

**“#CANCELSPOTIFY THAT’S THE ENTIRE TWEET!” –
A LOOK INTO CANCEL CULTURE ON TWITTER IN
THE CASE OF SPOTIFY AND JOE ROGAN**

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ABSTRACT

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<p>In recent years, the phenomenon of cancel culture has arisen as a prevalent part of public discourse causing turmoil for various individuals, organizations, and corporations. By cancel culture people mean a modern form of activism prevalent especially online, which seeks to socially ostracize or remove agents guilty of misdeeds from positions of power. The spread of cancel culture has been explained by factors such as consumers being both more demanding and aware of societal issues and the increase in polarization especially on social media. Various phenomena around digital platforms and the modern online discourse have also played a part in increasing such discussion. However, a more detailed understanding of cancel culture and the specific circumstances leading to it are still not clearly understood. In this study, by applying discourse analysis to tweets used to participate in cancel culture I seek to achieve a better understanding of the motives behind cancellation actions. From the data consisting of 126 tweets, six discourses were found: Cancelling based on practicality, Cancelling based on misinformation or disinformation, Cancelling based on Spotify’s inadequate payment policies, Cancelling based on communality, Criticism of cancel culture, and Cancelling as atypical behavior. These results contribute to the previous academic studies on cancel culture by providing additional details on the use of language in cancelling situations and by supporting some of the previous findings. Recommendations for further future research on cancel culture are also made.</p>	
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TIIVISTELMÄ

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<p>Viime vuosien aikana cancel-kulttuurin nimeä kantava ilmiö on yleistynyt olennaiseksi osaksi julkista keskustelua samalla aiheuttaen sekasortoa henkilöiden, organisaatioiden ja yritysten keskuudessa. Cancel-kulttuurilla viitataan moderniin aktivismin muotoon, jonka tavoitteena on sosiaalisesti syrjäyttää tai poistaa valta-asemasta väärinkäyttöksiin syyllistynyt toimija. Cancel-kulttuurin leviämistä on selitetty useilla tekijöillä kuten kuluttajien kasvaneella tietoisuudella ja vaatimuksilla yhteiskunnallisia tekoja kohtaan sekä etenkin sosiaalisessa mediassa kasvaneella polarisaatiolla. Tämän lisäksi lukuisat digitaalisten alustojen ominaisuudet, kuten algoritmit, ovat edesauttaneet cancel-kulttuurin yleistymisessä. Tästä huolimatta tutkijat eivät ole toistaiseksi saavuttaneet tyhjentävää ymmärrystä cancel-kulttuurista ja siihen johtavista tekijöistä. Tässä tutkimuksessa pyrin saavuttamaan syvällisempää ymmärrystä cancel-kulttuurista ja sitä edeltävistä vaiheista hyödyntämällä diskurssianalyysia twiitteihin, joilla ihmiset osallistuvat cancel-kulttuurin. 126 twiitin aineistosta oli löydettävissä kuusi diskurssia: käytännöllisyyteen perustuvat cancel-toimenpiteet, misinformaatioon tai disinformaation perustuvat cancel-toimenpiteet, Spotifyn riittämättömään maksupolitiikkaan perustuvat cancel-toimenpiteet, yhteisöllisyyteen perustuvat cancel-toimenpiteet, cancel-kulttuurin kritiikki ja tavallisesta poikkeavaan käytökseen perustuvat cancel-toimenpiteet. Nämä löydökset tukevat aiempien tutkimuksien havaintoja ja tuovat uusia näkökulmia cancel-kulttuurissa käytettyyn kieleen liittyen. Lopussa esitän myös jatkotutkimusehdotuksia cancel-kulttuuriin liittyen.</p>	
Asiasanat Cancel-kulttuuri, Spotify, Joe Rogan, Twitter, viestintä, viestinnän johtaminen, diskurssianalyysi	
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1 INTRODUCTION

During the past few years, a new term of cancel culture has arisen to become an often-discussed topic in the public discourse. Songs have been created about it (Blistein, 2021), articles written (Onninen, 2021), movies filmed (Brooks, 2023), and worrying statements expressed (Yar & Bromwich, 2019). One of the most notable statements is an open letter about the topic made by Harper’s Magazine. Signed by various academics, journalists, writers, and more, the letter voices its concerns about the modern state of open debate and people trying to silence others for certain opinions. (Harper’s Magazine, 2020.) But what exactly is it people mean when they use this new term of ‘cancel culture’?

As its own term, cancel culture is relatively new, only rising in appearance since 2019 (Google Trends, 2021). The definitions of cancel culture vary, but it is often seen as a term describing the rise of a phenomenon known as cancelling, which is a form of activism aiming to silence, ostracize, or remove the targeted agent from a certain position or job (e.g. Clark, 2020; Norris, 2021). Despite the term itself being new and novel, it stems from various forms of older phenomena around public discourse which have been adapted to fit the demands of the modern landscape of social media (Saint-Louis, 2021). Cancel culture draws from such topics as doxing (Burmah, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021), deplatforming (Saint-Louis, 2021), public shaming (Norris, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021), ostracization (Norris, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021), and even the pillory in the Middle Ages (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 344).

One recent target of cancel culture is the audio streaming platform Spotify. A heated conversation around the platform began when Joe Rogan, the host of Spotify’s most listened to podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*, was accused of constantly spreading misinformation himself or through his guests on various topics, such as Covid-19 (Torvinen, 2022). To combat this, 270 people consisting of doctors, professors, and healthcare professionals wrote an open letter to Spotify requiring it to “establish a clear and public policy to moderate misinformation on its platform” (Yang, 2022).

Other parties were quick to join the discussion, and shortly after the aforementioned open letter the famous country musician Neil Young delivered an

ultimatum of his own to the audio streaming giant: either Joe Rogan leaves Spotify or he does (Greene, 2022). Spotify chose to side with Rogan, after which Young's music was indeed removed from the platform, as he had demanded (Sisario, 2022). This was followed by the emergence of hashtags such as #CancelSpotify and #ByeByeSpotify on social media, as various users of the platform decided to cancel their subscriptions and delete their Spotify accounts (King, 2022). In addition to this, other musicians, such as Joni Mitchell, followed Young's example and asked for their music to be removed from Spotify to express their discontent with Spotify (Snider, 2022).

This case of Spotify is a clear example that even organisations are very vulnerable to cancel culture. After its dispute with Neil Young, Spotify was reported to lose \$2 billion in its market value over three days (Spangler, 2022). However, it is unclear whether this decline of Spotify's stock is completely due to case Rogan, as the stock had already plummeted 25 % year-to-date prior to Young leaving the platform (Spangler, 2022). Nevertheless, the verbal riot of users on social media and the potential snowball effect of even more artists leaving Spotify posed not only a reputational threat, but also a huge financial threat to the company. This serves as a good reminder that corporations are not out of the reach of cancel culture and should try their best to act accordingly. For this to happen, we need a better understanding of cancel culture and what exactly are the boundaries that when exceeded threaten to evoke a wave of cancellation.

Conversation around cancel culture has been heated during the recent years thanks to widespread movements such as MeToo and Black Lives Matter (Romano, 2020). Although the end-goals of cancel culture are often considered to be good, the ways used to reach these goals are met with criticism and sometimes even condemned as a threat to free speech (Norris, 2021). Even the former president of the USA, Barack Obama, has spoken about and criticized the topic of cancel culture on multiple occasions. In October 2019, at the Obama Foundation summit, Obama said the following on the topic: "This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically 'woke' and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly. (...) 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." These critical comments of Obama were met with high praise on both sides of the political dyad in the USA, but they also gathered criticism from some, especially representatives of minorities. (Yar & Bromwich, 2019.)

Despite it being a clearly prominent and often discussed part of modern-day communications, some have even denied the existence of the so-called cancel culture, stating that it is simply nothing more than holding wrongdoers responsible for their actions (Saint-Louis, 2021). But some problems remain: where is the line of wrongdoing drawn? Who decides when this line is crossed?

In this article, I wish to study how individuals perceive processes around the actions of cancelling someone or something and how they justify participating in cancel culture. In addition, I am hoping to discover certain thresholds that

need to be exceeded for individuals to either take actions in cancelling processes or to justify the cancelling actions made by others.

The research questions of this study are as follows:

- **How do people justify and make sense of cancelling processes?**
- **How do people use language in cancelling situations?**

This article will proceed in the following manner: In the second chapter, I will look into the theory of cancel culture and cancelling. The third chapter adds to this by explaining some terms and phenomena often associated with cancel culture. Then, in the fourth chapter, we will briefly discuss platform economies. The fifth and sixth chapter look into some related theories in Habermas' public sphere and Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence. In the seventh chapter I will introduce the data and methodologies used in this thesis. After that, the processes of my analysis will be explained and showcased in chapter eight. The actual findings of the study will be presented in the ninth chapter. In the tenth chapter, a conclusion for this thesis shall be drawn, after which the eleventh chapter discusses the limitations of this thesis and proposes some suggestions for future research. No artificial intelligence has been utilized in the making of this master's thesis.

2 CANCEL CULTURE

The definitions of cancel culture and ‘cancelling’ are multifold. The widely respected dictionary Merriam-Webster defines cancel culture as follows: “the practice or tendency of engaging in mass cancelling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure”. According to Merriam-Webster, the first usage of the term cancel culture in this context and meaning was in 2016. (Merriam-Webster, 2021, a.) Cancelling as a verb, on the other hand, is defined as “to withdraw one's support for (someone, such as a celebrity, or something, such as a company) publicly and especially on social media” (Merriam-Webster, 2021 b). Indeed, various additional sources also emphasize the prevalence of cancel culture especially on social media and other digital spaces (Norris, 2020; Clark, 2020; Chiou, 2020; Saint-Louis, 2021).

As of the moment of writing this text, scholarly discussion regarding cancel culture is still quite scarce. Usually cancelling seems to refer to some kind of an agency, in which an agent by choice withdraws their attention from someone or something whose values, actions, inactions, or speech are considered so offensive that the agent does not want to utilize their resources, such as presence, time, or money, to support the target (Chiou, 2020; Clark, 2020; Norris, 2021). With cancelling someone or something activists are seeking to achieve the cultural ostracism of their target (Norris, 2021). Thus, the target of cancelling can either be a person or something non-human, such as a brand or a corporation.

Cancel culture is said to have its roots within Black digital discursive practice from which it has since been hijacked from and counter framed by the social elite as a “reductive and malignant label” of cancel culture. (Clark, 2020). The origins of the term cancelling go all the way to 1991 to an American film called *New Jack City*, in which one of the characters says that he is cancelling his girlfriend, referring to breaking up with her (Romano, 2020; Vogels et al., 2021). The specific scene and term were later referred to by rapper Lil Wayne on a song in 2010, but it was not until an episode of the reality show *Love and Hip-Hop* that aired in December 2014 that the word started gathering more traction. In the episode a member of the cast tells his love interest that she’s cancelled during a fight. After this the phrase began to spread on Black Twitter slowly building up

towards its current meaning in public discourse: cultural ostracism. (Romano, 2020.) Especially as a person who does not belong to a minority, it is important for me to acknowledge these black roots of cancel culture. The communication scholarship overall is expected to give heed to the marginalisation of racial and ethnic minorities especially in the modern complex media systems (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs & McIlwain, 2018, p. 255).

Some researchers consider cancellation ultimately only happening when an individual is removed from a specific place or position, such as a job or a corporate appointment. In this instance for something to actually be considered cancelling concrete actions need to follow. These actions are not to be fulfilled by the people taking agency in cancelling someone or something online, but rather by third party representatives in power, such as employers, boards, or directors. (Saint-Louis, 2021.) The aforementioned emphasis on concrete consequences seems appropriate, as while inspecting social discourse around cancel culture, for many people participating in cancelling actions a simple apology or even a change of behavior does not often seem to fulfil the wishes of the activists, but rather more concrete sanctions are required (e.g. Norris, 2021). Saint-Louis (2021) goes on to argue that while the term 'cancellation' and its variants are used when individuals are raising their voice against an agent breaking norms, mores, or taboos, the different term of 'cancel culture', on the other hand, is being used as a criticizing and descriptive term by those denouncing the practices of cancelling.

Various sources state that cancellation is mostly reserved for public figures in positions of power (Chiou, 2020; Ng, 2020; Clark, 2020). Additionally, the blemishing of individuals and their personal brands evokes strong emotions relative to the individual's fame and admiration: the more famous and admired the person, the stronger the backlash (Wilska, Tuominen & Luoma-aho, 2022). However, a place of power is not necessary for cancellation to take place, as even people not in any notable position of power have experienced cancellation (Saint-Louis, 2021). For example, individuals may end up as the targets of various social media attacks after their angry or racist outbursts get caught on camera and spread out on social media. When it comes to the populace especially, the cancellation acts can often seem out of proportion in comparison to the original offence. (Bouvier, 2020.) Indeed, cancel culture has been described as unequal sanctioning, in which actions of different magnitudes and from different timelines are not treated in an equal manner (Saint-Louis, 2021; Vogels, Anderson, Porteus, Baronavski, Atske, McClain, Auxier, Perrin & Ramshankar, 2021).

Instead of seeking to make people in powerful positions responsible for their wrongdoings, the motives behind cancellation acts can often be about achieving a feeling of togetherness when attacking the target. (Bouvier, 2020). Norris (2021) defines cancel culture as "collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds". The power of a collective is strongly present here, and the social aspects of participating in cancel culture are not anything to be scoffed at.

Some scholars have tried to shove the main responsibility of cancel culture to people who identify as or somehow represent right-wing thinkers (Sarasti, 2021). I, however, see this as problematic, as I think it can be very clearly distinguished and witnessed that also those who represent more left-wing ideals and thinking are often guilty of what is perceived as cancel culture. Academic support for this statement exists as well; the whole political spectrum is worried about cancel culture (Norris, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021), not just one particular party. This can also be noticed from the public discussion around the phenomenon, a case in point being Obama's comments (Yar & Bromwich, 2019) mentioned in the introduction of this paper. In fact, criticism on cancel culture has also been provided by another former President, Donald Trump, who claims that cancel culture is a "political weapon of the left" and "the very definition of totalitarianism" (Trump, 2020). Hence, cancel culture does not seem to be only reserved to a certain political view, but rather the blame game is being played in a way that fits the political agenda of the person performing the criticism.

Continuing on politics, Norris (2021) states that the context of cancel culture and the silencing situated within it varies depending on the dominant culture and the dominant political view of any society. In their study, they found that in more liberal leaning post-industrial societies it was the right-wing political scientists who reported an increase in cancel culture perceived by them. On the contrary, in developing and more socially conservative societies the left-wing scholars were those reporting on a worsening atmosphere of cancel culture. To give a concrete example: in the USA the dominant atmosphere is considered to be liberal (left-leaning), and thus especially those individuals who identify as right-wing are currently audibly reporting their concerns about cancel culture, as the right-wing represent a political view that differs from that of the mainstream. (Norris, 2021.)

In their article, Chiou (2020) discusses the neurocognitive mechanisms of morality that can be associated to cancel culture. Chiou goes over the study of Workman, Yoder & Decety (2020), in which the participants viewed images of violent protests simultaneously as their brain activity was measured with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). In their study they found that violent actions which are congruent with the individual's moral convictions are amplified within the brain's reward system. Simultaneously the aversive responses of the emotion system are toned down. (Workman et al., 2020.) These findings hint that violent actions can become more acceptable when they are seen to fit one's moral convictions. It is notable that these mechanisms may be totally indifferent to the ideological beliefs of individuals, as the neural computation could be similar even if the views of different individuals are considered to be binarily opposite. These neural justifications of violence could also apply to various aggressive actions on online platforms, such as cancel culture. (Chiou, 2020.)

As we can see from the text above, the definitions of cancel culture and cancelling are numerous, as the term is still relatively new and still seeks its position in the academic field. In this article I argue that cancelling is not to be defined to only take place after legal or other concrete actions have been made by

representatives of third parties, such as the law or organisational management. Although connected to cancel culture, I see these as separate consequences for which we already have applicable terms and understandings for in our everyday language. Rather, in my opinion, cancelling is indeed very much portrayed by the mob mentality, cultural ostracism, and manhunts taking place on social media or other platforms of public discussion, on which masses of people are actively carrying out the ostracization and silencing of a specific agent after actions that are considered to be norm breaking or otherwise unacceptable.

I also propose that the term 'cancel culture' is not only reserved for those opposing and criticising the acts of cancelling someone or something, like stated by Saint-Louis (2021), but rather an overall phrase used to describe the phenomenon of cancellation no matter if the cancelling is directed at those sharing the same opinion or not. Naturally, though, for many it is exactly those who are not like minded whose opinions are considered to be wrong or even bad. This area of public opinion and how it is formed will be further discussed in the following chapters about the public sphere and the spiral of silence theory.

3 TERMS AND PHENOMENA OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH CANCEL CULTURE

3.1 Wokeism, woke culture, and being woke

Terms often associated with cancel culture in the public discourse include 'wokeism', 'woke culture' or 'being woke'. Merriam-Webster defines the word woke as being "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d. c). 'Woke' as a term is of African-American origin (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020) and "a way for black people to remind one another of the importance of socio-political awareness as a means of survival" (Gray, 2019). Wilska, Tuominen & Luoma-aho (2022) describe woke culture as the acknowledgment of latent inequality and racism.

While the term woke in its many forms may originate from black culture and is still sometimes used in the specific context of racial issues, it is often seen as a more of an overall moral compass especially when it comes to corporations and brands utilizing the term in a marketing context (Sobande, 2019). It is also important to note that wokeness is considered to be a dynamic concept (Sobande, 2019), which makes pinpointing its one true meaning a challenging issue.

Why has the term woke lifted its head in the modern public discussion, then? Wilska et al. (2022) suggest that consumers and businesses have become aware of the term woke through the language of enthusiastic social media users along with the terms of cancel culture and cultural appropriation. Some of it may have to do with the fact that brand activism has become both more adopted by corporations (Edelman, 2019) and more demanded by the public with 64% percent of individuals wanting the CEOs of corporations to take the lead when it comes to enacting change (Edelman, 2018). Simultaneously the amount of scrutiny corporations and brands face regarding their perceived authenticity and trustworthiness has significantly increased (Holt, 2002). 56% of the public say

they have no respect for CEOs who choose to remain silent on important issues (Edelman, 2018).

Much like other similar topics, such as sustainability and responsibility, wokeness can also be met with a fair amount of doubt. This has led to people coining the term ‘woke washing’, similar to the currently more established term greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In the case of woke washing the public does not consider the brand activism to be in line with said brand’s values, purpose, and overall corporate practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In other words woke washing is perceived when there exists ambiguity in the social cause practices of a brand, yet the brand still tries to actively push their concern on various themes of social injustice (Sobande, 2019). This creates an inconsistency between promises and actions, thus leading to woke washing (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2018).

As the importance of brand activism in the eyes of modern consumers is so prevalent, the possible issues of perceived woke washing become significantly more damaging to brands. If the consumers deem the performed brand activism to be unauthentic in regards to the actual acts of the brand, the overall effectiveness of brand activism on a larger scale diminishes as consumers become even more sceptical towards the authenticity of the activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, when brands are seen to portray themselves as caring of various social injustice issues, such as racism or sexism, they are often deemed to be doing so mostly to seek profit (Sobande, 2019). This seems only logical in the capitalistic society we live in, as Cottom (2019, p. 20) says: “what is moral is often determined by what has economic value.” In the eyes of the consumers, when it comes to these various moral questions brands seem to often be more interested in reaping the benefits of the economic value rather than being actual agents of change on the issues at hand. This perception, I argue, has played a huge role in the emergence of cancel culture as a countermotion to excessively capitalistic and profit-seeking ways of performing business.

3.2 Bandwagoning

‘To jump on the bandwagon’ is a phrase used to describe when someone joins a popular cause or activity, often also changing their view on it due to a surfacing trend (Merriam-Webster, n.d. d). Especially during the age of information overload on the internet and social media (Lin & Spence, 2019), people are prone to take shortcuts to both save their cognitive resources and ease their sensemaking processes in their thinking and communicative actions (Li, Lee & Yang, 2019). These shortcuts can be described as heuristic processing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), and bandwagon heuristics are an example of such a cognitive shortcut (Sundar, 2008).

As has been determined earlier in this paper, peoples’ motives to join cancellation acts appear to not always be striven by wishes for actual consequences

for wrongdoings, but rather by the feeling of togetherness achieved by joining the attack (Bouvier, 2020). This can be seen as a prime example of the bandwagoning effect often associated with cancel culture, or as Lin & Spence (2019) put it: “Bandwagon heuristics follow the logic that if others believe something has value or is meaningful, then it must be so.” When it comes to cancel culture, the perceived value can be seen as that of togetherness: achieving social capital through shared cancelling activities.

3.3 Whistleblowing

While cancelling and cancel culture can be seen as modern expressions, they are preceded by various terms for similar phenomena in the history of both social interaction and academic research. One of these terms is whistleblowing, which Jubb (1999) describes as a deliberate and non-obligatory exposure of wrongdoing to an external entity which has the means to issue sanctions or rectifications on the said wrongdoing. The exposure is made by an individual who has privileged access to the wrongdoing organization’s data. The misbehavior itself can be either actual, suspected, or anticipated. This definition of whistleblowing seems to be in line with Saint-Louis' (2021) understanding of cancel culture, in which concrete consequences by third party authorities need to be made for cancelling to actually happen. Jubb (1999) seems to take the stance that only members within the organization in which wrongdoing happens are capable of being the whistleblower. However, more modern takes on whistleblowing highlight the possibility of whistleblowers as outsiders of the organization (Culiberg & Michelič, 2017).

Much like with woke washing, Culiberg & Michelič (2017) also point out the modern trend of social responsibility declared by organizations and the possible inconsistencies between the declared and actually performed values of an organization. In these cases of inconsistency whistleblowers could hold a high value as the agents bringing this misalignment of values to daylight. This follows the idea of rational loyalty coined by Vandekerckhove & Commers (2004), in which the individual acting as a whistleblower chooses to do so when the actions of an organization are not aligned with its missions, goals, values and/or other intangible factors. With this said, whistleblowing appears to deviate from cancel culture in how the ethical misalignment is understood: in cancel culture, the idea of righteousness seems to be more vague and often created solely by the public, whereas in rational loyalty the righteousness of an act is judged in comparison to the values of the organization.

3.4 Virtue signalling

Virtue signalling is another social phenomenon prevalent especially in modern discourse and on social media (Levy, 2021). Merriam-Webster defines it as “the

act or practice of conspicuously displaying one's awareness of and attentiveness to political issues, matters of social and racial justice, etc., especially instead of taking effective action" (Merriam-Webster, n.d. e).

Levy (2021) equates virtue signalling to another term used by Tosi & Warmke (2016): moral grandstanding. They define moral grandstanding as "making a contribution to moral discourse that aims to convince others that one is 'morally respectable'" (Tosi & Warmke, 2016, p. 199). While the people who carry out this kind of behaviour are considered to be righteous in a way for partaking in public moral discourse, rather than actually seeking to improve the issue at hand they are often seen as being overly interested in themselves, eager for recognition, and getting their 'superior values' noticed (Levy, 2021). Much like with the observed unequal sanctioning of cancel culture (e.g. Saint-Louis, 2021), Levy (2021) also acknowledges a similar misalignment of consequences in moral grandstanding by stating that "Piling on seems genuinely to occur, and may have the effect of alienating people whose offense is trivial and who might otherwise have easily acknowledged it and benefited from sensitive discussion."

3.5 Echo chambers

Echo chambers are said to be created when specific factors, such as opinions, beliefs, or political leaning of varying users are being repeated or reinforced by peers, sources or other outlets with similar tendencies (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi & Starnini, 2021). This leads to the overall strengthening of attitudes on these beliefs within the said groups, which on the other hand leads to group polarization between different echo chambers (Sunstein, 1999).

On different platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, the ways to interact with other users vary vastly, thus the social dynamics can also differ significantly depending on the platform that is used (Golovchenko, Buntain, Eady, Brown & Tucker, 2020). The possible dangers, however, stay the same regardless of the platform, as with the formation of echo chambers it is possible that entire groups of people start manoeuvring towards more extreme positions on certain topics (Sunstein, 1999). This strengthens any already existing polarization even further, as people are shown to be more eager in sharing information to their peers when their opinions lean towards a similar direction with them (Cinelli et al, 2021).

3.6 Algorithms

Another factor that has an undeniable effect on the modern public discourse especially on social media is the existence of various algorithms. In simplicity, "algorithms profile users on the basis of their behavior and select, rank, and personalize content according to user data" (Milan, 2015). The distribution of content

shown on a user's feed differs between users based on a specific person's preferences and networks, which leads to a significant algorithm-based influence on what is shown to the users of social media platforms in the first place (Cinelli et al., 2021). Algorithms vary depending on platforms and are often proprietary of nature. They are a major part in making a platform what it is, as "content and infrastructure are intimately linked, as the former would not exist in the same form outside the frame of social media platforms" (Milan, 2015).

A major problem with algorithms is their opacity and the fact that they leave no physical trace or records, existing only on levels of microtemporality (McKelvey, 2014). This hidden nature of algorithms plays a role in creating "an illusion of platform neutrality" (Milan, 2015). This opaque quality of algorithms leads to an overall "loss of agency in technological systems" (Winner, 1978) and platforms. Hence, users can easily get stuck on specific loops and echo chambers without even realizing it themselves.

4 PLATFORM ECONOMIES

With the recent evolution of the internet, various digital platforms allowing a wide range of differing human activities have emerged. A key part in the popularisation of these platforms is the evolution of cloud technologies. These digital platforms can vary from each other by a large margin, for example from those functioning mainly as social media or search tools, such as Facebook or Google, to those providing people with a massive marketplace, such as Amazon or Etsy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). Platform economies are sometimes referred to with different terms, such as sharing economies, hub companies (Härkönen, Naskali & Kimppa, 2019; Fuster Morell, Espelt, Renau-Cano, 2020), creative economies (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), platform capitalism (Fuster Morell et al., 2020) etc. A lot of these companies are considered to be some of the most profitable, valuable, and fastest growing ones in the modern field of corporations (Härkönen et al., 2019).

Among these platforms is also Spotify, which as a platform serves a major part in the context of this study. Spotify is often described as a platform business, or two-sided market, that brings two or more distinct groups of users (such as content creators, advertisers, and consumers) together, making a profit through the interaction thus established. (Vonderau, 2019).

While platform economy giants have undeniably done a lot of good for their customers and the markets, they also contain various downsides. It is often that these companies grow too big for even their own comfort achieving an almost monopoly-like position on the market. The “idea of free market regulation” is questioned, for example, in the context of Twitter – another key platform in the context of providing data for this study – as it is said that no real alternatives exists capable of fulfilling similar needs for far-ranging communication (Härkönen et al., 2019.) The power of the platform owners is said to be even more daunting than that of the factory owners during the industrial revolution (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). This misalignment of power and influence can lead to a situation in which theoretically other alternatives for the same product or service do exist, but on a concrete level they are not really considered as such due to the sheer power of the leading platform.

With the increasing importance of responsibility, millennials especially are constantly more keen on companies donning sustainable businesses (Härkönen et al., 2019). As platform economies play such a huge role in the modern corporate landscape, this demand of sustainable and ethical business is particularly interesting in their context. The problematic nature of some platforms has also become apparent with various negative factors around algorithms (e.g. Milan, 2015) and echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2021). This begs an interesting ethical question: do platforms have responsibility for the content spread on them, or do they just act as an intermediary for third parties who are the ones actually behind the content? Gillespie (2010) compares modern platforms as similar to traditional media “despite the promises made” by them. Gillespie goes on to state that “as with broadcasting and publishing, their (platforms) choices about what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, are all real and substantive interventions into the contours of public discourse. They raise both traditional dilemmas about free speech and public expression, and some substantially new ones, for which there are few precedents or explanations.” Therefore, the platforms can have a surprisingly strong role as corporate behemoths gatekeeping aspects acceptable in the larger public discourse. This is something especially interesting in the context of cancel culture, as people can be quick to look for attached parties to blame even in situations which they themselves have not directly wronged (e.g. Wilska et al., 2022).

5 PUBLIC SPHERE

5.1 Habermas' public sphere

The public sphere is a term originally created by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. It is an ideal area of social life, which Habermas defines as a place where “private people come together as a public” to, through reasoning, create critical knowledge that leads towards political change (Kruse, Norris & Flinchum, 2018). A key idea of the public sphere is to provide an ideal site of rational communication (Thomassen, 2010, p. 34), in which any person capable of reasoning could partake in the debates (Thomassen, 2010, p. 41).

According to Habermas, there are three ideas which are central to the public sphere: disregarding inequalities, disregarding differing interests based on status, and being inclusive “in principle” (Habermas, 1991). Kruse et. al. (2018) put this in a more comprehensible way, saying that “the public sphere requires unlimited access to information, equal and protected participation, and the absence of institutional influence, particularly regarding the economy.” However, these idealistic visions of Habermas' public sphere were never really realized in practice (Thomassen, 2010, p. 42). Habermas himself states that the corporate interests prevalent especially within mass media are one of the main reasons why the public sphere does not exist in our modern times (Habermas, 1991).

While inclusive in theory, Habermas' public sphere has been criticized for its lack of inclusion in practice. According to Clark (2020) cancel culture is located within the Habermasean public sphere. Clark goes on to also add that within this said public sphere the public discourse is assumed to be the realm of the elites, referring to the lack of inclusion of, for example, women and minorities in Habermas' original framework (Thomassen, 2010, p. 48).

5.2 Public sphere and the internet

With the surging rise of the internet, many scholars have pondered the potential of a new public sphere within the realm of social media, as it “is organized in ways that meet the requisites of a public sphere” (Kruse et. al., 2018). For example, unlimited access to information and the possibility for both equal and protected participation seem to be apparent on social media. Since the internet is considered to be relatively accessible, in theory, pretty much anyone can participate in discussion and distribute information without excessive outside influence. (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 759.)

Despite these promising premises, after an evident-based study in the middle of a sea of mainly theoretical work regarding social media as a public sphere, Kruse et. al. (2018) come to the conclusion that social media does not fulfil the requisites for a public sphere. It is to be noted that even Habermas himself has voiced his criticism for the idea of social media, or “mediated communication”, as a public sphere as it lacks face-to-face interaction between participants and “reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions” (Habermas, 2006, p. 414–415). I would like to add, however, that it is important to note that the platforms of mediated communication and what we currently know as social media has evolved greatly since these comments made by Habermas, so certain aspects of his criticism might be outdated or irrelevant within the modern discussion around social media.

When it comes to adapting the ideas of the public sphere to social media, epistemic problems have also arisen; alas, the ability of the general public to distinguish between true and false on both mass media and social media (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020).

5.3 Contradictions within the academic discussion around the public sphere

After getting acquainted with scholarly text on the subject, I have come to the conclusion that whether one considers the public sphere to exist or not seems to be strongly dependant on what one considers to be a public sphere in the first place: is it a public forum for deliberative democracy following Habermas’ (1991) idealistic, and likely unreachable (Kruse et. al., 2018), requirements of *Öffentlichkeit*, as his original German term stands, or is it a simplified “way to refer collectively to citizens as political communicators (speakers and listeners, consumers, and producers of communication), to citizens as participants in political organizations, to media businesses of all kinds, and to formalized institutions and processes of political communication by elites” (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020).

In academic discourse, the term public sphere seems to get thrown around excessively to the point that it appears to lose its power while simultaneously

causing confusion with both scholars and readers. In my eyes, it would seem that Habermas' *Öffentlichkeit* is not something that describes the modern status quo of our communications landscape and social media, which is in line with what Kruse et. al. (2018) say. However, some scholars make the specific argument that the whole concept of cancel culture is situated within the Habermasean public sphere (Clark, 2020), which makes it difficult to approach the topic due to the lack of consensus around it. I would argue that the modern landscape of communication has features of Habermas' idea of a public sphere but does not - and most likely cannot - completely follow it. Even in our current times, the public discourse seems to indeed still be controlled largely by the elite, although less so with the upswing of social media (Kruse et. al., 2018; Leong & Ho, 2021).

Regardless of this inconsistency around the use of the term public sphere, I see the concept of a public sphere as a more general landscape, that perhaps thrives off the ideas of Habermas' (1991) ideals, being relevant within the requirements of this study in inspecting who has the ability and power to partake in public discussion in the first place. As discussion around cancel culture often takes place around the opinions of minority (e.g. Norris, 2021), it is important to place emphasis on who has the right to partake in public discourse around a topic and who has the power to establish public opinion.

6 THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

6.1 Noelle-Neumann's the spiral of silence theory

A theory that closely relates to cancel culture and phenomena around it is the spiral of silence theory. Bluntly put, according to this theory people who believe they have a minority opinion in something are inclined to stay silent and conceal their opinion from the public (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 339). While studying the more modern phenomenon of cancel culture, Norris (2021) reasserted the same finding. While correct and important, the short definition above is only a minor part of the theory of spiral of silence and thus not sufficient alone to fully explain the phenomenon of the theory (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 339).

Unlike some other scholars, like Habermas (1991), Noelle-Neumann & Petersen (2004) do not consider public opinion and debate to be based on the art of reasoning and rationality. Rather, they argue that public opinion achieves its power from the "man's social nature", which has developed throughout evolution and is not based on rational or logical thought but rather "on emotional, reflexive, subconscious reactions" (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 341). To describe the social nature of man and thus create a foundation to understanding the spiral of silence theory, in their article Noelle-Neumann & Petersen (2004) go through the multiple pioneers in discovering this social nature of man. It was especially during the times of the Enlightenment when seeing the public opinion consisting of something other than rational thinking and logical processes was frowned upon and resisted by even the contemporaries of many researchers and philosophers (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 341).

During his times already, John Locke (1894) wrote about the unbearable feeling of public ostracizing: "Solitude many men have sought, and been reconciled to: but nobody that has the least thought or sense of a man about him can live in society under the constant dislike and ill opinion of his familiars, and those

he converses with. This is a burden too heavy for human sufferance". Following these thoughts, Locke coined the "law of opinion, reputation and fashion", according to which those who disobey this law shall be met with disapproval which is "feared more than divine punishment or punishment by civil law enforcement authorities" (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 342). Although tying well to the modern phenomenon of cancel culture, these writings at the time brought Locke no happiness or salutations, but exactly that what he himself described: public disapproval (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 342).

Noelle-Neumann & Petersen (2004) go on to discuss Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that humans are always predominantly oriented outwards and attain "the basic feelings of life" through other peoples' perception of them (Rousseau, 1964, p. 193). Rousseau's finding was the contradiction between the individual nature and social nature of people. Put short: how are people to retain their freedom and put themselves first to both seek their own interests and satisfy their own needs, while simultaneously being respected and recognized in the eyes of their peers? This is what Rousseau described as the "fundamental problem". (Rousseau, 1953, p. 14-15.)

The spiral of silence theory is not static, but it constructs itself upon the status quo of a society as a social circuitry of sorts (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 347). On the basis of this theory is the fear of isolation experienced by people (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 349). The theory, according to Noelle-Neumann & Petersen (2004), follows a 13-step list of salient points.

1. People experience fear of isolation.
2. Due to this fear, people monitor and observe the behavior of others to search for opinions and behavior that receives public approval or disapproval.
3. The observation of the environment is shaken up by individuals' projections of what they already think others think about them, which then becomes visible in the individual's own actions.
4. Opinions that are perceived to be met with disapproval are (often) being left unsaid due to fear of isolation.
5. Opinions that are perceived to be met with approval are (often) being expressed freely and audibly.
6. The loudly outspoken opinions further enhance the fear of isolation perceived by those supporting the opposing opinion, while also reinforcing their feeling of being alone with their opinion, which further encourages them to stay silent about their opinion.
7. This process only takes place with issues that have a strong moral component: in situations where ideology, agitation, and emotions are included. It requires an underlying moral fundament, which implies that the people with opposing opinions are not only stupid, but also bad in essence.
8. A spiral of silence can only be triggered by controversial issues. If there is a true social consensus on a topic, there is no space for a spiral of silence.

9. The predominant view in public is not necessarily dependent on the strength or size of the group holding the said opinion. If the opposing view is not being publicly admitted or stated, even an opinion held by the minority of the population can become dominant.
10. The spiral-of-silence process is prone to influence from the mass media. If the majority of media outlets agree on an opinion in a morally charged controversy, they can heavily affect the direction of the spiral of silence.
11. People are not consciously aware of the fear or the threat of isolation.
12. Public opinion is limited by time and place. A spiral of silence can be either short-term or long-term. The geographical area of a public opinion can also vary in size. Usually, however, public opinion is limited by national borders or borders of a specific cultural group.
13. Public opinion is a form of social control and helps indirectly establish social cohesion. Therefore, any commonly shared controversies or issues that trigger a spiral of silence within a society pose a threat to social cohesion. This can lead to specific topics only being discussed with specific vocabulary or lingo (political correctness) or them not being discussed at all (taboo) to avoid not being targeted by public disapproval and isolation. These topics that are an issue for social cohesion can vary depending on different areas and societies.

6.2 Social media and the spiral of silence

While still held in high regard, some scholars have questioned and challenged Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory within the modern context of internet and social media (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). The increase of freedom in individuals' self-expression, anonymity, social connection, and selectivity are some aspects associated with social media that may threaten the applicability of the spiral of silence theory (Leong & Ho, 2021). It is also suggested that with the position of social media becoming more and more relevant, it might be likely that people eventually rely more on the online opinion climate rather than offline opinion climate while determining the public opinion (Leong & Ho, 2021). Some go as far as to say that social media creators have become the curators of public discourse (Gillespie, 2010).

7 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

7.1 Data

The data used in this study will be gathered from Twitter utilizing two hashtags in the search: #cancelspotify and #byebyespotify. Using these hashtags, I plan to gather together 50 tweets from three different timelines: January 27–28, February 2–3, and February 4–9. The third timeline was extended longer than the first two due to the decline in the amount of tweets suitable for the data of this study. With this temporal dispersion of data I wish to be able to inspect the development of the public discourse and the use of hashtags: what kind of discourses prevail during the early days of the hashtags' lifespan and what discourses appear as the conversation goes further on. More details of the data of this study will be discussed in the Analysis chapter.

7.2 About Twitter

Like any other social media platform, Twitter's role in a study context can be seen in many ways: it can be a tool, source, place, or target (Isotalus, Jussila, Matikainen & Boedker, 2018, p. 26). In the context of this study, I see Twitter as both a source (for my data) and place (of a phenomenon). The role of Twitter on a societal level is diverse, but it is said to increase especially during times of crises and significant news events. For example, during the 2014 crisis of Ukraine journalist Saska Saarikoski stated that "Twitter has become the eyes, ears, and roaring mouth of the world" (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 17).

While Twitter has grown to be a more and more popular field for various studies, it does not come without downsides. It is important to note that when studying tweets, indeed only the opinions of those using Twitter are being

considered (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 27). Some have also posed a question that the role of Twitter in academic studies can get overemphasised compared to its popularity (Weller, 2015). Thus, while being a legitimate part of the public discourse, it is important to remember that Twitter is only one of the many platforms for modern communication. In addition, the 'dominance of the few' rule should be taken into account, seeing as in the US approximately 25 % of Twitter users make up 97 % of all tweets (McClain, Widjaya, Rivero & Smith, 2021). Adding to these downsides, Twitter has also been referred to as the 'media of elites', which can then again lead to an illusion of Twitter being a bigger and more relevant platform than it actually is (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 25). This ties back well to the public sphere theory of Habermas: while everyone is theoretically welcome to join the public discourse, it is indeed the elite who often get a disproportionate weight on their participation and statements (Clark, 2020).

The reasoning behind choosing Twitter in particular for this study is as follows. Firstly, Twitter is specifically open as a social media platform, as it does not require contacting or connecting with someone to be able to access their tweets (Isotalus et al., 2018, pp. 9–10, 27). This makes communication on the platform more widespread and eases the collection of data, as it is openly available to practically anyone. Second, I see Twitter as an excellent choice to study cancel culture especially as the language used on the platform can often be excessively aggressive and acrimonious, sometimes even bordering hate speech (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 25). As strong use of language seems to often tie together with cancel culture, tweets as data should bode well for the aims of getting a better understanding of the nature of cancel culture. Third, in this study I am focusing on textual communication. Twitter is said to emphasize textual forms of communication, and it has been described as "searchable talk" (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 13) due to the utilization of hashtags as an archiving and interbinding element between individual tweets.

In this study, I am both studying Twitter as a communication platform and additionally a more specific part of Twitter: hashtags. Hashtags are said to be able to develop profound cultural salience and play a significant role in both linguistic and social work, which makes studying them important and necessary in our modern field of communications (Konnelly, 2015; Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 46). Individual tweets are seldom seen as particularly relevant, but when various tweets containing the same hashtag(s) are collected together, the collective meaning can grow to be very significant (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 37).

As tweets with one to two hashtags spread considerably further than tweets without any hashtags (Lee, 2016), I have chosen to focus on two specific hashtags which I came across while browsing through tweets on Twitter related to the theme of this study: #cancelspotify and #byebyespotify. Tweets considered in this study may also include other hashtags, but the data is collected by only specifically taking these two previously mentioned hashtags into account.

7.3 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method that can refer to various different ways of studying texts. It cannot be said that there is only one specific form of discourse analysis, as there exists a wide variety of differing styles that fall under the same umbrella term of discourse analysis (Gill, 2000; Gee & Green, 2011; Johnstone, 2018). The main idea of discourse analysis is that language and text are not considered as neutral reflectors of our social reality. Rather, they are simultaneously seen both as the products and producers of it (Husa, 1995; Pynnönen, 2013). Johnstone (2018) even goes as far as to state that “anyone who wants to understand human beings has to understand discourse” and that “discourse analysis can help in answering any question that could be asked about humans in society”.

According to Pynnönen (2013), the goal of discourse analysts is to examine how agents make sense of concepts through their use of language and to inspect the relationship between discourses and reality. People create accounts, with which they seek to describe their understanding of things like the social reality, ideas, and values. Hence, a key idea behind discourse analysis is to through language better understand our societies and cultures (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2009, p. 13–14). Regardless of the specific research question, discourse analysis is always descriptive by nature. However, mere descriptions of the status quo are not always the end goal of discourse analysis, as it can also serve as a form of social critique or even intervention. (Johnstone, 2018.)

I chose discourse analysis as my methodology of choice due to the so far quite mysterious nature of cancel culture. As said earlier, the phenomenon is still rather new, and thus the academic research on the subject is scarce. Seeing as cancel culture appears to be heavily reliant on the values of something being either right or wrong, good or bad, I feel like it is important for us to learn more about how people come to these conclusions when they partake in public discourse. With discourse analysis I seek to get a better overall understanding of how people produce language in cancelling situations and what kind of words, metaphors, and meanings they attribute to related parties.

Johnstone (2018) highlights the role of discourse analysts in answering questions about social relations considering, for example, solidarity or oppression. Since a majority of the means of cancel culture seek to point out and sanction wrongdoers – especially those in positions of power – in similar societal issues (e.g. Chiou, 2020; Ng, 2020; Clark, 2020; Norris, 2021), discourse analysis appears to make an adequate method to use while studying cancel culture. Additionally, discourse analysis is a common method used in qualitative analysis of Twitter (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 27), which implies that it is a fitting approach to use for data consisting of tweets.

Pynnönen (2013) refers to discourse analysis as a three-phase ongoing process, which moves from the textual and linguistic levels to interpretation and lastly critical analysis. Pynnönen then goes on to talk about the tripartitional

nature of the goals of critical discourse analysis: it aims to explain, interpret, and criticise.

Discourse analysis is traditionally divided into three categories: textual, interpretive, and critical (Pynnönen, 2013). This division depends on various things, such as the goals of the study and the positioning of the researcher. For example, in textual and interpretive discourse analysis the researcher assumes the position of an analyst, in which they aim to minimize their own participation with the data (Pynnönen, 2013). In this study, I seek to take the position of both an analyst and a critic, as discourse analysis is based on critical reading and often leads into questioning of the status quo, the division of power, and existence of inequality (Johnstone, 2018).

As a qualitative research method, discourse analysis often focuses on smaller batches of data to make qualitative claims of it. Thus, the claims made in discourse analysis are not focused on the occurrence of specific phenomena, but rather why and how they exist in the data. Therefore, any suggestions made about the likelihood of something similar occurring in other batches of data are merely suggestions. (Johnstone, 2018.)

8 ANALYSIS

To start my analysis, I searched for tweets on Twitter using my two hashtags of choice: #cancelspotify and #byebyespotify. To begin, I only searched for the 50 tweets from the 27th of January 2022. Neil Young made his original statement about Spotify and Joe Rogan on his website on the 24th of January 2022 (Carr, 2022), but it took a few days for the relevant momentum to gather on social media platforms such as Twitter. By the 27th the hashtags used in this study started to make an appearance on Twitter, as enough people had become aware of the situation for me to start gathering data for my analysis.

Using Twitter's advanced search options, I picked the newest 50 tweets including either of the two hashtags from the 27th of January. I then proceeded to familiarise myself with these tweets while doing a preliminary coding of them. According to Pynnönen (2013), discourse analysis moves layer by layer deeper into the meaning of the analyzed text. In the first steps of the analysis, the text itself is the main focus. This includes things such as words, expressions, sentences, and metaphors (Pynnönen, 2013). Following these principles, I first went through the 50 tweets coding out specific words that were used to describe or talk about the most relevant parties included, mainly Joe Rogan and Spotify.

While going through the first patch of tweets, I quickly noticed that a large part of them consisted of only hashtags. Since tweets only featuring hashtags had quite literally little to nothing to analyze about them within the tools of discourse analysis, I made the deliberate choice of ignoring tweets only consisting of hashtags in the data of this study, as they would not provide me with any added value in answering my research questions. In addition, I chose to only include original tweets, thus ignoring retweets, tweet threads, and answers to another user's tweets. While visual elements, such as images and videos, are a natural part of the digital age we live in (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 187) and can play an important role in modern communications overall, to normalize the data of this study I also made the decision to exclude tweets with visual elements or links, as I found them bringing excessively long strings of context to take into account for the context and methodologies of this study.

After this preliminary coding came the second phase of discourse analysis: interpretation. The goal of this phase is to create a larger understanding of the text and the discourses formed by it (Pynnönen, 2013). To accumulate understanding, focus is to be put on the meanings that the text and the discourses have in their specific contexts (Pynnönen, 2013). For example, when studying the phenomenon of cancel culture it is important to try and understand the meaning of the term 'cancel' in this specific context. While it can refer to literally cancelling one's Spotify subscription, for example, it can also indicate the more abstract goal of cultural ostracization and withdrawal of support from Spotify.

In this second phase, I started creating larger themes and discourses out of the previously coded words within the tweets. In their book, Gee & Green (2011) provide a total of 27 tools to utilize when using a discourse analysis. What they mean with tools is "a specific question to ask of data". The tools, despite being numbered and put into 4 'units', are not meant to be used in a specific order but rather all at the same time. Depending on the data at hand, some tools may prove to be more insightful and useful than others (Gee & Green, 2011). In the following chapters I will go through some of the details in my process of applying discourse analysis to my data, doing which I rely strongly on the tools supplied by Gee & Green (2011). Examples from the data of this study are provided at times to help demonstrate my thought processes. As stated earlier in this text, no exact agreed upon way exists for how to perform discourse analysis, and every researcher has to create their own way of executing it. Thus, by seeking to apply "things such as taste, innovation, risk taking, and good choices", I create my own approach to discourse analysis in the context of this study (Gee & Green, 2011.)

When seeking to get an initial 'bigger picture' of the data, one should ask how language is being used to achieve a "specific socially recognizable identity and engage in one or more socially recognizable activities" (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 201). In my data, featuring the hashtags #cancelspotify and #byebyespotify in tweets already creates shared discourses for those partaking in the communication. People using the hashtags are in one way or another looking to participate in the specific discussion around Spotify. As stated in the literature, the meaning behind using a hashtag can vary from an archiving tool to an expression of emotions or a producer of togetherness (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 36). The reasons to use the specific hashtags in my data can vary as well: for instance, by using either of the two hashtags a user can imply that they stand behind the apparent majority sentiment of the discussion in that Spotify should be cancelled. When looking at the data, this seemed to be the most prevalent reasoning behind using the hashtags. However, this might not always be the case, as users may want to join the discussion for other reasons as well. In this case they could be using the hashtags more as an archiving element and as a way to be noticed in the discussion whether or not they are actually hoping to cancel Spotify. On the contrary, some users even used the hashtags to relay a completely differing opinion: one in which they criticize the phenomenon of cancel culture or even take the side of Joe Rogan. In this discourse one could also talk about the possibilities of 'hijacking'

a specific hashtag for purposes differing from its original intents (see: Virolainen & Luoma-aho, 2018).

To ease our daily communication, we associate and use typical pictures for certain words and phrases based on their assumed, typical most common meaning (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 168-169). However, what is considered 'typical' or 'normal' is not such an easy task to define, as it relies on a myriad of changing variables. Gee & Green (2011, p. 170), thus, introduce the idea of 'a figured world', which is "a picture of a simplified world that captures what is taken to be typical or normal" in the specific context of both social and cultural groups. This then begs the question: what are some figured worlds present in the data of this study? One figured world which seems easy to point out in the context of this study and cancel culture overall is that of a 'moral code': what is considered to be right by a specific person. From the data, it is apparent that a majority of the users share a figured world where sharing mis- or disinformation on a large platform is not morally right. Indeed, Gee & Green (2011, p. 173) make an apt observation that seems especially fitting for cancel culture: "Because figured worlds deal in what is taken as typical or normal, they can sometimes become means to judge and discriminate against people who are taken as untypical or not normal. Often the sense of typical or normal that is captured in a figured world lapses into a notion of what is 'appropriate' or 'good'." With the aforementioned figured world condemning the spreading of misinformation comes another assumption: Spotify, as businesses overall, has a responsibility in doing good business and policing the content on its platform. In the eyes of the people sharing this specific figured world, by failing to do so in the case of Joe Rogan Spotify has failed in fulfilling its social responsibility.

When trying to understand any communication, the listener's or reader's task is to draw on their own existing knowledge and make certain assumptions based on the context of the situation (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 13). In doing discourse analysis this is essential, as we need to take into account that different people have different base knowledge depending on the topic and their background. Hence, we need to 'fill in' some things that are not explicitly mentioned to achieve clarity on the situation (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 12). Related to this, one also needs to ask about the specific situated meanings behind words and phrases used (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 153). For example, the terms 'cancel' and 'cancelling' can have various different meanings. However, in the context of these hashtags they can be mostly narrowed down to two options: either referring to an actual cancellation of a Spotify subscription or the use of Spotify overall, or the more abstract act of cancellation, in which one withdraws their support from Spotify even if it does not include any actual concrete actions. The latter could also happen in cases where the person performing the vocal cancellation actions has never actually been a user of Spotify in the first place.

Twitter, like many social media platforms, has some rules of its own that are adapted by its users. For example, Twitter's users are probably aware that there exists a 280-character limit to the length of a single tweet (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 10). This allows them to mold their language in a coherent way to fit these

limitations. They also know that hashtags are an important aspect of communication on Twitter, as they can work as archiving elements (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 10–11) or as directly embedded parts of the textual content of the tweet itself (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 41). Features like liking, retweeting, and sending a direct message can also be assumed to be well familiar to the users of Twitter (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 11).

Due to the set character limit of 280 on Twitter, cohesion can be an aspect that is often sacrificed in singular tweets, as this limit forces users to compress their messages and put heavier reliance on witty use of language (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 34). However, cohesion (or the lack of it) is something that should also be considered when performing discourse analysis (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 131).

In addition to the context of Twitter as a platform, some basic context of the situation needs to be filled in for anyone not aware of the whole Joe Rogan-Spotify situation. Who is Joe Rogan? What has he done? What is the role of Spotify in all of this? After some of this basic information we can move onto some topics that may divide opinions more: What is considered misinformation? Who are trustworthy sources of information? Is it Spotify's role to assure that people providing content on its platform are not spreading misinformation?

When going through the data, a large part of people seemed to be mostly aware of the situation and the events preceding it, which can be assumed as the use of the specific hashtags #cancelspotify or #byebyespotify can lead us to believe that the users have indeed done their homework on the situation to be aware of the hashtags in the first place. However, some tweets were explicit in stating the user's unawareness of the situation or parts of it:

@msholly_baby:

Can someone explain the

@Spotify

stuff going on? I've seen it all over and I have no idea what started it all. #Spotify #JoeRogan #NeilYoung #cancelspotify #ByeSpotify

From this tweet we can assume that the user does indeed know something of the situation, as they mention having "seen it all over", but "have no idea what started it all". In their tweet, they are relying on the information transmitting features of Twitter through other users to fill in the rest of the situation for them. Now, obviously other users are probably going to fill in the situation from their own viewpoint. A user siding against Joe Rogan would probably have very deviant issues to point out as one siding with Joe Rogan would.

When doing discourse analysis, one should also focus on what kind of privilege or de-privilege is placed on different ways of producing languages or different ways of knowing and believing (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 136). According to Gee & Green, humans contest and place privilege on different languages and ways of understanding. By doing this we also engage in politics – described as "any situation where the distribution of social goods is at stake" (Gee & Green,

2011, p. 118) – and distribute social goods in our society by using language to build up or tear down subjects (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 136–137). This kind of contesting appears to be very evident in cancel culture, and the data of this study is no exception: a clear polarization and division is noticeable in the use of language depending on the viewpoint of the user. Those protesting against Joe Rogan use contemptuous language of him and the information spread through his podcast, while those who are either criticizing cancel culture overall or taking the side of Joe Rogan use similar language of the opposing side and the mainstream media.

When using language, we can both connect and disconnect things to make them relevant or irrelevant to each other (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 126). For example, consider the following tweet:

@Heretic_w1n5t0n:

Done with Spotify. Can't support a platform that's ok with spreading vaccine and covid misinformation and being directly responsible for deaths. Switching to

@TIDAL

to ensure my fav artists actually get paid.

#spotifyexodus #cancelspotify #ByeSpotify #JoeRogan

The user, in their tweet, makes a clear connection between spreading misinformation and responsibility for actual deaths of people. They also make a connection between an alternative streaming platform, Tidal, and proper payment for artists, while simultaneously hinting that Spotify, on the other hand, fails to provide this adequate payment for musicians. Through this example we can see that connection through wording can also be used in a manipulative manner: people word what they have to say in a way which helps them to accomplish a specific goal they have in mind. Additionally, sometimes people may assume some connections to be so obvious that they do not explicitly state them, as they expect the audience to automatically do the connection themselves. (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 126.)

Social goods are something always at play in communications, as already stated earlier. But what exactly are social goods? Various answers exist, for example having ourselves or parts of ourselves, such as behavior or possessions, treated as 'appropriate', 'normal', 'worthy' or straight up 'good' (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 120). Gee & Green (2011, p. 119) also bring up what sociologists refer to as 'face needs', where 'face' refers to "the sense of worth or dignity each of us has and wants to be honored by others in society". These face needs can be divided into two major types: negative face needs, representing the face people turn away from others (e.g. wanting one's privacy to be respected), and positive face needs, representing the face people turn towards others (e.g. wanting to belong and be involved). In discourse analysis, we want to understand how language is being used to distribute or withhold these various forms of social goods (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 120).

From the data, we can take an example:

@orkneywebdesign:

So Spotify choose a Covid vax disinformation idiot over the music of the great Neil Young? Even though you're supposed to be streaming MUSIC? Guess I'm done with you

@Spotify

#cancelspotify

Here, the user clearly sees Spotify's role as a distributor of social goods through music, and not as a participant in taking a stance in societal topics, such as Covid vaccines. Emphasis seems to also be put on Spotify as a streaming platform of music especially more so than other content, such as podcasts. But seeing that a lot of music often delves into societal issues and topics as well, this seems a bit paradoxical. Or does the content type – music vs. podcasts – create some kind of a major difference in the weight of the message delivered within the content and its acceptability? Music is often considered a form of art, while it could perhaps be argued that in the eyes of the populace podcasts are seen more as consumable 'products' of sorts. Talking about societal issues, lifting Neil Young to some kind of a pedestal can also be considered problematic, as he has also caused some controversy on societal issues – which can be seen as a form of social good – in his own rights. From the data:

@SuperThey:

Still supporting #CancelSpotify but I can't support #NeilYoung and what he said in '85 at the start of the aids pandemic.

He was 39 🙄

#LGBTQIAhappiness #proud

"You go to a supermarket and you see a f— behind the f— cash register, you don't want him to handle your potatoes."

The tweet in question refers to Young's comments made in 1985 using the degrading word 'faggot' to describe a gay person, and going on further to state that it would be somehow unwanted that the gay person in question were to handle the customer's groceries. Here, we can see two ways of looking at social goods: first, the tweeter says they are for cancelling Spotify, presumably for the accusations of Covid misinformation (although not explicitly mentioned), as that is the reasoning Neil Young mentioned in removing his music from Spotify and Young is also referred to in the tweet. But interestingly enough, the tweeter refuses to support Neil Young – the torchbearer in the cancellation of Spotify – due to his earlier homophobic comments. Thus, the user is balancing two different social goods at once to guide their actions: spreaders of Covid misinformation

deserve to be cancelled, but even those taking a stand against said misinformation – like Young – may not deserve the support of an individual because of the problematic behavior of their own.

With these examples we can see that the balancing act of various social goods can indeed be very challenging – especially from the viewpoint of a corporation. As people put heavier expectations on corporations and organizations on various societal topics and issues (e.g. Edelman 2018; Edelman 2019), this dilemma becomes even more prevalent. People are different, and attaching even positive attributes to things people view as social goods can be considered as an insult by some and leave to a conflict (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 120). When dealing with polarized topics and phenomena, such as cancel culture, it can be very hard if not nearly impossible to please all of the differing sides and viewpoints.

Language is used by people to both build and sustain various kinds of relationships. The use of language chosen in specific situations is closely tied to the identity of both the speaker and the audience, as “we relate to other people in terms of different identities we take them to have”. (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 114.) In my data, various different identities can be clearly spotted. For example, those who see cancel culture as a justified phenomenon and those who oppose it. Those who are politically more liberal and those who lean more towards conservatism. Those who see that Spotify has wronged and those who think nothing of the sort has happened. Those who seem to partake in the conversation with the mission of educating people or trying to influence their thinking and those who just seem to want to state their own opinion without any apparent greater regard to whether or not they influence others with their speech. These identities people adapt are numerous depending on the situation, the context, and the type of relationship at question (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 106). Same people can also adopt various differing identities and relationships with the exact same people during different contexts or times (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 115).

Often, these identities meet with a clash: such can quite easily be said in the context of social media and Twitter especially, where the atmosphere is often described as hostile (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 25). In these conditions especially it is of interest how people utilize language towards others’ identities. People not only recognize identities of other people, but also ‘position’ others in certain ways to place them in a particular identity in their own head, according to which they treat them in the time and place (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 110). Let us take another example from the data:

@The_J_Dean:

Hey

@LPonthelleft

just showed back up in my podcast feed. After going exclusively

@Spotify

a few years ago and I stopped listening. Is this more #cancelspotify drama?!

Seriously why would you choose Joe Rogan over literally anything

In this example it is apparent from the end of the tweet that the user questions those choosing to side with Joe Rogan, portraying them as less intelligent than others.

It is important to remember that when people use language, they are not only transferring information, but also always seeking to perform one or more actions (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 42-44). Some examples of these actions can be detected from the identities listed above: trying to change someone's opinion of cancel culture or encouraging people to think for themselves instead of yielding to mob mentality. On a broader scale, the bare use of the hashtags #cancelspotify or #byebyespotify in the first place alludes to various possible actions behind the language. Perhaps the mere use of these hashtags portrays the action of actually cancelling one's Spotify subscription. This is something we can obviously not comprehensively conclude just based on the use of a hashtag, which is further supported by the data which explicitly states that the tweeter had not had a Spotify subscription in the first place – despite using the hashtag. In these cases, the action takes a more abstract form: voicing one's opinion and calling out the wrongdoings of Spotify. Achievement of social capital and the feeling of togetherness achieved through cancel culture (Bouvier, 2020) are also among some of the possible actions. An action, in some cases, can also attempt to change one's relationship or identity:

@LiterateGal:

From my friend: "It has everything to do with the chorus of voices from artists who make my world a better place who have used the rising tide of #CancelSpotify to bring awareness of inequity of payment that Spotify is known for."

Raise your voice. Cut off the cash. Be better.

A clear statement is made at the end of the tweet: by choosing another platform – one that pays its artists better than Spotify, in this case – you are adopting an identity of a 'better person'. Now, we should ask: better compared to what? This user paints a clear picture that those choosing to side with Spotify by paying for its services are lower on some moral level compared to those opting to choose another, better paying platform, or at the very least using one's voice to call out Spotify for its inadequate actions. They are throughout their used language attempting to affect the identities of their audience and thus achieve change.

Perhaps due to the nature of Twitter as a platform and its character limitation, the use of deictics – “words whose reference must be determined from context” (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 8) – in an unclear manner can be evident. However, by using hashtags as both archiving elements or parts of one’s message and by tagging other users of Twitter can achieve some clarity in their use of deictics as well. For example, in the tweet:

@HoojieBoojie:

Imagine living in a world where some clowns actually make money not only sharing conspiracy theories but making up some of their own

That's our world rn

@joerogan

#cancelspotify

The use of deictics “some clowns” and “their” might be initially unclear. However, with Joe Rogan tagged into the tweet it becomes apparent that the tweet in this context refers to him. As a plural form is used, however, it still remains somewhat unclear who else this tweet possibly refers to. One, and perhaps the most obvious, answer is that the reference is to other people who share similar views as Joe Rogan, in this case “sharing and making up conspiracy theories” or are otherwise of like-minded nature.

In this chapter, I have provided insights into some of my thought processes when conducting discourse analysis by utilizing examples from the data of this study. In the following chapter, the actual discourses discovered from the data will be presented and further discussed.

9 FINDINGS

After going through the 50 tweets (sorted by ‘newest’ to try and avoid any possible algorithm-based shenanigans and inconsistencies) containing no links or attached media from each of the three different time periods – January 27–28, February 2–3, and February 4–9 – I went on to eliminate tweets that featured no other content but the hashtags used in the search (#cancelspotify or #byebyespotify) and tweets that were written in any other language than English. After this elimination process, a total of 126 tweets were left to form the final data for this study.

Some tweets featured characteristics that could allow their placement under multiple different discourses simultaneously. In these cases I made the decision to place the tweet under the discourse which I found it to be the most relevant to. Factors contributing to this relevance were, for example, the amount of characters used in the tweet on topics relevant to the discourse and my qualitative interpretation of what discourse the tweet seemed to put most emphasis on. In some cases, if a tweet featured qualities of multiple discourses, the discourse most deviant from the other more prevalent discourses determined the placing of the tweet. This allows the finding of more viewpoints through more discourses that might get lost if only quantitative measures, such as the number of characters used on a certain topic, were included to determine the discourse of a tweet. Thus, in this study, one tweet could only fall under one discourse. Simultaneously, not all of the tweets from the final data were placed under any discourse.

All of the examples from data shown are kept in their original form with no edits. Parts of the given examples’ text are underlined to showcase the parts connecting the example to the specific discourse. The discourses found from the data will be introduced in the next subchapters.

9.1 Cancelling based on practicality

In the first discovered discourse cancelling actions were seen based on practical reasoning rather than purely on emotional or moral aspects. In this discourse,

Spotify was in many situations still seen strongly as a product in the form of a platform. While both emotional and rational aspects play a part in choosing to pay for a product or a service, factors especially leaning towards utility were those that the emphasis was placed on.

@JeffInVanBC:

For me, it's not about canceling Spotify so much as it is utility of the platform. I subscribed to Spotify to have access to any music I desire. As that is changing, the best decision was to switch to Apple Music.

And it costs the same.

#ByeByeSpotify

On some occasions, the content of the tweets did not even appear to be directly tied together to the Joe Rogan case. For example, one of the tweets expressed quite heavy discontent towards Spotify after claiming to hear advertisements on the platform despite owning the premium service, which should not feature any advertising between songs or other forms of media. Whether or not the user in case was aware of the whole incident with Joe Rogan, they had chosen to use the #cancelspotify hashtag strongly attached to the case.

@iancahillmusic:

Why the FUCK am I hearing ADVERTISEMENTS on

@Spotify

PREMIUM??? #Advertising #cancelspotify #WTF2022 #premium

In this discourse especially (albeit also present in other discourses as well) mentions of other streaming platforms were frequent. The reasonings for this may vary. For one, users referring to other platforms – such as Tidal or Apple Music – could be doing so to give an additional feeling of weight on their canceling statements, as in “these are not just mere words, I have actually changed the platform I use.” By mentioning other platforms users could also be performing an act of social service by attempting to highlight some actual benefits of competing services while simultaneously possibly pinpointing some downfalls of Spotify on a practical level. For example, the following tweet explicitly mentions being astounded by the sound quality of Tidal, while simultaneously making a non-explicit remark that the sound quality of Spotify left something to be desired:

@RomiDesigns:

Whole family is now

@Spotify

free and I formally signed us all up for the

@TIDAL

family plan. My kiddo LOVES it deeply. Actually, the sound is really superior and I didn't think I'd ever hear sound quality this good streaming #DeletedSpotify #spotifyexodus #ByeByeSpotify

Interestingly enough, in this discourse the use of intonation through writing in uppercase seemed to be more prominent than in other discourses. While intonation is an ever-present factor in spoken language due to its auditory nature, the details of intonation can be harder to pinpoint in written language. This does not mean that intonation does not exist in textual form. For example, speakers can use 'emphatic stress' to emphasize the salience of a particular part of their speech by dramatic pitch changes or loudness (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 28). In written language, writing in uppercase can be considered as an alternative means of doing this in cases where auditory elements are not available. As intonational elements are essential for the interpretation of utterances, even written texts should always be read out loud to make full sense of the meaning behind them (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 28). Thus, in written contexts the use of uppercase writing creates a clear emphatic stress on the specific part.

@WorldFusionRadi:

I see all the #cancelspotify and #DeleteSpotify Tweets and all I can say is what the FRELL were you doing there in the first place!?!?

There ARE other and better options!!!

9.2 Cancelling based on misinformation or disinformation

Perhaps the most prevalent discourse found from the data was that of cancelling Spotify and/or Joe Rogan due to the misinformation or disinformation they spread. This makes sense, as the accusations made about misinformation especially on Covid-19 and vaccines were some of the preceding causes to the events which lead to the emergence of the hashtags #cancelspotify and #byebyespotify (Yang, 2022). As many of the users participating in the use of these hashtags were probably closely following the media attention around the topic, it can be expected that they are quick to grasp on one of the main issues emphasized in various articles: the misinformation.

In this discourse, the responsibility of Spotify as a platform was often highlighted and Spotify was frequently directly connected to Joe Rogan's podcast despite only providing a platform for it. However, it should be noted that Spotify has signed a deal of roughly \$100 million to have exclusive rights for Joe Rogan's

The Joe Rogan Experience podcast, and from a business viewpoint it serves as the flagship podcast of Spotify (Torvinen, 2022). This places a heavier agency and responsibility on the shoulders of Spotify, as they have chosen to make a major financial commitment to the podcast. This assumed agency was prevalent in some of the tweets directly placing the fault of spreading misinformation on Spotify instead of Joe Rogan:

@NadineLpez1:

Cancel

@Spotify

everyone. They spread misinformation. Spread the word. #CancelSpotify

@zzelladonatella:

Finally got around to #cancelspotify. You have a right to give a platform to climate denial, sure. I just ain't paying for it. I'll miss_

@how2saveaplanet

though :-)

Some tweets put the explicit blame solely on Joe Rogan. Nonetheless, these tweets also at the very least feature the hashtag alluding to Spotify, so it is to be assumed that the users also place some guilt on the shoulders of Spotify as a platform. To me, this prompts similar ideas of issuing consequences as in Saint-Louis' (2021) understanding of cancel culture: third party representatives holding adequate power are those to fulfil the ultimate form of cancellation, not the individual people participating in cancelling activities. In this context it can be argued that the hashtag might not be used to signal the user's own acts of cancellation – be it through actual concrete actions or merely raising one's voice on the topic – but rather a demand towards the third parties in power, such as Spotify, to do something about the issue:

@HoojieBoojie:

Imagine living in a world where some clowns actually make money not only sharing conspiracy theories but making up some of their own

That's our world rn

@joerogan

#cancelspotify

In some tweets, the charges of guilt directed towards Spotify were stronger than in others. This phenomenon was already discussed in more detail in the analysis chapter of this study.

@Heretic_w1n5t0n:

Done with Spotify. Can't support a platform that's ok with spreading vaccine and covid misinformation and being directly responsible for deaths. Switching to

@TIDAL

to ensure my fav artists actually get paid.

#spotifyexodus #cancelspotify #ByeSpotify #JoeRogan

Continuing on the theme of connecting misinformation with actual human casualties, another user seems to do the same in a less explicit and direct tone. This is done by first calling out the lies and harmful behavior of Joe Rogan and then informing us about the identity of the user as a person working on ventilators, which are used to save the lives of people, including those in critical care because of Covid-19:

@whooomee:

Spotify continues to spread Joe Rogan Experience lies. I can not support a company that behaves like that. In my profession I work to save lives as a system architect for ventilators. Ventilators that are used to save critical care covid patients. #cancelspotify #Spotifydeleted

By creating the contrast between lies spread by Joe Rogan and lives saved by the ventilators, the user seems to create a less explicit connection of misinformation to casualties. The professional experience of the user and what they have seen or otherwise know about the Covid-19 patients in critical care is being used as a producer of authority and expertise against the knowledge of Joe Rogan, who as a podcast host and former martial arts professional presumably has no experience of working on the field of medical care - unlike the tweeter.

As an interesting note, some users seemed to be especially aware that their participation might not make a difference in the larger scale of things. However, in some of these cases a feeling of moral righteousness appeared to be more important than making a collective change:

@joped:

Canceled my Spotify subscription. I simply can not give money to a company who platforms misinformation and white supremacists. Will my subscription make a

difference? No, but I will sleep better. #DeletedSpotify #BoycottSpotify #JoeRogan-
IsaRacist #cancelspotify

9.3 Cancelling based on repulsiveness of an agent

In the third discourse actions of cancelling were based on and justified by the repulsive nature of the target. This is perhaps the discourse in which the poignant and aggressive language natural to both cancel culture (e.g. Chiou, 2020; Bouvier, 2020; Bouvier 2021) and Twitter as a platform (Isotalus et al., 2018, p. 25) was the most visible. The discrimination towards those differing from the norms of the users' figured world (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 173) was visible through language used to create various negative identities (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 110) for Joe Rogan:

@6nsinvt:

Capitalism is showing

@eldsjal

-

@Spotify

we have the freedom to choose to #DeleteSpotify #DeletedSpotify #cancelspotify bc
#NeilYoungIsRight.

#JoeRogan is a vile repugnant racist, but you knew that.

Here, in addition to the terms used to define Joe Rogan, we should pay specific attention to the final remark of the tweet: "but you knew that". The user seems to create a figured world here, in which they have identified Joe Rogan as an evil person to the extent that it should be a self-evident fact to all of the general public - or at least to the ones who share a similar figured world around the topic. Perhaps in doing so they also address those who support or share ideals with Joe Rogan saying that even they are well aware of Joe Rogan being 'evil', and by nonetheless choosing to support him they attach themselves to this same identity of iniquity.

@CharlieDavid:

#cancelspotify Cancelling because of Spotify's support for a racist, fear mongering person like Joe Rogan who should not have the privilege of a microphone. Grow up, be brave. Do the right thing.

Again, the user leads by addressing Joe Rogan with negative lexicon coming to the conclusion that cancelling Spotify and opposing Joe Rogan is "the right thing" to do. Hence, a similar figured world of Joe Rogan as an evil person is

strongly present. The actions sought to be made by the language of this user appear to be clear: be a better person, cancel Spotify. Similar accusations of racism and lies especially appeared in various other tweets as well:

@lwrncjones:

Can't give my money to

@Spotify

anymore as long as they support a bigot and liar like Joe Rogan #CancelSpotify

@FULLYFocused_:

Joe Rogan is a racist and should be canceled like all the rest of them. @Spotify continues to support him on their platform, so they need to be canceled too, literally!

#CancelSpotify #Spotifydeleted

Here, the second user goes as far to state that all racists should be cancelled without any further questioning. In this instance the line drawn for what is considered cancel-worthy is drawn more explicitly than in many other instances. As the awareness of latent racism is essential to cancel culture and attached phenomena – such as wokeism (Wilska et al., 2022) – the clear-cut line drawn in this tweet does not cause much confusion.

9.4 Cancelling based on Spotify's inadequate payment policies

Consumers are constantly expecting more from corporations and organizations when it comes to societal issues and doing 'good' business (Edelman, 2018; Edelman, 2019; Wilska et al., 2022). In addition to the discourse of misinformation, this became apparent in another obvious way: Spotify's payment policies. This is a discourse that gathered even an unexpected amount of attention from the users, as Spotify is nowhere close to being the only streaming platform accused of inadequate and unequal royalty payment (e.g. Sisario, 2021). Another interesting factor is the fact that the payment policy of Spotify was not one of the original preceding issues leading to the #cancelspotify movement. Rather, it appears to be an issue that users of social media adopted as an additional topic of criticism on Spotify as the movement progressed. Thus, the original reasons for which people started cancelling Spotify created a snowball effect, which led to users starting to throw additional cases of misconduct to the mix.

In a variety of the tweets under this discourse, the message was quite clear: users are voting with their feet and simultaneously sending Spotify a clear message to pay their artists better:

@LiterateGal:

From my friend: “It has everything to do with the chorus of voices from artists who make my world a better place who have used the rising tide of #CancelSpotify to bring awareness of inequity of payment that Spotify is known for.”

Raise your voice. Cut off the cash. Be better.

The user here places emphasis that the “inequity of payment” is something “that Spotify is known for”. Here again a figured world is created, in which it is assumed that people are indeed aware of the situation of Spotify financially mistreating those using its platform. This awareness in both “raising one’s voice” and concretely “cutting off the cash flow” towards Spotify is then signalled to imply that one is a “better” person than those still choosing to pay and thus support Spotify.

@DubbedPoogie:

#ByeByeSpotify Pay your artists better.

@Audioistic:

Not only should you cancel #Spotify for misinformation but also for the criminal activity and underhanded nature of the business to #avoid #paying the #artists #royalties

if you love music you don't use Spotify!

#ByeByeSpotify #ByeSpotify

In the above tweet, the user goes to the extent that by “avoiding to pay artists royalties” Spotify is committing actual “criminal activity” - which implies an actual offence of the law, but could be also used as a mere figure of speech. Now, this can be tied back to both the power and influence (Kenney & Zysman, 2016) and the ethical role and responsibility placed on the shoulders of platforms economies (Gillespie et al., 2010; Härkönen et al., 2019). Should platforms have such power at their hands and if so, would it not only be right that they are held accountable for potential misdeeds? After all, as the well-known saying goes: with great power comes great responsibility. Clearly, in the eyes of this user and their figured world, responsibility is expected to be placed on Spotify as a platform - and many other participants in the #cancelspotify movement appear to share a similar view. The user also connects the “love of music” with “not using Spotify” due to these aforementioned, making a plead to the emotions of the audience: no

self-respectful lover of music would support a platform which is considered to be guilty of doing “underhanded business” and even of “criminal activity”.

@un0ndXD:

I realized I hadn't listened to Spotify in months because I focus exclusively on unknown talent and their playlists only focus on discovered artists. Then I saw the Neil Young thing and yea time to #cancelspotify .. back to Apple music folks they pay artists better anyway

9.5 Cancelling based on communality:

As stated earlier in this study, the reasoning behind partaking in cancel culture can rely on aspects of social capital and a feeling of togetherness (e.g. Bouvier, 2020; Clark, 2020). This can also be tied to the positive face needs – in this case a sense of belonging and togetherness – mentioned by Gee & Green (2011, p. 119). It appears that for some users the social part of participating in cancellation activities with others was the driving factor of joining in themselves. Rather than explicitly stating their discontent with or criticism towards either Spotify or Joe Rogan, these users chose to emphasize the feeling of togetherness:

@JanKoester1:

Who's cancelling their Spotify account? I want to follow you. 🍷 #cancelspotify

Some users took the more passive role of a proponent, in which they through language encouraged others to participate in the cancellation of Spotify. As an example, the following tweet made a connection between various artists – much like Neil Young did – removing their music from Spotify due to the power of people voicing their opinion on social media:

@briandaly473:

I'm liking this ball that is rolling of artists pulling their songs off of Spotify. Keep that ball rolling people! #CancelSpotify

Indeed, a certain existence of mob mentality was strongly present in a lot of the tweets placed under this discourse. This user considered cancelling their Spotify while riding the wave of momentum present in the #cancelspotify hashtag:

@qbikmusik:

Considering cancelling my Spotify while there's momentum in the #cancelspotify movement, feels like now or never

The reasoning here can be considered interesting at the very least, as the user does not mention any actual arguments aside from the “#cancelspotify

movement". However, it is to be remembered that when using language, people often leave some parts unmentioned when they assume that the audience is capable of filling out the relevant parts even without them being explicitly mentioned (Green & Gee, 2011, p. 12). Obviously, this places a lot of responsibility on the audience and their capability to do so. In this case, it can be assumed that the user has got other reasoning behind their ponderance than just mere social factors. Perhaps they are either unhappy with Spotify as a service or against Joe Rogan. Be there other reasoning or not, from the content of the tweet we can assume that the social movement serves as some kind of a last nail in the coffin for the user, as they state that the current situation makes them "feel like now or never".

9.6 Criticism of cancel culture

As I was analyzing the later batches of tweets in my study, I noticed some evolution in the discourses: users either criticizing cancel culture or choosing to side with Joe Rogan joined the discussion. In this discourse I myself found an interesting nuance: while criticizing cancel culture and speaking down on those cancelling Spotify, the critics are sometimes essentially performing a sort of cancel culture themselves:

@SynthientArt:

Not so long ago I was impressed with

@Spotify

because it seemed like the only big tech that wasn't censoring... One of the few platforms left with an element of #FreeSpeech. Now they have deleted > 100

@joerogan

episodes? Censor Joe? #CancelJoeRogan? Nah #cancelspotify.

In the tweet above, the user expresses clear disdain towards Spotify after it – according to the user – censored content on Joe Rogan's podcast and even removed a plethora of the episodes from the platform. This marked a turning point for the user's own perspective of Spotify, as it had now gone from one of the "few platforms left with an element of free speech" to a target of cancellation itself. A similar mentality on the topic could be spotted in other tweets as well:

@twobitt:

If

@joerogan

leaves

@Spotify

I will delete them as soon as it happens. #cancelspotify

Here, the #cancelspotify hashtag was in a sense hijacked. The overall sentiment behind the hashtag remained: cancelling Spotify. But this time it was those siding with Joe Rogan who were the ones threatening to cancel Spotify. This highlighted the situation of Spotify being caught between a rock and a hard place reputation-wise: it would have to choose to please the more liberal-minded people and possibly damage salient shareholders of its flagship podcast and a massive source of monetary revenue, or to please Joe Rogan and his fans and face the consequences of various artists and content creators leaving its platform.

Here, some aspects of the spiral of silence seem to appear notably present, as in my data the majority opinion seems to clearly be that which opposes Spotify and Joe Rogan. In the first batch of 50 tweets on January 27th, not a single tweet was found that either criticized cancel culture or took the side of Joe Rogan on the issue. While it is true that the tweets included in this study only contain a minority of all of the tweets including the specific hashtags on said day, I find it interesting that the mentions against the minority opinion grew in prevalence later on the timeline.

Here is where the spiral of silence comes in: users holding the minority view are prone to conceal their opinion if they do not observe similar opinions being stated by others (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 339). Perhaps those possessing a critical view of cancel culture or the #cancelspotify movement were at first hesitant to speak up, as the majority of the tweets were of opposing opinion. After some of these users expressed their critique later on the timeline, it may have given other like minded people a much needed shove to do so as well. On the other hand, on social media various factors, such as algorithms and echo chambers, also come into play regarding the spiral of silence. Different people see different content in their social media feed, and thus the majority opinion an individual perceives online can also differ greatly from that of others (Milan, 2015; Cinelli et al., 2021). It could merely be that people opposing cancel culture in this case were just not aware of the situation or the existence of the hashtags criticizing Spotify and Rogan due to their algorithm not showcasing them the content in question.

Related to the algorithms and echo chambers, some tweets were more explicit in protecting the controversial content spread by Joe Rogan. In the example below we can see an alternative figured world and identity compared to some of those displayed in other discourses: one in which mainstream media is not to be trusted. On the opposite, it is actually the mainstream that is seen as the spreader of misinformation:

@OMGOpinions231:

hahaha seeing #cancelspotify makes me laugh. never gonna happen end of the day Joe Rogan hasn't spread misinformation just not information the mainstream want you to know. if anything they spread more #Misinformation than anyone else agree or disagree let me know what you think

Despite the colorful and pointed language in a lot of the tweets criticizing cancel culture, some took a more levelheaded approach to the topic:

@vynkay_:

Let's find a way forward...we don't have to necessarily #cancelspotify or #BoycottSpotify

In this tweet, however, the user does not offer any concrete suggestions or thoughts about what should be done to “find a way forward”. Even though their stance on the topic remains unclear in the context of the tweet, I consider it belonging under this discourse. In a way, the user is criticizing the phenomenon of cancel culture as something “unnecessary”. They seem to also create an image of the current phase in the timeline of events as a sort of a pit stop before some other, alternative solution to the situation appears.

This more neutral tone of criticizing cancel culture existed in differing forms. For example, some users took a critical stand on both sides present in the situation:

@Frank_Craft:

This

@joerogan

stuff is teaching me a lot. Apparently there is a whole world of people I have no interest in who have podcasts & rock rebels just want a different flavor of mob-rule conformity. Conform away, folks!

#ByeSpotify #cancelspotify #DeleteSpotify #thoughtcrimes

The user in this case seems to take the position of some kind of an outside observer in the phenomenon. They start by expressing their disinterest towards Joe Rogan by referring to him as a “people I have no interest in who have podcasts” and then go on to criticize Neil Young for “wanting a mob-rule conformity”. The overall tone of the tweet seems to be that of amusement, as the user then in a carnivalistic manner encourages others to “conform away”.

If we take a look at the hashtags used, we can also make an interesting observation. The user attaches the hashtags “#thoughtcrimes” to the end of their tweet. This refers to the word thoughtcrime popularized in the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, which in the context of the book refers to politically abnormal thoughts in the fictional language of Newspeak (Merriam-

Webster, n.d. f). The term has since been adopted in contemporary English use as well and is often used to describe personal beliefs that contradict the accepted norms of a society. This is what the user in case seems to refer to by making a connection to the dystopian world of Nineteen Eighty-Four and the modern narrow opinion climate in the context of cancel culture. In the book *Newspeak* was literally used to manipulate history and people by those in power, aiming to derive the populace of any original thinking. The lack of deictics, however, makes it unclear who it is the user accuses of these thoughtcrimes in this case.

Another user approached the topic by comparing the artists removing their music from Spotify due to the controversy to the actions of child-like bullies:

@kimmy122976:

All the people pulling music from Spotify is like saying u don't agree with me so I'm taking my bat n ball n going home. What about thinking for yourself? #cancelspotify #bullies #JoeRoganExperience

The “taking my bat and ball and going home” part is a clear reference to a sporting event – baseball, to be more specific – in which a participant chooses to throw a tantrum and leave because others do not share the exact same mentality or views as them. A lot of us can probably connect this kind of behavior to our childhood in one way or another, but that may not be the only possible connection to make. Nonetheless, the most probable context can be assumed to be that of children misbehaving due to not having developed a proper way of dealing with their emotions yet. In addition to this belittling comparison the user also refers to the mob mentality often perceived in cancel culture by encouraging people to “think for themselves” instead of following the will of the masses.

The often-political nature of cancel culture was also explicit in some of the tweets. In this case of #cancelspotify an assumption of a political polarization can also be made: those supporting Joe Rogan are often seen as right-wing or republicans, and those opposing as left-wing or liberals. In the following tweet, an assumed right-wing person uses this assumption to belittle those on the liberal side:

@mAYUvcgUU7UKAio:

Tuning into #byebyespotify and checking crazy lib meltdown 🍷Guys! Use your social welfare on mental services rather than streaming services 😊

Here, the political stance and attributes attached to it are weaponized to be used against the people. “Lib” is a shortened form of the word “liberal” used here attached to the words “crazy meltdown”. This paints a picture of liberals participating in the cancellation of Spotify as emotionally unstable people overreacting to events. To add to this, the user states that liberals should rather invest their social welfare – a core idea of libertarian economic thinking especially – into mental health services rather than streaming platforms. This, again, plays with the idea of liberals being mentally ill while also belittling their political views of economics in a sarcastic manner.

In our last example of this discourse another user voices their discontent with the #cancelspotify movement. They also question the cancelling of a whole platform “because of one guy most of us didn’t even know”, suggesting an idea that being personally unaware of the person conducting a misdeed somehow makes the act of activism via cancel culture “stupid”:

@opapado:

am i the only one who thinks the whole #cancelspotify thingy is just stupid? like- why cancel an entire streaming company because of one guy most of us didn't even know? plus, a lot of people upload stupid stuff on YT but i haven't seen any of y'all canceling Youtube.

As we see, the user refers to somewhat similar thoughts of those in Saint-Louis’ (2021) article especially on unequal sanctioning within cancel culture. They, however, do not clearly state that they oppose cancel culture overall, but at least in the context of #cancelspotify. The extenuating circumstance of Joe Rogan being a “guy most of us didn’t even know” is also an interesting one, seeing as the user then goes on to state that “a lot of people upload stupid stuff on YT but but i haven’t seen any of y’all canceling Youtube”. First, the user assumes based on their knowledge that YouTube has not faced similar threats of cancellation, but can they be sure about that? Just because this user has not seen any such communication does not mean that it would not exist. Secondly, if not knowing the person committing a misdeed shows the actions of cancellation in a foolish light, could that not be used as a mitigating factor in the context of YouTube as well? The user seems to create a contradiction here based on their own base knowledge, which can be understandable as it is exactly our own knowledge and context of the world through which we aim to make sense of things around us.

9.7 Cancelling as atypical behavior

When I chose to study cancel culture as the topic of my master’s thesis, one of the things I was especially interested in was when and why people choose to go ‘out of their way’ to participate in cancelling activities. At the root of cancel culture are often questions of moral nature (e.g. Norris, 2021), and it is obvious that the moral views of people can differ by a large margin. The social goods of communication should be considered here (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 120), and we can assume that users on Twitter also try to act in a way in which they seek to either distribute or withdraw social goods.

In a world full of differing viewpoints and polarization, what is it that people consider to be deserving of cancelling? No one is fit to have an all-encompassing moral compass with which they are capable of deeming every single wrongdoing in the world from an objective standpoint. Rather, we choose – depending on our identities and relationships – what we consider as good and bad. This is apparent in my understanding of cancel culture as well: instead of it being a

phenomenon only centred around – for example – a specific political viewpoint (e.g. Sarasti, 2021), it seems to be utilized in a way which fits the agenda of the party performing the criticism. This can also be seen in the data of this study, especially in the previous discourse. Some studies have shown us that even violent actions can be seen as more acceptable when they fit the moral conviction of an individual (Chiou, 2020).

In this discourse people put emphasis on the fact that they may not support cancel culture in the big picture, but the specific case of #cancelspotify created an acceptable atmosphere for even them to participate in cancelling activities. An example:

@patheticteam:

I don't agree with all cancel culture. But this one? Way too easy. #CancelSpotify #JokeRogan

To me, this is an extremely peculiar discovery. What makes the case of #cancelspotify different from other phenomenon of cancel culture for these users to find it more acceptable – “way too easy”, even? Can this be explained by polarization driving us towards more extreme viewpoints (Sunstein, 1999) depending on the messages spread in our own echo chambers close to our own opinions (Cinelli et al., 2021)? Perhaps the fact that the accused misinformation spread by Joe Rogan had possible serious detrimental effects on the health of people increased the weight compared to some other instances of cancel culture? Some reasoning behind the decision can be found from the repulsiveness of the agent – Joe Rogan – as well, considering the way in which the user belittles him by referring to him with the hashtag #JokeRogan. Another user voiced some similar opinions, but was less explicit about the rarity of their cancelling activities:

@jacobsonic:

Finally got around to #cancelspotify yesterday and I hate it... I've invested years on

@Spotify

platform. Their algorithms are so much better than

@AppleMusic

, but I can't see my money go amplify #HateSpeech and #misinformation ... C'mon

@eldsjal

... right the ship!

Here, attention should be put on the clear unpleasantness of the cancelling situation to the user. They claim to “hate” having to cancel Spotify and then go on to praise the features of Spotify as a platform in comparison to its competitors, while thus far we have heard quite the opposite in the context of tweets in other

discourses of this study. While not as explicit, by filling in some of the context and comparing it to other tweets featured in this study we can make an assumption that the user may not be as fond of participating in cancel culture. The emotion they highlight to describe partaking in cancellation of Spotify is “hate”, while various other users have expressed more positive feelings when joining the movement – some even seem to justify their whole participation by positive feelings of communality. Thus, in the context of the data present in this study, feeling such negative emotions appears as an anomaly. Clearly, the user behind this tweet has formed an emotional relationship with Spotify through monetary and possibly other, more abstract efforts placed by them. After all, they have “invested years on Spotify as a platform”.

At the end of the tweet the user also tags the profile of @eldsjal, which belongs to Daniel Ek, the CEO and founder of Spotify. Attached to this is also the request to “right the ship” – an expression which comes from a metaphor of righting the course of a ship. This again stresses the unpleasant feelings attached to the situation by the user: they are begging for the CEO to take a stand on the situation, after which the user could probably return to using Spotify and its “so much better algorithm” with a lighter heart.

This discourse in particular is one that – in my opinion – deserves more attention in future studies on cancel culture taking other methodological approaches to achieve a deeper look into understanding the specific reasonings of people joining cancellation activities in some cases while criticizing the phenomenon in others. Examples for suggestions for future research could include the application of methodologies such as the Critical Incident Technique (e.g. Flanagan, 1954) to cancel culture – but more on that in the last chapter of this study.

10 CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have studied the phenomenon of cancel culture especially in the case of Spotify and Joe Rogan. The goal of this study was to get a better understanding of How people justify and make sense of cancelling processes and How they use language in cancelling situations. Based on both the theory and data of this study, it is apparent that consumers place heavy expectations of responsibility on various corporations (Edelman, 2018; Edelman, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and platforms (Gillespie, 2010). As these platforms and the creators publishing content on them have become powerful (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Härkönen et al., 2019) curators of the public discourse (Gillespie, 2010; Leong & Ho, 2021) in what can be considered some kind of a modern online public sphere (Clark, 2020), organizations need to be cautious about what content they choose to platform and how the audience reacts to it. While the spiral of silence has suffocated various voices of minority opinions especially in the past (Noelle-Neumann, 2004), the anonymity, individuality, and social connection provided by social media have ensured that minority opinions can get spread perhaps better than ever before (Leong & Ho, 2021). As information travels at vast speeds online (e.g. Wilska et al., 2022) – especially negative information (e.g. Lievonen et al., 2018) – constant awareness of new arising topics serves as a key tool for organizations seeking to anticipate and mitigate potential reputational and financial threats caused by cancel culture.

By applying discourse analysis to my data of tweets containing the hashtags #cancelspotify or #byebyespotify, I was able to identify six discourses: Cancelling based on practicality, Cancelling based on misinformation or disinformation, Cancelling based on Spotify's inadequate payment policies, Cancelling based on communality, Criticism of cancel culture, and Cancelling as atypical behavior. By identifying and analyzing the content in these discourses I have sought to achieve a better understanding of how people use language and treat associated stakeholders in cancelling situations. By utilizing the findings of this data, I believe that corporations can learn to be better at both recognizing cancelling situations before they escalate further and understanding some of the reasons why consumers cancel agents in the first place. Despite the work

included in this study, a demand for more academic studies on cancel culture still exists due to the highly prevalent nature of the topic in our modern times. Hence, in the following chapter I will go through some suggestions for future studies while also addressing some of the limitations present in this thesis.

11 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This thesis contains various limitations that should be considered while inspecting its contents. For one thing, the data consisting of tweets was normalized to only consist of original tweets that feature no attached media, such as images, videos, or links. This was done to serve the purposes of this study focusing foremost on textual language and also to narrow the framework of the data so that it would not grow too extensive for the context of this study. As visual elements are overflowing in our digital age and are used as rich, symbolic means of communication (Gee & Green, 2011, p. 187), it would be worthwhile for future studies to place emphasis on the meanings attached to these visual elements of tweets and other digital communication as well. By doing this we could achieve an even more coherent understanding of cancel culture as a phenomenon on digital platforms.

Secondly, this study did not aim to provide organizational management with specific tools or procedures to utilize when faced with cancelling activities, but rather to help understand and recognize the language and discourses on social media which can lead to a wave of cancelling. General advice on handling crisis situations (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and articles providing such tools in the specific context of cancel culture (e.g. Wilska et al., 2022) already exist and more are bound to come as the phenomenon of cancel culture will most certainly remain a prevalent part of our modern digital discourse.

Thirdly, despite this study taking into account some progress on a longer timeline of events, it still ended up focusing on a considerably narrow timeline in which it was already apparent that the discussion around the specific hashtags was drying up rather fast. Therefore, there remains a need for studies focusing more on the long-term effects of cancel culture, as it has been questioned if cancel culture is actually capable of issuing adequate punishments for wrongdoings especially in the long haul, or if it should be able of doing such things in the first place (e.g. Bradshaw, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021).

Fourthly, when utilizing data achieved from a digital platform – especially one based around anonymity – the possible existence of artificial ‘fakeholders’

(Luoma-aho, 2015) and trolls (e.g. Golovchenko, 2020) is something that should always be considered. In this study, no specific effort was made in trying to distinguish trolls or fakeholders from the data, as these stakeholder groups can be hard to tell apart from genuine stakeholders (Lievonon, Luoma-aho & Bowden, 2018), such as those shareholders expressing their genuine discontent with Spotify. Hence, the possibility of these potential latent stakeholder groups having some effect on the validity of this thesis' data is something to be considered.

Lastly, the various discourses around social media and cancel culture are constantly shifting and evolving (e.g. Saint-Louis, 2021). The writing of this study began in Autumn of 2021. Since then, a great deal has taken place regarding cancel culture overall and the scholarly content around it. Even Twitter has gone through turmoil after Elon Musk bought the platform for \$44 Billion in October 2022 (Conger & Hirsch, 2022). A lot has changed, and even more is bound to happen. Thus, this study serves as a snapshot of the specific time of social media discourse in which it was written. The current situation of Twitter as a platform, for example, would surely benefit from a more recent study to add to the findings of this thesis. The inclusion of other qualitative methods, such as the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), could also help in achieving understanding deeper knowledge of the reasoning of individuals when participating in cancel culture.

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