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An Analysis of Cancel Culture and Its Impacts on Brands and Influencers

Introduction

In the past year, the new “cancel culture” phenomenon has become a looming theme in the media, showing up in several different forms. When people think about the term “canceled” many would define this as a celebrity or influencer with some sort of following within a community being cut off and losing all credibility for something they have done. While this is a large part of the cancel culture, some of the major types of this culture include canceling, blackfishing, calling out/calling in, racial injustice, and Covid-19 pandemic canceling. This paper will explore the origin of cancel culture, the main reasons for being “canceled”, and real world examples from people who have been canceled by the public. Although it is important for influencers and celebrities to be conscious of what they are posting to avoid making these harmful mistakes, the newfound idea of a “cancel culture” has left no room for error when it comes to posting content. Taking accountability for mistakes and learning from them is extremely valuable. However, the goal of this epidemic is to tarnish the reputations of those who are affected by it to the point of no return. Cancel culture has placed a high amount of pressure on these public figures and is detrimental to how they must operate their businesses at all times.

There are many different interpretations of “Cancel culture” or “canceling” someone, but a widely viewed definition of canceling is “A collective attempt at ruining the reputation and livelihood of an individual or organization in response to a problematic or harmful action or

opinion” (Erin Bunch, 2020). Cancel culture has spread exponentially in 2020 for several reasons including the 2020 elections, growing social movements such as Black Lives Matter, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Although “cancel culture” has grown in the year 2020, this might have been a thing in the past if social media had been in existence. With endless media platforms, it is now easy to call out anything and everything if you have an opposing viewpoint or feel that it is offensive.

Blackfishing is a new term that can be a reason for the canceling of a public figure. This term stems from the term “blackface” and means “the phenomenon of non-Black influencers and public figures using bronzer, tanning, Photoshop, or even cosmetic surgery to change their looks to appear Black or mixed race” (Taylyn Washington-Harmon, 2020). The difference between blackface and blackfishing is that blackface is when someone alters their appearance using makeup to make fun of the African American culture, but blackfishing is when someone alters their appearance for monetary gain.

One of the most discussed examples of blackfishing in recent news involves Swedish influencer, Emma Hallberg. The 19 year old influencer was publicly called out for appropriating through the deep shade of makeup she was wearing in a selfie she posted (seen below). Hallberg defended herself, telling Buzzfeed “I do not see myself as anything else than white. I get a deep tan naturally from the sun” (Olivia Petter, 2018).

Calling out and calling in are two ways that people can be warned or have something brought to their attention that is insensitive and could lead to them being “canceled.” Calling out is when someone addresses the perceived wrongdoing of an individual publicly while calling in is addressing someone privately about an issue. Due to social media, calling out is a much more popular method of addressing issues in today’s society through the easy method of posting,

commenting, etc. Calling in can solve a problem through mature private discussion before it persists, but both are continuing to happen as a result of cancel culture.

Cancel culture has been brought about in large part through racial insensitivity and behavior during the Black Lives Matter Movement. The difference between this and other reasons for being “canceled” is that not just people with large followings are canceled for this racial insensitivity. Much of this canceling is due to silence during this movement. Many influencers and celebrities were called out for not posting or making a statement in support of this movement and instead choosing to stay quiet.

Many influencers and celebrities have been canceled by the public as a result of their pandemic behaviors during the past few months. Much of this is caused by public figures posting or saying one thing about the pandemic, and then doing another. Hypocritical actions during the pandemic have caused many influencers and celebrities to lose large followings and credibility from large groups of people through the media. This has caused public figures to have to tiptoe around issues while on social media or they could lose everything they have worked for over a single post. Many examples of this have been seen in the news after exposing large holiday gatherings thrown by celebrities. Although there could have been facts left out about people being tested before gathering, it does not take much for the public to assume hypocrisy and cancel a celebrity for it.

Case Study: Arielle Charnas

In today’s age, influencer marketing is an integral part of the marketing and advertising industry. It is one of the most accessible ways for consumers to communicate with brands. Influencers are expected to be role models for consumers because of their status and influence over the general public. When they slip up, they are directly attacked, or “canceled” by internet

users in order to protect their following from following their lead. Due to the social justice movements, the current political climate following the presidential election, and the Covid-19 Pandemic, influencers have been held to a higher standard than ever.

One influencer who has been closely looked at and critiqued since the start of the pandemic is Arielle Charnas. Arielle, the founder of the blog *Something Navy*, currently has over 1.3 million followers on Instagram and shared on her platform that she had tested positive for Covid-19 back in March. This initially sparked interest and concern to the general public because at this time tests were hard to come by unless you are elderly or have a compromised immune system, neither category which Arielle falls into. Word got around that she received a test outside an urgent care clinic where her close friend worked which caused Arielle to start receiving backlash from the public. Additionally, within just a few days of her positive diagnosis, she, her family, and their nanny packed up their belongings and broadcasted on social media that they would be traveling out to the Hamptons from their home in New York City. This ultimately resulted in extreme backlash and many of her followers tried to “cancel” her for being irresponsible during a world health crisis. Many people did not understand why it seemed like she was completely ignoring the severity of the pandemic as well as the fact that she could be endangering her family and others by traveling with a positive test result. After receiving a profuse amount of negative comments, Arielle limited all comments on her posts and took approximately a month break from social media. Upon her return, she posted saying, “Thank you for letting me take time to reflect and be with my family. It has opened my eyes in so many ways both personally and professionally and it is this growth that I am extremely grateful for.” and began to attempt to make her platform a more positive and impactful place for her supporters.

One way she did this was to highlight small businesses that needed help and support during this difficult financial year.

Case Study: Lime Crime

The beauty industry tends to be littered with scandal and controversy as a whole; however, the brand Lime Crime stands out as one of the most hated brands within the industry. Though the brand has been “canceled” multiple times throughout the years, they continue to sell makeup even in mainstream stores like Dollskill. From antisemitic costumes to identity theft, Lime Crime has proved to be problematic time and time again, but how have they survived throughout all of these scandals?

Lime Crime, founded by Doe Deere, launched in 2008. The indie brand was known for its loose pigments and glitters in bright colors. They later launched a line called Unicorn Lipsticks, which many members of the indie beauty community claimed to simply repackaged wholesale mica pigments that were being sold for a lot more than they were worth. Lime Crime has never admitted to repackaging the pigments despite overwhelming evidence that this was indeed the case. When people spoke up about this issue, Doe Deere allegedly sent out cease and desist letters and bullied bloggers into taking down negative reviews. She even asked her customers to flood the inbox of one blogger with emails about how amazing Lime Crime lipsticks were.

In 2012, Lime Crime released an eyeshadow palette called “China Doll.” The campaign featured a white woman dressed in traditional Japanese attire, even though the Lime Crime claimed to be celebrating Chinese culture. Additionally, the description for the palette was: “Don't let her milky skin, pouty mouth, and flushed cheeks fool you. Underneath the poised facade, there lies a heart of a tigress.” Many consumers called the brand on the obvious cultural

appropriation; however, Doe Deere posted a blog post claiming that she was engaging in cultural exchange and that appropriation is not real. This was not the first time founder Doe Deere had engaged in offensive behavior. In 2008, Deere dressed up as Adolf Hitler for Halloween. Her explanation for such an offensive costume was simply that she wanted to see how much she could get away with.

In 2014, the company was gaining a more mainstream status when they were picked up to be sold in Sephora. After only a few weeks, they were dropped from the prestigious cosmetics store due to an overwhelming amount of complaints from customers. Lime Crime was also picked up by Urban Outfitters this year and is still sold there to this day. Lime Crime also formally filed a lawsuit in 2014 against a beauty blogger for defamation, claiming that the blogger was giving Lime Crime negative reviews for profit due to the fact that the blogger was running ads on her site. This same year, the brand's website was hacked due to an outdated SSL certificate, and customers' credit card information was stolen with damages of up to \$10,000 per customer. Instead of emailing the customers about the breach, the company simply posted a graphic on Instagram adorned with rainbows and bright colors. Many believed that because of the lack of effort in contacting customers about such a large security breach, the company was trying to cover up the losses. By the time the company formally reached out to the customers who were affected, the damage had already been done, and many were no longer able to be reimbursed. On a page labeled "Controversy" on Lime Crime's website, the company claims that the SSL was indeed up to date and did not see it necessary to refund customers.

The finale in this rollercoaster of controversies included issues with ingredients in some of the products. In 2015, the FDA sent a letter to Lime Crime regarding the use of ultramarines and ferric ferrocyanide in their Velvetine Lipsticks. Neither of these ingredients had been

approved by the FDA, and Lime Crime simply shrugged it off as mislabeling. Many customers had inquired about these ingredients before the FDA stepped in and were subsequently blocked or ignored by the company.

Since 2016, Doe Deere, who had been the center of many of the controversies over the years, began to take a step back from the spotlight of the brand. She stepped down as CEO and took the role of “muse” rather than holding any official title in the company. Kim Walls took the role of global general manager in 2017 and has since streamlined the company and cleaned up the rough edges. The company has since regained the trust of many consumers and expanded to more mainstream stores such as ASOS and Ulta. They also beefed up their online security as a condition of the settlement of a class-action lawsuit from the security breach in 2014. Lime Crime also dedicated a section of their website to addressing many of these scandals and explaining their side of each problem. As the company has corrected many of the mistakes from the past, customers do not seem to feel strongly toward early controversies. Cancel culture can negatively affect the image of a brand; however, once Lime Crime became more transparent about their business practices and showed specific steps they took to fix each problem, they were able to build brand equity and expand.

Implications

So, what does this all mean for influencers and brands that are living and advertising during a time of cancel culture that has never been experienced in this capacity before? The most obvious of implications that result from heightened canceling of people and companies is an impending sense that all eyes are constantly watching and waiting for the next opportunity to drag an existing reputation through the mud. In a world in which social media gives a never before seen amount of control in the hands of consumers, this audience has the ability to put all

posts, new or old, from corporate or personal brands under strict scrutiny. Many influencers have shared their personal experiences with several mental health struggles that result from the pressure of perfection put heavily on those with a large following. For instance, Charli D'Amelio, a 16 year old TikTok dancing sensation with a follower count of over 100 million users, recently broadcasted herself on Instagram Live while having a mental breakdown over the hate she was getting for being canceled for having a bad attitude at a family dinner that was caught on film. Despite the fact that it is far from rare that a teenage daughter would behave in a sassy manner toward her parents from time to time, Charli lost almost a million followers and received a mass amount of hate over the incident. D'Amelio shared that “if this is the community that [she’s] in and the community that [she] puts [herself] in, [she] doesn’t know if [she] wants to do this anymore.” Similar to Charli’s situation, countless influencers who have experienced the brunt of cancel culture on social media platforms feel that dealing with hate messages, being demanded of perfection, and putting on a brave face despite the haters isn’t worth the gratification they receive from being a public figure. In many extreme circumstances, individuals have left platforms all together due to a loss of passion for what used to be a fun hobby for them, but that magic had been stripped away because of the downside of canceling.

Despite the fact that being canceled has nearly ruined many public figures’ lives, many cancellers believe they’re doing work for the greater good of American society by calling out peoples’ wrongdoings. For example, a white woman, Amy Cooper, was canceled in May 2020 after a video featured her calling the cops on a black birdwatcher, Christian Cooper, after he asked the woman to put her dog on a leash per the Central Park rules. The clip in which Amy claims she’s going to tell the police station that there’s an “African American man threatening [her] life” amassed over 50 million views on Twitter alone. The fact that the woman was

profiling Mr. Cooper based on the color of his skin, as well as filing a misleading police report on him, led to Amy Cooper being fired from her job, getting her custody of the dog revoked, and being charged with a misdemeanor. Very few people felt remorse over how much was taken away from the lady, as they believe that a woman who would be so outwardly racist to a harmless black man doesn't deserve any of the things that were stripped from her, including her reputation. Pro-cancellers, such as Pavel Paulinich, creator of the @KarensGoingWild Instagram account, say that "using social media to call attention to actions they don't agree with, is the only way to create consequences for those who have more power in society" (BBC News). There is a growing group of people that truly believe the implication of cancel culture is purging society, and social media specifically, of powerful creators that don't hold a strong moral standing.

However, many Americans disagree with those who support canceling, including President Obama who is quoted as saying "if all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far" on a show with Oprah Winfrey, who agreed. The toxicity that naturally comes along with microscopes being held up to every action an influencer takes has been highly scrutinized as of late. A recent letter from many recognizable names including J.K. Rowling argued that the reflex to cancel someone after one mistake rids our society of the beauty that is the norms of open debate. Regardless of the motive behind much of cancel culture being to elevate the voices that often go unheard, several people have contended that canceling someone completely mutes the voices of those being canceled. As a result, not all voices will be heard at the open conversation our country needs to have about things people do that cause them to be canceled, like using racist slurs or appropriating a culture. Additionally, it's a common argument that being canceled robs individuals or brands of the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, take new opinions into account, and genuinely change their course of action for the better.

Furthermore, the controversial canceling of influencers has come under critique recently, specifically if being cancelled over certain beliefs is justified. Kendall Vertes, an influential TikTok star who got her start on Lifetime's *Dance Moms*, was cancelled in 2020 solely because of her public endorsement of Trump. While many cancellers claimed they could never forgive or give a platform to a star who supports such a terrible President (in their own opinions), several opposing people argued that one's political belief shouldn't stand as grounds for being cancelled, as America is a two-party system with freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment. Nevertheless, Vertes lost a couple thousand followers on TikTok, but stood up for herself and backed her beliefs on Instagram. Similarly, a group of fans of Addison Rae were outraged when haters were trying to cancel the TikTok sensation over speculation of blackfishing. Rae had posted a Snapchat story with a dark spray tan for a photo shoot along with a filter that gave the entire picture a dark caramel hue. Users were outraged at the appearance that Addison purposefully used blackface, but the star denied these allegations. Several conversations surrounding the topic of how far fake tans and darkening filters are allowed to go sparked up on social platforms, but no verdict was reached on the matter.

As victims of cancel culture, brands and social media stars can suffer from devastating financial losses as their fan base dramatically shrinks in such a short amount of time. Rachel Ratke, an Instagram and YouTube influencer who graduated from Grady in 2020, has shared her fear of cancel culture because "losing the respect of [her] followers means losing [her] job and income." Ratke is paid a considerable amount of money to share sponsored posts on her social media from recognizable brands such as Fenty by Rihanna and Princess Polly Boutique. If her reputation were to be tattered by saying or doing something offensive, she would lose thousands of followers, and brands would no longer want to be associated with a figure that isn't admired,

forcing Rachel to find another source of income. On a larger scale, Olivia Jade, whose entire family was canceled over cheating their daughters' way into being admitted to the University of Southern California, lost remarkable brand deals after the truth came out to the public. Olivia Jade's collaboration palette with Sephora was revoked as many customers spoke out, one saying "I was a long time Sephora customer and will never buy anything from them again if they endorse this terrible unethical selfish lying brand." This lost brand partnership, along with sponsors from Amazon Prime and Smile Direct Club caused a monumental financial impact on Jade, along with the emotional toll she was bearing.

Conclusion

The cancel culture movement has proven to be an unrealistic method of confrontation towards those who have misspoken about or poorly acted on certain issues. As seen by the various ways in which influencers and brands are being cancelled, the examples explored in this essay, and the emotional and financial toll that can hit as a result of cancel culture, this is no lighthearted matter. Our society cannot expect perfection from every public figure or business, or everyone would be cancelled. This hypocritical way of thinking has ruined many careers instead of allowing room for growth and learning for those who have made mistakes in the media. At the end of the day, these public figures and influencers are normal people like all of us.

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