

EXPLORING CANCEL CULTURE
AND THE DISTRUST OF YOUTUBE INFLUENCERS

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by

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AND THE DISTRUST OF YOUTUBE INFLUENCERS

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ABSTRACT

YouTube is the third most visited website in the world after Google and Facebook, and the second most visited social media platform after Facebook (Khan, 2017). As over 90% of 18- to 24-year-old U.S. American internet users use YouTube (Chen, 2020), this study tackles how individuals between in this age group view their role within cancel culture, specifically on the YouTube platform. A qualitative approach, collecting data from 5 focus groups, allowed for points on cancel culture and the James Charles and Tati Westbrook case to surface. Findings showed that many participants don't believe that cancel culture is a beneficial aspect of the culture on the platform but believe that it can be necessary in some cases. Participants elaborated on their own experiences on YouTube, explaining their thoughts and beliefs as it came to cancel culture on the platform. This study attempts to fulfill a literature gap due to no clear prior research on cancel culture. The research focuses on the audience role and their effect on cancel culture in the YouTube space.

Keywords: YouTube, cancel culture, James Charles, Tati Westbrook

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

We live in a constantly connected world, and YouTube is part of that which connects us. YouTube is the third most visited website in the world after Google and Facebook, and the second most visited social media platform after Facebook (Khan, 2017). Specifically, on YouTube, people go to the platform for everything from how to change the oil in their car to how to make an easy, healthy dinner (Webwise, 2020). Among university students, research shows that there are two main motivations for YouTube use: information and learning and entertainment (Klobas, McGill, Moghavvemi & Paramanathan, 2018).

Beyond the mere presence of videos is a strong community of YouTube creators and their audience (Rotman & Preece, 2010). In a study done by Rotman & Preece (2010), they found that users “conveyed the idea that a community is a complex structure that entails sociability: not just one-on-one, singular connections, rather a hub of interactions in which a user communicates with another or with several other users ” (Rotman & Preece, 2010, p. 324). Not only do creators interact with one another, but they also interact with users as well (Rotman & Preece, 2010). The ability to communicate in comment sections makes audiences feel more connected to the influencers on YouTube (Rotman & Preece, 2010). Creators directly talk to their audience, telling them secrets about their life and sharing everyday moments through video, which makes this platform unique. In turn, the audiences are what fuel the YouTube community. Without the audience, there is no community and the participatory actions done by this audience is the most important factor in the existence of a community (Rotman & Preece, 2010). One of the ways that audiences shape the community is through their actions, deciding who they do and who they do not support.

YouTube is not without conflict. Sometimes, that conflict occurs between content creators. YouTube controversy is where “cancel culture” lives within this social media platform. Some believe that “cancel culture” was born on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2008). Cancel Culture, also known as call-out culture, is a form of boycott defined by when someone “has shared a questionable opinion, or again, has had problematic behavior called out on social media. That person is then ‘canceled,’ which essentially means they’re boycotted by a large number of people, sometimes leading to massive declines in the person’s fanbase and career” (Mahan, 2019, p. 1).

Amid and after YouTube controversy, users will often respond to the drama and partake by posting their thoughts in comments, other social media platforms and sometimes unsubscribing from the “opposing” side. Many cancelations have had more intense consequences, such as being terminated from a job or separation from brand promotion (Greenspan, 2020). The effects of cancel culture have not yet been thoroughly studied.

Rationale for Study

By analyzing audience participation in cancel culture on YouTube through the lenses of Social Movement Theory and Collective Action, this research will add to current literature on the topic and will practically benefit the marketing industry. “Social movements are initiated by a group of actors who are the primary victims of a decision, action, or policy that drive them to protest and hold demonstrations” (Isa & Himelboim, 2018, p. 2). Collective action assists in how social movements can be operated (Isa & Himelboim, 2018). Understanding this cancel culture helps not only influencers, but marketers be more well-informed about navigation cancellation, or perhaps avoiding it altogether. If cancellation is avoided, it will create more trust with your audience and protect the overall reputation of the company.

Purpose of Study

This exploratory qualitative, phenomenological study will utilize focus groups to explore how people react to controversy on YouTube space, with an emphasis on the cancel culture phenomena. Specifically, the goal is to understand how people rationalize the motivation to cancel, or unfollow, certain people on YouTube. For this thesis, this topic will be studied surrounding the conflict between James Charles and Tati Westbrook, beauty influencers on YouTube who made videos exposing one another's "wrongdoings" in 2019 resulting in a loss of millions of followers. Ultimately, this study will answer the research question: *Considering the lenses of Social Movement Theory and Collective Action, what roles do audience members have in YouTube cancel culture?*

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Definition and Origins of Cancel Culture

“Cancel culture” is a phenomenon that is prevalent in the online community. The concept of “canceling,” has caught traction in the past ten years due to conversations prompted by movements that require and demand more accountability from public figures, such as the #MeToo movement which began in 2006 (Gill & Rahman-Jones, 2020). The #MeToo movement encouraged women to speak out about their experiences with sexual violence. This movement gained traction by keeping men high in power in politics and entertainment accountable for their actions (Greenspan, 2020). This culture shows how fast content can spread through digital platforms, and how it can produce large-scale responses to acts that are perceived as problematic (Ng, 2020). Cancel culture usually involves groups that were previously silenced making a dent, perhaps small, in the power of people who are privileged by race, gender, class, etc. (Butler, 2018).

The idea of canceling has been around for over a decade, but the term “cancel culture” has only come to be since 2017, after the idea of “canceling” celebrities and politicians for moral violations and statements became popular (Greenspan, 2020). The phrase “cancel culture” was born and saw tremendous growth in 2017. Insider saw less than 100 tweets and threads with the phrase “cancel culture” before 2018 (Greenspan, 2020).

To “cancel” is more than just unfollowing an influencer, politician, or celebrity, but making it a point to discourage a following for what this person is known for, and joining a movement publicly ridicule this person. To cancel someone publicly requires announcing the act, which leads to the attention of the target. Oftentimes the goal of canceling someone, is so that the person loses “cultural cachet” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Although, the target of cancelation

becomes a high point of attention to the audience and sometimes mainstream media, the goal is to rid the target of a large following, respect and attention. Lisa Nakamura, a professor in the Department of American Cultures at the University of Michigan, talks about this attention deprivation by saying, “People talk about the attention economy — when you deprive someone of your attention, you’re depriving them of a livelihood” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Culture, by definition, “is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people (Zimmermann, 2017). The development of social media, smart technology and viral content led to an internet culture. Internet culture cannot be defined in a singular sense, as each corner of the internet has its own unique culture (Allebach, 2019). YouTube, for example, has its own practices and commonalities. And people all over the web have developed an understanding and practice of “canceling.” There were so many “cancelations” that it became more than an action, it became a movement (Greenspan, 2020). The common practice led to the phrase, “cancel culture.”

Cancel culture occurs on social media platforms such as YouTube and affects influencers in particular. An influencer, defined as someone who has power to influence the purchasing decisions of someone because of their authority, knowledge, or relationship with their audience (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020), typically has a following in a niche category, such as beauty or gaming. Influencers can grow a large following which gains them enough popularity to be subject to this culture online (Dodgson, 2019). Canceling can destroy their online presence. The anonymity of the web fosters the incivility of user comments (Ernst et al, 2017), and thousands to millions of people will leave angry comments on social media, YouTube videos and unsubscribe and unfollow (Dodgson, 2019), rendering them canceled.

Understanding the YouTube Community

Cancel culture also affects influencers on social media platforms such as YouTube. Since its launch in 2005 (Chaffey, 2020), YouTube has grown into a large online community. YouTube releases videos online free of charge for anyone to access. According to YouTube, their mission statement is to “give everyone a voice and show them the world.” Videos can be uploaded by registered users which include institutional content providers (educational institutions, media firms, musicians, gamers, etc.), professional “vloggers” who earn their income from the videos they upload on their YouTube channels, and other individual users. The platform’s social capabilities revolve around features that allow users to follow selected content creators and watch content in a sequence that brings a new video up automatically at the end of the currently viewed video or by viewing the related videos to the side. YouTube’s algorithm determines what related videos to display based on the audience’s appeal to other similar videos - based on viewership, engagement by liking or commenting, etc. (Klobas, McGill, Moghavvemi & Paramanathan, 2018). As of 2020, YouTube has over three billion active social media users (Chaffey, 2020). Approximately two-and-a-half billion of those users are active on Facebook and two billion of those are active on YouTube. Every day, users watch over a billion hours of videos on YouTube and there are more than 500 hours of video uploaded to YouTube each day (Mohsin, 2020). Although YouTube is the second most visited social media platform, it has a unique structure in comparison to other popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. The video content on YouTube is what drives communication and social connection, unlike other websites where social networking is founded in individual profiles, friending, and following (Burgess & Green, 2008). YouTube’s purpose and design lends itself to individual participation, but collaboration among creators was naturally formed within the community.

Social relationships on YouTube can form around the video content, with viewing patterns and the preferences of users that drive connections (Khan & Vong, 2014). The social capital on YouTube can be defined by the number of followers or subscribers and number of views a user receives. When users log onto the platform, they see a list of videos recommended to them. As they engage more with YouTube and its creators, they “subscribe” to certain people that create content that interests them. They often become very interested in this person’s personal life beyond their YouTube content (Khan & Vong, 2014).

Within this “community” there are smaller communities, with a variety of different topics and interests that can be shared (Rotman & Preece, 2010). Engaged users can adjust the YouTube experience to their interests and become attached to certain YouTube creators that develop high quality video content for what they are interested in. There is content that caters itself to everyone that happens upon the site. There is a large appeal to the YouTube platform, but the motivations for user participation are relatively understudied (Khan, 2017). Engaged users are what fuel the community. They shape, argue and negotiate the ever-changing culture on the platform.

On YouTube, many influencers have experienced being “canceled.” Psychologist Pamela Paresky stated that “the human brain’s concept of community makes us start to see strangers on the internet like neighbors, and if we think they do something we think is wrong, we don’t like to associate with them anymore (Dodgson, 2019). YouTube viewers will see a statement or action as a moral violation and create outrage in the YouTube community. This results in thousands or millions of audience members leaving hateful comments on YouTube videos, social media pages, and unfollowing and unsubscribing (Dodgson, 2019).

Social Movement Theory and Collective Action

New social movement theory began in the 1960s, with a burst of activity in Europe and the United States. Protests were looked at as improving political benefit and needed for a healthy democracy. Movements such as the student movement, the civil rights movement and the peace movement were flourishing (Klandermans & Stekelenburg, 2009). Opinions on collective action and protest changed from viewing them as “irrational” outbursts to movements with goals, values, and rational strategy for change.

Researcher Joseph Ambrose Banks, in his monography, *The Sociology of Social Movements*, broke away from the structural and functional ways of looking at social movements and viewed them as catalysts to create social change (Millward & Takhar, 2019). Melucci, a leading new social movement theorist, also discusses how these movements have shifted from the focus of economic resources and needs for survival to involving more cultural factors and social relations (Castells, 1997), being of the first to form the idea of the new social movement theory. These movements are a major arena for collective action. The new social movement set of ideas was defined and characterized by Castells, Habermas, Melucci, Offee, and Touraine. In new social movements, activists are seeking change by lobbying social spheres of society (Millward & Takhar, 2019).

In more recent social movements, collective action is taken to reach a common goal. Herbert Blumberg changes the views of collective action, by looking at it as less of a “mob” and instead, “something that should be understood as something purposive, meaningful and something creative” (Millward & Takhar, 2019). Without collective action, there would be no social movement. Cancel culture can be seen today as a new form of collective action that falls under the social movement theory umbrella.

The development of the internet and social media provided a new site for collective action and social movement to unfold. Looking to the online space, collective action started to begin first on email (Gurak, 1999). For example, in 1990, software company Lotus, and credit bureau Equifax procured names, addresses and the purchasing behavior of over 100 million Americans (Gurak, 1999). In response to these actions, around 30,000 consumers organized collective action in a protest through email and online messaging boards. This led to release of the database being halted by 1991.

There has been an increasing usage of social media platforms in social movements since the late 2000s (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Social media sites, like YouTube have arguably given people a voice in social movements that would otherwise not be heard (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Within social media, according to Isa & Himelboim (2018), the characteristics of social movements have been shaped, making it more informal, accessible, and virtual. Individuals can bypass media gatekeepers and government censorships to have their voice immediately heard by certain groups, activists, and the public. This informal nature of social media has opened the opportunity for what they define as “non-elite” actors to participate in an active role from anywhere in the world at any time. “Elite” actors refer to those who have a lot of power to make change and have their voices heard with ease including – government officials, opinion leaders, writers of the news and more. “Non-elites” refers to those not in the higher groups, and these “non-elites” are the ones fueling the conversation online. But social media enables elite and non-elite actors to add value to the movement without the worries of state regulations and restrictions. But not all who act in social movements through social media are heard by all. Some of the actors become more influential as their posts gain more traction and get more shares and engagement than others.

Seigel (2009) looks at motivations for participation in collective action and introduces a model of aggregate behavior in his study on social networks and social movements. The model relies on two aspects: “One, individuals have varied motivations to participate. Two, individuals adjust their desires to participate over time, in response to the behavior of those to whom they are connected” (Seigel, 2009, p. 125). Seigel (2009) concludes that because participation is not costly, and if they have a motivation to participate, they will. Also, there is almost always more participation in collective action when a form of a network is present, than when none is, and never less (Seigel, 2009). This study shows that social networks are catalysts for movement.

Meek (2011) looks specifically at mobilization on YouTube. Meek (2011) stresses that as connections form, nationality and location start to become irrelevant, and awareness can spread like wildfire. In her study of YouTube participation as it relates to the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, where the army has conducted a campaign of terror on Uganda civilians (Meek, 2011), she found that the usage of YouTube in social movements is different from previous social movements with communication media. YouTube has a novel form of participation, that comes in the form of user generated video content which leads to a continuation of relatable conversation. (Meek, 2011). Participants can plug into the conversation even if they are across the globe and not physically present.

Isa and Himmelboim (2018) saw how traditional social movement studies found that social movements are benefitted by “spillover effects,” a phenomenon where social movements collaborate to expand their reach and get their publics in motion. Isa & Himmelboim (2018) found that on Twitter, activists use that strategy using the hashtags of other movements. The study finds that the strategy is successful in reaching out beyond community boundaries.

Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy & English (2013) agree with Isa & Himelboim (2018) in saying the wide availability and easy access to online media has influenced the ways that teens, specifically, build and maintain social networks, additionally how they consume and share information. Through an online survey, they found that YouTube was the most popular social networking site among youth, followed by Facebook and Twitter (Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy & English, 2013). Also, the positive correlation between the amount of time spent on YouTube and intention to participate in a collective action, in the form of “flash mobs,” in the future is significant. Flash mobs are defined as “a gathering of people who assemble in a public place, carry out a brief predetermined public performance, and then quickly disperse” (Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy & English, 2013, p. 884). In this study, they point out how “flash mobs” can range from a protest to gatherings to bring attention to social good. This participation possibly indicates a YouTube-amplified media effect where teens are seeing behaviors and are then more likely to engage in them (Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy & English, 2013).

In a study by Milan (2015), she states that “by providing always-on platforms in which interactions are practiced on a recurring basis, they amplify the ‘interactive and shared’ properties of collective action” (Milan, 2015, p. 7). She coins the term “cloud protesting” which claims to be able to make sense of collective action online. The cloud takes on two meanings: “first, it designates a digital imagined space where soft resources vital to collective action are stowed and experienced by participants; secondly, it stays as a metaphor for a way of connecting individuals in an instance of collective action which is specific to the age of social media” (Milan, 2015, p. 7). She concludes that this “cloud protesting” has paved the way to more participant visibility and supplemented the identity of social movement (Milan, 2015).

From the copious amounts of research on social movements, we see that social media has accelerated the processing and spread of information. While these studies analyze the result that social media has on protests, there is a gap between social movements and collective action that originate and occur exclusively online. Social movement theory is addressed in this study to examine the impact of the theory as it relates to cancel culture as a form of collective action on the YouTube community. This study explores what determines the cancelation of a YouTuber and how the formation of online protest begins on the platform and aims to further develop Social movement theory by adding a specific element to it.

Social Movement and YouTube Controversy

Online, fans have become like “watchdogs” for popular YouTube creators, or YouTubers, by keeping them accountable for their actions and calling them out on problematic choices. Digital intimacy tends to outshine real-world intimacy, because those participating in the dialogue online are “imaginatively interpellated” each time the YouTuber turns on the camera and begins to speak (Berryman & Kavka, 2018).

But this trust is formed not through a continued perception of a perfect life on the platform, but through vulnerability and honesty with their audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2018). The community grows stronger when trust and authenticity with YouTubers grows stronger. The “personal” and “real” videos are the ones that lead to comments of support and assurance that viewers are taking comfort from the video (Berryman & Kavka, 2018).

But on the platform, controversy can grow from racial slurs from a YouTuber or even from inauthentic product promotion, and it stems from these YouTube creators consistently and constantly. Laura Lee, a beauty influencer on YouTube, had a tweet from 2012 resurface in 2018. The tweet reads, “Tip for all black people if you pull ur pants up you can run from the

police faster.” Following this event, Laura Lee deactivated her Twitter account. Over the next thirty days, she had lost over 500,000 subscribers on YouTube. Along with a loss of followers, Ulta, Morphe and ColourPop are among a few of the makeup brands that stopped selling Laura Lee’s makeup line (Santos, 2018).

Casey Neistat, a popular YouTube “vlogger,” stated that it is important for content creators on YouTube to be honest with your viewers. “If the content is good, ad or not it’s usually appreciated, but transparency is very important when communicating with an audience that signed up for you, not the ads,” Neistat said (Alvarez, 2017). Closely following this statement, Casey Neistat received backlash for a video he uploaded to his channel titled, “FIRST DAY OF SUMMER,” which included a paid promotion for Samsung (Neistat, 2017). There was no sign of it being an advertisement, except for a message at the end that read, “This video was filmed entirely on the Galaxy S8. Every single shot. No color correction #NoFilter.” His audience was unaware of his relationship with the brand, and the ad not appearing till the end made his audience feel as though they were “tricked” into watching a commercial (Alvarez, 2017).

Controversy stems from not only YouTube creators, but from other big players entering the platform as well (Burgess & Green, 2008). But in this thesis, I will be focusing on the controversy that arises from YouTube creators specifically and how people react to their actions. Leading users on the YouTube platform use their insider knowledge in attempt to influence the culture of this social media platform. This kind of engagement in YouTube as a “communicative space and community” that produces YouTube as a space for “situated creativity and reflexivity.” Both characteristics that are necessary preconditions for user-led innovation and collective action and agency (Burgess & Green, 2008). Active and engaged users

defending, shaping, and contesting the culture of YouTube is an ordinary part of participation in the space.

YouTube users also perceived conflict as an “annoying side effect” of freedom of speech. Users had reported that “reduced awareness of others’ feelings and the safety of hurting others on YouTube, which lacks the repercussions usually attached to aggressive behavior, were important reasons for their use of conflictual talk (Bou-Franch & Blitvich, 2014). Burgess & Green (2008) argues that although there are internal conflicts, the YouTube community has a unique environment where new literacies, new cultural forms and social practices were originated, adopted, and retained. “In order to operate effectively as a participant in the YouTube community, it is not possible to simply import learned conventions for creative practice, entertainment, or audience-building, from elsewhere” (Burgess & Green, 2008, p. 3)

Cancel Culture Social Movement on YouTube: The Case Study of James Charles and Tati Westbrook

A specific incident arguably highlighted the actions and implications surrounding cancel culture on YouTube. James Charles, a beauty vlogger, experienced a quick rise to fame after starting his YouTube channel in 2015. Before the incident, at one point in 2019, he had over 16 million subscribers on YouTube. He became the first male spokesperson for CoverGirl at 16-years-old and appeared at his first Met Gala in 2019 (Scott, 2019). Tati Westbrook, then a 37-year-old YouTuber, started her career on the platform in 2010 under the username “GlamLifeGuru,” later changing it to “Tati” (Boan, 2019). Westbrook has become known for her detailed makeup and skincare product reviews, tutorials, shopping hauls and more. She has become one of the most popular beauty vloggers on YouTube, with over five million subscribers on the platform (Boan, 2019).

Tati Westbrook had discovered James Charles, and being impressed by his makeup talents, asked him to do her makeup for her wedding in early 2017. Shortly after, Westbrook and Charles uploaded their first joint YouTube video. In the video, she calls James a “wonderful friend” (Westbrook, 2017). A strong relationship began to form between them and developed over the next two years. They always spoke very highly of each other, and James considered Tati a sort of motherly figure (Boan, 2019).

In 2019, James Charles posted an advertisement for Sugar Bear Hair on his Instagram story. Sugar Bear Hair is a supplement claiming to help with hair growth (Kesslen, 2019). This created tension as Sugar Bear Hair and Westbrook’s company, Halo Beauty, were involved in a rivalry. Charles was said to have posted the advertisement in exchange for more exclusive passes to Coachella 2019, a popular music and arts festival (Dodgson, 2019).

Following Charles’ post, Westbrook shared her grievances about this “betrayal” by uploading a 40-minute video, titled “Bye Sister,” which detailed how Charles was “backstabbing and manipulative” (Live Archive, 2019). The video title was a reference to James as he calls his fan base “sisters” (Alexander, 2019). In addition to sharing her feelings on YouTube about Charles’ betrayal, she also made allegations that he behaved inappropriately around straight men. Westbrook claimed that at a dinner with her family, Charles behaved inappropriately with a waiter, “talking in detail about things you wanted to do to the waiter. And when I said, 'James, he's straight.' Your response was, 'Doesn't matter, I'm a celebrity'” (Live Archive, 2019). Furthermore, Westbrook discouraged his young audience following, adding that “[h]is behaviour online is what they are seeing and emulating to be successful and adored by the masses. Everything is oversexualized, and that’s the huge underlayer to this that I’ve finally had enough,” (Live Archive, 2019). Westbrook’s video was followed by others who shared their own claims

and videos about Charles' actions, which included men that were alleged to have been in contact with him in the past (Dodgson, 2019). He was called "a danger to society" and a "predator" (Dodgson, 2019). Charles' YouTube subscriber following decreased by about four million in a matter of four days, while Westbrook gained over four million subscribers in the same amount of time (Dodgson, 2019).

The Current Study

The review of literature has found that social movements and collective action can be seen nowadays as a benefit for change, but on the other hand, influencers and others have stated that cancel culture lacks a space for growth (Dodgson, 2019). This study will review how cancel culture plays a part as a form of collective action online. This concept of cancel culture and collective action has not yet been thoroughly studied, especially on YouTube. It's important to be knowledgeable of this concept for appropriate partnership with influencers and also how it can affect a brand. This thesis will study the case of James Charles and Tati Westbrook to address the following research question:

RQ1: Considering the lenses of Social Movement Theory and Collective Action, what roles do audience members have in YouTube cancel culture?

Chapter 3: METHOD

Sampling

From February to April 2021, college and university students between 18 and 24 years of age were recruited, as over 90% of 18- to 24- year-old U.S. American internet users use YouTube (Chen, 2020). Since most college aged students are the most active age group on the platform (Clement, 2020), it made them the ideal age group for this study on cancel culture.

I used convenience and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a type of convenience sampling (Glen, 2014). In snowball sampling, potential subjects are identified in the population. Those subjects are then asked to recruit others who might qualify for the study. This process continues until the needed sample size is found. This method was appropriate because it allowed for the study to take place where otherwise it may be impossible because of a lack of participants.

I used a recruitment advertisement via social media and email to connect with people about their engagement on YouTube and their knowledge of cancel culture. Respondents who were between 18 and 24 years of age, who were current YouTube users, reported watching YouTube at least once a week, had knowledge about the James Charles and Tati Westbrook case, and were willing to participate in my focus groups were recruited. The goal was to recruit 4-6 people for four focus groups. If they were outside the age group, did not have knowledge of the subject, or both, they were excluded from the study.

Methods Scheme

I utilized semi-structured, focus groups to examine how people who actively engage on social media reacted to controversy on the YouTube platform. Lindlof & Taylor (2010) argue that focus groups will consist of two different types of interactions – complementary and

argumentative. Complementary interactions appear when there is a consensus between people in the group. Argumentative interactions are present when opposing interactions and opinions occur, which can lead to more in-depth insight (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Kitzinger (1994, 1995) argues that interaction is the main feature of focus groups because the interaction between participants brings to light their view of the world, the language that they use about an issue and their values about certain issues. Interaction in focus groups allows participants to ask each other questions and reevaluate their own understanding of their experiences (Gibbs, 1997).

Another large benefit is that focus groups elicit information in a way that allows researchers to figure out why an issue can be important, and what is important about it. As a result, the gap between what people say and what they do can be better understood (Gibbs, 1997). If there are many understandings and meanings revealed by participants in focus groups, multiple explanations of their behavior and attitudes will be more readily communicated (Gibbs, 1997). I chose to use focus groups to gain insights and knowledge on the aspects that lead to the cancelation of YouTube creators through the “group effect” which Lindlof & Taylor (2010) describe as a method that draws upon shared conversation and directed discussion. I chose to utilize focus groups over interviews because in-depth interviews do not have the same effect as group interaction (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010).

I specifically looked at how people rationalize their distrust with influencers that led to a “cancelation” and public shaming through YouTube influencers (see Appendix 1 for Interview Schedule). Powell et al. (1996) defines focus groups as “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Gibbs, 1997).

The first few questions determined the depth of knowledge of cancel culture in the group. The next group of questions leaned into the personal experiences that people had on the platform after the James Charles and Tati Westbrook scandal. The goal of these specific questions and order was to determine a YouTuber user's role in cancel culture.

To get the most information from my focus groups, I recorded the audio from each session on my laptop, in which I am the only user and is password secured. The sessions were transcribed, and the transcriptions were de-identified so that names and other identifying information were not included in the final thesis.

Methods procedure

I held hour-long focus groups each where I, who acted as the moderator, engaged participants in a series of questions that explored topics that included what makes an influencer trustworthy, why they think popular YouTube creators should be canceled, and if they think that those who are canceled can recover from their controversial actions. To accommodate for the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing procedures (CDC, 2020) required that I conducted focus groups over Zoom.

In conducting the focus groups, the moderator's role is quite demanding and has its challenges. They need to have great interpersonal skills and personal qualities, be good listeners, non-judgmental and flexible. These qualities are necessary to promote the participants' trust in the researcher/moderator and will increase the probability of a productive and open dialogue (Gibbs, 1997).

Data analysis

To study the rich data that comes from focus groups, I applied a qualitative framework analysis. The advantage of using this approach is that it gave a clear series of steps to manage the

vast amount of complicated qualitative data much more easily (Rabiee, 2004). Another characteristic of framework analysis is although it uses a thematic approach, it lets themes develop from the research questions as well as from the narratives of the focus group participants (Rabiee, 2004). A common theme in social movement theory is the presence of collective identity and the motivations to participate as a group (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2011). As I conducted focus groups, I looked specifically for the presence of these themes. This specific form of data analysis will help me to look at the personal narratives of my participants through my questions to see why people are continually contributing to the concept of cancel culture.

It is important that after each focus group was recorded, it was also transcribed. Analyzing each focus group as soon as I could after it is complete made the analyzing easier at the end. When it came to focus groups, I analyzed the “how” and “what” of participant interaction, the interactions between the moderator and focus group participants, and the interactions between the participants themselves. Examining all three of these categories resulted in richer data and enhanced meaning (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran 2009). Data was organized and analyzed by focus group, separately. After focus groups were completed, compared the data for common themes. Data from focus groups was coded manually, immediately following the execution of the focus groups.

Chapter 4: RESULTS

The study was designed to explore how people react to controversy in the YouTube space, with an emphasis on the concept of cancel culture. The goal was to understand how audience members rationalize the motivation to cancel or unfollow people on YouTube, specifically surrounding the case of James Charles and Tati Westbrook.

Participants in the study fell between the ages 18-24, and there were four participants in each focus group. Participants are labelled as the number focus group they were in (1, 2, 3, etc.) and then given a letter assigned to them in the order of when they first spoke (A, B, C, etc.). Focus groups ranged from 30-40 minutes each and were conducted February-April 2021.

Understanding the YouTube space

The interview opened with asking focus group participants about their YouTube activity, what they use the platform for, and what they enjoy about the platform. In most cases, participants indicated that YouTube was a platform where they were seeking out more information about what they were interested in (e.g., Gaming or makeup related content). Most participants indicated logging into YouTube daily to follow/watch their favorite creators, enjoy entertaining content, and/or learn something educational.

Watching and following their favorite creators. As discussed in the literature review, YouTube has grown into a large online community. Participants in 3 of the 5 focus groups referred to the “YouTube community” directly (Focus groups 1, 3 & 4). Videos are available on the site for anyone to access. As users engage more with YouTube and its creators, they “subscribe” to certain people that create content that interests them (Khan & Vong, 2014). For instance, participant 1B stated that she likes to

“watch lifestyle YouTubers. Her YouTuber name is ‘Fashion Mumbler.’

She vlogs her life and lives in England and lives in a cottage and she gardens and that’s not my lifestyle but how fun to watch someone have that lifestyle.”

YouTube becomes a part of users’ daily life and keeping up with creators becomes an aspect of their everyday routine. Participant 5C stated she was “addicted to Emma Chamberlain when she first started getting famous. I watched all of her videos in like two days. I knew everything about her.” Emma Chamberlain is a lifestyle YouTuber who acquired 8 million subscribers in under two years (Bromwich, 2019).

Users become invested in the lives of online personalities and sometimes obsessed with the culture. Participant 3B said that “YouTube is my literal childhood...I snuck into a Playlist Live once, it was that bad.” Playlist Live is a social media convention in Orlando, Florida that had over 13,000 attendees in early 2020 (Tenbarge, 2020). Once users are involved in the “YouTube community” it’s easy to be invested of the lives of creators on the platform.

Entertaining content. YouTube is a source of entertaining content for most users, with content for many different niches of content. Participant 1A stated she liked “commentary channels. Overlapping into dramentary channels...It’s also mindless.” Participant 2A said she enjoyed gamer videos and participant 5A stated that they watched a lot of compilation and drag makeup videos. And once you start watching videos, you get sucked into the platform. Participant 5B shared that “once I get in, I always watch what’s next. It’s like a dark hole, and hours later I’m like oh it’s dark outside.” YouTube’s algorithm recommends videos specifically for the user, which makes the platform so addicting (Khan & Vong, 2014).

Learning something. Many users also turn to YouTube to learn something they don't know how to do, from changing their car's oil or how to make easy and healthy recipes (Webwise, 2020). For instance, participant 2B said that YouTube is "so good for informational things, like, my car was having troubles last weekend and I just pulled up YouTube to help me fix it." Participant 1A said "it's interesting to be kept up on what's going on," in reference to commentary content on YouTube. And participant 2A said "you learn so much from YouTube versus other social media channels." Users learn things in relation to many topics. For example, participant 4A shared that she watches a lot of advice videos on the platform. YouTube has many facets beyond just entertainment, which makes it a unique social media platform.

Being canceled on YouTube

After discussing the general use of YouTube and the role the platform plays in participants' lives, they were prompted to discuss what it means when someone on YouTube has been "canceled." Participants discussed what it means when someone is canceled, what actions would cause someone to be canceled on YouTube, the efficacy of apology videos after their cancelation, and if someone can stay canceled.

What it means when someone is canceled. Focus group participants were asked to share what it means to them when someone has been canceled on YouTube. In most cases, participants stated that the YouTube influencer has been involved with a scandal and users are speaking out and keeping this person accountable. Participant 1C assumes that "there's been some type of scandal or controversy involved" when they see someone has been canceled.

Participant 1A elaborated:

"It was probably something bad. A lot of people start unsubscribing from them, maybe other YouTubers came out and started spreading rumors or tea about

them and were like cancel this person, so people start unsubscribing and they get a bunch of hate on YouTube and other social media. That's what I picture when someone is canceled."

Viewers assume that the person in question has messed up or done something troublesome that users don't think is morally right. Participant 4A stated that someone has done "something that collectively, as a YouTube community, people do not agree with." Participant 2B "automatically thinks they're problematic" and participant 2C shared that "they probably messed up in one way or another." It's assumed that when users see that a YouTube creator has been canceled, they have done something scandalous that doesn't fit the moral norms of the YouTube community.

Actions that are cause for cancelation. Focus group participants in all groups stated very similar answers: Actions related to racist, sexist and homophobic behavior were common themes when asked about things that deserve the de-platforming of influencers. Participant 1D said that "a lot of things we see now are racist, homophobic, sexist and any type of those comments" and participant 4A shared that it was "obviously sexual harassment, sexual abuse, racist comments, anything that could attack someone else for something they can't control or change." Participants in focus groups 3 and 5 stated that YouTube influencers need to be held accountable for these actions and that's why they are canceled.

Things from people's past also often comes back to affect their current social status on YouTube. For example, participant 1D said, "I know something common, which I think is valid, is someone tweeted like 6 years ago and they used a slur and then everyone starts finding out and digging into their past." And participant 2C also said that "a lot of things come up from people's past coming back to bite the. Previous racist comments, etc. is what usually gets people canceled

the fastest.” Controversial actions, related to homophobia, racism, transphobia, etc., are all fair game to viewers on YouTube when canceling an influencer.

The efficacy and authenticity of apology videos. The topic of apology videos was brought up during each focus group, unprompted by the researcher. YouTube creators often post an “apology video” after they are canceled to address and hopefully diffuse the situation that they are involved in. Focus group participants across the board stated that apology videos are an inauthentic way to make up for what they have done. Words like “less genuine,” “forced,” “fake,” “scripted,” “manipulated,” “attention seeking,” and “not enough” were all words that came up in focus groups to describe apology videos. Participant 1D believes these videos show:

“How well can they [a YouTube influencer] manipulate their following and the internet [in apology videos]. I think that’s why in a ton of apology videos that’s why you see people crying where you can easily edit it out.”

Participant 2B reinforces this point and says “especially if they cry, it’s so much worse and less genuine.” Authenticity and action is important to users when taking responsibility for their issue, but they don’t always follow through. Participant 3B said that “there’s definitely a right and a wrong way to do them (apology videos). I think taking responsibility is the most valuable and they don’t really do that.” And participant 3A elaborates saying “they’ve gotten better if they lay out what they are going to do or discredit the drama... They just feel forced.” Participant 3D expressed that “authenticity is so important.” Viewers care about authenticity on the platform, and because they feel so close to these influencers, they need a valid and genuine apology before there’s a chance of forgiveness.

Can someone stay canceled? Participants in every focus group discussed how after someone on YouTube is canceled, some influencers often bounce back from the situation and

continue to create successful content. There was no general consensus on the reasoning behind how some influencers can bounce back, but all focus groups believed that influencers do bounce back from cancelation at times. Reasons ranged from gender roles to emotional ties to an influencer. Participant 5D shared that she thought “male celebrities bounce back quicker than women.” In relation to the James Charles and Tati case, participant 3B thought:

“He should be [canceled], but it’s common for someone like him to bounce back because A. They have the money to get people to help them and B. the audience is too strong. James does a lot for his community. He calls them “sisters” and they have merch...I feel like when creators call them something like that, subconsciously it hits home and they feel a part of something.”

As a part of this YouTube community, viewers have an emotional tie to these influencers so it’s hard for them to separate controversy from emotions.

An example of someone that has been “permanently” canceled is Shane Dawson. Shane Dawson, in the last few years, earned the title of the “King of YouTube,” with documentary series type videos that “arguably changed how content was made on the platform” (Dodgson, 2020). Dawson, throughout his career, was involved in numerous scandals but it all came to a climax in 2020 when he began attacking other creators, including James Charles. He has not uploaded new content since then. Participant 3A reinforces the previous point in saying “people like him [Shane Dawson] probably have fans but not a community...People will be more willing to forgive when there’s a connection. I think that’s the difference.” If the influencer has a strong and loyal audience, it’s common for them to bounce back.

Views on cancel culture

In every focus group, participants expressed their concerns about cancel culture in general. In most cases, participants were vehemently against this method of punishment for influencers. Participant 1D expressed that:

“I personally don’t think it’s ok to look at someone’s one mistake or hear rumors from someone else and cancel them. I think what we need to do instead is hold people accountable. If there are repeat offenses, that’s different, and they need to make a change. But if they’re showing they’re making steps I don’t think it’s a bigger deal. I just think the term cancel culture is so harsh.”

Participants expressed a case-by-case cancellation. In most cases, participants said we can be too quick to cancel someone and others it’s worth it. Every case is situational. Participant 2B said that “for small things, we are way too quick to cancel, but bigger things...I don’t think you get a second shot at like not being racist in 2021. But it also depends.” Participant 4A said that “when it’s miniscule, it [the situation] doesn’t matter, it’s just petty.”

But in certain cases, participants felt it necessary to cancel someone. For example, participant 2B said “if it is truly a cancelable offense – Racism, sexual assault, transphobia, homophobia – then I think that’s a big part of positive change. Not giving people who exhibit those types of behavior a platform to be recognizable or benefit.”

The theme of accountability and action came up in every focus group. Participant 3B said, “Cancel culture is a two-way street. In most cases you need to keep people accountable but sometimes it’s too intense. We’re all humans but when it’s human issues like racism, pedophilia, it needs to be taken up a notch.” It’s important to viewers that influencers aren’t getting away with unacceptable actions. “I personally think that sometimes it’s good...I compare it to #MeToo where people are being held accountable...but I think sometimes it’s unnecessary and becomes

this hate fest so it depends on the situation.” Viewers want to see growth and learning from the influencers they look up to.

The Case of Tati Westbrook and James Charles

The remainder of the focus group questions focused on the case of James Charles and Tati Westbrook, specifically surrounding their conflict on YouTube in 2019. Questions were very open-ended (similar to all questions in the focus group), to better understand the interest and involvement with the drama in this case. The approach let participants talk about what they truly thought about the drama. Focus group discussion centered on how viewers obsessed over the drama, taking sides, comments influencing personal views, and the goals of the audience members in canceling James and/or Tati.

Obsessing over the drama. Focus groups expressed an interest in simply the drama aspect of this case. Overall, it was easy for audience members to get wrapped up in this over-the-top situation and its details. James Charles was losing subscribers on YouTube at an alarming rate. Participant 2C stated that they even “watched a live video of his subscriber count going down...When the video dropped, me and my friend sat and watched it so intently.” And participant 2A shared that they “thought it was kind funny... and I remember sitting at lunch with my friends and watched the count.” Participant 5C said “I literally had that countdown on while I was studying.”

People become fascinated with drama. Participant 2B said that “drama is addicting, and I was so enthralled in it” and participant 2C shared that they “think people just love drama and things to talk about. You want to be able to know what’s going on.” Participant 3A “saw the Twitter drama and flew to YouTube.” There was an urgency to know everything going on about two of the most subscribed beauty influencers on YouTube. Participant 1A said she remembers

“when Tati uploaded that video and I was like oh my gosh I have to watch it. I was with my boyfriend...and turned it on immediately and shushed him [her boyfriend].” And participant 1D had “never clicked a video so fast in [her] life.”

Taking sides. With any dramatic feud, people often take sides in the argument. There wasn't a general consensus on whether participants thought Tati Westbrook was in the right versus James Charles. Participant 1B said it was “easy” to take Tati's side, participant 2B “was on James' side” and participant 2C “was rather impartial.

But overall, participants stated that their views have changed over the past couple years after seeing the entire situation play out. Participant 2A said “after watching each person's videos, I kept flip flopping and after not knowing what was true or not, I couldn't take anyone's side.” Participant 3A shared:

“My opinion changed after things came out. Especially after all the receipts from the DM's. But at first, I was team James because I was like oh she's just salty about the gummy bears. But then I felt like an idiot for not believing her... It was just annoying from both sides.”

Participants didn't know who or what to believe when it came to this case. Participant 4A said that “when Tati's video first came out, I was on her side because she went first, then James' stuff came out and now there are two sides to every story.” Viewers didn't know who was telling the truth. Words like “embarrassing,” “ridiculous,” and “dramatic” were used to describe the situation. Participants shared that they stayed away from one or both of their videos and took action when it came to the situation. Participant 2C said she “did unsubscribe or unfollow James.” Participant 3A on the other hand “stanned Tati after this.” Participant 2B said the entire

situation was “so petty, so now I don’t like Tati and now I don’t like James because he’s creepy and weird.” But for strong followers of James, participant 5D said “I was going to watch him more and advocate for him more.” Participants took actions in all ways: leaving comments, defending their favorite influencer, viewing and choosing to not view videos.

Comments influencing personal views. I had anticipated an overwhelming response saying that the comment section of videos would greatly influence their thoughts, but that was not the case. In some cases, though, those not knowledgeable about one of the parties involved would receive their information from the comment section. Participant 5D said that “the comments shaped any opinions I had of Tati because I hadn’t watched her in years.”

But comments often reinforced the participants existing views on the situation. Participant 2A said that “it lets me see a different perspective and solidifies what I felt.” Participant 3D agreed in saying “it reassures what I hear or how I feel.” And participant 1C said that the comments “gives me new perspectives, but it doesn’t influence my thoughts.” Viewers seem to look to the comments to reinforce their point and see that others on the platform are also agreeing with them.

Goals of the audience members. For audience members, participants believe that people aim to de-platform these famous influencers after they do something problematic. Participant 2B said they think “people unsubscribe after situations like this to decrease their profit if it’s based off viewers or followers for a sponsorship, to impact them that way. Want them to reach less of an audience.” Participant 3A say that “audience members just unsubscribe” and participant 3C believes it’s all about “taking the other one down.” In most cases, focus group participants believe that the goal when it comes to canceling a YouTuber, is to rid them of their platform.

And to achieve this goal, the internet has made it easy for the parties involved. Participants in focus group's 2 and 5 discussed the concept of "cancel culture" always existing but the internet now acts as a catalyst for audience members to get involved. For example, participant 5B discussed the political scandal of Monica Lewinsky and how she believes it's the same kind of situation, but a different media. She expressed that "It's definitely different now because anyone can have their voice in it." Participant 2A stated that cancel culture wasn't in existence pre-internet, but "now we have the power to do it." Participant 2C described cancel culture as "forming an angry mob online." Specifically in the case of James and Tati, participant 1A said that "her [Tati's] fans formed an army. They were like oh he hurt her, he promoted an opposing brand, so let's work against him a bit." Social media and the internet, in general, have given everyday people the power to participate in a "mob" or "army" online to bring someone down.

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Findings

I executed this research study because I wanted to comprehend the power and influence that audience members had and believed they had as it relates to the concept of cancel culture, specifically on the YouTube platform. I wanted to understand the motives and thoughts of YouTube viewers when asked about the Tati Westbrook and James Charles scandal, arguably one of the most memorable scandals that hit the YouTube platform. The goal was to understand how people rationalize canceling certain people on YouTube. In using focus groups, I wanted to see how opinions would influence other's voices and how they reacted collectively to the situations and questions at hand. College students between the ages of 18 and 24 years old were recruited for the study, as over 90% of 18- to 24-year old United States American internet users use YouTube (Chen, 2020). Since most college aged students are the most active age group on the platform (Clement, 2020), it made them the ideal group to discuss the experiences on the platform. This study was developed to provide detail on the following research question:

RQ1: Considering the lenses of Social Movement Theory and Collective Action, what roles do audience members have in YouTube cancel culture?

For cancel culture, in general, focus group participants shared that actions related to racist, sexist and homophobic, transphobic, etc. behavior were strong cases that needed to involve cancel culture. As it relates to James Charles and Tati Westbrook, specifically, participants were "obsessed" with the drama and even keeping up with the number of subscribers that James Charles had lost and the number of subscribers that Tati Westbrook had gained. People quickly took sides in the situation with views changing as new information was constantly flowing from the two influencers. Participants noted a changed view of one or both of

the influencers, unsubscribing, and veering away from one or both of their YouTube channel's content.

Participants stated that the opinions of other viewers (comment sections), would reinforce and solidify their stance on the situation. The comment section wouldn't sway their allegiance in one way or the other but make it so they were sure of their thoughts and actions. The internet and YouTube have made it simple to engage in collection action and social movement against someone who has been involved in something scandalous or controversial. Participants noted that it's easy for people to insert their voice, form an online mob or army against a specific influencer.

An interesting tension that was discovered was that, in most cases, participants were not advocates for cancel culture. Many saying that they strongly disagreed with this type of punishment, but on the other hand, they said they would also be unfollowing and advocating for their favorite YouTubers in a scandal. Perhaps, they feel this pressure by the community to partake.

Significance

Findings linked to prior literature. A range of literature was reviewed for this research, and each piece of literature was used to connect to thoughts expressed in my study.

First, the literature review discussed how Khan and Vong (2014) talked about how social relationships on YouTube can be formed around just the video content, with viewing patterns and preferences of users that drive connection. Findings from the focus groups found that users would become invested in the lives of their favorite influencers. One participant noting that she snuck into a social media convention to see her favorite influencers and another participant stating that she binged Emma Chamberlain's entire YouTube library in two days. Chamberlain,

herself, stated in a New York Times interview that she started watching YouTube to “connect with other people and see what they were up to, and weirdly enough, it felt like I had friends that were cool, and it was people that I maybe admired” (Bromwich, 2019).

As people utilize the platform more and spend time watching influencers’ content, they become invested in their lives beyond just the videos they are posted on their channel. Berryman and Kavka (2018), also said that the more “real” videos are the ones that lead to supportive and assuring comments from their viewers. This study found this to be true, finding that a majority of the participants expressed that authenticity was valuable to them when choosing which influencers to support. In the case of James Charles and Tati Westbrook, multiple participants noted that as new information continued to come out about the situation, it became harder to know what was true and what was not, and because of this, it was hard to take someone’s side and stick to it.

Second, the literature review talked about the unique characteristics of YouTube. Burgess and Green (2008), stated that the unique communicative space produces a space for “situated creativity and reflexivity.” These characteristics are necessary for user-led innovation and collection action and agency (Burgess & Green, 2008). Rotman and Preece (2010), also said that in this unique community, there are a variety of different niches to be involved in, with a place for anyone to find an interest. Participants stated many different interests as it relates to the YouTube content they consume, from makeup tutorials to video game gameplays. Participants had also referred to the platform as a community. There is a space for everyone and for every interest.

Burgess and Green (2008) also stated that it’s not possible for someone to important learned conventions for creative practice or audience building elsewhere, for YouTube. The

platform is unique and has its own cultural norms (Burgess & Green, 2008). I found that as users participate more on the platform, the more they become invested in the lives of these online personalities. There are conventions that exist just to interact with your favorite YouTube influencers, i.e. Playlist Live, discussed above. A participant had also said that YouTube was her “literal childhood” and she had even snuck into a Playlist Live in the past. These actions may be difficult to understand for those not privy to the pull and relationship that YouTube influencers can have with their subscribers.

Lastly, Dodgson (2019) states that cancel culture lacks a space for growth. My focus groups found this to be true, with many participants saying that the goal of cancel culture should be a way to keep influencers accountable for their actions, and not completely writing them off without giving them a chance to grow and change. Participants across the board agreed with this language stating that they want to see action and change from their favorite influencers as they’re coming into a scandal. Continuous lack of change could possibly lead to a more permanent “cancellation” according to participants in the study. James Charles, for example, came into scandal with Tati Westbrook in 2019 and was accused of predatory behavior (Dodgson, 2019). Although we don’t know the results of what came from that incident, James Charles made a TikTok video in 2020 with the caption “You think you can hurt my feelings? I lost 3 million subscribers in one day & canceled over something I didn’t actually do” insinuating that the allegations were false (Charles, 2020). In April 2021, James Charles has been accused again of predatory behavior and because of this, he’s lost many followers, YouTube has temporally demonetized his channel, and makeup brand Morphe has ended their partnership with the beauty influencer (Godwin, 2021).

Findings linked to theory. The lens of Social Movement Theory and Collective action was the guiding light for this study. To reiterate from the literature review, social movements “are initiated by a group of actors who are the primary victims of a decision, action or policy that drive them to protest and hold demonstrations” (Isa & Himmelboim, 2018, p. 2). This lens of Social Movement theory helped me view this case of James Charles and Tati Westbrook in a more holistic view, comparing it to the very beginning of collective action. Cancel culture can be seen today as a new form of collection action that falls under the social movement theory umbrella. The internet, and YouTube specifically, gave viewers on the platform a new site for collective action to unfold.

Firstly, Isa & Himmelboim (2018) discuss how there are no guardrails and anyone’s voice can be heard on the platform, from just the comments or creating your own video content. They elaborate further saying that this nature of social media for what they describe as “non-elite” and “elite” actors. “Elite” actors have power to make big change, while “non-elite” actors fuel conversation. Findings from this study found this theory to reign true. As it relates to Tati Westbrook and James Charles, Westbrook and Charles acted as the “elite” actors for their audience, the “non-elite” actors that fueled the feud. Charles and Westbrook had made several videos with allegations and evidence against one another, influencing their audience members to act on this new information learned. Participants had stated that they believed that Tati’s fans “formed an army” and worked against him [James Charles]. So, although Tati had put allegations and information out on her YouTube channel, it was her fans (the “non-elite” actors) who had the power to fuel the unsubscribing, commenting, etc. to cancel James and vice versa.

Second, Seigel (2009) introduced a model of aggregate behavior as a way to explain the motivations for participation in collective action. The model relies on two factors: One,

individuals have a range of reasons to participate. Two, individuals shift their want to be involved over time, depending on the behavior of those who they feel connected to (Seigel, 2009, p. 125). This study showed that social media networks are catalysts for social movement. My study found all of this to be true. As it relates to Seigel's (2009) first part of the model, focus group participants expressed different reasons that they were involved in the James Charles and Tati Westbrook drama: They were obsessed with the drama, they were fans of Tati, fans of James, etc. As for the second part of the model, some participants expressed feelings of being "over the drama" as new information came out from both sides and the truth became blurrier and blurrier. But, there were varying reasons of switching sides or choosing not to involve themselves further.

Lastly, in a study by Milan (2015), she introduced the term "cloud protesting" which claims to make sense of collection action online. The cloud takes on two characteristics: One, it lays down a digital space for action to take place and two, it allows for those within the "cloud" to connect individuals in relation to collective action. In my focus groups, the term "angry mob," came up among participants. The internet and social media has allowed us to gather in an online space to share opinions, form a mob or army of sorts, and collectively attack or support a figure. It was mentioned that the internet has made it simple and easy for those to engage in collective action, specifically cancel culture, online. Milan (2015), says that "cloud protesting" has paved a way for more voices to be heard and "supplemented the identity of social movement." Focus group participants had shared that a form of "cancel culture" has always been present, but with social media and the internet, it acts as a prompting and faster way to get involved and have your opinion heard.

Research significance. My research in this study contributes to the field of journalism and strategic communication by elaborating on the existing research of previous scholars and researchers. My research focuses on the actions of audience members and their effect on “canceling” someone on YouTube, specifically. There was a gap in data regarding cancel culture on YouTube. After reviewing past research on similar topics, there was no research that touched on cancel culture on YouTube and how the audience was involved in that concept. This study exists to explain and provide context about cancel culture that has risen as a topic of conversation in the industry for the past decade.

Implications. I believe that this qualitative study gives a generous insight into viewers opinions, beliefs and actions in relation to cancel culture on YouTube that’s applicable to others. This study allows others to see how audience members view cancel culture and their motives behind their actions and beliefs as it relates to canceling someone online. In turn, people can recognize the impact of social movement and collective action as it relates to cancel culture and understand how authenticity is valuable social currency for influencers.

This study found that users on YouTube enjoy a variety of different content for entertainment as well as education. Results also saw that users will continue to watch content from creators they enjoy and become invested in their personal lives beyond just the eyeshadow tutorial they posted on their channel, for example. For cancel culture, specifically, users noted feelings of disdain for this form of consequence even though they also noted that they unfollowed people online for scandals they’ve been in. The research perhaps hints at a pressure for users to participate in cancel culture so they are believed to be doing what is “right” although they may not agree with this form of punishment.

Most importantly, loyal YouTube subscribers value authenticity and change when it comes to scandalous behavior from their favorite creators. But, I saw that if that YouTuber has a strong bond with their audience, users may feel less pressure to participate in canceling them even if they were objectively in the wrong.

These learnings as it relates to James Charles and Tati Westbrook, in particular, showed that although users will take sides, participate and leave hate comments, these creators have the opportunity to bounce back from a controversy they've been involved with. After James Charles had released a video telling his side, he had regained about one million of his lost followers after Tati Westbrook put out her original video with the allegations on her channel (Abad-Santos, 2019). And it is known that Charles calls his fans his "sisters," with him tweeting that "I call my followers sisters because ya'll are my family..." (Charles, 2017). He clearly has a strong bond with his followers despite his list of scandals. In May 2021, James Charles sits at over 25 million subscribers on YouTube, approximately 9 million more than he had right before the scandal with Tati Westbrook occurred (Scott, 2019). These results and sentiment from focus participants hint at a strong bond contributing to a flourishing influencer on YouTube.

I believe that the information in this study has an interesting perspective on cancel culture, as this topic has not been studied in-depth in the past. The themes in this research can show influencers how to best gain trust with their audience and revealed what's most valuable to them in times of scandal and controversy. It also shows to brands that are seeking influential partnerships to choose influencers that are showing as more authentic to their audience.

Limitations

It should be noted that this one study cannot provide the answer to every aspect of audience involvement in cancel culture, nor can the small sample be representative of the

entirety of users on YouTube. But, the study still offered information on YouTube user's actions and beliefs in ways that had not been studied before.

I was faced with a few limitations in regard to this research. First, research related to cancel culture should represent a more diverse set of people, including different races, sexualities, genders and perhaps a wider range of age. But race, sexuality and gender were not concerns in criteria when looking for participants to be involved in the study. But there was a great lack of gender representation. More diverse individuals would lead to a wider range of perspectives as it relates to this topic.

Also, as this was a qualitative study that utilized focus groups, there is a lack of quantitative and numerical data that would provide a stronger support for the results found in this study. A supplemental, quantitative study with a much larger sample would benefit in supporting the findings in this study or discovering alternate viewpoints to support future research related to cancel culture and YouTube influencers.

Also, due to COVID-19, the ability to recruit and the focus group interaction was extremely limited. Because of the quarantine, I had to rely heavily on online methods to recruit individuals to participate in focus groups. I was still able to find people who fit the criteria for the study, but I had to heavily rely on one degree of separation with participants in snowball sampling. I did not choose friends or relatives to participate in the study to avoid biases. Owton & Allen-Collinson (2013) state that including friends in methodology can result in a bias in the research, disturb the natural setting and/or contaminate the results. And because of the barrier of Zoom, communication and relationships between focus group participants might not have been as strong as they could have been if the focus group were conducted in person.

Directions for future research

Findings that arose in the research that were not addressed in this particular study include the types of content that are consumed by users on the platform. It was found that there is a niche type of content for every individual on the platform, and my study supports this claim. However, I would be interested to see if the type of content a YouTube user consumes affects who they're familiar with on the platform, what they see as it relates to general drama on the platform and if this affects how and if they are more or less involved.

I also believe that TikTok should be studied in addition to YouTube, as it relates to cancel culture. Participants had noted, in multiple focus groups, that they see cancelations on the platform as well and noted that they consumed similar but more short-form content on that platform compared to YouTube. According to Cerria & Schlewitt (2020), cancel culture on YouTube has become a very extreme, with no consequences for offensive behavior or a flood of hatred sometimes inclusive of death threats. TikTok was also the third most searched term on YouTube in 2020 (Sehl, 2021). 18- to 29-year old's are the most active age group on TikTok, with 48% indicating they use the platform (Sehl, 2021). It would be interesting to study this age group, similar to the age group evaluated in this study, and compare the older and younger opinions on cancel culture on TikTok.

Research for this topic in the future should include more involvement from different genders, races and ethnicities: African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and transgender participants. The inclusion of more diverse voices will result in a wider scope in the results, which will in turn provide additional points of view that will contribute to this study's findings or bring different thoughts to the research.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

Although my research study alone cannot assume behaviors for all YouTube subscribers as it relates to cancel culture, it can be a basis for studies in the future. Participants noted that cancel culture is ubiquitous in today's social media culture, so it's important for influencers, brands as well as individuals to understand while navigating the online space. As there was a lack of research on this topic, I was seeking to understand what audience member's roles were as a part of this culture. Audience members drive the conversation, fame and discourse as it relates to their favorite and least favorite influencers on YouTube. Without the audience members, there would be no "power" for these content creators.

I see this study being relevant to influencers and brands looking to use YouTube and YouTube creators, because it helps to understand audience values, motivations and actions as it relates to cancel culture and community on the platform. We see this in action in the case of James Charles and Tati Westbrook. And due to COVID-19, there has been a rise in the use of the platform, so it's important to understand it more now than ever. During a March 2020 survey of social media users in the U.S., 64% of respondents noted that when stuck in their homes during the coronavirus, they used YouTube more during that period, relying on the video playform to stay entertained (Tankovska, 2021).

From my research, the actions and the effect that audience members have on YouTube influencers and the community were found. Nothing can be assumed as a universal experience from just this study, but the insights gained from the 16 focus group participants should be considered when looking at cancel culture now and in future research. As YouTube continues to develop and more and more people are discovering and delving into the platform, it will be interesting to see how cancel culture evolves specifically on this platform.

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Appendix I

Focus group questions

Introduction

- What are your favorite things about YouTube?

Depth of knowledge

- What does it mean to you when someone on YouTube has been “canceled”?
- What actions cause someone to deserve to be canceled?
- In general, have you ever disliked a video, liked the opposition, or left comments to participate in cancelling someone? What were your goals in these actions?

Personal experience

- Now I want to discuss the incident between Tati Westbrook and James Charles. [Provide a brief summary]. What were your reactions to that incident?
- Have you strayed away from watching either Tati’s or James’ content due to their reputation? Why or why not?
- Did reading comments influence how you felt about the situation? How so?
- Did you take a side in this dispute? Did you dislike or like a video or leave comments? What were your goals in these actions?
- In your opinion, were either Tati or James canceled? Why?
- For those who felt that either of them were canceled, what was the goal of the cancellation?

Appendix II

Participant demographics

Focus group 1

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
A	22	Female
B	19	Female
C	22	Female
D	23	Female

Focus group 2

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
A	24	Female
B	21	Female
C	21	Female
D	20	Female

Focus group 3

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
A	21	Female
B	21	Female
C	19	Female
D	21	Female

Focus group 4

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
A	18	Female
B	21	Female
C	21	Female
D	20	Female

Focus group 5

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
A	22	Female
B	18	Female
C	21	Female
D	19	Female

Appendix III

Recruitment materials

Recruitment email

Subject: Volunteers Needed for Research Study on YouTube

Hello,

Are you an active YouTube user? We are seeking participants for a research study about controversy in the YouTube space, with an emphasis on the cancel culture phenomena.

Participants must be between 18 and 24 years of age, a current YouTube user, watch YouTube as least once a week and have knowledge about the James Charles and Tati Westbrook conflict. You will be needed for a 1-hour focus group conducted via zoom.

Participation in the study is voluntary.

Contact Tiffany Nguyen at atnnq9@mail.missouri.edu for more information.

Recruitment ad

Volunteers Needed for Research Study on YouTube

Are you an active YouTube user? We are seeking participants for a research study about controversy in the YouTube space, with an emphasis on the cancel culture phenomena.

Participants must be between 18 and 24 years of age, a current YouTube user, watch YouTube as least once a week and have knowledge about the James Charles and Tati Westbrook conflict. You will be needed for a 1-hour focus group conducted via zoom.

Participation in the study is voluntary.

Contact Tiffany Nguyen at atnnq9@mail.missouri.edu for more information.

Oral consent script

Are you an active YouTube user? We are seeking participants for a research study about controversy in the YouTube space, with an emphasis on the cancel culture phenomena.

We invite you to take part in this research study, because you fall within 18 and 24 years of age, are a current YouTube user, watch YouTube at least once a week and have knowledge about the James Charles and Tati Westbrook conflict. Because of COVID-19, this focus group will be conducted via zoom.

You will be asked to answer questions on how people rationalize the motivation to cancel, or

unfollow, certain people on YouTube. The focus group will be recorded, but de-identified during transcription to protect your privacy.

Participation in the study is voluntary.

If you want to talk privately about your rights or any issues related to your participation in this study, you can contact University of Missouri Research Participant Advocacy by calling 888-280-5002 (a free call), or emailing MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu.

Researcher name: Tiffany Nguyen

Email: atnnq9@mail.missouri.edu

Phone number: 8165509466

Appendix IV

Focus Group Transcriptions

Focus Group 1

Q: How often do you watch YouTube? Favorite things about YouTube? Why do you like it?

A: Everyday. I like commentary channels. Overlapping into drammentary channels. It's interesting to be kept up on what's going on. It's also mindless.

B: Even though it's drama, what's going on with YouTube is not serious so it's kind of nice to have something that's not super serious. I watch lifestyle YouTubers. Her YouTuber name is fashion mumbler. She vlogs her life and lives in England and lives in a cottage and she gardens and that's not my lifestyle but how fun to watch someone have that lifestyle

Q: What does it mean to you when someone on YouTube has been cancelled?

C: That probably means there's been some type of scandal or controversy that's assumed for me.

A: It was probably something pretty bad. A lot of people start unsubscribing from them maybe other YouTubers came out and started spreading rumors or tea about them. And they were like oh cancel this person so people start unsubscribing and they get a bunch of hate on YouTube and other social media. That's what I picture when someone is cancelled.

Q: What actions would cause someone to deserve to get cancelled?

D: I think a lot of things we see now are racist, homophobic, sexist, any type of those comments. I know something common, which I think is valid, is someone tweeted like 6 years ago and they used a slur and then everyone starts finding out and digging into their past. I think that's a common reason and that's the most valid category of reasons in my mind: racist, sexist, homophobic comments. Things that aren't really subjective.

Q: Have you ever disliked a video or liked the opposing video? Left comments? Participated?

B: I was subscribed to Tati and was super into makeup when I was 16. I don't really like or dislike or comment I'm just a watcher I'm not an interactor. I've never participated in cancel culture. But my mindset of people has changed but physical action probably not. Still subscribed to Tati but don't watch her content anymore.

Q: What were your reactions to the James/Tati situation?

A: I remember when Tati uploaded that video and I was like OH MY GOSH I HAVE TO WATCH IT. I was with my boyfriend at the time and turned it on immediately and shushed my boyfriend. I watched it and was confused because I didn't know anything about James. I wasn't a fan of James so my reaction wasn't to cancel him but I will say now in retrospect, initially I believed her even though she had no evidence and no proof. I just think the way the video was presented, she made it easy to believe. Initially I wanted to cancel him.

D: I still can't believe it. I never clicked a video so fast in my life.

C: Bye sister! I knew she had a mentor like relationship with James I just didn't know anything about him. I was never a follower. So I guess that made it easy to believe everything she was saying since I didn't know anything about him. I knew the stereotypes – He's young and he's confident. He's breaking all these barriers for men in makeup. Because he got so famous and rich so fast, a lot of what she was saying seemed like it could make sense. Even though she didn't have proof.

B: No I did too. And I was immediately believing her. But he made a video and I was already #TeamTati.

Q: Did you stray away from watching their videos after the scandal?

A: I view James in a more negative way and Tati in a more positive light. So that's the simple answer.

B: I don't know if it changed my viewing habits but my mindset definitely.

Q: Did the comments influence how you felt about the situation?

C: I'm sure I was reading the comments, I always do when I'm on YouTube just like everyone else. I can say, in general, as I'm watching a video I'm definitely scrolling through the comments. It gives me new perspectives but it doesn't influence my thoughts as I'm watching a video.

Q: Did you take a side?

A: Initially I was on Tati's side. She made serious allegations.

D: So serious! She said he's a predator, preys on men that are straight, preys on men that are underage.

B: It was easy to take her side.

A: She posted a follow up about Jeffree Star and Shane Dawson a year later.

D: Oh my god I forgot! Shane's content was so good and went live and went crazy and now he'll never post again.

A: So yeah my perception has changed. I know Tati posted an apology after a year and James rebounded because nothing Tati said was grounded in anything. So I guess now, in a way I feel bad for her since in her apology video she seemed like she was manipulated. But also she was crying the whole time. And I HATE when people leave that in the apology videos. You could've taken that out and now you're manipulating your audience and you're just crying.

B: She never really owns up to what she did so in a way I feel bad that someone made you believe those things about him, but also you're an adult. Out of everyone involved you're the oldest.

C: I don't know, if you were really that close to James why were you that close to him? So I guess my perspective has changed. I definitely don't believe what she said about James anymore. So do I view James in a negative light now? No because it came out that her accusations weren't true.

D: I kind of feel bad for her because it put a damper on her career. But also she could have not done that.

C: The Jeffree/Shane stuff was insane. But people can't really stay cancelled?

A: I think that's interesting. I am not a proponent of Cancel culture. I don't think it's right unless it's like a repeated instance and you're never showing that you're learning. I think there's a difference between cancelling someone and showing someone that they need to take accountability.

B: I think James has been uncanceled and has recovered. The numbers show it. I don't think people have forgotten about it but I think it's reflected more poorly on the other people involved than him.

D: I don't even understand how people can bounce back from that, but he's seemed to.

B: I think for James it was stuff people was saying about him versus things he'd actually done. When it came out those things weren't true, it made it easy for people to feel bad for him. Whereas someone who messed up on their own and said something racist or homophobic then it's harder to feel bad and uncanceled them.

Q: Did you think they were both canceled? Just James?

A: Initially just James because everyone was on Tati's side. I don't think either of them are canceled now. People are kind of done with the situation because people realized Tati wasn't saying anything that was based on anything factual. I don't think either of them are canceled anymore. People are just like ok it happened.

Q: For those who felt that either of them were canceled, what was the goal of the cancellation?

B: I don't know. I've never had that platform so it's hard to think like oh if I were in your shoes what would my goals be? I guess for Tati she wanted to be like I want to warn you about this person because I fell into this trap and he seems like a predator and young and dumb and not learning.

D: It's hard to believe she was trying to be this advocate to warn others because she talked to negatively of him. Not in a way that was like watching out for the rest of the community to beware of him.

A: I guess her goal was to give him a wake up call. Humble him? De-platform him and make him less credible?

B: I think the audience followed her lead. I don't know anyone right off the bat that was like not on her side at least a little.

C: I mean I was.

A: I totally was too.

D: Did the audience have the same goal as her?

A: I think it depends on if you're a fan of James Charles. I didn't care about de-platforming him because I wasn't a follower. I think it depends on if her fans were also fans of him.

C: There's definitely an overlap because of her mentorship.

A: Her fans formed an army. They were like oh he hurt her he promoted an opposing brand so let's work against him a bit.

B: I totally agree.

Q: Final thoughts?

A: I HATE the term cancel culture. I think it's valid and very interesting you're doing a thesis on it, because whether or not we like it, it's something that's here in our modern day internet culture.

C: Yeah whether or not you believe in it, it's here to stay.

D: I personally don't think it's ok to look at someone's one mistake or hear rumors from someone else and cancel them. I think what we need to do instead is hold people accountable. If there are repeat offensives, that's different and they need to make a change. But if they're showing they're making steps I don't think it's a bigger deal. I just think the term cancel culture is so harsh.

B: It's SO toxic and it's getting more and more escalated.

A: I'm so sick of seeing YouTube apology videos and it's interesting because some people can make tons of apology videos throughout their career and they always bounce back fine and other people have one mistake and they're cancelled forever and it's like why?

C: Yeah, why do you think that is?

D: I think it's how the person who is trying to cancel the other person, how well can they manipulate their following and the internet. I think that's why in a ton of apology videos that's why you see people crying where you can easily edit it out.

A: They definitely leave that in intentionally.

D: I think it's how well you manipulate people and some people can do it better than others.

A: Ok, do ya'll know who Laura Lee is?

D: Yup.

C: Her apology video is FAMOUS!

B: Yeah she starts off crying and KEEPS crying. Jaqueline Hill does that too in all of her apology videos just crying.

A: It's always the beauty community. I miss 2014 YouTube. Smoky eye tutorials. Zoella vlogs.

B: In my bedroom as a 16-year-old going to high school with a smoky eye.

D: YES, Bethany Mota. And now they're all pregnant and married.

A: And it's just the beauty community that's still doing this at 30 years old.

C: And I do feel like it's always the beauty community that's canceling and it's so interesting because why?

A: You look at the people involved in these scandals and there's always the ones who have had their own makeup lines, brands, partnerships. So I think a lot of it is competition too. How bad can we make someone look so that they buy my stuff instead. Maybe a lot of it is that as well? Motivated by profit.

D: There's so many products. They all have a Morphe collab.

C: It's like a rite of passage.

Focus Group 2

Q: How often do you watch YouTube? Favorite things about YouTube? Why do you like it?

A: The only thing I really love on YouTube is gamer videos

B: I love it. Mine is the polar opposite. Makeup videos is my main genre. Product reviews but not super often now because of TikTok.

C: I liked YouTube more before all the ads. And you learn so much from YouTube versus other social media channels.

B: And it's longer videos which I didn't realized I liked until tiktok and short-form content rolled out. It's so good for informational things like my car was having troubles last weekend and I just pulled up YouTube to help me fix it.

A: I think you can also pick what you watch versus TikTok. So you can get into a rabbit.

Q: What does it mean to you when someone on YouTube has been cancelled?

C: They probably messed up in one way or another. I see it trending on Twitter and immediately search and wonder what do they do?

B: I automatically think they're problematic. Which is maybe too harsh. But there's always some sort of drama which is fun to look into.

D: The drama is so addicting

B: I think that's a part of the draw. The relationship between the content creators and their drama.

Q: What actions would cause someone to be cancelled?

C: Recently, a lot of things coming up from people's past coming back to bite them. Previous racist comments, etc. is what usually gets people cancelled the fastest.

B: Homophobia, transphobia, being racist. And I feel like a lot of the time it's like being uneducated about some things. Especially with the younger people who make content on YouTube. Just making a big opinion on something without knowing what you're talking about and it goes south really fast.

Q: Have you ever liked a video/like the opposing/left comments?

C: I personally have not liked, disliked or commented on a YouTube video I don't think so, no

B: I don't think I have either

D: I'm the same way, but it's crazy that so many people do but I don't anyone that would

Q: What were your reactions to the James/Tati situation?

C: I literally watched a live video of his subscriber count going down

A: I thought it was kinda funny and I watched the count and I remember sitting at lunch with my friends and watched the count

B: I remember thinking I was shocked she made such a big deal about this promotion he did. Drama is addicting and I was so enthralled in it

C: When the video dropped, me and my friend sat and watched it so intently. I was so intrigued when it first came out. I think people just love drama and things to talk about. You want to be able to know what's going on and talk about it with other people. You're more in the loop

A: It felt like an underdog thing. Tati was causing all of this and "downfalling" this giant YTer even though she was his mentor

B: Especially YouTubers and influencers. I think it's so interesting that it's their job and their wellbeing. Their income depends on these ads, sponsorships and views. I can't imagine a world where my life depended on something like that. There was so much traction because it was insane someone was that big and they fell so fast. It's just so weird that they have all of these eyes on them

D: I thought it was weird that Tati was his mentor but he had more subscribers than her

Q: Did you stray away from watching their videos after the scandal?

C: I remember the whole thing after James was talking to minors I did unsubscribe or unfollow him. But I was looking for both sides of the argument

B: I wasn't even interested in them after it died down

D: Totally agree

Q: Did the comments influence how you felt about the situation?

C: Comments definitely don't influence me

B: Rarely

A: It lets me see a different perspective and solidifies what I felt

Q: Did you take a side?

C: I was rather impartial

B: Until the whole talking to minors piece came into the picture, I was on James' side because it seemed ridiculous if they were that close and he was just doing a partnership with a brand. If she was his mentor she should be hyping him up. But after everything I was impartial

A: After watching each person's videos I kept flip flopping and after not knowing what was true or not I couldn't take anyone's side

Q: Did you think they were both canceled? Just James?

C: I mean they're both so popular now again. Like I know they were both cancelled but they're still making money and they're both still popular. So they were cancelled but it didn't damage their careers all that much. Not as much as people thought it would and people can't really stay cancelled. I feel like a lot of celebrities – Jake Paul, Logan Paul are cancelled forever so there are some where it does stick and some where it doesn't and people forgive and move on. I think it depends on what they do. For James and Tati it was a conflict of interest. But people that do things that are cancelled for something like racial things, it sticks more

B: I also think it depends on the content they offer. With the James thing, I was thinking Jeffree star. That is the same alley of content but he's been cancelled for racial things before and probably currently, but people are just addicted to his content. It's a separate the art from the artist thing. It's like oh I'm just into the drama stories, the makeup, the content, not his actual views. I think it depends on what the viewers care about and the content that's being offered

Q: For those who felt that either of them were canceled, what was the goal of the cancellation?

B: I think people unsubscribe after situations like this to decrease their profit if it's based off views or followers for a sponsorship to impact them that way. Want them to reach less of an audience. For Tati, it was such a weird dynamic. I think she wanted people from his side and maybe it was for profit. I really think it was a money thing and not giving him an audience

C: I think that Tati gained a lot of relevance so I'm curious if it was for PR. I wouldn't be surprised. She just wanted to show people what "James was actually like." A lot of people who do videos like this, want to explain their side before people can attack them for certain things. But I don't really believe in cancel culture.

A: I think it depends. If someone is racist I think it's necessary. The only thing I can think of is the Kevin Spacey drama. When that news dropped, he disappeared, and I think that was deserved based on what he did. For me, do they actually deserve it

B: I agree with all of that. If it is truly cancellable offense – Racism, sexual assault, transphobia, homophobia – then I think that's a big part of positive change. Not giving people who exhibit

those types of behaviors a platform to be recognizable or benefit. If it's just a petty argument than cancel culture is just damaging

C: I think it depends too. It's situational and it can be good but it can be bad for people who don't do anything. People on TikTok get cancelled because some people just assume things from their videos and they get cancelled for no reason. I'm thinking of Jenna Marbles and her fish tank right now. I think at the end of the day it's like do they deserve it? We are too quick to cancel sometimes these days.

B: For small things we are way too quick to cancel, but bigger things we discussed I don't think you get a second shot at like not being racist in 2021. But it also depends.

A: On Twitter you get so-and-so is cancelled party and conversation floods and you can't actually figure out what actually happened because people are tweeting out jokes but I want to know the truth and judge. That's the internet for you – it's a battleground half the time.

C: People have nothing better to do than sit around and cancel people. It's like entertainment and people like to do it sometimes

A: Did anyone get cancelled pre-internet? It wasn't a thing because now we have the power to do it.

D: It's like forming an angry mob online. So people do it fast and destroy careers and then they'll just make an apology video and it's fine

C: I think they're hilarious

A: I think they make me cringe and they are not authentic. It's just to save their ass that's all it boils down to.

B: Especially if they cry. It's so much worse and less genuine

A: Omg and after Tati's video she tried to reignite it a year later. After that it was like too much. Now it's like so attention seeking

Focus Group 3

Q: How often do you watch YouTube? Favorite things about YouTube? Why do you like it?

A: I was not the typical middle schooler for YouTube but now I am so addicted. I find a lot of people on TikTok and Instagram and follow them on YouTube after that.

B: I'm so opposite. YouTube is my literal childhood. Like O2L

C: OH MY GOSH YES

B: I snuck into a Playlist Live once it was that bad.

D: I love makeup and that's what got me into it then I got into a rabbit hole. The beauty community is who I subscribe to the most

C: I was the weirdo that made the videos

A: If you never had a YouTube channel were you actually ever living?

B: It's called building character. Editing all your videos on iMovie

Q: What does it mean to you when someone on YouTube has been cancelled?

B: I think it really depends on the circumstances. I think that sometimes it can be a little much especially when it's like surface level things. Like the Sugar Bear Hair thing was personal beef and didn't need to be public. It depends on the morals of the viewer. Like if someone gets cancelled for being racist I don't have a problem with that happening ya know? It depends on where the morals lie and what's important to you

A: What are they being cancelled for? I think that's what matters because there's so much hate between these people all the time.

C: I think things like racism or James Charles' predatory actions are fair to be cancelled and I think we've done well as a culture instead of just cancelling we are holding people accountable. I think it's the better route than just flat out cancelling. But if there's no remorse than just cancel all the way. But we're moving forward

Q: Definition of cancel culture? What actions would cause someone to be cancelled?

B: People don't deserve to take up space if there are other people that could be adding value in that space. But sometimes people take it too far. All that to say is it's just people losing their platform

A: I totally agree. Just losing significance because there could be a surface level thought process in someone cancelling someone but it takes a big step to unfollow and unsubscribe.

C: It needs to show in the numbers. It's putting it into action is equal to cancelling

Q: Have you ever liked a video/like the opposing/left comments?

B: I'm totally not a troll. I more watch in the background and probably share with friends. The biggest thing I'll do is unfollow or unsubscribe.

A: I totally agree. I can't even think of a time where I've even liked a video which is sad. I should be supportive. But views matter the most

C: I comment on giveaways a lot

Q: What were your reactions to the James/Tati situation?

A: I would say overall, when I saw it blowing up, I saw the Twitter drama and flew to YouTube. The Sugar Bear Hair situation was so dramatic. I get there was a deep-rooted hurt from being his mentor. But I don't think she was wrong, but the method she used seemed like an attack and out of more concern rather than revenge. But I was like what the heck are you doing dude.

B: When she posted that video, I always just thought she was sus. She just lives this weird life so right off the bat I just took her words as a grain of salt. But she was saying all of those other things so he would get cancelled just cause she was salty about the gummies. It's so dumb and immature

C: She could've just reached out to him personally. The public was more about what she said not even the vitamin thing, but some crazy things and that's what people reacted to.

A: Wasn't there like a dinner party or something?

C: It was someone's birthday and the waiter was straight and he said something like it doesn't matter because I'm famous.

B: It was so fucked up and terrible but it's the grey line. It's bad and someone should get cancelled for these things but the motives were so weird so do I agree or not.

A: It took away credibility for what she said about him. People would have been more willing to cancel him for the predatory thing but it got overshadowed by the petty drama

C: And we never found out if anything was true.

B: And he's back at it again and it's not a good look cause it's not once but now twice.

C: But also when people are willing to change and learn they can get like uncanceled but this has like happened twice now

A: It's their time to cut him off

Q: Did you stray away from watching their videos after the scandal?

C: I stanned Tati after this

B: I really really love makeup. It's a huge passion of mine so I watched the videos mainly for the art on their face. But I watched them with a bad taste in my mouth like you guys all suck what's going on here. It was so petty so now I don't like Tati and now I don't like James cause he's creepy and weird.

D: I don't watch his videos anymore after everything. I continued watching both for awhile but not either anymore

A: Now I only watch out of curiosity every now and then. I was just annoyed by it all and turned me off from both of them

Q: Did the comments influence how you felt about the situation?

D: I don't know it depends on the video and the content. I loved the ACE family when they first started but now they're problematic so I read the comments and people say things about the parents and it reassures what I hear or how I feel. But it's specific to the creator

A: I try to avoid comments because they're so brutal and it's bad. But I do look there for clarity or reinforce my ideas

C: Did you know the wife from the ACE family dated Michael B Jordan?

B: YES, people said she was an escort for celebrities. But just like dated them for show cause she's hot.

Q: Did you take a side?

A: My opinion changed after things came out. Especially after all the receipts from the DM's. But at first I was team James cause I was like oh she's just salty about the gummy bears. But then I felt like an idiot for not believing her. But I wasn't even FOR her either. It was just annoying from both sides

B: Both sides were so wack and neither of them had enough backing for something valid. I never took a side I just observed

Q: Did you think they were both canceled? Just James?

B: James more than Tati. People were more on her side

A: I agree. But he's bounced back so him in that moment but he somehow crawled out of it.

D: She's never been super relevant. She was at first but never a hot topic. I feel like her peak was when that happened. She wasn't that good or that entertaining. She was so irrelevant till this happened

C: She was just jealous honestly.

B: Yeah, that too.

Q: For those who felt that either of them were canceled, what was the goal of the cancellation?

A: Tati's goal honestly might have been so she can do better. Honestly that could have been the motive

B: Same thing. Just for the spotlight. She was his mentor but now he is more famous

A: But audience members just unsubscribe and as more things happen it just escalated and escalated

D: People just comment their thoughts and then never think about it again

C: It depends on the side because some people don't believe her but taking the other one down.

A: And also people should stay cancelled but I'm so confused how he came out of this.

D: Did you guys see the thing with Charli when James was there with them at the dinner party with her family. She lost a lot after that and his stuff got pulled up with that drama too. People just push things under the rug. He should still be cancelled but he's not

B: He should be but it's common for someone like him to bounce back because A. they have the money to get people to help them and B. the audience is too strong. James does a lot for his community. He calls them sisters and they have merch and "we're all sisters." I feel like when creators call them something like that, subconsciously it hits home and they feel a part of something and it's personal for some people. So it gives him a strong audience

C: Some people DO stay cancelled like Shane Dawson.

A: People like him probably have fans but not a community like Sofia just said. People will be more willing to forgive when there's a connection. I think that's the difference

B: By the time Shane Dawson got cancelled, no one cared about him anymore. He was older and was irrelevant

C: The emotional tie is so important especially for me, I don't think cancel culture is really right for every situation

B: Cancel culture is a two-way street. In most cases you need to keep people accountable but sometimes it's too intense. We're all humans but when it's human issues like racism, pedophilia, it needs to be taken up a notch.

A: I agree. For human issues you HAVE to hold people accountable for things like that. People can't walk over those things but it's so important to give people a chance and allow them to do better. You can't let someone do that for you. It's something they have to do. If they're showing change, then they deserve some grace.

B: When people started to cancel Charli for being a picky eater I was like ok we need to chill.

D: That was the weirdest thing. She was acting spoiled but she lost like a million followers.

A: Overnight millions. But the next three days she gained three million.

B: That was so dumb I don't agree. She was a brat but she's 16.

A: I don't want to see an apology video for that. They've gotten better if they lay out what they are going to do or discredit the drama. I don't even know. They just feel forced

B: There's definitely a right and a wrong way to do them. I think taking responsibility is the most valuable and they don't really do that.

D: Authenticity is so important. If you know Laura Lee her apology videos are so inauthentic she's known for it

C: Wait OLIVIA JADE! She made a video vlogging where she was saying she's only at college to party and she made a video apologizing and she was like oh that was so wrong and it was in black and white it was embarrassing

Q: Final thoughts?

B: James is shady and Tati is boring. Those are my final thoughts

Focus Group 4

Q: How often do you watch YouTube? Favorite things about YouTube? Why do you like it?

A: I watch a lot of lifestyle videos. A lot of vlogs and what YouTubers do on a weekly or daily basis

B: I watch a lot of advice videos. I used to watch a lot of beauty since as I grew up I wasn't into that anymore.

C: Same a lot of lifestyle stuff.

Q: What does it mean to you when someone on YouTube has been cancelled?

A: Someone does something that collectively as a YouTube community, people don't agree with.

D: Yeah something like sexual assault, sexual abuse, something illegal or something not in the norm for the community that's when someone gets cancelled.

Q: What actions would cause someone to be cancelled?

D: Obviously sexual harassment, sexual abuse, racist comments, anything that could attack someone else for something they can't control or change. Anything illegal basically.

Q: Have you ever liked a video/like the opposing/left comments?

A: Oh no I never felt like the need to put it out there. They always say whatever you put out on the internet it's always there.

D: It's kind of childish

A: Yeah publicly posting it and taking the energy to do it is not worth it

C: Totally agree

D: Same

Q: What were your reactions to the James/Tati situation?

B: With any tea it's always exciting to see something come from it, but then as I was watching it they weren't explaining the truth.

A: It's hard because they both have their sides to the story. They only showed parts that supported their arguments of course

D: I remember when that video came out I wasn't even watching Tati's content anymore and I was like oh my god

B: I wasn't a fan but I wasn't watching either daily. But the claims were absurd. It was out of nowhere

Q: Did you stray away from watching their videos after the scandal?

D: It was so ridiculous because they were both adults. They kept drawing it out and made it more dramatic then it needed to be. They took breaks and then came back to address things. They got too involved and made it worse

C: It was so embarrassing

Q: Did the comments influence how you felt about the situation?

C: Comments helped me understand better than what the video was saying sometimes but it didn't influence me though, I didn't want to dwell on it

Q: Did you take a side?

A: I think when Tati's video first came out I was on her side because she went first, then James stuff came out and now there are two sides to every story. Like I said, they were saying things that supported themselves. Let's just move on from the drama.

B: People always took her side from the beginning and as things progressed, people just took no one's side because it was so dumb

A: Right! There was no solution they just made things way more dramatic. Even the screenshot James had in his video was unaddressed

Q: Did you think they were both canceled? Just James?

D: Both of them were cancelled in different ways. James was cancelled because other things were coming out that made Tati's claims kind of valid. I don't know there was just no truth. Guys would come out and make claims and then later took it back. Tati just got cancelled because she was a grown woman hating on an 18-year-old.

B: Tati just needed to be an adult really.

A: It's just so insane that's it's a real thing that happened

C: Yes and Jeffree Star getting involved and Tati making a video a whole year later!

B: At that point she was just in it for the views. And Shane Dawson went live after Tati's videos and freaked out.

A: Yes! He was like yelling and it was so bad. He's like a goner now.

Q: For those who felt that either of them were canceled, what was the goal of the cancellation?

D: With any young creator in an industry that's been going on for years, I think there's something that can bring down this guy's ego. Other people thought his ego was getting big and his name being big in the industry shouldn't have happened so fast. People were like finally! Knocking down someone who needs to earn it. Tati wanted to get back her spotlight. And take back things she taught him. She wanted to like teach him some sort of lesson. It was just like getting James out of the spotlight.

A: Ok but James has bounced back I don't even get it.

D: I feel like people don't stay cancelled

B: Like Shane Dawson stayed cancelled. All that stuff came out about him and then disappeared. But James kept creating content and wanted to be a part of it still so it's like on the person.

C: David Dobrik right now too.

A: Oh my god yes the tea.

C: He is trying so hard to not cancel himself but he's making it worse. And Tati and James was like the same thing they just kept bringing it back. Like they weren't changing or growing

A: Ok but the David Dobrik stuff is crazy. But it's been like coming. I don't know if anyone follows Trisha Paytas but she has been saying stuff but no one believed her cause she's insane.

C: Yeah maybe she wasn't that crazy

A: I don't follow her but her stuff comes up on my TikTok FYP all the time and I was like oh my god she was right.

C: His fandom just downplays it so much cause they're so loyal but now we saw it happen.

A: And he made like two apology videos already

B: They're just so bad. I mean they're good cause people address the situation but bad because they spend hours and hours and hours and hours thinking about how to say it without offending people but just tell the truth. Like the whole Laura Lee thing with the fake crying

D: That was a whole thing oh my god

B: Yeah apology videos are good but we know you're faking it so people will like you again. Like are you really apologetic

C: Yeah none of them are authentic and the fake crying I can't take it.

B: I don't know if they're rambling, sometimes I believe it more cause it's less scripted. But they're just so fake. But people feel like they need to do one in like a cancel culture routine

A: I just don't think we need cancel culture. Especially little things it won't matter the next few days. Cancelling is just ridiculous. People make mistakes. But when things are big that's a different story I don't know. But when it's miniscule it doesn't matter it's just petty

C: We talked about this in one of my classes. Like the concept of snowflakes – People are so ticked off about the tiniest things. Cancel culture made that ok. Cancelling someone for wearing the wrong shirt or wearing a crop top when they said they were conservative I don't know that's the first thing that came to mind.

A: Yeah but with major things it's also weird. It should be more calling people out then removing them from the universe. If that was the case then all of us should be cancelling honestly for the things we did as kids

D: Right!

A: I get they're in the public eye and they didn't expect it but they also didn't know they'd get big. They're just trying to learn, I mean hopefully they are. And cancelling makes it hard for people to learn because they just think they are horrible and unforgivable now

D: We are all about mental health now but also like let's cancel someone for hating a food. The two just don't mesh

B: It's not good but I see why it makes sense. I think it's so toxic but in some situations like they needed it. Like if they aren't learning at all

A: Ugh yeah I don't know. The whole YouTube community is just so weird these days

B: It's so different in a bad way

A: And all this social media makes things worse. It's one app to another to another to another.

D: I just watched the social dilemma and wow I want to delete everything and erase myself it's crazy. It's a lot. It was an escape and now I can't even associate myself

C: I talk about this with my parents. Like the things that creators get to do is absolutely insane. And the way they earned it is insane. Like the D'Amelios get to do all these things and make all this money and they just dance for 15 seconds on TikTok

A: Yes and now they have a TV show! And Dixie made a video with Vogue. I don't even like them

C: Charli is still 16 which is crazy to me

D: No hate. She started doing what she loved but she looks sweet and in reality she's grown this ego.

B: Like the video she did with the snails and the chef and James Charles. She was like "Oh yes I wish I reached 100 million followers in a year." And James said "99 million isn't enough for you?"

A: It's so bad for the younger generations. Being an influencer is a dream. People just focus on numbers and followers and what's good for social media. Social media doesn't let influencers grow up

B: It just keeps getting worse. Like it started with Tumblr. Making their page and posts perfect and then Instagram and then TikTok

C: Everything just competes with each other

A: And now YouTube has a TikTok type thing too. Ugh I just can't keep up.

Focus Group 5

Q: How often do you watch YouTube? Favorite things about YouTube? Why do you like it?

A: I watch a lot of YouTube. A lot of compilations. A lot of drag videos.

B: Once I get in, I always watch what's next. It's like a dark hole, and hours later I'm like oh it's dark outside.

C: I've never related to something more. It's like I was so addicted to Emma Chamberlain when she first started getting famous. I watched all of her videos in like two days I knew everything about her.

Q: What does it mean to you when someone on YouTube has been cancelled?

A: I feel like it depends on the situation. Sometimes it's like unnecessary internet drama and then it's like keeping people accountable.

D: I totally agree. Like the David Dobrik situation.

C: Oh my god the tea

A: That one is so bad

D: Yeah I don't know. He came out with two apology videos and they're both not good.

A: I was on a TikTok live and this guy was talking about his apology videos and asking about what people thought about it and it was insane. The comments were going crazy

Q: What actions would cause someone to be cancelled?

B: I think if people were abusing their fame or doing something they need to be held accountable for

Q: Have you ever liked a video/like the opposing/left comments?

B: Not really, but in the James Charles situation I unfollowed James, Shane and Jeffree

C: Oh my gosh yes when Tati came out with that video a year later

B: Yeah but now James was accused of all that other stuff recently. I was fully defending him at first but now I do not know.

C: Jeffree is just living as if nothing happened

B: Which is what he always does

C: Yeah and Shane has like fallen off the face of the planet.

B: He had a lot of stuff that came out too.

A: Yeah like his cat drama. Like I don't know if it's true but I can't follow you anymore

D: I used to love him. When he used to do the videos with the wig.

B: Yes and when he used to do the Dare the Dawson videos. I also love his boyfriend.

C: Yes Ryland still uploads I think.

Q: What were your reactions to the James/Tati situation?

D: My initial reactions were like you're a grown woman and it seemed like she was attacking someone younger than her with claims that had literally no proof. I got really on his defense because she was an older woman coming at him and he's gay. She was demonizing gay men which I did not like.

A: I was subscribed to her but I haven't watched her in like years. She was famous when like beauty people first started making their way on YouTube. There was like a group of beauty gurus

D: When I watched it also, I didn't know how the Shane stuff factored in. All in all it was just a bad situation.

B: Yeah that video came out like a year later and she was saying like Shane and Jeffree were targeting me and told me to put out this video

A: Yeah yeah yeah that's how we figured all of this out. She gave me Karen vibes in the first video

C: And it was like 40 minutes long. And if you don't have evidence. Like if you don't know something happened then don't talk about it. No receipts and James clapped back so hard

Q: Did you stray away from watching their videos after the scandal?

D: Not James but again I haven't watched Tati in years. But James I was gonna watch him more and advocate for him more

Q: Did the comments influence how you felt about the situation?

D: The comments shaped any opinions I had of Tati because I hadn't watched her in years.

A: It was all so insane and it started over gummy bears.

D: Literally. Whatever it's called. Sugar Bear Hair.

B: Yeah but he did it for free Coachella tickets, which I would've done the exact same thing too.

Q: Did you take a side?

D: James, of course. I didn't leave hate comments or anything.

Q: Did you think they were both canceled? Just James?

A: I think they were kind of both cancelled at one point. James more than she was maybe because he had younger followers. But everyone was talking about it and posting his follower count countdown

C: I literally had that countdown on while I was studying

B: Same! He was losing like a million at a time

A: It was like 6 million in three days. Crazy

Q: For those who felt that either of them were canceled, what was the goal of the cancellation?

D: I honestly think Tati thought James was abusing his platform. But people were cancelling both of them for different reason. They called her crazy after that video and then called James a pedo.

B: Yes the "bye sister" video

C: Yes and when the Harry and Meghan interview came out I saw a meme of the queen doing like a "Bye Princess" video

A: That was so good I love the internet

Q: What do you think about apology videos?

A: If you have a platform it's necessary just to speak on it. But if it's more major like sexual assault a video is not enough. They should do something to support the cause

D: And in my personal opinion, male celebrities and then bounce back quicker than women.

A: I agree with that.

D: For example, like Nessa

B: Oh my god yes

D: Took her a year to stop even getting comments

C: Trisha is the exception to all of this. She can't get cancelled and that's like her brand. She's gonna do stupid shit and move on

A: I have such a love hate relationship with her

C: I just stan her now honestly

B: Now that all the David Dobrik stuff came out she's like "told you so"

D: That's a good example too. Brands pulled out, but followers have kind of stayed the same. He puts out an apology video and people are ok with him now.

A: But now I wonder like how he is even going to put out content. He hasn't posted in a year but does a podcast too

D: I don't know what he's going to do but needs to take a minute

B: Yeah anyways I think that cancel culture manifested on the internet. But if you've seen the Britney Spears documentary they go over like Monica Lewinsky and it's the same just different media

A: True like it's always been there but now we've defined it

B: It's definitely different now because anyone can have their voice in it but it was showing Britney getting asked about what she did to Justin by the press and stuff like that

D: I saw a tweet that Oprah wanted to do an interview with her

C: The internet would break. Get her dad on that too

Q: Do you believe in cancel culture?

D: I have an unpopular opinion on this, because me and my sister debate it often. She's completely against it. I personally think that sometimes it's good because I think it's almost I compare it to #MeToo where people are being held accountable when things are unacceptable but I think sometimes it's unnecessary and becomes this hate fest so it depends on the situation. But people are being held more accountable than they used to be

B: I totally agree with you because stuff like the Charli situation where she was a brat. Like some people just don't like snails

C: And she's 15!

A: I was way more annoying at 15

D: And the Nessa thing was another example. And there's like the microinfluencer cancel culture. Like there's an astrologist that I followed that commented on black astrologists TikToks saying something wasn't real and then make the same exact video. This girl made a compilation and it was not good so I unfollowed her

B: That's like, do you know WhoWoreWhat on Instagram?

D: Yes yes yes! I saw that whole tea too. Like she should be held accountable

B: She's like stealing content from people with like no following and then turns off all the comments so people can't hate on her

D: She just keeps all the nice ones. This is an apology that would be worth it like saying "this inspired me I won't do it again" done.

B: Yeah I agree, something like that is like worth it. But Charli and her snails and losing a million followers I didn't think that was worthwhile

A: I think that she got more hate for hating snails then David did for like literally all his stuff. People were going insane on her.

B: It's so dumb but I love it