

Who Holds the Power: A Textual Analysis on the Cancellation of YouTube Star David Dobrik and the Vlog Squad

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The internet has created new pathways for the formation and implementation of social movements (Castells; Hill; Poell). Online or digital activism can be described as politically motivated actions on the internet aimed at achieving certain goals or changes for a group of people (McCaughey and Ayers). Elements of the internet – like its low cost, accessibility and ease of use – have created more egalitarian participation in social movements by removing traditional barriers of entry that marginalized groups had pre-internet age (Bennett and Segerberg; Vegh et al.). The use of online platforms, particularly social media, has been cited as a prominent tool used in successful modern social movements (Fileborn; Powell; Wood et al.). However, some have argued the internet is a means to cease activist efforts like the contemporary social movements to call out poor behavior that has been dubbed “cancel culture.” The purpose of this study is to get a deeper understanding of the elements that make a successful ‘cancelation’ of someone in power, who enabled and profited from creating a culture that actively harmed members of marginalized groups. In particular, this study utilizes a textual analysis to investigate the elements that were instrumental in cancel culture’s general goal of effectively creating behavioral and policy change towards an oppressor.

Cancel culture is a term coined by Black Twitter users to describe the mass outrage from the public towards a person or entity that has displayed disparaging actions or behaviors (Bromwich; Clark). It has been defined by writers and scholars in a variety of ways. Feminist scholar Lisa Nakamura describes it as a “cultural boycott” in which individuals agree to not “amplify, signal boost (or) give money to” entities and persons that have done controversial things to deprive them of their

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livelihood (Bromwich). David Ardit and Jennifer Miller argue that this type of activism involves the collection of “digital receipts,” usually in the form of screenshots, to put offensive behavior in the public spotlight. Eve Ng explains it as a withdrawal of support of “viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.” (623) from those who said or did something that is problematic. Lastly, writer Asam Ahmad explains it as “the tendency among progressives, radicals, activists, and community organizers to publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others” (Ahmad), although the tactic has been used by conservatives as well (Gibson; Paulson). The scholars above have all articulated that the goals of cancel culture are a mixture of bringing awareness to behaviors, de-platforming individuals, and hopefully changing the actions that are deemed unjust. Put simply, cancel culture encompasses collective ostracization on online platforms from the public towards actions of questionable morality, with an end goal of ceasing the livelihood of the wrongdoers and causing some kind of behavioral or policy change. However, there is no consensus on the means for reaching this change.

Cancel culture has faced choice critiques over the years, with politicians, celebrities and companies decrying that it does not work (Bowden; Kurtzleben; Radsken). Former President Barack Obama describes cancel culture as:

This sense that “the way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people and that’s enough” [...] That’s not activism. That’s not bringing about change. If all you’re doing is casting stones, you’re probably not going to get that far. That’s easy to do. (Guardian News)

In addition, former President Donald Trump, who has participated in cancel culture himself, also conveyed negative connotations about it. At the 2020 Republican National Convention, he stated “The goal of cancel culture is to make decent Americans live in fear of being fired, expelled, shamed, humiliated and driven from society as we know it” (Santucci). In scholarly texts, cancel culture has also been examined as a faulty iteration of activism that focuses on online harassment rather than an instrument that facilitates actual change in individual or institutional behavior (Jusay et al.; Lee and Abidin; Tandoc et al.). Its biggest criticism follows Evgeny Morozov’s idea of “slacktivism” or the act of an individual showing low-cost support for a cause without “helping the same cause in more productive ways” (Morozov). His idea has been heavily debated in academia and supported by empirical investigations within various fields including political science,

psychology and communications (Breuer and Farooq; Lane and Cin; Lee and Hsieh). On the opposing side, researchers have found public callouts of unfavorable behaviors to be effective in increasing the likelihood of future support and garnering offline action from the general public (Christensen, “Political,” “Simply”; Kristofferson et al.; Lee and Hsieh; Štětka and Mazák).

Very few studies have looked at what makes a successful cancel culture event, and within those limited examinations, there lacks a clear consensus on the role that social media users play in cancelation. Some scholars have found that media consumers can directly impact administration and cause creative changes by using a combination of strategic tactics like starting online petitions; utilizing hashtags on Twitter to spark critical discourse; writing letters to content creators; calling on companies to drop advertising or sponsorships for offenders; and then ceasing consumption of content from problematic entities (Anderson-Lopez; Ng). In addition, on the individual level, scholars have found that people commenting on social media posts and directly calling for a person to be canceled, can also be effective in stopping their livelihood and getting behavioral changes (Velasco). Whereas other scholars found that during cancellation events, virality can obscure a movement’s objective (Bouvoir); and that even when users speak about their grievances using a myriad of digital platforms, it does not guarantee a change in behavior from assailants with high social capital (Lawson), and particularly influencers with large followings. This present study aims to be one of the early explorations into identifying the roles that social media users play within newer digital social movements. Using the contemporary case of the cancelation of YouTuber David Dobrik, this study will evaluate the positions and actions that media users took throughout different stages of the event that helped to enact change.

Dobrik is a 26-year-old Slovakian-born immigrant who garnered a mass following on the video platform for creating short video skits with friends. He was the subject of an online cancellation after being the orchestrator of a “prank” that resulted in the sexual assault of a 20-year-old woman (Tenbarge). In 2014, Dobrik created the “Vlog Squad,” an award-winning collective of YouTube creators, that regularly uploaded pranks on the video-sharing platform until 2021 (Kile; Mendez II Shorty Awards). On March 16, 2021, a Business Insider article titled “A woman featured on YouTube star David Dobrik’s channel says she was raped by a Vlog Squad member in 2018 the night they filmed a video about group sex,” was published and changed the trajectory of the Vlog Squad’s success (Tenbarge).

Journalist Kat Tenbarge detailed the experience of the victim, who said she was given copious amounts of alcohol before she was sexually assaulted by Vlog Squad member Dominykas “Durte Dom” Zeglaitis (Tenbarge, “A Woman”).

Less than a week after the article came out, eleven companies dropped their partnerships with Dobrik including the grocery delivery service Hello Fresh; shaving razor company Dollar Shave Club, General Mills, Door Dash, Facebook, HBO Max, Audible and EA Sports (Billington; Fitch; Perellie and Bradley; Wong). According to Social Blade, the viewership and subscriber count on Dobrik’s YouTube also plummeted, with him losing 300,000 subscribers and a decrease of nearly 100 million video views before he posted an apology video on March 23 (Social Blade). A month later, Dobrik had lost nearly 500,000 subscribers and his overall viewership had decreased by two billion views (Social Blade). On March 25, 2021, YouTube announced that it had temporarily demonetized, or the process of ceasing all income made from YouTube videos by suspending advertisement placements (Thompson), on both Zeglaitis’ and all three of Dobrik’s YouTube channels citing that: “We have strict policies that prohibit sexual harassment on YouTube and take allegations of sexual assault very seriously. We have temporarily suspended monetization on David Dobrik and Durte Dom channels for violating our Creator Responsibility policy” (Tenbarge and Sonnemaker). This situation even garnered mainstream news and entertainment attention, with articles appearing in the New York Times, Washington Post and the BBC among other publications (Andrews; Criddle; Lorenz “David”). In early April 2021, Saturday Night Live portrayed a comedy skit depicting the heedlessness of the Vlog Squad-style videos and Dobrik’s apology (Haasch; Jennings). The fashion of Dobrik’s decline is consistent with that of the idea of being “canceled” – with his cancellation having a strong emphasis on stopping his streams of income, behavioral change and policy enforcement.

Dobrik is not the first YouTuber to be canceled (Dodgson; Lawson; Haylock) and certainly not the first person to be called out for creating a toxic environment that perpetuates rape culture. The stories that arose from the cancellation come after the height of the broader #MeToo movement, which had been instrumental in the takedown of several famous men who have abused their power to sexually assault and harass women, including Harvey Weinstein, R. Kelly, Matt Lauer, Mario Batali and more (Carlsen et al.; Glamour). However, Dobrik is among the few popular YouTubers to be demonetized for defamatory actions, joining Logan Paul, who was demonized indefinitely in 2018 after uploading a video of a dead body when

visiting a suicide forest in Japan (Jarvey). Dobrik is also among the few YouTubers whose cancellation made it to mainstream news outside of YouTube communities, joining YouTubers like Jeffree Star and James Charles, who have been in the press for instances of racism and pedophilia (Godwin; Lorenz “The Problem”; Sanfronova). Dobrik is also one of few YouTubers to be dropped from every single endorsement and partnership they had, including him having to step down from a company he co-founded, the disposable camera company Dispo, amongst outcries from the public (Porter). The social environment had not only caused a social rejection of Dobrik but also caused big companies and organizations to dissolve long-standing relationships with the profitable creator. As cancel culture becomes a defining method of collective action in modern times, inquiry into how it functions or disrupts our notions of society is necessary to understand the present and future of American culture.

Related Work

Social Media and Power. Social media has unequivocally changed the communication environment. Prior to the internet, the primary means for the mass public to get information was through newspaper and television network programming (Eldridge; Graber; Mondak; Park; Raymond), with companies and organizations deciding the content and disseminating it from a top-down approach. The disruption caused by social media has not only decentralized where the public gets information from (Chan; Kelly; Lăzăroiu; Mitchell et al.) but also enabled the masses to add commentary and share their own perspectives on a litany of public platforms (Carlson; Hermida et al.; Kalsnes and Larsson). A developing area of communication scholarship has looked at the emancipatory potential of social media for disadvantaged groups.

In an analysis of rape justice, Powell asserts that communication technology may be a viable alternative for victims of sexual assault in their justice-seeking measures. In the study, they found that when victims share stories of sexual violence on social media, perpetrators may receive widespread social repercussions that would not happen if victims just went through the traditional criminal justice system (Powell). In addition, for victims who do not and cannot go to the police, the online sphere may help them get “informal justice” (Powell 573). The ideas surrounding online measures to empower sexual assault victims and combat rape culture has been studied by other scholars (Fileborn; Wood et al.) and successfully

shifted the power paradigm in the highly successful #MeToo movement (Swanson and Szymanski).

In a study on the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, Asogawa looked at how WhatsApp and Twitter were used to radicalize Nigerian youth to want change. They found that 95% of their sample of Kogi State University students' awareness about the election was from social media, and the commentary they saw about each candidate in relation to social change motivated them to vote (Asogwah). Students specifically stated that they used social media because it was cheaper and more accessible than traditional media (Asogwah). Wilberforce Dzisah corroborated the influence of social media and youth political participation in an analysis of two Ghanaian elections. They concluded that access to social media promoted democratic discourse and subsequently equipped the youth to join in civic conversations (Dzisah). Several scholars have shown that social media has leveled the playing field for previously marginalized groups to participate in public discourse and activate social change, in ways that they could not before due to a lack of resources (Bakker and de Vreese; Enjolras et al.; Valenzuela et al.).

The literature shows that the diffusion of public opinion on social media can redefine power structures in modern society, where users are more emboldened to participate in the change they want to see. This study will further this premise, as it investigates the role social media users played in a case revolving around sexual violence and Dobrik's cancellation.

Social Media and the Façade of Power. Through a critical approach, scholars have also examined how social media has exacerbated existing disparities and created a falsehood of digital democracy. The core of this research is ideas surrounding social determinism, or that society itself is ultimately the governing force that shapes cultural values, social structures, and technologies like social media (Mackenzie and Wajcman; Thompson). From this standpoint, several questions have been raised about the effect of social media and who is in power.

In an examination of social media use in authoritarian regimes, Tucker et al. found that social media platforms reflect the power dynamics of a given society. In their review, previously excluded groups had new access to political discussions via social media, but restrictive governments also used social media as a political tool for their own goals that in some ways repressed public conversations (Tucker et al.). Loader and Mercea found similar findings in their study on social media's disruptive potential. They concluded that social media could make for a more participatory environment, but traditional interests of larger communicative powers

that have an invested interest in private social media companies can suppress the public at a whim (Loader and Mercea). In an investigation on online political participation amongst disenfranchised youth, a study contended that social media comes with a caveat of repressive tactics, like censorship and surveillance, which ultimately inhibit users from seizing the full potential of their civic action (Lee). In addition, it was found that social media can reflect the already existing socioeconomic bias in a society because it only alleviates environmental barriers while systematic institutional blockages still exist (Weber et al.).

In a deep dive into social media and society, Fuchs shares several shortcomings of social media including the confines of its participatory culture that are restricted by private ownership; the effects of the political economy on platforms that exploit everyday users; and the overall functions of social media that operate under corporate control. He argues that social media can give an illusion to the public that they are seen and heard but ultimately it works for corporate interest (Fuchs). While social media instigated large discussions about Dobrik, it does not mean that users were the instrumental force in his cancellation. A critical lens has been applied for this study to identify interrogate and define the power dynamics of the cancellation.

Social Media, Social Movements and Civic Engagement. One of the ways that users of social media attempt to influence the public is through the means of online activism. Researchers have often had mixed conclusions when examining the ways that online activism functions.

Kevin Lewis, Kurt Gray, and Jens Meierhenrich examined the Save Darfur campaign on Facebook and its impact on creating social awareness. The Save Darfur Coalition was a human rights advocacy group, whose goal was to raise awareness and mobilize global support for human rights in the Darfur region in Sudan (Lynch). At the height of the organization's efforts, it had 1.1 million members on its Facebook page, who raised more than \$90,000 (Lewis, Gray, and Meierhenrich). However, the researchers found when they removed the top 1% of the most active members – and their recruits and donations – 62.84% of the membership and 46.54% of the donations disappeared. In addition, most of the members who did donate, did so one time and failed to recruit more people (Lewis, Gray, and Meierhenrich). Although it spread awareness, the campaign failed to mobilize the masses or create substantive donations.

Kony 2012 was an American-based documentary aimed at getting political intervention from world powers to promote the detainment and arrest of fugitive Ugandan guerilla war criminal Joseph Kony (Vidal et al.). Melissa Janoske,

Rowena Briones, and Stephanie Madden looked at the success and weaknesses of the Kony 2012 campaign by analyzing 500 tweets, 170 Facebook comments, 180 blog posts and 100 YouTube video responses. They found that in general, social media users felt moved to do something after watching the documentary, but they seldom did. They concluded that the initial hype surrounding the campaign did not lead to sustainable action or investment from consumers (Janoske et al.). In a separate study (Madden et al.), the researchers also found that some of the negative emotions from the documentary were misdirected at the organizations trying to help, with people questioning their reputation and legitimacy, rather than collective action against the real problem (Madden et al.). Another study on Kony 2012, also found that despite the virality of the documentary, which had more than 100 million views, neither the public nor global organizations took substantial action toward a solution (Glenn).

On the other hand, research shows that initial exposure through online activism can increase political action in some cases. In a study of slacktivism and civic action, Yu-Hao Lee and Gary Hseih investigated if initial low-cost low-risk behavior could lead to subsequent actions. They found that individuals who sign an online petition were more likely to donate money to a related charity by roughly 20%. (Lee and Hseih). In a 2011 online survey by Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication and Ogilvy Public Relations, researchers discovered empirical evidence from 2,000 Americans, that revealed that social media users who partake in slacktivist behaviors online are twice as likely to volunteer than those who do not. Slacktivists were also more likely to recruit others to sign a petition, contact political representatives and request others within their circles to donate (Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide and The Center for Social Impact Communication at Georgetown University). Hao Peng, Ceren Budak, and Daniel M. Romero also found that online measures, like social media, can influence an individual to participate in an in-person movement. In their examination of the Black Lives Matter Movement, they found that social media users are more likely to join an on-the-ground event and re-participate than those who don't use social media (Peng et al.).

The collective actions against David Dobrik from the public could align with either position from scholars. This examination will focus on social media users' direct calls to action and involvement with the loss of corporate support for Dobrik as a result of the news article. This study aims to answer these two research questions: What reactions and calls to action did social media users have to news

stories about David Dobrik's involvement in the sexual assault? What role did social media users have during the cancellation of David Dobrik?

Methodology

To understand the involvement of social media users in David Dobrik's cancellation, a textual analysis was applied to comments on social media. A textual analysis is a qualitative analytical procedure designed to analyze how language, symbols, pictures and patterns within the text, are used to convey messages about society (Burrows; McKee). With an emphasis on how texts usually represent conflicts, congruences and friction between an individual and the larger social structures, textual analyses is a systemic way to analyze the literal and hidden meaning in messaging (Byrne; Fairclough and Fairclough). Textual analysis has been used to understand social media comments related to domestic and sexual violence (Adekoya et al.; Al-Zaman; Kosloski et al.), sexism in the media (Sensales et al.) and callouts of poor behavior (Pennington).

For this study, Twitter was chosen as the social media platform of focus because it allows for widespread conversation across different demographics (Brock); facilitates dialogue of trending or current topics (Madani et al.; Zubiaga et al.); and allows everyday users to interact with media creators and brands (Einwiller and Steilen; Mamic and Almaraz). After the article was published, the term "David Dobrik" was trending on Twitter, with over 200,000 tweets from users speaking about Dobrik's facilitation and complacency during the assault, which was still posted on his YouTube (B). Co-currently the term "Vlog Squad" and "Durte Dom," Zeglaitis' pseudonym, was also trending with users highlighting his history of sexual assault accusations that date back to 2017 (Bergman), and overall misogynistic and inappropriate behaviors (Asarch) – all of which had been documented in various Vlog Squad videos. Twitter commentary has also been used in previous studies about cancel culture (Anderson et al.; Lawson).

To understand any change in the messaging throughout the different stages of Dobrik's cancellation, Twitter commentary on posts from three different newspaper articles that were published at different times of the cancellation was analyzed. Three prominent news publications were chosen, as they represent entities that have reputable journalistic integrity and yield a large readership. The first article chosen was the initial article about the victim's story, which was posted by *Business Insider* on March 16, 2021. This article was posted on Twitter by the author, Kat Tenbarge,

on the same date and yielded 512 comments. The next article chosen was a *New York Times* article titled “David Dobrik, Losing Sponsors and Fans, Steps Down from App He Co-founded,” which was posted on March 20, 2021. This article was written on March 19, 2021, and posted on the *New York Times*' main Twitter page and yielded 38 comments. The last article chosen was another *Business Insider* article, titled “YouTube is temporarily demonetizing David Dobrik's channels following a rape allegation against his former Vlog Squad cohort Dom Durte,” which was published on March 26, 2021. This article was posted by the main *Business Insider* Twitter account, on the same day it was posted, and yielded 65 comments. All the comments from each Twitter post were manually collected and analyzed.

A thematic analysis was then applied to the data to draw out patterns and larger themes. Thematic analysis is commonly used in conjunction with qualitative studies, to effectively code and organize the data in ways to identify topics and ideas that arise from the data (Braun and Clarke). The major themes of Twitter users' commentary per stage of cancellation were then organized chronologically in order to answer the research questions.

Findings

Within this investigation period, 615 Twitter comments were captured and analyzed. Nearly 90% of Twitter users' reactions came from the first *Business Insider* article, with a sharp decline during the middle of the cancellation and a slight peak towards the end. The cancellation produced six distinct themes, with the most variety of reactions happening at the beginning of the cancellation, which are discussed below (see Table 1).

The Beginning: Not Shock, Happiness, But It's Behind a Paywall? Twitter users had extremely polarizing reactions to the first news article, which encapsulated the themes of skepticism, predictability, and joy. Most of the Twitter's discussion on Tenbarge's post was a backlash towards the article. This backlash seemed to be centered on anger toward the paywall that popped up before one could read the article (see Table 1, quotation 1-6). Some users who were upset about the paywall felt that it stopped the public from becoming more aware of the occurrence, with one user stating “no offense, and this may not be directly your doing, but people shouldn't have to pay for media that involves rape allegations. i feel that it's quite wrong and abhorrent to do so.” A good portion of commenters used the existence

of the paywall to discredit the victim's story or argue that Tenbarga was trying to profit off of sexual violence (see table 1, quotations 7-9). In response to a user requesting for Tenbarga to give them access to the story, another user commented "It seems like everyone wants to make money off the victim so....really sad."

Other forms of backlash included straight denial of the story like a user stating, "the fakest accusations I have ever seen in my entire life," and other users accusing the victim of being an attention seeker, like this user stating "That was so long ago. Why would she just start talking about this now? I think shes trying to catch attention. But remember it's only my opinion." It is important to note that within the article, Tenbarga not only details the instance from 2020 but also reviews previous accusations of sexual harassment or assault by Zeglaitis that Dobrik was made aware of. Some of these accusers had shared their own stories publicly, via YouTube videos. While others had shared it privately, and directly contacted Dobrik or Zeglaitis about the wrongdoing to no avail (Tenbarga).

The second most frequented commentary was unsurprised responses (see table 1, quotations 10-11). These users were familiar with the Vlog Squad's content and knew something of this nature was going to come out eventually, as this comment states:

this is 100% not a surprise. their whole thing about dom in the vlogs is that he's essentially a sexual predator. so when it turns out to actually be true suddenly they're retracting the whole thing? it makes no sense. they told on themselves before this allegation was even made.

In some cases, the users recollected previous apprehension and uncomfortable feelings watching the content and felt that the Vlog Squad trivialized the severity for comedic sake (see Table 1, quotations 12-13). Famously, former Vlog Squad member Gabby Hanna – who revealed that she suffers from bipolar disorder (Smith) – said that she endured extreme bullying from the group and had to leave to protect her mental health (Theil and Cheong). Some of the things she cited as the reason for her 2017 departure include Dobrik constantly body shaming her and criticizing her appearance by frequently calling her "ugly" and unattractive (Bernardini; Theil and Cheong). Social media users who expected public allegations of the Vlog Squad harming people to be made, however, rarely made any direct calls for any reprimands or consequences towards Dobrik.

Date	Theme	Topic	Illustrative Quote
March 16 (Start of Cancellation)	Skepticism because of paywall	Not paying for the article	(1) "Not paying a dollar homie" (2) "Why do we have to pay for this" (3) "Ok but the fact that we have to pay to read this is kinda shitty" (4) "Why is this behind a paywall?" (5) "Why pay wall it though? I don't see how that will help the victim at all" (6) "Trigger Warning: you have to subscribe to read the article." (7) "Insider has always been a disgusting company. I'm glad this girls story was put out there, BUT they didnt do this to help her. 100% for money, obviously. I hope the girl gets justice but this reporter and her article are a joke. 'Well golly gee sir i just do my job'. what a cunt"
		Accusations of exploitive journalism	(8) "Trying to do good by helping the girls have a voice but we have to pay to hear that voice. Disgusting." (9) "Did you put this behind a paywall to get money off of a girl's sexual assault story?!? I am so glad I got a free version"
	Inkling that this would happen	Watched Dobrik's channel and saw Durte Dom's behavior	(10) "As a former fan of many years, I'm not surprised. David and his team should be held accountable. David should've done a lot of things by now, and addressing/correcting/apologizing doesn't cover it." (11) "when im watching david's vlog, im skipping every part Durte Dom is in because of how he actes. And ngl i always thought that this (being accused of rape) was gonna happen to him one day." (12) "Anyone who's watched the vlog from the beginning knows about all of this shit. For me I saw many things that were happening as fucked up but since there was such positive reactions to the videos and millions upon millions of views I began to be desensitized to a lot of it."
		Felt uncomfortable watching the content before	(13) "Yo I remember this vlog actually, but David just keeps laughing and all his friends laughing so I thought its just something funny" (14) "Thank you for magnifying this young lady's voice and getting her story out there where she can be heard." (15) "Your reporting is excellent" (16) "Thank god. Someone finally explaining what this is about." (17) "Good job with this one! They deserved to be outted"
Happiness	The story has outed David	(18) "This story really breaks my heart. Full support to every victim" (19) "Thank you for working so hard on this story. I'm so glad she finally got to tell it." (20) "Thank you for giving victims of SA a platform to be heard and to have justice for the voiceless. You are doing great work for uncovering these criminal acts people do."	
	Support for victims	(21) "Thank you so much Kat for reporting this. We believe you Hannah and we stand with you."	
March 20	Unaware of the situation	Does not know David Dobrik	(22) Who? (23) I'm sorry who the fuck? A nobody until this boost you just gave him. (24) This that goofy dude y'all kept reposting to get a free Tesla? (25) "There is nothing comedic about his content. The bullying, the racist jokes, the anti semitic jokes, the sexual assault en the borderline casting coach porn... yes let's call it fast paced comedy"
		Dobrik is troublesome	(26) "Good. This man facilitated a rape. He profited off of a woman's assault and trauma. Also has a long history of racist and sexist content and former members of this group have accused him of bullying and a toxic environment." (27) "I hope more attention goes to power imbalance issues and assaults in the future."
	Power imbalance and history of issues	Cancel David	(28) "Cancel him"

			(29) <i>"The Andrew Cuomo of Youtube? Can we just cancel everyone and get this over with?"</i>
March 25	Unsatisfied reactions	YouTube needs to do more	(30) <i>That really doesn't mean anything. Didn't they say they were doing the same to Shane during his scandal. It's just a public statement they make while the dust settles and they'll monetize him again.</i> (31) <i>Temporarily, huh? Youtube making those hard decisions against the sexual predators who earn them their money.</i> (32) <i>"it should be permanent."</i> (33) <i>"it should be permanently, wtf youtube Only temporary?"</i> (34) <i>Youtube bears more responsibility than this. They have encouraged this type of content for years.</i> (35) <i>"What does this really do long term, though?"</i> (36) <i>"Great to see some action. But temporarily?"</i> (37) <i>"Come on @YouTube knows that they won't be uploading anyway for a while. So am i to assume that by the time david is back uploading he has his montization back? Pretty disappointing."</i> (38) <i>"Aka we're gonna pull ads then when this dies down we're gonna put them back while no one notices."</i>

Table 1. Themes Identified and Exemplary Quotes

The last reaction was happiness towards Dobrik being “exposed” (see Table 1, quotations 18-21). These tweets ranged from general “thank you” to the author, or compliments to the reporting like this comment: “gottem good. Thank god for journalism, the only way to bring the big ones down.” These users were also more likely to add supportive messages directly to the victim, like this: “I believe you Hannah. Thank you for coming forward I know it wasn’t an easy decision” (see Table 1, quotations 18-21). These joyous and happy tweets however were less frequent than other commentaries and were more likely to be short responses.

The Middle: Cancel Dobrik, But Who Is He Again? Four days after the Business Insider article was posted, the New York Times wrote about the situation, reviewing the details of the sexual assault allegations and actions companies took in response. It is important to note that at this time, more women came out about their own experiences of being assaulted or harassed by Zeglaitis and posted stories on Twitter and TikTok (Mehta), in the #MeToo movement style – which is marked by sexual assault survivors created online threads or videos to share their story on public platforms to bring awareness (Gill and Rahman-Jones). Commentary on this tweet was extremely sparse, however, almost all the reactions were related to two themes: people who were unaware of who Dobrik was and people who were happy something was being done.

Several social media users had no idea who Dobrik was and expressed confusion over why the New York Times wrote a story about him (see Table 1, quotations 22-24). Some users even accused the newspaper of giving Dobrik a

“boost” in publicity by writing about him in the first place (see Table 1, quotation 23). One commenter even mentioned that the *New York Times* had a paywall as well and that would stir away people from reading the otherwise “shitdrivel” story about someone no one knows.

On the other end, Twitter users expressed happiness about the revelations surrounding Dobrik but in more substantive ways than earlier in Dobrik’s cancellation (see Table 1 quotations 25-26). These users historicized Dobrik’s deprecating behavior, how he profited from the situation and how the current conversation can illuminate how power imbalances can silence sexual assault victims (see Table 1 quotations 27). Dobrik was and had been an extremely popular YouTuber when the allegations came out. Dobrik’s YouTube, simply named “David Dobrik,” was the channel where all the Vlog Squad’s videos were posted, amassing nearly 19 million subscribers and more than 8.2 billion cumulative views on 471 videos as in 2021 (Social Blade). Not only was Dobrik the figurehead for the Vlog Squad, but according to Dobrik himself he also managed and organized the content, wrote out scripts for their videos, told members to solicit guests, took part in editing every video, and uploaded them on YouTube (*Entertainment Tonight*). Dobrik also capitalized immensely from the YouTube channel, receiving major brand endorsements from companies, even proclaiming that he makes \$275,000 a month from YouTube ads alone (*Men’s Health*; Monton). In 2020, he ranked at number nine on the Forbes list of top-earning YouTubers, earning \$15.5 million (Berg).

Other reactions were individuals correcting the language used by the New York Times, like this one “It’s not just sexual assault allegations, it’s straight-up rape.” Several users explicitly stated that David needed to be “canceled” (see Table 1, quotations 28-29). Responses in this stage also did not reflect any calls to action but showed that there was an increase in awareness regarding the issue.

The End: Unsatisfied. The end of Dobrik’s cancellation marked a new string of reactions from Twitter users that were all centered on the same sentiment: people were not happy with YouTube’s decision to temporarily demonetize Dobrik.

Twitter users were mostly disappointed in the actions YouTube took because they claimed it was not enough (see Table 1 quotations 30-33). Users with these sentiments had simple statements like “Make it permanent” and more elaborate responses like:

He profited off of organizing, filming and then publishing a r*pe on THEIR PLATFORM!!!! Their no tolerance for sexual harassment or assault

obviously isn't that strict. I get more and more pissed off about this whole situation everyday. Remove his channel. This is disgusting.

Commenters also used this moment to speak about YouTube's history of allowing and promoting demeaning content – that is racist, xenophobic, sexist and transphobic (Bryant; Lewis, Marwick and Partin) – on their platform (see Table 1, quotation 34). Several users also questioned the long-term effects of YouTube's decision, citing that the temporary demonetization will go away and Dobrik will come back seemingly unscathed and make more content (see Table 1 quotations 35-38). One Dobrik sympathizer felt that YouTube's actions were misdirected and done without due process:

Also YouTube taking sides on stuff they don't even know it true is f'd up he worked his ass off for his channel doesn't matter if what they accuse him or not that's his private business not YouTube's business to demonetize.

On the other hand, a small number of users were satisfied with YouTube's decision, commenting things like “good,” “yes,” and “finally.” Commentary on Twitter at the end of Dobrik's cancellation was extremely sparse, in comparison to the first day, and lacked a diversity of thought about the actions taken against Dobrik.

Discussion

David Dobrik's cancellation represents the power of the internet in helping social movements, like that of cancel culture, triumph in creating change. However, this analysis of Twitter commenters showed that users' involvement in creating the change was minimal. In fact, if Dobrik's cancellation was contingent on only social media users, there would be no consequences because the commentary lacked a consensus on whether people saw his involvement as problematic and an equitable punishment for those who did. Discussion on Twitter showed that although public awareness was growing, it did not mean everyone was on the same page about canceling Dobrik.

The first article yielded the most contentious reactions from Twitter users, who were more focused on the presentation of the article than the actual content. Most users were perplexed about paying to get access to the article, although the author explained that paywalls support investigative journalistic pieces that uncover wrongdoings. Users' resentment towards paying for the article, turned into accusations against the authenticity and truth of the content. As seen in previous movements, some social media users' increased awareness became misdirected

anger towards the author(s) and the victim (Madden et al.). This reaction from users can cause further transgressions on the victim because doubt was cast on the story, even if the user could not read it; and people discredited the publications, calling them “money-hungry” instead of entities that could do social justice work. In the previous literature, the misdirected anger of the masses towards entities exposing an issue was related to the overall ineffectiveness of civic engagement (Madden et al.). A similar result can be concluded from the current movement.

In the realm of awareness, many social media users were able to confirm that their initial uncomfortable feelings towards Dobrik’s content were valid. This evoked self-reflexivity in Twitter users who expressed their own complacency in watching Vlog Squad videos with troublesome plots. However, a large portion of users did not know who Dobrik was or care about the situation. This could be the result of *New York Times* general readers not being privy to YouTube creatives drama, and the articles not linking Dobrik’s situation to the greater conversations about rape culture. In other cancel culture studies, researchers have asserted that without a linkage to a more mainstream movement, injustices that happen in niche communities can fail to get widespread support from the masses (Lawson).

Lastly, the lack of calls for action was a key theme in social media users’ responses. Throughout the cancellation, users mostly reflected on their personal feelings towards Dobrik, what they understood about the situation and their interest in the story unfolding. However, little retort was given to calling for reform or organized requests to companies to stop working with Dobrik. In some of the previous studies on cancel culture, social media users’ direct calls to brands, companies, and corporations were instrumental in the plight of the cancellation (Anderson et al.; Velasco). For Dobrik, users’ reactions seemed stagnant and remained online, with no indication that any offline civic action occurred. On the last day of the event, users were the most vocal about wanting more consequences for Dobrik from YouTube, after the slew of corporations already decided to stop working with him.

This analysis showed that social media commentary had barely any influence on the directive actions taken to cancel Dobrik, but he was still effectively de-platformed and changed his behavior. His cancellation was still successful despite the divisive and mismanaged reactions of social media commenters, which indicates that there were bigger powers that were instrumental in Dobrik’s cancellation than the everyday Twitter user.

Limitations and Conclusion. The study yielded some natural limitations. This study focused on Twitter user reactions only, to get a general understanding of social media responses from the most conversational platform. Any future research on the subject matter can broaden the sample pool by looking at other social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Tik Tok and Reddit. Secondly, there were other posts than just news articles that documented the situation as it unraveled. These included podcasts, YouTube videos, Twitter threads and several other articles from smaller news outlets and entertainment sites. This study only reviewed commentary on three of the most circulated and read articles to exemplify the most prominent media content and reactions at different stages.

Cancel culture can be used to trigger social consequences against individuals who display poor behaviors. Social media plays a role in these social-justice-oriented movements by bringing awareness and creating larger discussions about them. Cancel culture has become a defining term in the lexicon of contemporary movements and has become a go-to for the public to utilize when they perceive wrongdoing. Highly credible newspapers also help to instruct change by bringing it to mainstream attention. However, social media can also be ineffective in creating change due to the same democratic participatory elements of the web that can get a movement going in the first place. For cancel culture, social media commentary can work to stifle change because it can propagate diverse perspectives that can work against the goal of the larger movement. However, when larger authorities direct the change, social media commentary is almost an insignificant factor. Thus, the emancipatory potential of social media during cancel culture can be highly contingent on bigger entities with power like companies and corporations. As progressive as newer media technologies boost their platforms to be, the same corporate gatekeepers of traditional times can have the same influence and stronghold on our current media landscape. Future studies on cancel culture should investigate the power play of social media discussions versus corporate actions to further explore the power dynamics of what is instructing the change that occurs. Despite this exploration into a YouTube star, a similar study can also be conducted on canceled politicians, celebrities and even brands.

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