentic through their carefully curated social media personas. Fans expect to have consistent social media updates on celebrity life. Despite the celebrity's careful creation of their social media, these influential people are not without flaws, and having these flaws exposed inevitably leads to cancellation. Everything is under constant scrutiny on social media,

and just like gnats swarming in the summer heat, many users constantly monitor celebrity life. This surveillance on social media has become normal; any celebrity who makes a mistake - no matter how big or small - is at risk of cancellation. Though cancelling was intended to be a form of social justice activism, many Twitter users have warped it into becoming the consequence of an imperfect social media performance.

Fandoms often serve as a buffer to being cancelled on Twitter. Here, a parasocial relationship emerges in which the celebrity is oblivious to the individuals that make up their fandom. This type of relationship is very one-sided: fans obsess while the celebrity is unaware of their very existence as individuals (Angus, 2019). The celebrity knows that they have fans on Twitter, though they may not know the extent to which the fandom is at work to keep their celebrity reputation as positive as possible. This platform in particular is a space in which diverse users share similar interests and create their own niche groups - ingroups. Ingroups are defined as having shared interests that overcome differences (Smith, Himelboim, Rainie, & Shneiderman, 2015). The ingroup that is most closely linked to celebrity cancel culture is stan Twitter. Stans are part of the larger celebrity fandom; what makes them distinct, however, is their outwardly obsessive emotional attachment to their favorite celebrity. They will do everything and anything to show their support and tear down competition. Stans obsess to the point of stalking celebrities, bullying rivals, and harassing critics (Monroe, 2019). They are blind to the imperfections of their favorite celebrity so much so that stans seem to idolize and worship them no matter how egregious the celebrity's actions may be. Because of this unrequited, unhealthy love that stans have for their celebrity, they will do almost anything to be noticed by their celebrity. As an entire social group on Twitter, stans have the ability to shape the very narratives that exist around many celebrities.

Because of the sheer amount of stans that exist on Twitter for any given celebrity, they can effectively prevent cancelling hashtags from going viral by bullying (and cancelling) those who tweet it, reporting their accounts for spam, and using the platform to their advantage. This is called “reactionary fan culture” and is essentially bullying masked as cancel culture activism within a fandom (Cardenas, 2019). Stans in particular have flipped cancel culture on its head and appropriated it for their own gain. Reactionary fan culture uses trends like #cancelled and #*x*isoverparty (*x* could be anyone on Twitter: #kanyewestisoverparty has been a recent trend) to combat those who critique or compete with their celebrity (Stanfill, 2020). For example, pop music artist Taylor Swift and rapper Kanye West have a complex, years-long conflict. In short, Kanye claims to have made Taylor famous by jumping on stage at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards and saying that Taylor’s award should have been given to Beyoncé instead. Years later, this incident is still being talked about. The lyrics in Kanye’s 2016 song “Famous” state, “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / Why? I made that bitch famous” (Coleman, 2020). Undoubtedly, Taylor stans despised Kanye and attacked him for that line; Taylor was clearly famous enough to be given the award for Video of the Year in 2009. Kanye claimed to have gotten permission from Taylor to add those lyrics in, but she claimed that he did not say those lyrics exactly. In 2020, a video was leaked of the phone call between Kanye and Taylor in which he quickly mumbles the lyrics and she says that she likes the song. After the video of Kanye on the phone with Taylor was released, Taylor stans took to Twitter with the hopes of cancelling Kanye once and for all with #kanyewestisoverparty. These stans saw a threat to their idol and immediately lashed out against the man who claims to have made her famous. This is just one of an infinite number of examples where stans appropriated the logic behind cancel culture and used it to tear down critics in order to build up their idol.

Because of how trivial these trends of stans cancelling the competition are and how frequently they emerge on Twitter, stans have a very poor reputation. They are often joked about or brushed off for being an emotionally obsessive and abusive group who would violently attack anyone who questions their celebrity. They are incredibly influential, however. It is now common lingo on Twitter to say things like “we have to stan” (see Figure 1) anytime a celebrity does anything minimally good such as donating to charity or taking a picture with a fan.

Additionally, #cancelled and #*x*isoverparty are either jokes about a celebrity’s trivial mistakes or serious hashtags that intend to truly cancel. However, because of how stans have appropriated cancelling in reactionary fan culture, these



Figure 1: popular meme frequently used by stan Twitter

trends rarely have a lasting impact on the celebrity’s reputation. The results of this parasocial relationship are clear: the celebrity benefits from the stans’ constant emotional and technical labor to silence critics. Though being cancelled is a constant possibility on Twitter because of how easy the platform makes it for anyone to unearth past wrongdoings, problematic tweets, or irresponsible actions, being cancelled is a very weak threat if the celebrity’s stans decide to go to war for them, which they always do.

In a much broader sense, these phenomena have normalized polarization. Stan Twitter and cancel culture are not just about celebrity gossip and rumors running rampant; they both need to be critically analyzed in academia. These two phenomena are the seeds of polarized

behavior, planted in social media, and they implicitly affect the ways that Twitter users respond to and make sense of the world in general. Social media can help to coordinate, organize, and empower activists both online and offline (Tufekci, 2016). Unfortunately, it can also unravel social justice movements because online activists are constantly inundated with conflicting information. It is nearly impossible to separate the so-called objective truth from the fake news. Although cancel culture stems from an overtly political movement online, it has become distorted and lost much of its original power. The narrative surrounding the current version of cancel culture is mostly negative; masses of people are fed information that is never objective and is frequently tainted by a hidden agenda.

Cancelling is now a constant trend on Twitter, and users are becoming socialized to be intolerant towards anything they disagree with. Stan Twitter's influence is incredible; they have appropriated cancel culture and normalized intolerance towards differing opinions. The fear of being cancelled limits productive discourse, necessary growth, sharing conflicting viewpoints, and bridging differences. Because of my unique location as a participant observer, I have a particular insight into the world of stan Twitter and how it operates by depreciating the value of cancel culture. By tracking the trends of cancel culture and stan Twitter, I hope to uncover the ways in which the vast majority of users are becoming socialized to polarity and intolerant towards others with different opinions; these far-reaching Twitter trends likely have real-world consequences. Though cancel culture was and still is necessary to show the wrongdoings of those in power, its gravity has been diminished because of how stans have warped it to fuel their own fires. Reactionary fan culture is the evil twin of cancel culture; people are seen as disposable, and meaningful conversations are rarely had.

Twitter

An overview of Twitter demographics is essential in understanding how pervasive these phenomena truly are. Twitter is a type of microblogging social media app in which users can create tweets that are no more than 240 characters (Aslam, 2020). Tweets can be liked, retweeted, commented on, and quoted by other users. These posts can include videos, images, gifs, links, emojis, and hashtags. The site came into existence in 2006 and quickly gained popularity. Celebrities, politicians, and other well-known individuals have their accounts verified by a blue check mark next to their name in order to differentiate between their real account and any fakes that may be out there. Today, there are 500 million tweets sent per day and 330 million monthly users. Interestingly, only 10% of these users create 80% of the tweets (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). Twitter users account for $\frac{1}{5}$ of American adults, and they are more likely to be Democrats than the general public. The majority of Twitter users are affluent millennials, of which 71% say they use the network as their primary news source. Twitter is not immune to polarized news, and it is increasing exponentially each year (Garimella & Weber, 2017). These are significant findings from which extremely important information can be inferred. More young people are getting their information from this platform on a daily basis. Almost an entire generation is seeing polarized content and are often unaware of how the platform fuels this polarization.

It appears that Twitter users have complete control over who they follow and what appears on their timeline; however, the platform's algorithm works in mysterious ways. Filter bubbles and echo chambers are two technological phenomena that influence what a person sees on their Twitter feed (Cardenal et al., 2019). Filter bubbles occur when the platform provides users with content similar to that which they search, suggesting that other users - who they do not follow - tweet similar things. Echo chambers occur when the people a user follows all tweet

similar things, leading the user to believe that nearly everyone on the site holds the same beliefs or supports the same people (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). Filter bubbles are more individual, while echo chambers are more social, and the combination of the two creates a platform that is unknowingly polarized, misguided, and divided by blindness towards others' opinions.

These two algorithmic phenomena heavily influence what appears on Twitter for the majority of users. Hashtags are often suggested in the "Trending" tab even if they would not naturally appear on the user's timeline. Otherwise completely irrelevant trends are forced onto users' timelines, making it appear as if these trends are significant and worthy of discussion. Twitter makes it seem as if everything is relevant at all times, and it is often difficult to focus on only one topic and distinguish between relevant news (such as abuse of power) and irrelevant rumors (such as a new celebrity couple). What people see influences how they behave, and because of the popularity of cancel culture, it is a new norm. This normalization of behavior relates to social learning theory in psychology. Social learning is a type of cognitive process and performance in which individuals observe others and imitate their behaviors only if they are positively reinforced (Wodtke & Brown, 1967). On Twitter, positive reinforcement is evident in the form of likes and retweets; thus, the more interaction a tweet receives, the more positively reinforced it becomes. A stan may cancel a particular celebrity for being a competitor to their idol and tweet about how this competitor is #cancelled. The rest of stan Twitter likes and retweets their tweet in order to boost its popularity and create the impression that this cancellation is widely supported. Stans in particular are socialized by others within their echo chambers to behave a certain way, often as members of reactionary fan culture because of how normalized that behavior is within those circles. They do permeate into other areas, however, such as the "Trending" tab just by the sheer number of tweets that they create around a certain

celebrity being cancelled. Obsessive stans can tweet and retweet so much information on Twitter (they are likely the 10% producing 80% of content) that they can make certain topics trending. The trending tab is visible to everyone regardless of who they follow, so these frequent cancellations of people seem normal to all of Twitter, not just to stans.

Method

I have always been fascinated by fandoms and why people are so enamored by celebrity life. The people that make up fandoms interest me much more than the celebrities themselves; why the obsession with someone so distant from one's own reality? As an avid Twitter user, I am exposed to trending topics on a daily basis. Celebrity gossip pops up on my timeline constantly even though I follow very few celebrities. Hashtags sneak in through the "Suggested for You" section. My location as a participant observer allows me unique access to the social circles of cancel culture and stan Twitter. This aca/fan perspective, part academic and part fan (Jenkins, 2012), allows me to critically engage with the content on my timeline, of which I am doing a textual analysis. Because of how long I've been in these circles, there are certain nuances that appear to me that may otherwise be hidden to pure academics outside of this Twitter subculture. Certain nuances in trends, tones, jokes, memes, and vernacular require an insider's perspective to translate. Using this toolbox of information that I have acquired throughout my seven years on Twitter, I am critically analyzing the different manifestations of cancel culture, how stans have appropriated the hashtags, how reactionary fan culture is aggressive and violent, and how cancel culture is so frequently ineffective because of this.

History...

There are important historical threads to tie together in order to understand the current relationship between cancel culture and stan Twitter. Cancelling is a constant threat on Twitter

because of how easy it is to dig up past offensive tweets made by anyone. However, cancelling is often ineffective because of the power dynamics at play behind the scenes, or it is seen as a joke because of how stan Twitter has appropriated cancelling and made it so frequently petty and insincere.

...Of Cancel Culture

Cancel culture - or cancelling - is a social movement that removes widespread support from a popular public figure for their abuse of power or other morally questionable acts (*What It Means to Get "Canceled,"* 2019). Cancelling did not always affect powerful people negatively, however. Until recently, cancelling came from the powerful to the powerless in order to maintain their position in the sociopolitical hierarchy (Coates, 2019). It has always been about silencing those who do not maintain the traditional - white male - status quo: the detention camps of Japanese Americans in World War II was a racist cancellation of people; the cancelling of Colin Kaepernick's NFL career for kneeling during the national anthem was an attempt to shame him for peacefully protesting police brutality; the hush money sent from Donald Trump's election campaign to Stormy Daniels was expected to censor their affair. People in positions of high power still have the ability to cancel others, and they always will. Due to the democratic nature of Twitter, however, the modern, popular version of cancelling has fallen into the hands of the people.

Though it has since been appropriated and applied to a variety of serious or joking contexts, the phrase "they're #cancelled" originated on Black Twitter. Black Twitter describes the millions of Black users that share specific concerns, experiences, and values (Florini, 2014). Distinct from the typically whitewashed portrayal of social media users, Black Twitter users are most visible in hashtags or trending topics: #BlackLivesMatter for police brutality awareness;

#OscarsSoWhite for the Oscars ignoring Black film achievements; #MeToo for sexual assault; #BlackGirlMagic for celebrating the power and achievements of Black women; #MenAreTrash for toxic masculinity; and of course, #Cancelled.

Without the contributions of Black Twitter, the platform would be vastly different. So much of Twitter culture - whether jokes, memes, lingo, or serious discussions - comes from Black Twitter, and yet they are rarely given credit, as is evident with the #MeToo movement which is just one example of so many. Without this group of users, Twitter culture would be vastly different, and it is incredibly important to credit Black Twitter for creating the foundations of cancel culture.

Cancelling began as a form of online activism to publicly critique and “call out” corrupt companies or people in power in order to shed light on their wrongdoings, often involving their acts of racism or sexism. Black Twitter users, most often women, moderate the content on their timelines for racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. and call out those that publicly partake in such bigoted rhetoric (Nakamura, 2015). Twitter as an entire social media site benefits from users monitoring others, reporting hateful messages and accounts, and keeping the website safe for everyone. By creating hashtags and crowd-sourcing support, Black Twitter is often able to effectively intervene in problematic content. This type of online labor is almost always uncompensated, except for likes, retweets, or follows. Nevertheless, calling out problematic people for their behaviors on Twitter has increased exponentially.

Calling out is a way for the less powerful to make their voice heard about the wrongdoings of the more powerful. Call outs are thus incredibly public social media trials that denounce and shame influential people who are racist, sexist, or tone-deaf about a serious social issue. This is most frequently done through tweets that include hashtags in order to track who is

being #cancelled and for what reason. Cancelling frequently went viral because of Black Twitter; having these hashtags go viral means that they appear on nearly everyone's Twitter feed, not just those within a certain echo chamber. Going viral helps to spread the message about how powerful people are often cancelled, for what reasons, and why everyone should care.

The whole point of cancelling is to gain widespread support to boycott the person, organization, or event in question. The goal is to squash their influence and eventually make them powerless by boycotting them financially, politically, or professionally. Critics of cancel culture argue that these online social justice warriors are policing others, lacking a sense of humor, and imposing their so-called politically correct values onto others by any means necessary (Nakamura, 2015). It is often seen as a counterproductive approach that prevents anyone from having meaningful discussions from which to grow and learn, thus "creating a society in which punishment is favored over rehabilitation" (Tucker, 2018). People are ostracized instead of educated, and rarely is any real progress made, middle ground found, or perspectives respectfully shared. Though these

critics of cancel culture are completely correct in their points, I believe that current cancel culture is seen in this light because of how stan Twitter appropriated the terminology and hashtags (see Figure 2) and created their own version - reactionary fan culture - which is aggressive and terrifying. Reactionary fan culture is a



Figure 2: critic of stan Twitter noting that African American Vernacular English has been appropriated by stans (@KUROM1DYKE, 2019)

diseased stem from cancel culture in which anyone who questions a celebrity is at the mercy of stan Twitter, and rarely are they merciful.

...Of Stan Twitter

Stans are obsessive, passionate fans within a certain celebrity fandom on Twitter. The term originates from rapper Eminem’s song “Stan” in which a crazed fan writes to Eminem about his deeply intense obsession with the rapper. In the song, Stan gets so upset about Eminem not answering his fan mail that he kills his pregnant girlfriend and himself (Monroe, 2019). Originally, being called a stan was considered an insult, but the term has gained popularity on Twitter, and when one applies it to themselves, it becomes a “badge of honor” (Michel, 2019). It shows dedication, commitment, and loyalty to a celebrity. Stans typically have names so that others can identify which fandom they are part of: “Arianators” for Ariana Grande; “Beliebers” for Justin Bieber; “Bey Hive” for Beyoncé; “Little Monsters” for Lady Gaga; “Rihanna Navy” for Rihanna; “Swifties” for Taylor Swift. These labels function as clear signifiers of stans. For example, an unaware Twitter user may stumble upon an Arianator’s profile and think that they’re just some crazy fan, but a stan will seek out other Arianators and try to make connections with others in the fandom.

Anyone can stan anything as long as they hold a deep attachment to the celebrity or brand. There are stan Twitter accounts, whose sole focus is tweeting pictures and details about a specific celebrity (see Figure 3). Stans commit incredible amounts of



Figure 3: stan account for pop music artist Doja Cat (@DojaAccess, 2020)

time, energy, and emotional investment in idolizing their celebrity, while the celebrity only knows them as one of a million unidentifiable people within the fandom (Hills, 2015). This relationship is clearly parasocial: stans quite literally fall in love with someone who does not know they exist by internalizing all the information provided by other stan accounts, projecting their personal fantasies back onto the celebrity, and repeating the process with every new bit of information they can find. They devote incredible amounts of time and energy obsessing over their celebrity and making sure their idols are being portrayed positively on Twitter.

Though the relationship with the celebrity is parasocial, the relationship one stan has with other stans creates a type of social cement in which their identity is performed and validated by other fans who feel similarly. Within some areas of stan Twitter, the actual relationship with the celebrity is the “secondary aim, the primary one being one’s relationship with one’s surrounding social network” (Hills, 2015, p. 494). This is a curious facet of stan Twitter: though the celebrity is commodified and consumed, the real goal is to connect with other stans and broaden one’s understanding of the celebrity. The celebrity then becomes a byproduct of the fandom, while the stans are what keep the fandom in motion regardless of the celebrity’s public appearances. Stans actively seek out other users who obsess over the same celebrity, and this is how filter bubbles

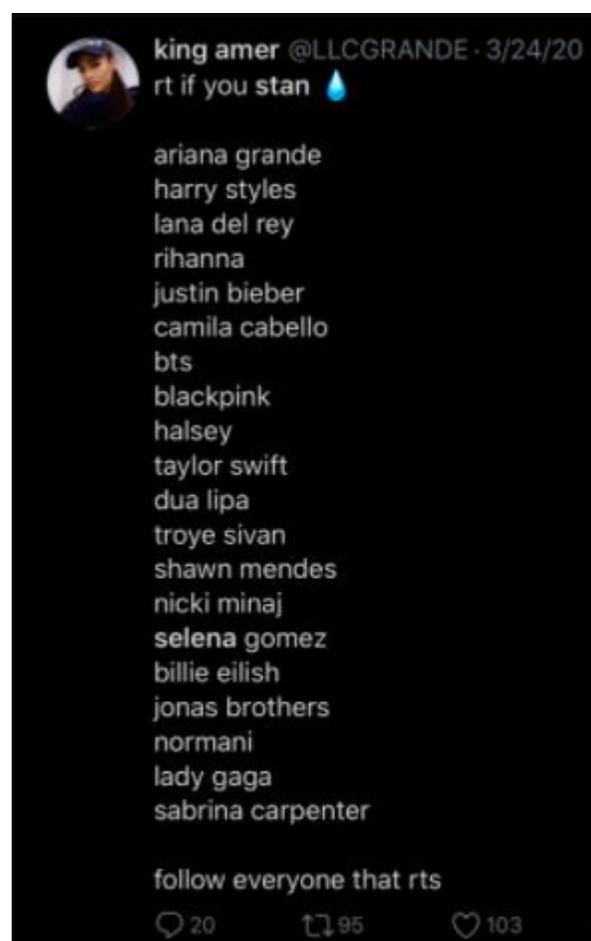


Figure 4: new stan account searching for fellow stans (@LLCGRANDE, 2020)

and echo chambers are formed within this social circle on Twitter (see Figure 4). Common in stan Twitter are mutuals (users who follow each other) and group chats that exist primarily to talk about the idolized celebrity.

Stan Twitter is distinct from traditional fandoms in that they primarily exist on social media. Without Twitter, stans would just be obsessive fans. Though fan clubs birthed stan Twitter, stans are much more severe and committed than traditional fan clubs. A significant marker of a stan is their inability to accept criticism towards their idolized celebrity. By passionately supporting someone so much that flaws become ignored while critics or rivals become villainized, stans contribute to the pettier side of celebrity cancel culture.

Stan Twitter has taken Black Twitter's trend of viral activism and twisted it into something less about social justice and more about personal attacks. Though fans of a celebrity have always been the first line of defense, stans do so more aggressively than traditional fans.

Reactionary fan culture emerges when stans directly attack those who compete with, question, or criticize their celebrity (Cardenas, 2019). Stans "troll" people by making fun of them, reporting their accounts as abusive, tweeting inflammatory messages about them, starting fights with anyone who liked or retweeted their critique, and bullying them into silence. They even go so far as to stalk a



Figure 5: Twitter user made a comment criticizing pop music artist Selena Gomez; a Selena stan stalked the user on other social media sites and bullied them on their private Instagram account (they have since deleted all social media, 2020)

Twitter user's other social media and bully them on every platform they can find (see Figure 5). In order to act in solidarity, they use #cancelled in order to appear on other stans' feeds (by way of filter bubbles and echo chambers) and receive positive reinforcement and support from other stans in tearing down the user who made any negative tweet about their celebrity.

Celebrity Surveillance Theory

In order to analyze why celebrities on Twitter are so frequently cancelled, it is important to point out the ways that social media serves as a reverse panopticon of sorts. Celebrities are under constant scrutiny and always have been, since the beginning of celebrity surveillance in the 1920s (Tucker, 2018). This type of reporting began by showcasing classic socialite and celebrity culture, but it quickly grew into gossip-based entertainment. Tabloids sensationalized the daily lives of celebrities, and paparazzi would stalk in the shadows in order to find interesting content. On television, networks like *E!* began feeding audiences constant celebrity news, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Modern-day celebrity reporting is deeply focused on mistakes, scandals, and downfalls. In the age of social media, this constant monitoring of celebrity life allows people to dig into a celebrity's past in order to find wrongdoings - similar to how paparazzi lurk in the shadows, waiting for the perfect scandalous shot. Paradoxically, the more removed a celebrity is from ordinary life in order to maintain some sense of privacy, the more the public is invested in having constant access to them on social media. Obsessive fans disregard the celebrity's need for privacy in an attempt to consume and produce information about them online. Stan Twitter specifically fosters an environment in which fans feel entitled to celebrity personal information. Pictures are posted, addresses are stalked, friends are interrogated, and mob mentality is formed. Celebrities are under constant surveillance by their fans and by those who stan their competitors; one wrong move could result in cancellation.

Social Learning Theory and Groupthink

Popular, powerful people carefully create their social media persona. Twitter has a way of packaging celebrities and making them appear easily accessible through directly tweeting to them or by liking and retweeting the celebrity's personal tweets. Celebrities are seen as commodities, something to invest time and money in, a trend to keep up with (Burns, 2009). Because people want to be up to date on the most current trends, they seek out information from those that are already invested. In this case, social learning runs wild within stan circles. This theory of social learning suggests that people see a behavior and replicate it if positively reinforced (Wodtke & Brown, 1967). Interestingly, this theory was based on how aggressive social behaviors stem from observation and imitation. In the early 1960s, psychologist Albert Bandura created the Bobo doll experiment to analyze how and why children imitate what they see, especially violent behaviors. If the child was able to identify with the person they were observing and saw them being rewarded for their aggressive behavior, the child would later imitate the violent actions on the doll. These findings supported the social learning theory and raised questions about violence in the media and its influence on audiences. In modern-day, non-experimental settings, social learning theory has important implications for social media. It is nearly impossible to escape the endless stream of information, often negative, on every screen. Aggressive behaviors are normalized, audiences become numb to tragedy, and the influx of content dilutes the effect of both positive and negative information.

On Twitter, users see what others are tweeting about and form opinions based on how many people agree with the tweet through liking or retweeting it. They then project their own brand-new perspective to the world through their own tweets, which in turn are reinforced by people who feel similarly. This is amplified even more by filter bubbles and echo chambers.

Stans believe that the majority of people agree with them because of how the platform feeds their tweets to other stans. To stans, the few people who do rival, critique, or disagree with their favorite celebrity must be anomalies because of how barren the critic's tweet is when compared to the stan's tweet with hundreds of likes and retweets.

Because of the effects of filter bubbles and echo chambers, certain groups - ingroups and outgroups - emerge. Ingroups are very tight communities of people with shared interests (Smith et al., 2015); stan Twitter is one of the most popular ingroups. Outgroups are comprised of individuals who do not fit into the ingroup for whatever reason; they are often ostracized, belittled, or blatantly ignored by the ingroup. There is an obvious power dynamic at play with these group dynamics - ingroups have all the power. Though there is something positive to be said for having a tight-knit community of people who share common ideas, ingroups often have many blind spots. One phenomenon that results from the creation of ingroups and outgroups is groupthink (Janis, 1971). This occurs when ingroups attempt to appear united despite individual differences, and the preoccupation with a harmonious, cohesive appearance leads to irrational thinking and dysfunctional behaviors. Although stan Twitter is made up of different smaller ingroups - different fandoms - it is seen as one mass of users who act irrationally anytime someone from the outgroup makes a negative comment about the stans' favorite celebrities. The threat of having their favorite celebrity cancelled leads to mass hysteria, and stans lash out against anyone from the outgroup. Stans turn the cancellation around and direct it towards those that threatened it (by merely questioning their celebrity or pointing out problematic behavior) in the first place. This menacing behavior is a direct result of groupthink, caused by filter bubbles and echo chambers, and rooted in social learning. Stans protect their celebrity from being cancelled no matter how deeply they have to hurt those that questioned their idol's integrity.

Spotlight

In order to survive being cancelled, having stans is essential. Being a celebrity is less about being in the spotlight, doing interviews, or producing content and more about having the social power of stan Twitter to defend from any questions of wrongdoing. As long as a celebrity's fanbase aligns with the typical Twitter user (young, affluent, liberal), they are able to overcome cancellation. Stans hold so much power on Twitter just through the sheer amount of self-identified stans that exist on the platform. If a stan sees that their celebrity is #cancelled (even for valid reasons), they get their army together to reshape how the celebrity is being portrayed on Twitter through mass tweeting. They attack and silence those that criticize and ensure that there are no lasting consequences for their idol. Though it is nearly impossible to trace every thread of who, when, and why within cancel culture, I attempt to show how it affects different types of celebrities and uncover the complexities of cancelling, stans, and reactionary fan culture in the following sections.

Kendall Jenner, #Cancelled

In April 2017, the carbonated soft beverage company Pepsi ran the "Live for Now" commercial starring model and media personality Kendall Jenner. In the ad, Kendall is mid-photo shoot when she notices protestors marching down a nearby street. All protestors are smiling, laughing, hugging, and holding posters that say, "Join the Conversation!". It is unclear what exactly they are protesting. In the climax of the ad, Kendall reaches the front line of the protest, comes face to face with a police officer, and offers him a can of Pepsi soda. He takes a sip, and everybody cheers as the protest dissolves (Akanbi, 2018). Immediately on Twitter, she was called out for her privileged ignorance and insensitivity toward police brutality against Black Americans. Pepsi was also under attack for appropriating images of the civil rights

movement and Black Lives Matter marches and trivializing the dangerous reality that so many people face when protesting powerful organizations such as the police force in America (Victor, 2017). This utopian representation of a peaceful protest that focused on a white woman's perspective in times of great racial injustice was met with enough backlash that the ad was quite literally cancelled in less than one day. It was removed from circulation on television and on the Pepsi website. In this instance, cancel culture is doing what it intended to do as a form of online social activism to point out the tone-deafness of powerful people and organizations. Pepsi issued an apology and Kendall made a tearful video saying how she did not know it would be like that

(Akanbi, 2018). However,

because Kendall is part of

the infinitely powerful

Kardashian family, whose

lives are portrayed on the

reality television series

Keeping Up with the

Kardashians, she has plenty

of stans. People made jokes

about the ad but did not shame her for her participation; rather, she was framed as a victim of

Pepsi exploiting her and of her team for not doing their research (see Figure 6). Other users

pointed out the flawed logic behind cancelling a celebrity but taking no real action to boycott

(see Figure 7). Others

made light of the ad's

blind spot by



Figure 6: A Kardashian stan comes to Kendall's defense in a Twitter thread in which multiple users are criticizing the celebrity (@Kikiedpt, 2020)



Figure 7: flawed logic of cancel culture (@the_urban13g3nd, 2018)

referencing Martin Luther King Jr. and suggesting that he offer a Pepsi to combat systemic oppression (see Figure 8). Kendall's modeling career did not suffer, she did not lose sponsorship because of the ad, Pepsi sales did not decline, and Twitter quickly moved onto the next person in line to be cancelled. In this case, cancel culture had no real long-lasting effects on Pepsi or on Kendall Jenner because of how



Figure 8: Martin Luther King Jr.'s son comments on the tone-deaf advertisement (@BerniceKing, 2017)

powerful they both are. What is unique about this situation specifically is that there were no overt manifestations of reactionary fan culture. Stans worked their magic by framing Kendall as the victim rather than by going after her critics. The Kardashian family is frequently trending on Twitter for various ignorant actions, and yet their power is undeniable. Kardashian stans ensure that their idols being cancelled has no serious consequences; stans will still support the family no matter what - stans purchase Kardashian products, support their social media, watch their reality TV show, and see everything and everyone else as irrelevant. Kendall is an A-list celebrity, and her powerful status grants her a certain level of immunity to cancel culture. For those at the very top of the celebrity hierarchy, any attention is good attention; it all fuels their influence and power.

James Charles, #Cancelled

Though some celebrities are born into their lifestyle, others create it for themselves. People gain influence on social media by creating a certain persona and self-branding (Senft, 2013). Microcelebrities are successful at doing just that; they are individuals who rise to fame by using social networking sites to sell their brand - themselves - and profit off of fans (Marwick, 2015). What distinguishes microcelebrities from A-list celebrities is that A-listers will continue to be famous on or off social media, but microcelebrities would be completely irrelevant without it. Their primary source of income is not from movies or interviews but rather YouTube videos or Instagram promotions. On Twitter, one of the most popular microcelebrities is beauty vlogger James Charles. James began his career by doing makeup tutorials on YouTube and quickly rose to fame. Less than a year after posting his first tutorial, he became the first male CoverGirl (Feldman, 2016). James has around 17 million followers on YouTube and 5 million on Twitter. His online presence is nearly inescapable: parts of his videos are often made into dramatic jokes or reaction memes and are circulated widely, even among users who do not watch his videos. James frequently portrayed himself as an unproblematic angel who got along with everyone and made money doing what he loved. However, a public feud between James and his mentor Tati Westbrook, another famous Youtuber with over 9 million followers, went viral and started a great deal of tension online. Tati has been a microcelebrity for years longer than James. She has her own supplement brand, and James publicly advertised another, later apologizing over an Instagram story for supporting his mentor's rival. In a bombshell 40-minute video, Tati told the world why she refused to work with James anymore - why he was cancelled - and cited multiple other unethical incidents in his past with which she took personal offense. Immediately, her YouTube video went viral. The debate became a trending discussion that broke from the echo chambers of James/Tati fans and permeated into the larger Twitter society via the "Trending"

tab. Twitter was flooded with debates for both sides, memes about the emotional videos posted by both makeup artists, and most significantly, questions for ex-fans as to why it took a white woman cancelling James to be seen as enough of a reason despite people of color trying to cancel him for years over racist jokes about Ebola. The power of cancel culture is most clear in numbers: James lost 3 million subscribers while Tati gained 4 million (Rodulfo, 2019). James' livelihood was threatened by this major loss; the outing of his behaviors could have led to his brand sponsors (such as CoverGirl) dropping him. What is significant here about cancel culture is that it took a white woman pointing out a laundry list of past behaviors for people to seriously cancel him. Very quickly, Twitter became divided in stans supporting James and people critiquing his stans for defending his behavior. James' subscriber loss was not permanent; his stans framed Tati as an evil woman jealous of James' success and quickly purchased a surplus of his products. Despite his subscriber count plummeting, he retained enough stans to diminish the severity of Tati's

claims by digging into her past as well. The significance of this celebrity cancellation is not necessarily about the celebrity himself, but rather how stans were viewed as a result. Because this



Figure 9: compilation of tweets mocking James Charles stans (@Tenorable, @fuckmansoor, & @jeongjournal, 2020)

topic was so widespread on Twitter and so many users were forced to interact with him being #cancelled whether they intended to or not, stans became a major point of concern. Since then, being a James stan is deeply controversial on Twitter. I would argue that stan Twitter became widely recognized as a result of James being cancelled. Because of how loyal stans are to their flawed idols, they are viewed as dumb young people who lack social or cultural awareness (see Figure 9). Finally, because so many Twitter users' first impressions of stans were when they defended James from the consequences of his behavior, they quickly earned a terrible reputation. James Charles, unlike Kendall Jenner, was not born into celebrity life; he had to create it for himself. His self-made brand makes him appear more accessible than A-list celebrities; he has to constantly maintain a social media presence and interact with fans online in order to stay relevant in celebrity culture. However, his online influence is not purely self-made; James' stans are what keep his career afloat. They see him as relatable and accessible; he often responds to or likes stans' tweets about his videos. For a microcelebrity like James, the power of stans is what buffers one from being cancelled and facing serious professional losses. However, because stans do incredible amounts of work to make their idol's flaws seem less troublesome, they are often seen as willfully ignorant for constantly engaging in this parasocial relationship that offers them so little in return.

Roseanne Barr, #Cancelled

For those that have the loyal support of stans, being cancelled is only a minor threat. For those that do not, however, being cancelled results in serious loss and tangible consequences (Guerrero-Pico, 2017). Roseanne Barr, producer and main character of the sitcom *Roseanne*, saw massive success after her show returned in March of 2018 after a two-decade-long break from network television ABC (*Roseanne* originally ran from 1988-1997). The show quickly received

extremely high ratings and appealed to a massive audience by being lighthearted, realistic, and relatable to working-class Americans and their values. Even President Trump reached out to Roseanne to congratulate her on the show's success (Haberman & Healy, 2018). This set the tone for how Roseanne was viewed on Twitter as a conservative, bigoted individual who was guilty for even associating with Trump, regardless of whether she did anything outwardly immoral.

Roseanne on Twitter was nothing like the mother she portrayed in her sitcom. In May of 2018, she went on a racist Twitter rant comparing former Obama advisor Valerie Jarrett to an ape (Bradley, 2018). The platform was flooded with former *Roseanne* fans calling her out for her bigoted remarks, and she was effectively #cancelled socially. Professionally, as well, she suffered because of her shameless racism and how her audience reacted. Hours later, ABC cancelled *Roseanne*, saying that her remarks were "abhorrent and inconsistent with the network's values". (Koblin, 2018). Just a few months later in October, ABC premiered a spinoff series *The Conners* which portrayed her family as coping with her death and kept the same plot lines as *Roseanne* (Keveney, 2019). Cancelling Roseanne quite literally made her irrelevant, cut her out of her own sitcom family, and took away her influence. In this situation, cancel culture only worked because of the lack of support for Roseanne.

Roseanne had no stans; given that Twitter users are mostly liberal young people, her alignment with Trump only fueled most users' hatred for her. Nobody was defending her which is unusual considering most celebrities are stanned. I think this is particularly interesting because cancel culture is so focused on digging up people's past, but in this case, Roseanne's past as a left-wing presidential candidate did not fit the traditional #cancelled narrative of her being bigoted and problematic (Hughes, 2012). In this case, cancel culture clearly brought about

meaningful change by taking away her platform as a weekly show on network television. What is complex about this situation is how Twitter users viewed her as problematic long before she ever made those racist tweets; being supported by Trump is not beneficial to most mainstream entertainment celebrities with a majority young liberal following. Given that Twitter presents celebrities as commodities, she was viewed as this one-sided, narrow-minded celebrity from the second Trump congratulated her. In most cases of cancellation, people dig up the past in order to create a longer list of reasons why to cancel. However, in this case, Roseanne's liberal past did not align with her current presentation and thus was completely irrelevant and never mentioned. Paradoxically, bringing up a celebrity's past fuels cancel culture only if their behaviors can be seen negatively; any past good deeds that may be the celebrity's saving grace are ignored completely. This speaks to the increasing polarization on Twitter and how users interact with information that they do not immediately agree with. Any content that does not align with the dominant cancelling ideology is thrown to the side and ignored; the only content that is widely circulated is that which has surface-level relevance.

Reactionary Fan Culture

Groupthink is a dangerous manifestation of stan Twitter identification. Because of the unhealthy loyal nature of stans, anyone that creates friction or debate about a celebrity must face the wrath of angry stans with a mob mentality. Though stans are essential in surviving cancel culture, the way they go about combatting critique of their idols is just as problematic as that which warrants cancellation. Anyone who has the potential to negatively comment on their stanned celebrity is at risk of facing reactionary fan culture. For example, pop star Ariana Grande's ex-boyfriend Pete Davidson posted about how he was struggling with mental health issues after their breakup (Wallis, 2018). Though Pete is a professional comedian on *Saturday*

Night Live, his suicidal post was no joke. Despite the flood of support in his comments from his own fans, Arianators taunted him for being heartbroken and bullied him to the point that he deleted all social media (see Figure 10). The ill-wishes continue to this day, and stans normalize bullying and baseless cancelling.



Figure 10: compilation of tweets in response to Ariana stans bullying Pete (@calvinstowell & @YeBoiAron, 2018)

Every other stan is aggressive about their adoration of their idol, and because of online social learning, new stans behave aggressively too. Most shockingly, after the death of a celebrity is posted on Twitter, stans often flood the comments, saying that maybe if the dead celebrity stanned another celebrity (the stans' idol), their life would not have ended (see Figure 11). Because of the wild emotional abuse that stans commit against other Twitter users, they are never taken seriously and the entirety of stan Twitter is viewed as crazy fans who are mentally unstable. Additionally, some stans have noted how toxic this particular ingroup has become by



Figure 11: critique of stans' insensitivity (@neomucolorful, 2019)

partaking in dysfunctional groupthink, normalizing bullying, and spreading misinformation. They could offer support for others, create a positive group dynamic, and be a place of inclusivity, and yet, the rush of cancelling others is too much to give up. Despite these concerns about the group's inner dynamics, stan Twitter remains largely untouched and continues to function with a mob mentality. Because of this emotional volatility that is so commonly associated with stan Twitter, and because of how stans have appropriated cancel culture to fit their narrative, serious social justice issues are edged out of the discussion around #cancelled and petty celebrity cancellation becomes what is most well-known.

Humorous Connotations

Because cancel culture is frequently misconstrued by stans' reactionary fan culture - and because most people see reactionary fan culture when they think they're seeing true cancel culture - it has become a joke in certain echo chambers. Though cancel culture does have significant power when done rationally and with the goals of educating others and putting a stop to bigoted behavior, it is so often appropriated by those who have ill intentions, and it has lost its power to many Twitter users. Nowadays, celebrities are frivolously cancelled for cringe-worthy publicity stunts, friends are cancelled for bad jokes, everyone and anyone gets cancelled



Figure 12: jokes about getting cancelled (@allergic_2_sex & @Skoog, 2019)

for some reason at some point in their social media career (see Figure 12 and Figure 13). Rarely is #cancelled taken seriously on Twitter anymore because of the ways in which stan Twitter has taken the term and made it the laughingstock of

trends. Rarely is it a trend non-stan Twitter users want to partake in.

Conclusion

By tracing the history and overlap between cancel culture and stan Twitter, and by spotlighting a few examples of different types of celebrities, stans, and cancellations, I hope to have shown how complex this new vein of cancel culture truly is. Cancelling is not just a petty way of censoring people; it has an incredibly intricate behind-the-scenes power dynamic. Twitter is a digital democracy: any regular user can interact with any verified user (celebrities, politicians, etc.) and create a direct line of contact between seemingly powerless and powerful people. This disrupts the traditional hierarchy of influence; ordinary users create techniques to act in solidarity with one another and challenge those in higher authority or more influential positions. Cancel culture's original motive was to remove abusive individuals from their



Figure 13: joking gif of Oprah's giveaways on her show (@_JesuisChrisXX, 2020)

powerful positions and boycott any company or other influential person who stood for such problematic behavior. Despite these roots in social justice activism, the current connotations of cancel culture are overwhelmingly negative. It has been robbed of its original intent and appropriated by users who abuse cancel culture to further their own agendas. Stan Twitter saw the original impact that cancel culture had, noticed how it could negatively affect their idols, and decided to twist cancel culture into something incredibly vicious and appalling. Reactionary fan culture is this infected branch of cancel culture created by stans, but it has reshaped how all of cancel culture is discussed. Rarely are stans talked about when analyzing the bullying, stalking, harassing, and censoring that is so common in cancel culture nowadays; stans are so often brushed off as crazy fans who suffer from groupthink and whose priorities are out of line. However, modern cancel culture would not be as unhealthy as it is without stans and their visceral reactionary fan culture when faced with criticism of their idols.

Although it appears as if individual Twitter users are in control over what type of content appears on their timelines, they may be unaware of how they are being socialized to accept an incredibly unhealthy norm. Making light of cancel culture is common across many social circles on Twitter because of how ridiculous the movement has become and how hyper focused some users are on finding the skeletons in everyone else's closets. However, due to how common cancel culture is and how rarely it is taken seriously, it no longer has a lasting impact on celebrities. They can easily hide the scarlet letter of cancellation by harnessing the power their stans have in reshaping what appears on most users' Twitter timelines. People who abuse their power are able to continue making money and engaging with others on the platform; cancelling is a witch hunt that rarely works anymore. The movement has lost nearly all sense of meaning, though it is normalizing polarization. The voices that need to be amplified are being diminished;

people who do not agree with the dominant ideology are seen as disposable, and meaningful conversations are rarely had.

These phenomena have solidified the normalization of polarized content. The narrow niches of Twitter have become generalizable, as Black Twitter's cancel culture has become diluted as a direct result of stan Twitter misusing the phrase. So many critics of cancel culture see it as a flawed system of censorship in which there is no trial by jury, no innocence until proven guilty, and no chance of redemption for those that have been cancelled, but this is only the case for those few people who have no stans to reshape the dominant narrative about them on Twitter. It is easy to brush this off as a distorted social media space or an unusual occurrence on the fringe of broader American society, but because so many Twitter users are getting their news exclusively from the site (Aslam, 2020), these phenomena have dangerous real-world, widespread implications. Twitter is so often a site of social and political activism (Tufekci, 2016), but polarization is becoming the norm for so many users due to filter bubbles and echo chambers. It is deeply troubling to note how the narrative around activist content is being rewritten. Complex issues are so often simplified and aligned with one specific ideology: though grounded in social justice, cancel culture has lost its significance and is frequently disregarded as a petty way to get rid of anyone who does not align perfectly with one ideology. The problem with this oversimplification of ideas is that it feeds into media manipulation and social polarization.

Because of how people easily align with widely supported content, it is normal to cast away those that bring up alternative viewpoints. It may seem that with all the information available at our fingertips, there should be no reason for this willful ignorance towards conflicting opinions, and yet, so many Twitter users see this polarization as completely normal.

It is clear how people in power can benefit from this polarization if they have enough supporters to come to their defense. Stan Twitter is not the only circle that harasses users whose ideas conflict with their own: the majority of President Trump's tweets are not about political action, but rather about and name-calling his opponents, tearing down the Democratic party, and furthering his own agenda. He does not need stans to go to war for him online when he has supporters in the government who will easily fall in line.

The fact that Trump was a reality television star shows how significant and far-reaching celebrity life has become. No longer is celebrity gossip contained on television; it has permeated nearly every aspect of American life and is now deeply ingrained in politics as well as social media. Unfortunately, polarization of all sorts is now completely normal, as most Twitter users are socialized to see one type of information, and anyone who speaks up against this divided nature or tries to share a different perspective is portrayed as a fool who feeds on fake news. Of course, freedom of speech has not disappeared, but having one's voice heard is nearly impossible if it does not align with the dominant ideology. Future studies should analyze why cancel culture may be viewed as democratic censorship and how free speech complicates the effects of cancel culture. Because I am situated on the outer circles of stan Twitter with access to their more public group dynamics, it would be beneficial to have future studies explore deeply the inner workings of the group, specifically how the group may be incredibly supportive of its own members or how the group deals with conflicting ideologies among members.

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