

CANCEL CULTURE:  
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICE OF  
CANCELING

by

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A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communication  
Boise State University

August 2021

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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

**DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS**

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Thesis Title: Cancel Culture: A Qualitative Analysis of the Social Media Practice of Canceling

Date of Final Oral Examination: 24 May 2021

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Wood, thank you for pulling me aside at the end of class five years ago and telling me I had a future in media storytelling. While I didn't go for production, changing my major was one of the best decisions I made during my time at BSU.

Dr. Moore, Media Law and Ethics continues to be a favorite class of mine. Your teaching style meshed so well with my learning style that even years after taking your class, I still remember and am able to talk about what I learned from your class. Thank you for giving me some of my favorite knowledge.

Dr. Hicks, thank you for changing my world in all things communication and difference. My interests, passions, and drive to make change all started in your class and have been key in my success. Thanks for being an awesome Coach, Chair, Professor, and literally everything.

To Janice and Randi, thank you for the unwavering support and interest in my work- and all of the yoga.

Thank you to Mallory, for the late night talks on canceling, making sure I took breaks from writing, and somehow not banning the words "cancel culture" from our home.

## ABSTRACT

Unlike previous forms of public shaming, canceling is a product of Web 2.0 and the boom of social media. The act of canceling is inherently tied to the word “canceled,” however, how the public defines a cancellation is not static. Instead, how those on social media partake and understand canceling is due to consistent strategies that emerge during a cancellation. In this research, I conducted a case study of the cancellation of Kevin Spacey that took place in 2017. Over 1700 tweets discussing Kevin Spacey’s cancellation were captured in order to determine the process of canceling. Through qualitative content analysis, multiple strategies were revealed that illuminated how the masses on Twitter utilize social media to participate in cancel culture. This research demonstrates how canceling functions and the strategies that appear throughout the process of a cancellation.

*Keywords:* Canceling, Cancel Culture, Kevin Spacey, Social Media, Twitter, Qualitative

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It was the night before Halloween, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except for BuzzFeed News reporter Adam Vary. At 9:32 p.m. EST, a bombshell was released in the form of an article titled “Actor Anthony Rapp: Kevin Spacey Made a Sexual Advance Toward Me When I Was 14.” Despite the late hour, social media was alight with discourse surrounding the breaking news. Vary’s interview with actor Anthony Rapp was an extensive exposé that revealed the allegation that Kevin Spacey made a sexual advance toward Rapp when he was a child.

As a highly regarded actor with a career spanning over thirty years, Kevin Spacey is a household name who has received countless accolades for his work in Hollywood. However, instead of the praise and support Spacey was used to receiving, he was now faced with navigating the public’s response to the allegations against him, alongside the continuous echo throughout Twitter that included a word that no one wants to hear next to their name: Kevin Spacey is canceled.

Coming out of the other side of the #MeToo movement, which encouraged those who experienced sexual assault to share their stories and led to many of those who were exposed being removed from their social standing, cancel culture took the reins soon after. A practice that takes place on social media, cancel culture is the masses on Twitter’s way of responding to unacceptable behavior in order to block continued support or success of the offender. The masses on Twitter utilized the tools that social media

provides such as the dissemination of discourse at a mass scale, and the ability to communicate with people all over the world instead of those only in one's offline social circle, social media users band together to serve their own form of justice.

One of the first in a long line of future cancelations, Spacey being cancelled rocked the world and demonstrated the power that social media users have when utilizing canceling to meet a goal. Feared as a tool that destroys lives dependent on a single action, cancel culture is critiqued for its fast acting consequences and lack of clarity of its role in the status quo. These fears disrupt discourse supporting cancel culture, overwhelming the public's understanding of canceling as an undeveloped phenomenon that causes more harm than good. Viewing cancel culture this way hinders much needed discourse regarding the practice, specifically, how we know that a cancelation is taking place and why. Illuminating these aspects of canceling is necessary in understanding why people take part in canceling and how they do it.

In this research I ask the following research question:

**RQ: How do social media users participate in cancel culture on Twitter?**

The scope of this research is centered around one specific moment within the phenomenon of canceling: Kevin Spacey's cancelation on Twitter. This is for two main reasons. The first is that Spacey's cancelation received an immense amount of attention that sets up this research to collect a rich data set that demonstrates a cancelation. The current lack of scholarly research on cancel culture leads me to pick an instance of canceling that can provide this data to offer researchers a foundation to expand upon in the future. Second, because there have been multiple cancelations, the amount of data and analysis that would be required to study cancel culture as a whole qualitatively would be

extensive to the point of hindering the clarity of the results. Therefore, studying one specific instance within the phenomenon rather than studying the phenomenon as a whole will enhance the clarity of canceling and the prospect for future research.

In this research my goal is to examine the data collected from Spacey's cancelation in the form of tweets to determine the process of canceling and what strategies are used within that process. First, through the review of literature in Chapter Two, I examine key aspects that relate to the study of cancel culture as a social media practice: social media and social platforms, power and the elite, online activism, and public shaming online. This review of relevant literature is essential to understanding the functions of social media, advocacy, and power which is necessary when discussing cancel culture. In Chapter Three, I discuss my method, a case study completed through a qualitative analysis under an interpretivist lens. Chapter Four presents my findings through a detailed analysis of the data collected by the case study. Additionally, this chapter holds the pilot model that demonstrates the process of a cancellation that was created through the findings of this study. Lastly, in Chapter Five, I discuss the limitations of this study, explore the implications of cancel culture through this research, and offer insight on potential areas of future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Social Media and Social Platforms**

With the birth of social media and its continuously evolving nature, there are many terms and definitions that have been established to navigate its breadth. Some of these terms are interchangeable, while others will direct attention to a completely different subject matter. There are two definitions that must be established in order to differentiate the independent and interdependent nature of social media: social media, and social network.

Constantinides (2014) defines social media as “web 2.0 applications enabling the creation, editing, and dissemination of user-generated content” (p. 42). boyd and Ellison (2007) define a social network as “the combination of features that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Essentially, “social media” is the application or platform and social networking is the act that takes place through the use of the platform.

While some social media networks may have similar qualities, the success of a social media platform in attracting users derives from its ability to provide features that are distinct from other platforms. The vastness of the internet creates competition for social media sites to establish uniqueness that determines how users will be able to network. Darmon et al. explains in their 2015 article on communities in online social

networks that “the *structure* of the social network influences how information can be broadcast or diffuse through the service” (p. 1). How social media platforms structure their site determines how users will communicate and how information will disseminate.

The purpose of social media is fluid and continuously evolving with and for the needs of the users. Someone who wants to use social media needs a device and access to the internet. The majority of social media sites do not cost the user anything to use the service. This ease of access provides opportunities to share and exchange information with users around the world (Pfister & Soliz, 2011). These sites are often rather easy to navigate, and through trial and error, mastery of the use of the platform is quickly obtainable. Social media sites are an increasingly useful source of connecting people with others through hosting a platform where users can create discourse with little to no mediation from a third party (Pfister & Soliz, 2011). Social media sites are a product of the evolution of people needing to connect with one another without the concern of time or distance (Shuter, 2012). These sites are a hub that collects and broadcasts the behaviors of its users (Marwick & boyd, 2010). With a lack of anonymity and a relinquishment of personal information in exchange for access to the service, social media sites are a snapshot of what people are willing to do to inhabit a space where they can connect and generate content.

Platforms such as Twitter have positioned themselves as a prime location to communicate at a mass level. As one of the leading social media platforms with over 330 million monthly users worldwide, Twitter attracts individuals with a wide array of professions, interests, and authority (Omnicores, 2020). In the United States alone, there are over 68 million monthly Twitter users, a number that continues to increase every

quarter (Statista, 2021). A 2019 study conducted by Pew Research Center found that Twitter users are “younger, more educated, and more likely to be democrats than the general public” (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). When it comes to social issues such as race, gender, and immigration, the masses on Twitter lean favorably to support those negatively impacted by discrimination. How the masses on Twitter view other topics are not all that different from adults in the United States as a whole (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). When asked about their attachment to their communities and thoughts about taking offensive content seen online too seriously, Twitter users and the general U.S population shared similar opinions (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019).

In 2006, Facebook launched its newsfeed feature that frequently refreshes the activity of a user’s friends, motivating users to the social aspect of the platform. In the same year, the microblogging site Tumblr launched with a site that encouraged users to generate and share original content at a mass level. However, both of these social media sites were designed to be accessed via computer rather than a mobile device. Twitter was designed to be used on a mobile device at its launch, taking into consideration smaller screen size and less options for navigation. This added to its ease of use and mobility from the start, and after just three years, Twitter surpassed 18 million accounts (The Nielsen Company, 2009, as cited in Marwick & boyd, 2010).

At its most basic level, Twitter is a platform where you write your thoughts and then click a button to share those thoughts. Forgoing the bans Twitter has implemented to eliminate political content and hate speech, the platform provides an outlet for users to exercise their right to free speech with the opportunity to be heard across the “Twittersphere” instead of solely their in-person social circle. Communication is a

constant on social media where claims, ideas, and inquiries can be posed and answered by anyone with an account.

Twitter encourages communication and networking by having specific functions on their platform, such as “retweeting,” “mentions,” and “hashtags” (Darmon et al., 2015). “Retweeting” refers to the act of sharing a tweet made by another user to one’s own followers, and “mentions” refers to directly mentioning or tagging an account on Twitter (Darmon et al., 2015). Hashtags are “user generated content of categorized dialogue” (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). Hashtags are a categorization system that aggregate tweets that use the same hashtag in order to easily access tweets about similar topics. This allows users to find and network with other users, as well as document the popularity of topics of conversation. Hashtags inherently ask to be shared in order to gain recognition and then get categorized with the other uses of the hashtag which in turn creates a space for discourse (Brock, 2012; Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). While other social media platforms have implemented hashtags into their structure, Twitter is especially successful in encouraging communication outside of one’s social circle (out-groups), while sites like Facebook are modeled to keep already established social circles connected (in-groups) (Saxton et al., 2015).

Tweeting on Twitter mimics in-person communication more than other social media sites. Twitter focuses on “in the moment” communication and is often the default platform for the public to access when there is an event taking place. “Live tweeting” is the act of tweeting several times in a row on the same topic regardless of how much time has passed in-between tweets. Live tweeting is a reactionary form of generating content, where an action takes place and it is responded to in real time. Followers can participate

in the live tweeting of another by commenting on the tweets and retweeting. Live tweeting can happen simultaneously with thousands of other users, expanding the opportunity to network with others.

Humans rely on building communities in order to find belonging which is imperative to cognitive and social development (Over, 2016). As technology has advanced, humans have found new ways to build these communities and further develop the skills that humans rely on to communicate. Darmon et al. (2015) define a community within a structural network as, “a collection of nodes (users) within the network which are more highly connected to each other than to nodes (users) outside of the community” (p. 2). Social media has provided a space for communities to grow and flourish by hosting a platform where individuals can find each other while not being dependent on factors such as time and location. There is no limit to the amount of communities that a social media user can be a part of. Over (2016) explains that a sense of self and belonging is built through interacting with others and learning behaviors that are and are not acceptable. While one’s identity and outreach might be stunted outside of technology, social media opens the gates to limitless opportunities to find and bond with those who share similar experiences and interests (Pfister & Soliz, 2011). Finding communities often leads to the creation of in-groups and out-groups. An in-group is a collection of individuals that share similar beliefs, ideas, and goals, while an out-group includes those who do not share the same qualities of a particular in-group (Stadtfeld et al., 2020). The separation of in-groups and out-groups attracts certain people to participate in a particular group. The separation of in-groups and out-groups creates boundaries in which the groups exist within, and functions as a way to categorize individuals depending on what

they value (Stadtfeld et al., 2020). The use of hashtags and keywords can quickly put a user on the right path to an abundance of posts that revolve around a specific topic or group (Darmon et al., 2015). Depending on the structure of the platform, social media does not require that you ask permission to join a community. Instead, social media users simply jump in and join conversations and communicate with others that are present on the platform. This aspect of social media is a key part of continuing the cycle of users finding communities and each other (Shuter, 2012).

This recognition of multiple identities is a prominent aspect of social media platforms. Intersectionality is the act of recognizing the existence of more than one identity within a single being (Crenshaw, 1989). In-person community building may not be cognizant or diverse enough to provide resources to house dialogue of the multiply-burdened. However, social media provides a unique opportunity where those with intersecting identities have a space to flock to (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). When someone identifies with a group that they don't have access to in-person, social media provides a space to find solidarity and support that may not have otherwise been possible. Subsections of social media are continuously growing to accommodate those with a variety of identities and the unique experiences those identities create (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014).

There are many subsets of Twitter that exist such as Black Twitter and Gay Twitter which revolve around a space on the platform where there is common language and understanding of experiences often without the need for codeswitching (Brock, 2012; Richardson & Ragland, 2018). Simultaneously, recognition of these groups has grown with the use of hashtags and trending topics (Brock, 2012). Twitter has provided a space

where these out-groups shift into an in-group, even if only momentarily (Brock, 2012). Those outside of these spaces retweet tweets from Black and Gay Twitter into white and straight Twitter spaces, making these groups more visible than they may have been if discourse from and about these groups were solely in the hands of traditional media.

As social media has grown, so has its user demographic. Restaurants, small businesses, and corporations have jumped on the social media bandwagon in hopes to appeal to their consumer base and attract potential customers. But just like anyone who decides to put themselves in the public eye, especially on a social networking site that encourages discourse, criticism is waiting in the wings. Kirkwood et al. (2019) explains that social media provides a space for employees and stakeholders to “critique and resist corporate actions” (p. 335).

While there is no sense of real privacy when it comes to the internet, there is a difference between private and public spaces on social networks. A private space would include turning a social media profile on “private” which would prevent those outside of the users chosen social media circle from accessing the private user’s content, ceasing the possibility of mass networking and outreach. boyd (2010) defines networked publics as “publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (pg. 1). These networked publics mimic in-person public spaces by providing a place for communication. However, networked publics go further by solving problems that impact the quality and amount of communication that can take place such as time, location, and mobility that in-person public spaces cannot. Social media users have the

ability to take part in worldwide events without having to wait until a gatekeeper shares that information, where the possibility of a gatekeeper's influence or bias may distort the original message (Pfister & Soliz, 2011; Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014; Shuter, 2012). Instead, first-hand accounts and real time events have a space to exist and be shared with little interference, as long as the terms of service are followed. This also provide users the opportunity to advocate for themselves and provide representation for identities that were previously controlled by traditional media outlets (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014; Shuter, 2012). Social media allows individuals to provide a first-hand account of how they can and should be represented, an opportunity that is not easily obtainable in the hands of traditional media.

Social media sites provide a platform for users to perform their desired self, or a self that is constructed to serve an imagined audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This performance is established through user created profiles, posted texts and images, and the interactions that are curated by the user in order to best serve the users imagined audience (boyd, 2010). Marwick and boyd (2010) explain that an imagined audience is the audience we imagine we are communicating with, even if what is imagined isn't the case. The performance of the user and the imagined audience are interdependent because of the feedback that the user receives on their performance and the choice the user has to alter their performance or not (boyd, 2010). The intent of these actions is to find a community that reflects similar interests and supports one's contributions to those interests, or as Marwick and boyd explain "the *ideal* audience is often the mirror-image of the user" (p. 13). Being viewed as authentic by their audience is often a priority for social media users as a way to maintain followers and build and market their personal brand (Marwick &

boyd, 2010). However, the real audience can hardly be defined, for even if what one posts may be intended for a specific audience, there is nothing stopping that post from reaching many unconsidered audiences (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; boyd, 2010). Twitter users have an idea of who their audience is but often overlook the vastness of the platform and how one tweet could shift them towards a completely different audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Not understanding the possible outreach one has when posting can propel a user into the spotlight. The more attention someone receives on social media, the less privacy they have on and off the internet. Understanding how to navigate social media in order to communicate is only one aspect, for the possibility of becoming a topic of conversation is the hands of the audience, not the user.

The amount of self-disclosure one provides on social media is dependent on several factors, including the structure of the platform and the evaluation (or lack thereof) of cost and benefits of that disclosure. Self-disclosure on Twitter is a far more deliberate act than on other social media sites (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). On Facebook, one's relationship status, gender, place of work, and school are presented on the user's profile. A Twitter user would have to specifically share that information on their limited profile or through a tweet. Facebook asks for this information when building an account, and while there is the option to not submit this information, those who do, then have intimate facts about their life on their profile that is accessible to anyone who has permission to view the account, which is dependent on cleverly hidden privacy settings. Bazarova and Choi (2014) explain "selective disclosure minimizes a disclosers vulnerability and personal information risks, while still satisfying the desired goals and motivations" (p. 636). Twitter's interface lets users cater their performance to their imagined audiences

more carefully which aids in receiving the desired outcomes such as attention, support, and more followers (boyd, 2010). Both Facebook and Twitter utilize reciprocation through “sharing” and “retweeting” and the option to post publicly or privately to “friends” or “followers.” What is unique about Twitter is that the Tweet is the focal point, not the profile.

### **Power and the Elite**

Khan (2012), in their work on the sociology of elites, defines elite as “those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource” (p. 362) and that that disproportionate control allows them to convert their power into action as “engines of inequality” (p. 373). The less dominant are referred to as the masses or the periphery (Avin et al., 2018). The elite is commonly regarded as “the 1%,” referring to American citizens who make the most income compared to the rest of the population (Avin et al., 2018; Khan, 2012). Even though the elite is a considerably smaller population than the aptly named masses, power and influence leads society to center itself around the elite (Avin et al., 2018). The relationship between the elite and the periphery functions as a symbiotic relationship, where at least one party in the relationship is benefiting from the other. The elite benefit from the periphery through labor, attention, capitalism, and support. The masses keep the elite in the 1% by purchasing the elite’s material goods, working to support the elite’s lifestyle, or supporting elite’s position and status in roles of power such as government (Keltner et al., 2003). In turn, the elite provide entertainment, material goods, protections, and leadership (Keltner et al., 2003). This cycle establishes the elite’s social capital, or the connection and privileges that they have access to due to their standing in society. Avin et al. (2018) explains that the gap between the elite and the

masses is increasing even though less people are obtaining mass wealth (p. 2). This indicates the hoarding of mass wealth, with fewer opportunities for the masses to acquire elite status, even though the dream of acquiring fame and fortune is alive and well and sold as a possibility for anyone who works hard enough. Even though the elite makes up only 1% of the population, their influence over society and the resources they have access to allots them a disproportionate amount of power over the 99% who do not share the same privileges (Avin et al., 2018).

There are several factors at play that keep the masses reliant and trusting of the elite. First is the elite's monopoly on government, corporate, and technological power structures (Creech, 2020). Second, the elite exhibits their power to the masses and the rhetoric they use to keep the masses dependent on elites (Brauer & Bourhis, 2006; Creech, 2020; Keltner et al., 2003). Technology has exasperated this separation in power with outreach to the masses becoming increasingly easier (Creech, 2020). The elite is often defensive of their actions in order to keep their status, even at the detriment to the masses. Social and ethical responsibility often goes to the wayside in exchange for social and political capital, profit, and fulfilling self-interests (Creech, 2020).

Brauer and Bourhis (2006) explain that the power imbalance between the elite and the masses results in three main differences, including "(a) how they perceive and judge others, (b) how they are evaluated as targets, and (c) how they behave" (p. 601). Those who hold power tend to look at low power holders negatively, while low power holders look at those with power more positively (Brauer & Bourhis, 2006). To power holders, losing their power is a threat to their entire identity and social status. Brauer and Bourhis (2006) define social status as "the relative position of groups on valued dimensions of

comparison such as educational achievement, occupational status, wealth and speech style” (p.602; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One’s social status is linked to their power and access to resources and the power to withhold them (Brauer & Bourhis, 2006). Power is associated with social norms in the sense that those with more power are more often to either violate social norms, ignore social norms, or be excused from social norm expectations (Brauer & Bourhis, 2006; Keltner et al., 2003). This exemplifies the breadth of the power imbalance between the elite and the periphery, for those who wield more power are excused from societal expectations because they can afford to not comply (Keltner et al., 2003). Those who do not have power must follow expectations or risk punishment, often a cost that they cannot afford.

Keltner et al. (2003) defines power as “an individual’s relative capacity to modify others’ states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments” (p. 265). The goal of the elite is to maintain the power that they have obtained, even if that is to the demise of the masses and established institutions (Creech, 2020). The masses are told how to behave by the elite, motivated by the system of rewards and punishment (Keltner et al., 2003). This is not to say that these forms of power are inherently evil or intend to cause harm, but the affects they have in influencing behavior for gain of some sort demands attention be placed on how the elite use their power, and how that use affects the masses.

In Whitmeyer’s (1997) critique of Mann’s four sources of power, Whitmeyer emphasizes distributed power as the power one group has over the other (p. 211). To truly understand the power the elite has and how they use it, Whitmeyer explains that we must not attribute the power a group has to the group, but instead the actors residing

within that group (p. 213). This allows a more accurate and useful understanding of how the elite use their power rather than equating power with the elite. Instead it focuses on analyzing what each member of the elite is able to do with the power they have and how they will use it to further interests (Whitmeyer, 1997). Narrowing in on a single actor removes the camouflage that hiding within a larger group can provide. Keltner et al. (2003) offers that “power should be characterized not in absolute terms but as falling on a continuum relative to the power of others” (p. 269).

Whitmeyer describes three ways in which power is used over a person. The first is by affecting the set of motivators through linking behaviors with a reward or punishment (pp. 215-216). Second, affecting current behaviors through changes in the market-place, infrastructure, or disrupting monopolies (p. 216). And third, by linking behaviors and motivators through influence, altering long-term behavior, and altering motivators either short or long term (p. 219). These examples become apparent when elites influence behavior through the encouragement or discouragement of educational standards and institutions, government sponsored assistance, and accessibility (Keltner et al., 2003; Whitmeyer, 1997). When the power to dictate behavior is in the hands of the few, the many are in a vulnerable position to comply in order to receive rewards that the elite hold, because those rewards are intrinsically linked to education, health, class, food, access to services, and more (Keltner et al., 2003). These power structures are purposefully placed and tended to in order to keep the masses reliant on the elite’s guidance and distribution of rewards.

## Online Activism

After the murder of Trayvon Martin, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter began circling social media and henceforth became a movement that exists outside of social media as well. This reflects the transformative nature of Twitter that results in social change. Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 article discusses intersectionality and the importance of recognizing how individuals can be multiply-burdened. Intersectionality is a response to a single-axis framework of marginalized subject positions (Crenshaw, 1989). Instead of recognizing one aspect of a marginalized identity, intersectionality articulates how several identities that are marginalized can exist within one person, and how those identities interact with each other (Crenshaw, 1989). After the murder of several Black woman by police, Crenshaw utilized social media and co-created the hashtag #SayHerName (Richardson & Ragland, 2018). This then led to the hashtags #BlackGirlsMatter and #BlackWomenMatter which provide a call for specific attention to those who were not being fully represented in the Black Lives Matter movement (Richardson & Ragland, 2018). Black women-focused hashtags were an evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement through the use of social media after recognizing that Black women were being left out of the conversation of police brutality. The creation of these hashtags creates advocacy for those who experience several forms of marginalization in order to the end the silence of oppression.

The term "hashtag activism" is used to describe the use of hashtags to direct attention to an event as a form of activism (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Hashtag activism is often associated with or used interchangeably with the term "slacktivism" which is described as a type of activism that is lackluster, lazy, or unimpactful to a movement

(Jost et al., 2018). Associating hashtag activism with slacktivism diminishes the impact that hashtags and social media have in regards to social justice causes. If a hashtag activist is active on social media, that doesn't mean that they are not politically active outside of social media as well. Using hashtags to advocate is not a cause for dismissal of worth to a movement. When researching the impacts of “#BlackLivesMatter” with white Twitter users participation, Clark (2019) found that:

Each participant described a process of engagement that consisted of using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as a means of contextualizing the instances of police interactions with Black and brown bodies, which primed them to begin acknowledging the legal, social, and political factors that shaped incidents of police brutality...ultimately motivating them to take some sort of action, both online and off” (p. 526). In addition, Kuo's (2016) work on racial justice activist hashtags states that hashtags can function to “(a) demonstrate injustice, (b) re-frame discourse, and/or (c) promote policy change. (p. 2)

Hashtag activism is often seen as a lesser form of activism. However, activism is not defined or practiced in just one form. Clark (2016) states “the categorical dismissal of Black Lives Matter and its online discourse as simple ‘outrage’ obscures the complex inner workings of protest repertoires that required users to perform their racial identities online in the pursuit of racial justice” (p. 520). Not recognizing hashtag activism as a useful means of activism reflects fear of success of social media's impact in social change, and an attempt to defend the status quo (Jost et al., 2018).

As a form of activism, hashtags provide the opportunity for individuals to network regardless of location or time (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). For those who are not

able to participate in offline activism, hashtag activism is an opportunity to join the cause, show support, and share information. Social media provides an opportunity for the public to participate in politics, especially since the general public utilizes social media to learn and gain insight on current affairs (Clark, 2019). But even so called slacktivists are vital in advocating for social change, as Jost et al. (2018) explains that while slacktivists may contribute less to a movement on social media, the information they shared and their outreach was comparable to non-slacktivists.

Twitter is what Bonilla and Rosa (2015) call “a unique platform for collectively identifying, articulating, and contesting racial injustices from the in-group perspectives of racialized populations” (p. 5). Twitter serves as a platform that gives marginalized groups the representation that traditional media has failed to. Bonilla and Rosa continue to say that “most mainstream media contexts the experiences of racialized populations are overdetermined, stereotyped, or tokenized” (p. 5). Twitter users are representing themselves and their thoughts on social injustices, while traditional media’s representation of social injustice often exists to serve hegemonic power structures (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). In their article “The Problem of Speaking for Others” Alcoff (1991) explains “in particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (p. 6). Social media provides the opportunity to humanize experiences that main stream media may exploit.

Unlike traditional media outlets, social media creates a system where the public can inform each other through networking. This level of control over news circulation by the masses has never existed before. The public does not have to rely on traditional media

to receive information without the ability to communicate on a mass level themselves. As Schejter and Tirosh (2015) explain “to better the unequal position dictated by utilitarian policies and the nature of traditional media, the inability of individuals to mass communicate left them at the receiving end of the communication process. Freedom of expression to the public was the right left for those allowed to communicate:

broadcasters, newspaper owners, and multichannel television operators” (p. 801). Social media also works as a system of checks and balances. If a media outlet represents something incorrectly or biased, Twitter users are quick to jump on social media and correct it, exposing misinformation (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). Those participating in informing the public on social causes are more introspective, humanizing, and provide a more collaborative experience due to the ability to represent what traditional media leaves out (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). However, social media platforms are not without their own shortcomings or problems. Social media use almost always requires an agreement of the terms of service of the platform which can restrict what users are allowed to share. One form of media is not necessarily better than the other, but how information is presented and what is allowed to be discussed through the mediums vary. These variations are vital to filling in gaps of information that one may leave out along with keeping one another accountable.

Factors of accessibility, mobility, networking, and choice have led to social media being a successful medium in distributing information of a political nature (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). As Jost et al. (2018) states “information received through social media channels is mediated by a social network that the individual has chosen to join. Decades of research in social psychology would suggest that political information shared in this

way would be far more impactful than messages conveyed through newspapers, direct mailings, or other conventional forms of strategic political communication” (p. 110). The conversations, and the unforced participation provides a new way of understanding social justice issues, through a first-person perspective rather than a third party.

Social media provides a level of transparency that traditional media cannot (or will not) provide and functions as a vehicle for political conversations to take place in order for citizens to be more informed and act (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). Social media is a platform that encourages and provides a place to exercise rights of free speech and contribute to our democracy by questioning government leaders, fact checking power holders, and correcting misinformation spread by traditional forms of media (Clark, 2019; Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). This is especially so when government fails to recognize injustices that are imbedded in social structures. Fileborn’s (2017) research on victims of street harassments choice to seek justice through social media states that “in this sense, online justice holds the potential to contribute towards broader social justice efforts by providing a forum in which the power structures and oppressions underpinning street harassment are identified, challenged and, ultimately, dismantled” (p. 1498). Social media interrupts cycles of injustice by skipping over the powers that keep it in place, and exposing the truth on a platform that does not rely on erasing these stories.

Having an alternate platform that is not run by traditional frameworks provides an outlet that is unregulated by hegemonic structures and powers. As Zarsky (2014) explains:

Governments are ill-equipped to deal with legal challenges arising at the cutting edge of the technological environment in which social media develop. In

addition, like any other highly complex regulatory process that relies on external feedback, the regulatory process might be tainted by political interests and lobbying. Accordingly, many benefits might follow if the public's preferences could be met without direct government intervention. (p.157)

Instead of the government representing the people, social media provides a space where the people represent the people.

### **Public Shaming Online**

Public shaming is an umbrella term that encompasses varying forms of punishments used to target something or someone in the attempt to criticize, disrupt, and/or delegitimize (Shenton, 2020). In-person communication strategies such as gestures, symbols, and language take a different shape through social media. Online public shaming utilizes social media to create discourse within in-groups and out-groups by sharing memes, hashtags, and images with an expanded audience (Mielczarek, 2018). Shenton (2020) explains the impact of public online shaming through their framework of *social media poetics* stating that “public online shaming through which antagonists criticize one another and, in so doing, create their own identities” (p.170). Shenton continues to say that people “become” their posts and polarization of communities and identities both shape the identity of the shamee and the shamer (2020). This identity extends to making groups consisting of those who share the same viewpoints that then turn into an “us vs. them” mentality. Hands (2014) explains “these groups were forged becoming “we” by sharing experiences that could be connected and amplified through social media” (p.242) and “what we see is a focus on individual interest and gratification, even if at times this is mitigated by an aggregation of partially shared interest” (p.243).

For public shaming to be its most successful, it relies on finding others who share the same goals creating a collective “we.” These groups often fade out after the shaming has run its course. Online public shaming allows these “we” groups to be formed and then disband, only to have several more ready to take their place. These groups form quickly and are vast in their targets due to the ease of use of social media platforms (Gallardo, 2017). The goals of these groups are dependent on who is involved and what values are being upheld. Due to this inconsistent and rapidly changing process, how the means reach an end is everchanging and questions the overall intent of online public shaming’s contribution to a common good (Hands, 2014).

Social media platforms are a hub for users to spread information quickly to a possibly large audience. Traditional media do not encourage networking like social media does (Kirkwood et al., 2019), instead it functions as a one-way channel for communication where consumers interacting with each other is not key to its success or outreach. Traditional media outlets become obsolete when it comes to timeliness due to how many people can interact with the content and how fast news reaches mass audiences. These limits have become apparent with the popularity of social media leading to the decline of newspaper sales and broadcast ratings. Social media users don’t have to rely on a single source of information in which discourse cannot be had.

For an example of this difference, MTV’s Super Bowl halftime show in 2004 is not remembered for choreography or music, but the reveal of Janet Jackson’s breast. During their performance of Justin Timberlake’s song “Rock Your Body,” Timberlake reached across Jackson’s bustier and tore off a piece of the fabric, exposing her breast for less than a second, but the resulting response lasted for far longer than that.

Representatives from the Federal Communication Commission, the White House, the Parents Television Council, MTV, and others, made statements about the performance and demanded action take place (Mason, 2005). Jackson faced backlash and ridicule over the incident. 2004 brought forth new forms of media that Jackson's experience quickly dominated, with record breaking TiVo replays and internet searches for the performance (Mason, 2005). The blame landed heavily on Jackson's shoulders as she faced a possible felony charge (Mason, 2005). Timberlake's apology was lackluster and came late after Jackson's career started to decline while Timberlake's continuously climbed. Rolling Stones reporter Hillary Crosley attributes the backlash that Jackson faced in part to "America's dismal Jezebel trope surrounding female sexuality- the idea that Black women are irrational sexual beings that must be controlled and stamped out" (2014). The public shaming that Jackson faced was perpetuated by traditional media, especially broadcast. Discussions and arguments of the infamous performance continued for months after via traditional news media, continuously holding Jackson responsible for Timberlake revealing her breast due to a wardrobe malfunction (Mason, 2005). Many have wondered what Jackson's experience would look like today and the part social media would play in sharing and discussing the event.

The everyday citizen is no longer confined to a singular temporal structure in their search for justice. Technology has created limitless spaces for what are called "digital vigilantes" (Trottier, 2020). Vigilantism is the act of citizens taking law enforcement in their own hands when appointed law enforcement is not meeting the expectations of the public, usually, but not always, with the intent to right a wrong (Gallardo, 2017). Online vigilantism takes it a step further and uses the internet to hold people accountable often

through means of shaming (Gallardo, 2017; Hess & Waller, 2014; Trottier, 2020). Online vigilantes tackle many issues that they feel demand exposure and action to fix or change. From bad parking and littering to pedophilia and corruption, online vigilantes come from all corners of the internet to bring to light problems that they feel aren't getting enough attention (Gallardo, 2017; Trottier, 2020). Online vigilantes use social media and technology to gather evidence and share it on a mass scale (Hess & Waller, 2014). Documentation is often a key part of the online vigilantes' arsenal, providing specific instances through photos, private information, and personal documents to support their case. However, an online vigilante is not bound by a set of guidelines (Trottier, 2020). How the online vigilante gathers and reveals their evidence or materials can lead to destroying someone's reputation, livelihood, and privacy (Gallardo, 2017).

A well-known online vigilante group is "Anonymous." Anonymous is known for leaking information about an individual or group that is causing harm (Zetter, 2014). Anonymous is referred to as a criminal group, hacktivists, and as online vigilantes, as their work to expose injustices has led to arrests, exposing government corruption, and revealing identities of those associated with hate groups such as the KKK. Anonymous relies on hacking, doxing, and the internet to take law enforcement in their own hands (Zetter, 2014).

Social media users have utilized and expanded upon expressions of resistance such as aggression, humor, trolling, ridiculing, and malicious or disruptive behavior in an attempt to spotlight their call to action against their target (Kirkwood et al., 2019). Online mediated boycotting is the process of ending the consumption or support of a product or business. Makarem and Jae (2016) explain that four themes are attributed to instrumental

boycott motivations, including “call for action, awareness and information sharing, making a difference, and offering alternatives or substitutes” (p. 206). Online boycotting takes several forms and utilizes methods that will best serve the desired outcome (Makarem & Jae, 2016). Unlike traditional boycotting, online boycotting gathers widespread support that can dominate space on social media, projecting a message that can catch the attention of their intended target (Makarem & Jae, 2016). However, these boycotts often stay within the in-group in which they started. The sharing of posts stays within the in-group that is leading the boycott with others who already share the same opinion, which in turn limits the outreach to sway the opinions of others who are not already involved with the boycott (Tsai et al., 2020).

While not a requirement of online mediated boycotting, public shaming is often a catalyst for a boycott to take form. For example, the boycott of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese that started in 2012 exemplifies the power of online mediated boycotting. The boycott originally began when parents realized that artificial dyes found in Kraft’s Macaroni and Cheese were not allowed as additives in several other countries (Kirkwood et al., 2019). Facebook pages and mommy blogs began calling for a boycott of the products and created a petition in hopes that Kraft would remove the dyes while shaming Kraft for potentially harming their children, (Kirkwood et al., 2019). Kraft responded and stated that they would remove the dyes and replace them with natural coloring, but denied that the boycott and petitions swayed their decision. Then in 2016, Kraft came out with a new frozen pasta product called “Devour” which was advertised with the tagline “food you want to fork” a play on words for “food you want to fuck.” Religious organizations took to social media and told their members to boycott Kraft products due

to the products advertising campaign (Reimer-Barry, 2016). But it wasn't until 2019 when Kraft released an ad during the Super Bowl that depicted a couple watching "amateur food porn" and posted a longer version of the ad on Pornhub.com that the fear of a full-fledged boycott caused Kraft to take action. The sexual nature of the ads concerned parents who associate the brand with a product they give their children. The Pornhub ad was on the site for one day before it was removed. Kraft apologized and stated that they would avoid using pornography sites to advertise in the future. The intent of boycotting a brand is for a behavior or act to stop (Makarem & Jae, 2016). Social media has provided a platform for those who share similar interests to stand together and demand change.

Trolling is an act that is unique to technology and online interactions. Defined as "an online subculture primarily interested in upsetting and alienating as many people as possible" (Aspray, 2019, p.155), online trolls work to direct the attention of a person or event in a negative manner through subverting the truth, with little regard to the impact it may have on an individual or public level (Aspray, 2019). Trolls often work fast and deliberately, posting as much as they can and responding to comments to encourage outrage and gather attention (Herring et al., 2002). However, social media's growth and prominence has bred a new form of troll that works as a sort of vigilante rooted in resistance. This new troll is not necessarily concerned with targeting people "for the lulz" (Aspray, 2019, p.157), but instead targets bigger fish, such as corporations and the elite to rally attention. Traditional trolls are heavily associated with alt-right and right-wing ideologies, working to further agendas that are intertwined with their beliefs (Aspray, 2019). Either the original troll, or troll 2.0, both use humor, aggression, and dismissive

behavior to further their goals: to shame, ridicule, bend the truth, and have as many people as possible see it happen.

Doxing is the process of revealing personal information to a mass audience and can include phone numbers, addresses, social security numbers, places of employment, and more. Doxing is often used to harass an individual who has been targeted to the point of needing to completely uproot their life in order to stay safe (Gallardo, 2017). In 2014, Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media and video game blogger was targeted by a community of men who disagreed with her feminist critique of tropes in media and video games. Her private information was leaked to the public and she started getting non-stop phone calls that threatened her with rape and murder (Campbell, 2019). Her face was posted on pornographic websites and every post she made to her YouTube channel or social media platforms were bombarded with threats and harassment (Campbell, 2019). Another instance of doxing was seen in 2020 when former Oklahoma Council member Alex Scott had her home address leaked online by an individual after Scott proposed cutting the law enforcement budget by 4.5 million dollars (Shen, 2020). Her address was shared on social media by someone who submitted a public records request, and Scott's information was spread on several social media platforms. Shortly after her information was released, her neighbor in the duplex next to Scott's was raped, and Scott claims that she herself was the intended target in response to her proposed budget cuts, and that if her information wasn't leaked, this situation may have never happened (Shen, 2020).

Social media has provided an expansive platform where networked publics combine the advancements of technology with communication (boyd, 2010; Constantinides, 2014; Ellison & boyd, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Humans are

evolving with technology bound communication, and are building communities, new language, and spaces where the masses on social media hold more control in participating with news and the dissemination of information (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Brock, 2012; Darmon et al., 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Pfister & Soliz, 2011; Richardson & Ragland, 2018; Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). These new forms of communication have led to critiques of disproportionate holdings of power by the elite and expressing resistance to the status quo (Creech, 2020; Keltner et al., 2003; Khan, 2012; Zarsky, 2014). Unlike traditional media, social media platforms encourage discourse and networking with others on the platform and disclosing information about oneself to share with an audience (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; boyd, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010). This freedom to express ideas and concerns with others reveals issues in society that may not be receiving the attention it deserves (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Brock, 2012; Clark, 2019; Kuo, 2016; Richardson & Ragland, 2018; Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). Social change through online activism has proven to be a successful by making substantial change that lends itself to offline spaces (Clark, 2019; Jost et al., 2018; Kuo, 2016).

Social media is a mass form of communication that provides limitless information to millions of users around the world on a given platform. The diversity in experience, values, and ideas of acceptable behavior make rules or guidelines of how to treat others a difficult feat. Anonymity and access to mass audiences have fostered several forms of shaming individuals on social media with varied results (Gallardo, 2017; Hands, 2014; Herring et al., 2002; Hess & Waller, 2014; Kirkwood et al., 2019; Mason, 2005; Mielczarek, 2018; Shenton, 2020).

The last few years have led us to a pivotal moment in online public shaming, where one's reputation, livelihood, and privacy is at risk through one's presence on social media. Cancel culture is a pervasive and unique aspect of social media. The concept of who can be canceled and why is everchanging and fluid. With no set of rules or guidelines, canceling has been known to effect non-power holding individuals, elites, corporations, and movements or organizations. Why someone or something may be canceled may include everything between derogatory language or claims to outright felonies. With the creation of new language, symbols, groups, communities, and system of governance (no matter how inconsistent), canceling is a culture derived and nurtured through social media.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD AND PROCEDURE

### **Method**

#### Interpretivism

Interpretivism is a methodological paradigm that acknowledges the subjective nature of human experience. These experiences are relative to circumstance and construct multiple truths that determine numerous social realities rather than one common reality (Ryan, 2018). How these realities are interpreted can be shaped by historical and cultural forces that direct social practices that in turn create symbolic meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

Interpretivists often turn towards a humanized and reflexive approach in the attempt to understand subjective realities (Dean, 2018). This approach encourages the researcher to treat their subject of research ethically, through collaboration, empathy, and putting the needs of the subject above the needs of the research (Tolley, 2017). This should be done reflexively by the researcher being conscious about how their socialization has created their worldview and how that could impact how they treat their subjects and how they complete their study. What is observed will be interpreted by the researcher after observation and analysis and therefore will be influenced by the researcher's experiences and world view. Through an interpretivist paradigm, not only is the researcher studying a phenomenon, but the researcher is inherently studied as well. How a researcher collects and interprets the data is shaped by what the researcher values and will therefore hold influence (Fink, 2016).

Interpretivists support the understanding that the real world does not exist under an objective truth, and investigating and studying other truths brings value to the scientific field (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2002; Stryker, 2017). While positivists believe that there is one objective truth, interpretivists support the idea that the world is socially constructed and therefore there are many truths (Ryan, 2018). An interpretivist paradigm favors the notion that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed. Furthermore, an interpretivist paradigm goes further than simply acknowledging the existence of a phenomenon and instead encourages the researcher to study the characteristics of the meaning making process (Dean, 2018; Ryan, 2018). An interpretivist paradigm works to understand phenomenon in the context of which it is happening (Dean, 2018).

The meaning making process is constructed through social interaction and shapes how individuals view the world. For researchers to demonstrate this, “communication should be studied in its natural occurrence” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p.11). This is done by going to the place where the phenomenon is happening. This reveals the reality created through the observed symbolic interactions taking place. When observing and researching how a subject is communicating, interpretivists are encouraged to emphasize the importance of empathy and preserving the subjective reality of the subject (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Instead of seeking to change how communication takes place, an interpretivist paradigm works to understand what communication means to the subject and how that shapes social realities and creates social practices. Because interpretivism considers that realities are created through symbolic interaction, viewing the interactions naturally rather than through an experiment or organized procedure provides a more

accurate result. Interpretivists are encouraged to extensively observe in order for their research to be as credible and accurately reflective of the subject being studied (Krauss, 2005).

There are several approaches when utilizing the interpretivist paradigm. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2019), “reality is prolific and emerges between humans through their symbolic activities of expression and interpretation” (p.11). To understand how these social realities form, the symbolic activities of the subjects must be observed (Krauss, 2005). In accordance with this, Meads (1962) symbolic interactionism theory highlights three key principles when using this approach. First, is understanding that a person’s behavior is constructed by the meaning they have created, second, meaning is constructed from social interaction, and lastly, meaning can adapt depending on context (Ryan, 2018). This understanding aligns well with the interpretivist’s paradigm due to the emphasis on observation, acknowledgment of multiple realities, and the construction of meaning.

### Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that is used to determine patterns within collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These patterns indicate themes in data that are then interpreted by the researcher in relation to the research questions posed. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p.82). What is determined as a theme is dependent on the philosophical assumptions of the researcher. Ely et al. (1997) elaborates on this notion, stating that the themes don’t emerge from the data, but instead emerge from the

researcher. There are four main principles of thematic analysis: acknowledging theoretical and philosophical assumptions, determining a theme, detailed descriptions of an expansive data set, and determining whether to use an inductive or theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Acknowledging philosophical and theoretical positions and assumptions is key in thematic analysis. It must be realized that the themes used to interpret data are chosen by the researcher and understanding that it was a decision and not something that just exists within the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers theoretical and philosophical assumptions are inherently linked to how they will determine a topic of research, collect data, analyze the data, categorize it, and interpret it (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Therefore, the researcher must not only acknowledge their assumptions to themselves, but should reveal them in their research as well. This establishes a needed transparency and acknowledgment that the assumptions and world view of the researcher will influence how they interpret data. To think that the researcher could completely separate their assumptions and positionality from their research would be not only be inaccurate, but irresponsible, especially when researching subjects outside of the researcher's world view. The researcher should not believe that their positionality does not affect how they will interpret what they are researching. Because the goal of thematic analysis is to understand deeper meaning of a specific topic, and not proving something true or false, the researcher acknowledging their assumptions will provide space for further research that is framed by different assumptions. This also works to prevent the researcher from "speaking for others" (Alcoff, 1991) and instead emphasizes that the researcher has acknowledged that their positionality and assumptions will affect how they

conduct their research, and the result of the research should not be considered as a resulting one truth.

Determining what a theme is, is key to understanding how to conduct thematic analysis. A theme should be related to the research question. Themes are not dependent on quantitative measures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes do not have to be determined based on their prevalence in the data, but should be chosen if they provide the opportunity for interpreting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis looks past the surface in order to determine the true meaning of phenomena. We can't understand meaning if we only look at the top layer of communication.

Having an extensive collection of data provides the researcher with more warrants when explaining their interpretation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The descriptions of the themes should be detailed and supported by the content of the data set. By doing this, the researcher provides the reader with the opportunity to justify the research in multiple ways. The researcher exhibits the trustworthiness of the data by not only stating their findings and explaining their process, but proving their interpretation and claims through rich descriptions, analysis, and a clear organization system (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transparency of the authors process, the detail of the descriptions, and justification of the data and interpretation aids the research in being considered useful and meaningful. Braun and Clarke claim that this is especially so for work in an under-researched topic (pg.83).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify two primary ways to analyze data through thematic analysis: inductive and theoretical analysis. Inductive analysis considers that the determined themes are intrinsically linked to the data (Clarke et al., 2015). This form of

analysis works to avoid the theoretical assumptions of the researcher, as they are not trying to associate the data in a previously decided framework, but instead let the data guide the creation of the framework (Clarke et al., 2015). However, as Braun and Clarke emphasize, it is impossible for the researcher's theoretical assumptions to be completely disregarded or ignored during the analyzing process (pp. 83-84). A theoretical analysis works with the researchers theoretical and philosophical assumptions and focusses on the researcher's specific interest in order to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

With these principles in mind, Braun and Clarke (2006) propose a 6-step process to conduct thematic analysis that includes “familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report” (p. 87). This process has been utilized in many fields when conducting thematic analysis in a variety of topics and phenomena.

#### Familiarization and Immersion

The first step is the researcher familiarizing themselves with the data as an immersive and active process that reveals the depth of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015). During this process, the researcher evaluates the data several times and makes notes of the initial ideas and themes present. Being extremely familiar with the data aids in the following steps of the method, starting with generating initial codes. Because this is a qualitative method, reviewing the data several times aids the researcher in determining the intended meaning of the data. A first pass of the data may be interpreted by the researcher through their own world view. Multiple evaluations of the

data reveal other truths that those outside of the researcher's positionality are communicating.

#### Generating Initial Codes

Generating codes identify key features of the data that the researcher is looking to study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes are how the researcher will associate interpreted data that is associated with themes (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Lowe-Calverley and Grieves (2018) study, *Thumbs up: A thematic analysis of image-based posting and liking behavior on social media*, determined their initial codes by identifying "key words, phrases, and sentences that indicated recurring patterns in the data" (pg.1904). These codes acknowledged the key ideas present in the data that the researchers are interested in studying. Braun and Clarke explain that this coding process ties back to whether the research is using an inductive approach that find codes derived from the data, or a theoretical approach that works with the researcher's specific interests. Depending on the approach, what is coded will depend on either the data itself, or what the researcher previously established is being looked for.

#### Associating Codes With Themes

Next, the researcher associates the codes with potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). How this sorting is organized depends on the researcher, but can include a visual representation such as a thematic network. Attride-Stirling's (2001) work on thematic networks, a process which organizes the themes determined from data, offers that when defining themes, they can be categorized in three ways: basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes (p. 388). By doing this, the researcher's interpretation is categorized in a fashion that aids in the rationalization of their claims. Attride-Stirling emphasizes the

importance of establishing how the theme is recognized. This is so thematic analysis can be considered a useful and recognized method, but also for the researcher to have a rich collection of data that can be analyzed and provide meaningful results (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

### Code and Theme Review

Once the initial themes are noted, the fourth step is to review them. This process requires the researcher to sift through their data and determine if the initial themes are actually themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This reveals themes that may be too broad, that are too similar, and themes that need to be separated. This is where being familiar with the data is vital. Establishing what is going to be considered a theme in the research is dependent on understanding what the data means. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that the process of reviewing themes has two parts. The first is to determine whether the coded data has a pattern that supports the theme. The second is to determine if the themes accurately reflect what is in the data. If these two steps are unable to be completed, then the researcher must go back and determine new themes that can be used to interpret the data. Additionally, Joffe and Yardley (2004) explain that it is vital that the researcher's themes are consistent in order for the research to be reliable. This is especially so due to the interpretive nature of thematic analysis. If how the interpretation is happening isn't consistent, then its validity and comprehension is questioned.

### Defining and Naming Themes

This process associates specific meaning of the theme and what coded data can be associated with it. This step includes writing an analysis of the goal and purpose of each theme and how and why it will be used. This also reveals themes that may overlap or

determine that what was once considered a major theme may instead be a subtheme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In a study conducted by Shanahan et al. (2019), *Self-harm and social media: thematic analysis of images posted on three social media sites*, the authors determined four themes present in their data: communicating distress, addiction and recovery, the presentation of gender and the female body, and identity and belonging (pp. 3-4). Through an inductive approach that gathered themes presented from the data, the goal of their research was to determine how people communicate self-harm through images on social media. The themes that the authors found provided a broad analysis of different conversations that took place. With these themes, the authors were able to categorize the data they collected to best represent the phenomena that they were studying which aided how we understand those who talk about self-harm on social media.

### Reporting Findings

The sixth and final step is to produce a report of the findings. Not only does the report need to include the data and analysis, but it must show the validity and importance of the research and interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is done by providing evidence, detailed explanations and justification of chosen themes, and a demonstration of how the researcher decided how the data would be put into those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The report also requires the researcher to explain how the thematic analysis links back to the research question. The researcher must consistently and extensively explain how the themes that they have established interpret the data in a useful way that reveals something about the topic.

## Procedure

I conducted a case study of Kevin Spacey's cancellation that started in October 2017 and is noted as one of the early cancellations where people used the word "canceled" to call for his removal from Hollywood. Spacey's career was ultimately ended by his cancellation. Directors, producers, studios, and actors have stated their refusal to work with Spacey. This led to not only Spacey not receiving new work, but also resulted in his firing from the Netflix original hit show *House of Cards* and having his already shot role in the film *All the Money in the World* recast and reshot by another actor. These aspects of Spacey's experience during his cancellation provided me with a case study rich with data. This case study was completed by utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for conducting thematic analysis.

### Data Collection

Twitter is the primary source of data collection for this study. Twitter's immense user base and its hashtag categorization system makes the platform a useful and manageable location to study cancel culture. Twitter is also recognized as the platform where the majority of cancellations begin, especially due to the retweeting feature that disseminates information quickly. Using the Twitter trend finder and tweet publishing application "Tweetdeck," I set the parameters of the tweets that were collected. The tweets collected matched with the key terms "Kevin Spacey" and "Canceled." The timeframe starts on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017 and ends August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The key terms are used together to gather tweets that discuss both Kevin Spacey and his cancellation specifically. The time frame begins on October 29<sup>th</sup> to account for the first tweet that was used to declare Kevin Spacey canceled, in accordance with the BuzzFeed article that was

released on the same day, reporting the allegations of Spacey's alleged sexual assault on actor Anthony Rapp.

I begin by searching my key terms "Kevin Spacey" and "Canceled" into Tweetdeck, and all of the tweets posted within my designated timeframe are supplied. Tweetdeck provides me with all of the tweets within my parameters from Twitter instantly. These terms pin-point key cancellation moments, such as accusations, evidence, and responses to the cancellation. This data was in the form of Tweets made by Twitter account holders that participated in the conversation of the canceling of Kevin Spacey. Utilizing an interpretivist paradigm encourages me to observe and gather data from a source where cancel culture is prominently communicated in order to obtain a rich collection of data.

### Coding and Analysis

I collected 1,785 tweets that were within my established parameters. I screen-shotted each tweet and numbered them from 1 to 1,785. During this process, I took note of common themes that were apparent in the tweets which resulted in 14 codes. My first official round of coding after collecting and sorting the tweets was accomplished through an excel spreadsheet. I numbered and coded each tweet. After reviewing the initial round of coding, I refined my codes to eliminate repetitive themes which resulted in 11 codes. I completed another round of coding with my refined list. Afterwards, I reviewed each code in order to find common strategies, that appeared in the tweets. Each code revealed multiple strategies within them. I utilized tweets that illuminated these strategies to demonstrate the strategies within the codes in my analysis.

## Summary

When using thematic analysis, researchers seek further understanding of how people communicate their experiences. In the aforementioned Shanahan et al. study, the authors found that those who shared their experiences about self-harm on social media, built community support systems and had discussions about self-harm as a form of addiction, which is a relatively new understanding. Thematic analysis provides researchers the opportunity to see how people who are actively participating in a phenomenon experience the world and how they communicate their experiences with others. Depending on the goal of the researcher, this could aid in creating influence or change in the studied field. The research of Shanahan et al. (2018) aided clinicians in understanding how people communicate about self-harm and how they can be best supported. Lowe-Calverley and Greives aforementioned study (2018) determined that their thematic analysis explained that people interpret “likes” on a social media post as a form of social support, therefore furthering understanding of why and how people use and value social media. These examples show how thematic analysis is a useful method when studying how people create meaning through symbolic interaction.

Thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows the researcher to determine the focus and scope of the research in several ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015). Thematic analysis is successful in revealing deeper meanings in texts and how those meanings explain how people interact with each other, shape their social realities, and how that influences how they communicate. This is especially useful when researching social media. The sheer amount of available data on social media allows for a rich sample, and the access to different experiences encourage the understanding of

different positionalities, how they create meaning, and the influence of outside forces on these processes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

### **Evidence and Media Coverage**

The first source that published Anthony Rapp's story, which discusses Spacey sexually assaulting him at age 14, was Adam Vary's 2017 BuzzFeed article "Actor Anthony Rapp: Kevin Spacey Made A Sexual Advance Toward Me When I Was 14." This article was rapidly shared due to its detailed account of Kevin Spacey's assault allegations. This provided Twitter users with information that led to their decision of beginning Spacey's cancellation. By sharing this article, Twitter users are distributing sources that back up the reasoning for the cancellation. The BuzzFeed article's expansive report of Rapp's experience provided Twitter users with a piece of evidence that could be referred to if and when the cancellation was questioned. After the BuzzFeed article was released, many other media news outlets began reporting on the accusations against Spacey. The amount of media coverage led to Twitter users sharing sources in abundance, providing other Twitter users with information about the allegations and the cancellation. Twitter users utilize sharing sources in order to discuss the cancellation and the catalyst that began the process. Two strategies were found to be used by Twitter users discussing evidence and media coverage.

#### Anthony Rapp Was Assaulted by Kevin Spacey

Twitter user @KateAurthur was the first to share the BuzzFeed article that reported the allegations against Spacey. They tweeted "Huge story by @adambvary: Actor Anthony Rapp: Kevin Spacey Made a Sexual Advance Toward Me When I was

14” and included a link to the article that also provided an image of Anthony Rapp as a child next to fellow actors. @KateAurthur’s tweet furthers the understanding of the cancellation in several ways. First, the tweet includes the name of the article which mentions the accuser, Anthony Rapp, and the accused, Kevin Spacey, paired with the information that Spacey assaulted Rapp at age 14. This clearly names those involved in the catalyst that led to the cancellation. @KateAurthur’s tweet provided key information along with posting a link to the full article. For Twitter users who are less likely to click on outside links or read articles, this tweet provides the necessary information without additional action needing to be taken. Second, the tweet provides a link to the article that reveals the allegations. This provides a credible source that is now receiving attention and circulating. @KateAurthur’s tweet accumulated 807 retweets which means that 807 people also shared the article just from @KateAurthur’s tweet alone, continuing the cycle of credible evidence that is key in disseminating the catalyst event. Tweets that shared the article also included the Twitter user’s additional commentary by declaring Spacey canceled and sharing the article simultaneously. This connects the cancellation to the catalyst event even further because declarations are being backed by evidence, defending the cancelers decision.

456 tweets about Spacey’s cancellation included links to outside sources. Twitter user @jasonleong shared an article from The Hill titled “Netflix cancels “House of Cards” after sexual misconduct allegations against Kevin Spacey” in their tweet “Thumbs up for @netflix As I said earlier @KevinSpacey is canceled. His behavior inexcusable. Now go & live as a disgraced, unemployed man.”

Twitter user @effortkills utilized this strategy to specifically draw attention to the catalyst and the victim through their commentary alongside the New York Daily News article they shared titled “Anthony Rapp, who accused Kevin Spacey of sexual assault, is being blamed for the demise of ‘House of Cards’” in their tweet “People are accountable for their own actions. Kevin Spacey’s actions got HOC canceled, not Anthony Rapp’s. Let him have some peace and quiet and leave him alone.” The use of an outside source does not guarantee the support of the cancellation, for Twitter users defending Spacey or denying the cancellation also share outside sources, but regardless, information about Spacey’s allegations and cancellation are shared at a mass scale.

#### Kevin Spacey’s Career is Over

As the cancellation process continued, the outside links to articles shifted from discussing the catalyst event in detail, and instead reported the status of Spacey’s career. These articles discussed the work that Spacey began losing because of the allegations and cancellation. News outlet Sunrise tweeted “#BREAKING There are reports that popular Netflix show ‘House of Cards’ has been CANCELED amid Kevin Spacey allegations. #sun7” along with a linked video of the outlets reported coverage. After the BuzzFeed article revealed the allegations, the repercussions to Spacey’s career became the focus. Spacey’s role in Netflix’s hit show *House of Cards* was now being questioned, which altered the focus from the victim to the perpetrator. Tweets that utilized this strategy appealed to Twitter users who were fans of Spacey’s work, and shifted the conversation to what shows and films would be canceled because of Spacey’s cancellation.

Twitter user @tiffing tweeted “Because Kevin Spacey is canceled.” alongside a link to an article written by Varsity titled “‘House of Cards’ Set to End With Season 6.”

@tiffllating's tweet works to associate the cancellation of *House of Cards* with Spacey being canceled. This tweet does not provide information as to why Spacey is canceled or why he is responsible for *House of Cards* being canceled, but is still effective in spreading information and confirming the cancellation of Spacey.

Titles of articles shifted from discussing the allegations to breaking news of canceled films and shows that Spacey was affiliated with. Twitter user @starbuck125 tweeted "Good. But you could've canceled just Kevin Spacey and keep going. Just saying." along with a link to an article by The A.V Club titled "Netflix cancels #HouseofCards says it's deeply troubled over Spacey allegations." Tweets like @starbuck125's attempt to negotiate the effects a cancellation will have on the content that the cancellee was associated with. @starbuck125's tweet still affirmed that Spacey's cancellation was acceptable, but canceling the show he starred in was up for debate. Once again, information about the allegations or the victim's name is not included in the tweet. Tweets like @starbuck125's are not against canceling Spacey, but are more concerned about how they, the masses, will be impacted by the cancellation.

### **Discussing the Catalyst**

According to Adam Vary's 2017 BuzzFeed article that published the allegations against Spacey, both Anthony Rapp and Spacey were performing on Broadway in 1986 (Vary, 2017). Rapp had seen Spacey at several parties, and at age 14, Rapp considered 26-year-old Spacey a friend and potential mentor (Vary, 2017). During the end of a party, Rapp found himself alone with Spacey in Spacey's apartment. Rapp recalled Spacey picking him up "like a bride" and laying him on a bed (Vary, 2017). Spacey then climbed on top of Rapp, in what Rapp describes as a sexual advance (Vary, 2017).

Reasons for canceling someone are many, and Kevin Spacey sexually assaulting Anthony Rapp is a prime example. After meeting with a lawyer, Rapp was told that there was no case due to lack of evidence and the statute of limitations having expired (Vary, 2017). However, Spacey not being taken to court didn't mean that he would not be put on trial. Some Twitter users shared and tweeted the allegations against Spacey, spotlighting the assault and shaming him on a mass social media platform. Others attempted to justify the allegations against Spacey or diminish the severity, either in unwavering support of Spacey, or in hopes that their favorite show wouldn't be canceled.

#### Kevin Spacey Assaulted Anthony Rapp

Through this strategy, other Twitter users are informed of the catalyst which aids the cancellation process. Twitter users utilizing this strategy are appealing to morality by discussing the specific nature of the catalyst. By highlighting the catalyst in a tweet, the perpetrators actions are exposed. This blatant display makes it difficult for others to deny or reject the severity of the catalyst. Twitter user @Road-trippn discussed the catalyst in their tweet "Netflix canceled House of Cards. Kevin Spacey is now the Drunkard that made advances on a 14 yr. Old boy. An actor I so admired was a fake." Twitter user @konyli also discussed specific details of the catalyst in their tweet "wait kevin spacey sexually assaulted a 14 year old boy ?????? goodbye and canceled." @konyli's tweet first discusses the catalyst before discussing Spacey's cancellation. This puts the reason of the cancellation at the forefront, and then makes the connection that the perpetrator has caused the cancellation. This removes the responsibility of the cancellation from the victim and onto the perpetrator.

This strategy is also useful when informing others who may not know about the catalyst. Twitter user @ateeqmungal responded to another Twitter user with a tweet stating “@CRJHosein It got canceled bc Kevin Spacey allegedly made sexual advances to another actor who was a minor at the time and now he’s blaming it on being drunk, and he says he’s officially gay now.” @ateeqmungal’s tweet is directly informing another Twitter user of the catalyst, explaining that because of Spacey’s actions, *House of Cards* was canceled. Tweets like @ateeqmungal’s show that not only are Twitter users posting about the catalyst and cancellation, but they are also responding to others to further inform. This strategy works to further shame Spacey and support the cancellation in continuing.

#### That Kevin Spacey Pedophile Thing

Twitter users who utilize this strategy avoid clear discussion of the catalyst, and use language that is ambiguous. Providing information or clarity of the cancellation is not the goal with this strategy. Instead the catalyst is used as a secondary means to discuss either Spacey’s cancellation, or the work that Spacey is a part of that could be canceled. Twitter user @Davidstillnotsuspended tweeted “Duuude House of Cards was canceled because of the whole Kevin Spacey thing.” This tweet emphasizes what is being lost (*House of Cards*) and then uses vague language to explain why. By calling the catalyst “the whole Kevin Spacey thing” @Davidstillnotsuspended’s tweet does not highlight the catalyst, which removes the appeal to emotion and morality, and instead focuses on the cancellation of *House of Cards*. @Davidstillnotsuspended does not express anger, but instead disbelief, insinuating that the cancellation of the show is more shocking than the catalyst.

Anger expressed through this strategy is associated with the cancellation of *House of Cards* rather than the catalyst itself. As Twitter user @M\_Compton145 demonstrates in their tweet “Fuck you Kevin Spacey for getting House of Cards canceled because you can’t keep your hands to yourself.” @M\_Compton145 expresses their anger at Spacey for the cancellation of *House of Cards* and connects that with a dismissive description of the catalyst. @M\_Compton145 tweeting that the reason *House of Cards* is being canceled is because Spacey couldn’t keep his hands to himself, dilutes the severity of the catalyst and dedicates the attention to the cancellation of *House of Cards*. Twitter user @Guts\_Glam\_Glory also utilizes this strategy when referring to the catalyst in their tweet “No they canceled 6 bc of the Kevin spacey stuff.” Twitter users who use this strategy show that they are not necessarily upset about the catalyst, but instead, are upset at what the result the catalyst has led to- the cancellation of *House of Cards*.

### We Been Knew

Not all cancellations or catalyst reveals are a surprise. Not all catalyst’s garner attention, especially before the boom of social media and Twitters crowning of being the hub for cancellations. This strategy holds the cancellee responsible for their actions, claims that this is not the first time the cancellee has committed a violation of expectations, and demonstrates that the cancellation is justified. Twitter user @romapancake demonstrates this in their tweet “If anyone’s new to the Kevin-Spacey-is canceled party: stories of his unwanted advances on young men have been circulating forever.” @romapancake enforces the cancellation by informing others that it is justified not only because of the recognition of the catalyst, but because it is not the first time. Twitter user @slaytersan also acknowledges Spacey’s known problematic behavior in

their tweet “kevin spacey was/is/always will be canceled.” @romapancake and @slaytersan are providing more backing to the cancellation by highlighting the severity and multiplicity of Spacey’s actions, making it difficult for others to brush off the catalyst as a single occurrence.

Twitter users also use this strategy to express previous denial of overlooking violations or demonstrations of unacceptable behavior. Twitter user @ns0n tweeted “I know we should’ve canceled Kevin Spacey years ago but I was in deep denial. No more.” This tweet was paired with a link to Vary’s BuzzFeed article. @ns0n’s tweet is effective for multiple reasons. First, it insinuates that Spacey’s behavior is not new or unexpected from him, providing more evidence to support the cancellation. Second, by revealing that they have been ignoring these past violations and then publicly revealing that, @ns0n’s transparency is encouraging to others who may be embarrassed or ashamed to share that they did the same. This expression is important because it demonstrates the ability to not support someone who has committed a cancel worthy offense even if one has previous moments of ignoring that behavior. This shows that a cancellation can be powerful enough to have the masses on Twitter reflect and take action against someone with high social capital, even if they wouldn’t do it before.

#### House of Cards is Canceled Because Spacey Touched a 14-year-old 30 Years Ago?

This strategy diminishes the catalyst as a minor event that is underserving of attention, and puts the blame on the victim. Twitter users who make use of this strategy are expressing anger that the victim called out their accuser resulting in the cancellation of the cancellee alongside their content. In Spacey’s case, Twitter users who employ this strategy are upset that the accuser coming out is responsible for the cancellation of *House*

of *Cards*. Twitter user @ebbs1234 tweeted “Great.....Netflix have canceled House of Cards for Kevin Spacey try to get some underage dick 30 years ago. #HouseOfCards.” @ebbs1234’s tweet first expresses displeasure that *House of Cards* is being canceled, then refers to the victim as “underage dick,” and lastly states that the catalyst took place 30 years prior. @ebbs1234’s insinuates that because the violation happened 30 years ago *House of Cards* should not be canceled. Twitter user @rovitaghiyev also focuses on *House of Cards* when discussing the time frame of the catalyst in their tweet “Great.....Netflix have canceled House of Cards for what that idiot Kevin Spacey did 30 years!!! How is that our fault? #HouseOfCards.”

Twitter user @CassCamsModels tweeted “House of Cards being canceled because some guy ‘alleges’ Kevin Spacey tried to touch him where he wee’s is the biggest upset of my year.” @CassCamsModels’s tweet emulates this strategy by questioning the actuality of the violation, diminishing the severity of the catalyst, and expressing anger that it is resulting in *House of Cards* being canceled. Tweets like @CassCamsModels’s attempt to lessen the severity of the catalyst by using language that subverts the attention of the perpetrator being responsible for their actions and the resulting cancellation, and instead puts the blame and responsibility on the accuser. This strategy attempts to make the catalyst seem less severe than other Twitter users present it to be, in hopes to stop the cancellation process or the consequences of the cancellee being put on the masses.

### **Declaration of Cancellation**

Less than an hour after Adam Vary’s 2017 BuzzFeed article that revealed the sexual assault allegations against Spacey was released, the first tweet that stated that

Kevin Spacey was canceled was posted. One Twitter user posting about Spacey being canceled turned into hundreds overnight. While the definition of “canceled” is ambiguous, there is a common understanding that when someone is “canceled,” that they did something that warrants the title. The reveal of allegations against Spacey functions as a catalyst for a cancellation to take place. In Spacey’s case, his cancel worthy offense was sexually assaulting a minor, an act that violates social norms, expectations, and the law. By tweeting that Kevin Spacey is canceled, Twitter users began the cancellation process in order to remove his social standing as a highly regarded figure in Hollywood. How Twitter users communicate the start of Spacey’s cancellation was accomplished in several ways.

Kevin Spacey is Canceled. Period.

Cancelers only need one instance of behavior viewed unacceptable to the masses on Twitter in order to begin a cancellation. This serves as a catalyst event that provides a warrant to start tweeting that someone is canceled. After Vary’s article was released, revealing the allegations of sexual assault, Twitter users began posting tweets the declared Spacey canceled. Twitter user @EJtheG says it best with their 26-character tweet “Kevin Spacey is canceled.” Many Twitter users tweeted the same text in their posts, which functions as a sign of agreement communicating to others that the message of Spacey’s cancellation is being shared and supported. Twitter user @yewande expressed this strategy through their tweet “Guess what Kevin Spacey is? Canceled.” Similarly, Twitter user @hoterismo tweeted “Kevin spacey is now canceled. Bye.” The text in these tweets slightly vary, however they all demonstrate this strategy by focusing on declaring Spacey canceled and nothing further. Twitter user @Wasabi\_llama took this

strategy a step further by tagging Spacey directly with a tweet that simply stated “Canceled.” For those who do not want to delve deep into the cancellation or discuss the specifics of the catalyst, they may use this strategy to make their stance clear, but avoid further discussion.

This strategy is useful in not only acknowledging a cancellation but also in gaining support of it. The goal of this strategy is to take action fast. Tweets that follow this strategy are effective in spreading the news of the cancellation because these tweets are short, to the point, and are persuasive in their simplicity. Social media, especially Twitter, relies on short posts in order to communicate quickly and not lose the reader’s attention. By following this strategy, Twitter users can take part in a cancellation without much effort. This simplicity makes the dissemination of the information efficient and effective.

During the first few days of Spacey’s cancellation, this strategy was used more than any other strategy that discussed Spacey being canceled. By stating that Spacey is canceled without discussing the catalyst or the victim, pressure is put on the cancellee to respond. The cancellee must explain their understanding of the cancellation and its reasoning, either accepting or denying responsibility. How the cancellee responds or does not respond provides cancelers with information that will determine how the cancellation will continue.

#### Wait, Kevin Spacey is Canceled?

This strategy works to confirm a cancellation or to gain additional information as to why the cancellation is happening. This confirms that the previous strategy discussed is gathering attention to the point where more information is being requested. Twitter

user @livtyler666 tweeted “Kevin Spacey canceled?” @livtyler666’s tweet is asking for confirmation of Spacey’s cancellation. Similarly, Twitter user @IbeChichi tweeted “So Kevin Spacey is canceled as well?” Both @livtyler666 @IbeChichi are prompting discourse to take place about Spacey’s cancellation.

Twitter users also use this questioning strategy as expressing disbelief, starting conversations about the details of the cancellation, which gathers more attention. Twitter user @KyleJAndrews tweeted “Dang Kevin Spacey is canceled too?” @KyleJAndrews isn’t necessarily asking for confirmation that Spacey is canceled, but is instead expressing how they feel about the cancellation. This strategy is not attempting to question the validity of the cancellation, but instead understands that the cancellation is happening regardless of whether or not the Twitter user using this strategy agrees with it or not.

These tweets do not utilize the first strategy of claiming the cancellation as fact, but instead are in the second wave of cancelers who may not have started the cancellation, but are key in continuing it. For while this strategy does not blatantly state that someone is canceled, it instead refers to the cancellation taking place as truth. When this strategy is used, it proves that the cancellation is gaining traction and the process is continuing.

### I Used to Love Kevin Spacey, But That’s Over Now

Kevin Spacey has collected a large amount of social capital through his thirty-year acting career. With that, he has a large fan base around the world that spans across several generations. This resulted in Twitter users expressing what they feel they are losing with the cancellation taking place. These Twitter users know that a cancellation

leads to a lack of new content due to a lack of support of the cancellee. This is demonstrated though Twitter user @theblakebuz's tweet "Thanks Kevin Spacey. You made me fall in love with House of Cards and now it's probably gonna get canceled." This doesn't mean that these Twitter users do not agree with the cancellation or believe that it should stop, but instead are expressing that they have to consider how much the cancellation of someone they hold in high regard will affect parts of their own lives.

Twitter users who utilize this strategy also express their dedication or love that they had for the cancellee, such as Twitter user @softkale who tweeted "wow I loved Kevin Spacey a lot but he is canceled now." As @softkale explained in their tweet, their love for Kevin Spacey does not mean that they are denying the cancellation or its validity. Instead, this strategy acts as expression of grief. Twitter user @alyssajill also denounces their love for Spacey in their tweet "My love for Kevin Spacey is canceled." Similarly, Twitter user @Elle\_Chantel tweeted "I liked him, but Kevin Spacey is canceled." Twitter users like @softkale, @alyssajill, and @Elle\_Chantel who utilize this strategy are not negotiating their level of support for Spacey, and are instead stating that while they may have been a fan before the cancellation, they are no longer.

#### Spacey is Canceled Because He Made a Sexual Advance on a 14-year-old

This strategy appeals to morality by focusing on the victim and their experience, rather than the cancellee or expressing grief about the cancellation. By discussing the catalyst in their tweets, Twitter users are continuing to inform those who may not be aware of why the cancellation is happening, while also shaming the cancellee for their actions. @AlyssaDZaczek discusses the catalyst in their own text along with Vary's

article that states even more details about the catalyst, in their tweet “I used to love Kevin Spacey, but this shit is pedophilia. Spacey is canceled. I am 100% with @albinokid.”

Twitter user @chick3n\_ tweeted “Using “I’ve been in the closet for years” and “I was drunk” as excuses to assault a 14yo is unacceptable. Kevin Spacey is canceled.” First, @chick3n\_ shames the excuses the Spacey made in response to his cancellation. Second, the tweet includes a description of the catalyst: the assault of a 14-year-old. Lastly, @chick3n\_ confirms through a declaration that Kevin Spacey is canceled. The information included in this tweet effectively names the cancellee, exposes their cancel worthy offense, and then reinforces the cancellation. Twitter user @kellyyaakissi tweeted “yeah kevin Spacey is canceled. How do you not remember sexually abusing a 14 year old. Creep...” Utilizing this strategy increases the amount of information that is being shared in tweets which adds clarity to those consuming tweets about Spacey’s cancellation. Twitter user @JanisVingris demonstrates this in their tweet “House of Cards is being canceled by Netflix over allegations against Kevin Spacey of sexual assault of a 14 year old.” Tweets that utilize this strategy work to justify and continue the cancellation process by providing key details of why a cancellation is taking place and why it should be taken seriously.

### I Know He’s Canceled But...

Another strategy Twitter users utilize when discussing a cancellation is to negotiate their support of the cancellee’s content. By consuming the cancellee's content, it expresses support of the cancellee. Twitter users consider how their consumption of the cancellee’s content, old or new, will reflect on their role in participating in the cancellation and how it may support the cancellee’s livelihood. Kevin Spacey’s cultural

influence is extensive. His likeness is used in GIF's and memes and his work in movies and television was highly regarded by the public and the industry he worked in. Because of this, fans expressed their concerns of not being able to continue to enjoy some of their favorite works that star Spacey. Twitter user @2juiceboxes tweeted "ok big question, friends. Is it okay for me to like Kevin Spacey movies that I saw before I knew he was canceled?" Twitter users who tweet with this strategy are attempting to negotiate their moral or ethical responsibilities when it comes to continuing to support or consume content from a person who has been declared canceled by the masses on Twitter. Twitter user @LCyance demonstrated this strategy in their tweet "So like now that Kevin Spacey has been exposed and canceled..Can we not watch Usual Suspects and American Beauty now or what?" By tweeting these concerns, Twitter users are looking for confirmation on whether they can or should consume the cancellee's content.

Twitter user @samhoulden tweeted "We all know Kevin Spacey is #canceled but I can still watch Se7en, right?" @samhoulden is expressing their want to watch a movie that stars the cancellee, but is questioning whether or not it is acceptable. Twitter users who utilize this strategy are not necessarily going to follow along with the responses they receive to their questions. The questions asked in this strategy may or may not be rhetorical, but what is accomplished through this strategy is the confirmation that Spacey is canceled. @samhoulden is not questioning that Spacey is canceled. Instead, they are attempting to understand or clarify what the repercussions of a cancellation are for the masses.

This strategy lends itself to the discussion of separating the art from the artist which is an argument that appears during cancellations. Twitter user

@OneAngryRainbow acknowledges this in their tweet “Sorry if I’m over here not able to separate [*sic*] artists from the art, but Kevin Spacey’s done. Over. Canceled.” Questioning whether or not the art can still be enjoyed if the artist has been deemed canceled, Twitter users utilizing this strategy are hoping for a response that lets them continue to enjoy the art while settling the moral ambiguity that is often left unclear during a cancellation. The consensus is often that if someone is canceled, then so is all of their content. How people interpret and apply this to a cancellation is clearly communicated through this strategy as seen in the previous tweets that expresses their hope to still be able to consume Spacey’s content while simultaneously demonstrating that they understand that a cancellation leads to the assumption his content is canceled is well.

#### Did Someone Forget to Tell Kevin Spacey He’s Canceled?

This strategy is used when the cancellee continues or to produce new content. Those who support the cancellation will shame the cancellee for trying to get attention for the cancellee is attempting to ignore their cancellation. This leads cancelers to work to remind the masses on Twitter of the cancellation, remind the cancellee that they are canceled, and shame the cancellee into not sharing or creating more content.

On December 24, 2018, a year and two months after Spacey’s cancellation began, Spacey released a video titled “Let me be Frank,” a play on words that included the name of the character Spacey played in *House of Cards* “Frank Underwood.” After the release of this video, Twitter users were quick to respond. @Nick422 tweeted “Doesn’t Kevin Spacey know he’s canceled?” Twitter users who utilize this strategy are shaming the cancellee for trying to regain social capital after a cancellation has taken place. A cancellee attempting to ignore their cancellation is not positively received. Twitter user

@1PissedFeminist utilizes this strategy in their tweet that directly tagged Spacey “you were already canceled, we shouldn’t have to do it twice. Don’t make us do it twice.”

Canceling is a social practice that is orchestrated by the masses on Twitter. This strategy reinforces that the power of canceling does not lie in the hands of those being canceled, but the ones doing the canceling.

This strategy does not discuss the catalyst, nor provide much detail about the cancellation. Twitter user @cwowens tagged Spacey directly and tweeted “We canceled you already.” Tweets like @cwowens works under the assumption that the majority understands that this cancellation exists and is still active. This strategy works to publicly shame the cancellee once again, but instead of shaming them for the catalyst, they are instead ridiculed for thinking they could enter back into the spotlight. Twitter user @PostureFairy tweeted “Kevin Spacey forgot he’s canceled. But we didn’t.” These tweets by @Nick422, @1PissedFeminist, @cwowens, and @PostureFairy confirm this idea by questioning Spacey’s attempt to create content and expressing that because he is canceled that content is not wanted. This can be done with a serious tone or sarcasm, but is often a quick confirmation that reminds the cancellee of the terms of their cancellation.

### **Resistance of Cancellation**

The use of Twitter to begin a cancellation has shown to be extremely effective in removing the cancellee from their previous standing. However, supporting a cancellation is not the only action taken. Those who disagree with a cancellation use Twitter to push back against the cancellation in order to defend the cancellee and their actions. By doing this, those against a cancellation work to lessen the severity of the catalyst, deny its validity, and build up the importance of the cancellee’s contributions. This strategy works

to protect the cancellee in an attempt to stop the cancellation. By defending the cancellee, these Twitter users utilize their platform to protect the cancellee from losing their social capital. Kevin Spacey's cancellation received immense media attention. Twitter users who were against the cancellation were highly outnumbered by those who supported Spacey's cancellation. However, this did not deter anti-cancelers from continuing to tweet out their support to Spacey through several strategies.

### It Was 30 Years Ago!

Spacey's cancellation was due to the attempted assault on Anthony Rapp when Rapp was a minor. This accusation was inherently linked to Spacey's cancellation and discussions surrounding him. The reactions and publicity to the accusations against Spacey communicated the severity of the catalyst to the masses on Twitter. However, the lack of evidence and the amount of time between the catalyst and the accusation prompted some Twitter users to speak out against the catalyst's perceived severity. Twitter user @Nxbert tweeted "They canceled my fav Kevin Spacey for some blurry incident in 1986. Sakucheza madolo." @Nxbert expresses their disapproval of Spacey's cancellation in a few ways. First, they start their tweet by establishing that Spacey is their "fav," communicating that Spacey is still a favorite of theirs even amongst the allegations and cancellation. Second, @Nxbert references the catalyst as a "blurry incident in 1986." By referring to the catalyst this way, @Nxbert attempts to lessen the severity of it by calling on the inebriated state of Spacey during the catalyst and the length of time that has passed. Twitter user @TD\_Zelios also utilizes this strategy in their tweet "House of Cards is getting canceled for something Kevin Spacey did in 1986???????? I don't even watch the show and that shit pisses me off." @Nxbert and @TD\_Zelios claim that the

amount of time between the violations and its reveal do not warrant a punishment. These Twitter users do not provide an amount of time that would be appropriate for a cancellation to take place, but instead move the conversation from discussing the catalyst and instead to how much time has passed since the catalyst took place.

This strategy works as a distraction and prompts discussions of Spacey's character. @skander\_ab tweeted "They canceled house of cards for something Kevin spacey did YEARS ago..once.. yo people change so maybe he's a better person." @skander\_ab's tweet emphasizes the amount of time that has passed similarly to @Nxbert. @skander\_ab continues on to defend Spacey's character by linking the amount of time that has passed to the possibility of Spacey not repeating a similar act. As with the tweets presented to exemplify this strategy, these Twitter users do not deny that the violation has happened, but instead use the amount of time that has passed to elude that the violation was an anomaly that was not and will not be repeated.

### Canceling Has Gone Too Far!

Some Twitter users took the opportunity during Spacey's cancellation to critique canceling and its impacts on the cancellee. This strategy attempts to defend the cancellee and simultaneously denounces the methods being used to remove Spacey's social capital. Twitter user @mannbell20 critiques those withdrawing support in their tweet "If House of Cards gets canceled before anything with Kevin Spacey is actually proven, @netflix has no backbone whatsoever." Twitter user @RexDuis focuses on the role justice plays in canceling, demonstrated through their tweet "#KevinSpacey had his show canceled on a rumor that he did something inappropriate. That's unjust People can be falsely accused vindictively." @RexDuis begins their tweet with discussing the effects of the cancellation

on Spacey so far, via *House of Cards* being canceled. This loss is used to justify their tweets closing statement that people being canceled can lose something by being falsely accused. @RexDuis states that this is “unjust,” referring to the result of the cancellation. How @RexDuis refers to the catalyst as a “rumor” and “something inappropriate” communicates that @RexDuis does not view the violation as true or severe, leading to their tweet to be interpreted as standing in solidarity with Spacey and rejecting his cancellation as a means of punishment.

Twitter user @KingArinSummers argues against canceling in their tweet “And I keep seeing people say, “Kevin Spacey is canceled.” Bro, WHERE THE HELL IS YOUR PROOF?! Y’all siding so damn hard with victims y’all don’t even know! With cases y’all don’t even know! You just see a trending topic and hopped on the fucking bandwagon!” @KingArinSummers claims that Spacey’s cancellation is not justified due to a lack of proof and that Spacey’s cancellation is due to people hopping “on the fucking bandwagon.” @KingArinSummers’ tweet demands proof of the violation, cancelers proof that Spacey being canceled is an acceptable action, and proof that the cancellation does not consist of people simply following others who heard about the cancellation. @KingArinSummers’ tweet also discusses the victim, claiming that cancelers are siding with them without reason. By doing this, @KingArinSummers places doubt on the warrant of the cancellation and shames those who are canceling Spacey. Twitter users like @KingArinSummers and @RexDuis both demand that there be more proof before a cancellation takes place, otherwise, it is seen as unjust and unproven. However, what would be considered just and proof is not established. This strategy works to push against a cancellation by denouncing the fairness of canceling.

### Just Canceled Netflix

Twitter users who utilize this strategy communicate their disapproval of the cancellation and the decline of the cancellee's social capital. Often times, this disapproval is due to the loss of content that would have been provided by the cancellee. By tweeting their disapproval of loss of support, these Twitter users do not mention the violation, but instead express their own support for the cancellee. Twitter user @chloethepooch demonstrates this strategy in their tweet "Won't be watching, have canceled Netflix!! Both are nothing without Kevin."

Twitter users who disagreed with Spacey's cancellation took to Twitter to voice their displeasure. Twitter user @mccurryjeannie tweeted "I canceled my subscription to Netflix the day they let our @KevinSpacey go." @mccurryjeannie's tweet clearly demonstrates their support of Spacey by tweeting him directly and through their language of calling Spacey "our" Kevin Spacey. This communicates that Spacey is someone that is important or dear to them. @mccurryjeannie also states that the reason they canceled their Netflix subscription is directly related to Spacey being fired from *House of Cards*, communicating that they will not support a company that does not support Spacey, regardless of the catalyst or the cancellation taking place.

Twitter users also use this strategy to critique the cancellation of Spacey. Twitter user @TheReaper60901 tweeted "@Kevin Spacey I have canceled @netflix in support of Kevin. It's a giant bandwagon that's in style. #KevinSpacey." @TheReaper60901's tweet implies that the withdrawal of support of Spacey and the resulting cancellation is due to a "bandwagon" effect, which does not merit Spacey being canceled. Both @TheReaper60901 and @mccurryjeannie tweet at Kevin Spacey directly, explicitly

showing their support to him and their opposition to his cancellation. Twitter user @Grizzly0903 demonstrates this strategy in their tweet “This is unacceptable!!! Kevin Space was “accused” this man is “accused” and Kevin Spacey’s show gets canceled. Canceled Netflix on HULU.” When utilizing this strategy, these Twitter users disregard the catalyst and the cancellation in support of Spacey.

#### He Doesn’t Deserve to be Canceled

Spacey’s career being jeopardized and the reactions of production companies pulling projects that Spacey was involved in, caused some Twitter users to speak out. Twitter users who disagreed with Spacey’s work being canceled presented arguments that claimed the resulting consequences of Spacey’s cancellation were unfair due to unproven accusations. Twitter user @slcmof tweeted “There’s a number of issues with Kevin Spacey being removed from films, his show canceled, and basically – having his career ended by accusations.” @slcmof’s tweet critiques Spacey’s cancellation and the resulting demise of his career, claiming that accusations are not enough for Spacey to be removed from projects. @slcmof’s insinuates that until the violation has been proven to the standards off of social media that Spacey’s firing and removal from films is problematic. Twitter users like @slcmof do not agree with the cancellation process providing a punishment before Spacey was proven innocent or guilty in a court of law.

Twitter user @lindasamelson tweeted “Is it just me? One accusation against Kevin Spacey years ago and he is persons [sic] non grata. House of Cards has been canceled. Overreaction!” @lindasamelson’s tweet weighs Spacey’s loss of work against the accusation made against him, and determines that it is not a fair exchange. Similarly, Twitter user @dannyanthony99 tweeted “ONE accusation against @KevinSpacey, no

police involved and one of the best shows ever @HouseofCards is canceled. Bullshit.”

Twitter users like @lindasamelson and @dannyanthony99 do not provide an appropriate punishment, or what violation would be worthy of the punishment Spacey is receiving, but instead claim that the cost of Spacey’s career is not an appropriate loss for the catalyst. Twitter users who use this strategy are concerned about Spacey’s content being affected by the cancellation and not the catalyst or the victim. By ignoring the reason the cancellation began, these Twitter users subvert the attention of the severity of the violation, in exchange for what is being lost. These tweets make Spacey the victim of his circumstance, and removes the responsibility from the perpetrator. By lessening the severity of the catalyst, these Twitter users claim that more is being lost than won.

### **Supporting the Cancellation**

Supporting the cancellation is demonstrated when the cancellee loses support over their career, content they have created, and support of their social capital. This can include not purchasing or viewing content that the cancellee produces. By doing this, the cancellee begins to lose revenue and future jobs in order to maintain their social capital which is often tied to their wealth, relationships, and image. The goal of supporting the cancellation is to remove the cancellee’s social capital enough that the cancellee stops or is unable to continue to keep or gain more social capital. If a cancellee’s income is tied to their ability to make content, if enough support is withdrawn from the cancellee then they are unable to earn income or continue to produce content. Supporting the cancellation removes the demand from what the cancellee provides until the cancellee stops supplying it. This is effective in removing the cancellee’s social capital and in Spacey’s case, resulted him in being removed from several projects in varying degrees of completion.

Supporting the cancellation can also mean not consuming any content from the cancellee even if the purchase of the content was done previous to the cancellation. By not consuming the cancellee's content, people are communicating their disinterest in supporting the cancellee in any form.

During a cancellation, some attempt to directly communicate their emotions and grief regarding the cancellation with the cancellee. By expressing anger towards a cancellee, the cancellee is being shamed directly rather than through indirect discussion of the cancellation. This directness is an intentional strategy to shame the cancellee. These strategies allow the masses on Twitter to communicate their grief regarding the actions of the cancellee.

When the masses on Twitter decide that they are withdrawing their support alongside a cancellation, people who would usually work or associate themselves with the cancellee distance themselves from the cancellee. This is in order to not risk being canceled alongside the cancellee due to aiding the cancellee in maintaining social capital- which is the opposite of what cancelers are working to do. This further isolates the cancellee by removing opportunities for them to further increase or maintain their social capital. If the cancellee begins to lose work or acclamations, cancelers see this as a sign of the cancellation process working. If people continue to work with the cancellee and aid in their gain of social capital, the masses on Twitter will demand otherwise and any party attempting to aid the cancellee risks being canceled as well.

#### Never Watching a Kevin Spacey Movie Again

Twitter users who utilize this strategy are expressing that the connection between the cancellee and their work cannot be separated, and therefore, any work the cancellee

has produced should be canceled as well. Twitter user @MissCreep tweeted “I’m throwing away my copy of *American Beauty*. Kevin Spacey is canceled” which demonstrates this strategy in several ways. First, @MissCreep states that they will throw away their copy of *American Beauty*, a film Kevin Spacey starred in 1999. This communicates the severity of the violation to @MissCreep. By throwing away a film that they had already purchased, @MissCreep demonstrates that the cancellee and their work are connected, and therefore the cancellee’s content should not be consumed regardless of the amount of time and money spent to enjoy the content. Second, @MissCreep tweet appeals to other Twitter users who are deciding their stance on the connection between content and creator which prompts decisions to withdraw support of the cancellee.

Twitter users like @MissCreep are taking a stance paired with an action, and by sharing those decisions on Twitter, are demonstrating the effects being canceled has on the legacy of a cancellee. By throwing away the cancellee’s work, they are claiming that their work has lost its value. Twitter users who utilize this strategy communicate that the continuation of watching, purchasing, or enjoying the cancellee’s work is in conflict with their morality. Twitter user @RalBoullosa tweeted “Everything @KevinSpacey has ever made should be canceled period!” Similarly, Twitter user @barebackcontessa tweeted “I really like Kevin Spacey but he’s canceled. I’m never watching *House of Cards* or anything with him in it again.” Tweets like @RalBoullosa’s and @barebackcontessa’s express that any content the cancellee has created should have its support withdrawn.

This strategy demonstrates that by watching Spacey’s films and shows not only expresses

support where it is undeserving, but that even when Spacey is playing a character, that it is not enough to separate him from the catalyst.

This strategy is effective in supporting the cancellation because it is clear, straightforward, and describes an action taking place. When others hear about others throwing away or refusing to consume the cancellee's content, it is persuasive as it communicates that this is the clear action to take. Often times this strategy communicates that by watching Spacey in a film would only serve as a reminder of the catalyst, and by watching Spacey's films you are enjoying watching someone who assaulted a minor, and this strategy urges that this is immoral and unacceptable. This strategy is also very effective in diminishing the long living legacy of those with social capital, as was the case with Spacey. @RalBoullosa, @barebackcontessa and @MissCreep include in their tweet that Spacey himself and his work has been canceled, which associates the act of withdrawing support as a result of being canceled. Twitter user @joshwillhall calls on others to withdraw their support in their tweet, along with a link to Vary's article "Kevin Spacey is canceled. Abuse victims are not making it up. Do not protect a man you don't know because you liked his movies."

### Fuck You Kevin Spacey!

This strategy was used to communicate Twitter user's emotional response to the cancellation. This was accomplished in several ways, including tweeting Spacey directly. By tweeting the cancellee directly, Twitter users are taking another step to express their reactions to the catalyst. Tweeting the cancellee directly not only shames them but also communicates to other Twitter users that that specific person has done something that warrants being cursed directly at on a social media platform. Twitter user @JeremyDozier

tweeted “Fuck you @KevinSpacey. You’re canceled.” @JeremyDozier’s tweet tags Spacey directly, curses him, and reinforces the cancellation. By cursing Spacey directly, @JeremyDozier is communicating their response to emphasize their feelings over the catalyst. Tweets that use this strategy hold the cancellee accountable for their actions and the resulting cancellation. This strategy does not curse the victim nor blame them for the cancellation taking place, unlike some other strategies. Instead, Spacey’s name being cursed paired with the declaration of being canceled, conveys that Spacey is losing support.

Through this strategy, the hashtag #FuckKevinSpacey began. The intent of a hashtag is to categorize content that consists of a similar theme. The hashtag #FuckKevinSpacey was created and used in order to express this strategy. Hashtags encourage others to add the hashtag to their own posts which sends a specific message. The message “Fuck Kevin Spacey” was connected to Spacey’s cancellation. If it wasn’t for the reveal of the catalyst and the accusations made against Spacey, this hashtag would not have gained the traction it did. It functioned as a way to shame Spacey in a method unique to the use of social media. Twitter user @respectisOaF tweeted “@KevinSpacey you’re a sick fuck. Glad your shitbag of a show was canceled. #FuckKevinSpacey.” @respectisOaF’s tweet once again directly tags Spacey, curses him, and uses #FuckKevinSpacey to associate themselves with the message the hashtag has been associated with. By doing this @respectisOaF takes time to directly shame Spacey, and then associates themselves with others who use this strategy. What this does is aid Twitter users in identifying others who share similar sentiments and use the same or similar strategy. Additionally, because #FuckKevinSpacey is associated with his cancellation, the continued use of the hashtag reinforces the cancellation.

### Spacey Ruined His Content for All of Us

Twitter users utilize this strategy to communicate their emotions regarding the consequences the cancellee's actions had on their content. Once Spacey's cancellation began, *House of Cards* showrunners came out and said that the show would be canceled. However, they did not associate the cancellation of the show with Spacey. Twitter users viewed the event of *House of Cards* being canceled just a few days after Vary's article being released as a connected event as demonstrated by Twitter user @jackson\_noxeema's tweet "Now House of Cards is being canceled?! Fuck you even more Kevin Spacey! First you use the community to deflect and now this." Twitter users began tweeting through this strategy to express their displeasure of Spacey's actions resulting in canceled content. Twitter user @acbrownie tweeted "shout out to another Hollywood Fuckhead. @KevinSpacey's despicable actions have now resulted in @HouseofCards being canceled. Thanks dick." @acbrownie's tweet continues similar themes that appear in the previous strategy, such as directly tagging Spacey and cursing him, but @acbrownie takes it a step further by directing their indignation that *House of Cards* is being canceled. Twitter user @Will\_M\_ tweeted a similar sentiment "@KevinSpacey they canceled House of Cards bc of your fuckin dumb ass." This strategy shames the cancellee and continues to hold the cancellee responsible for the cancellation and the canceling of work associated with Spacey. Like in previous strategies, the victim can experience the brunt of blame for cancellation taking place and the consequences the cancellee is facing. This strategy acknowledges the one responsible is the perpetrator and enforces this understanding by cursing the cancellee for their actions and the results of the cancellation.

### It's What He Deserves

During his cancellation, Spacey was recast and reshot in a film, was fired from his role in *House of Cards*, had his planned International Emmy Founders Award revoked, and had several guest speaking opportunities canceled. All of these instances received media coverage and quickly spread on social media. Twitter user @VosoosoV tweeted “@HouseofCards great to see HOC canceled due to @KevinSpacey sexual advances & misconduct. It’s gone on far too long. Never hire him again.” @VosoosoV’s tweet directly tags @HouseofCards and @KevinSpacey to support the decision of his firing, and to communicate to Spacey that this is a result of the catalyst. @VosoosoV also states to “Never hire him again” proclaiming that Spacey should not be making new content and should not be hired to create content. Twitter user @UhHaYeah also supports Spacey’s firing from House of Cards as demonstrated through their tweet “The major media outlets are just as sick and twisted as Kevin Spacey. I’m glad House of Cards got canceled. #MondayMotivation.”

Twitter users also use this strategy to make claims about how cancellees like Spacey should be punished. Twitter user @OlgaTells tweeted “Predators need to be ostracized and not given attention. Kevin Spacey for instance saw his shows canceled.” @OlgaTells’s tweet demonstrates that the call for Spacey to be canceled and the resulting effects of the cancellation, his lost work opportunities, is the expected result of a catalyst such as Spacey’s. By not giving the cancellee attention and by ostracizing them directly impacts their ability to maintain or further gain social capital. Therefore, @OlgaTells confirms that the result of Spacey losing his show is directly correlated to his ostracization, or cancellation, and is not only the desired result, but one deserved.

### **Response of the Canellee**

Mass dissemination of a catalyst and a resulting cancellation is orchestrated by the masses on Twitter. This means that the information shared and extrapolated upon is led by those on social media. Until the cancellee responds to the discourse taking place, cancelers build up their cases to defend the cancellation and shame the cancellee for the catalyst.

The response of the cancellee can have many goals. Because the majority of content on social media surrounding a cancellation makes claims about the catalyst and the cancellation without input from the cancellee, the response of the cancellee works to defend their social standing. Due to cancellations happening most often on social media, the cancellee will take to posting their response on their social media accounts in order to get as much visibility as possible.

A response from the cancellee can take the form of an apology either to the victim of the catalyst and/or to the public. Canellees also take this opportunity to defend their actions either through providing more details of the catalyst, or making excuses or explanations for their actions. During the cancellation process, the response from the cancellee is often highly anticipated, for depending on what the cancellee puts in their response determines how the cancellation will continue. For cancellees, the hope is that their response will deter the cancellation from continuing or at the very least, diminish the consequences the cancellee is experiencing. For cancelers, the response gives more information in determining if the cancellation should stop or continue.

Spacey's response to the reveal of the catalyst and his cancellation was posted on Twitter soon after Vary's BuzzFeed article was published. Spacey begins his response by

complimenting Rapp's acting career and then continues on to claim that Spacey does not remember the catalyst taking place, due to the 30-year time span from its occurrence. Spacey apologized to Rapp for his "inappropriate drunken behavior" (Spacey, 2017). Spacey continues in another paragraph to discuss the private nature surrounding his sexuality, and then takes the opportunity to come out as a gay man. Ending his response with a claim of wanting to examine his own behavior (Spacey, 2017). How Twitter responded to Spacey's apology came through in two strategies.

### He Apologized!

One strategy that Twitter users utilized to respond to Spacey's apology was to post tweets that accepted it. By doing this, Twitter users communicate their stance on the cancellation and their forgiveness of the catalyst. Through this showing of support, Twitter users stand behind the response of Spacey to persuade others that the response was sufficient and therefore, punishments should cease. Twitter user @peterrock24 tweeted "I love Kevin Spacey and House of Cards it is unfair that show is canceled and Spacey getting that much hate when he actually apologized." @peterrock24's tweet emulates this strategy by explaining that it is unfair that Spacey is facing the consequences of being canceled even after he apologized. By accepting Spacey's apology, Twitter users like @peterrock24 urge that Spacey should be forgiven, or at least forgiven enough that *House of Cards* gets to continue.

As seen in @peterrock24's tweet, many Twitter users utilize this strategy to advocate for the cancellee's content to continue to be made. While this strategy may accept the cancellee's response, it also works to persuade others to accept the response in exchange for continued content. In Spacey's case, Twitter users who posted with this

strategy accepted Spacey's apology also discussed their disappointment that *House of Cards* was being canceled, and used Spacey's apology as reasoning for *House of Cards* to continue. Twitter user @Seer0101 tweeted "Livid that @HouseofCards will be canceled. This is one of the only shows that had content. Very touched with @KevinSpacey apology!" Through this strategy, @Seer0101 discusses their displeasure that *House of Cards* is going to be canceled and continues on to accept Spacey's apology. By doing this, @Seer0101 establishes that something substantial (*House of Cards*) is being lost, and that Spacey's apology was more than sufficient. What this communicates is that if a cancellee responds and apologizes for the catalyst that it is enough to maintain their social standing.

This technique is persuasive because other Twitter users who see this strategy are faced with the decision to support Spacey by accepting his apology in hopes that enough people will agree which may lead to *House of Cards* not being canceled. By appealing to fans of *House of Cards*, Twitter users utilizing this strategy move the conversation from the catalyst and the victim, and instead focus on the cancellee and the resulting consequences of their cancellation and how those consequences also effect the masses. The goal of this strategy is to disrupt the cancellation, advocating for others to accept Spacey's apology.

### You Call That an Apology?

A cancellee's response to their cancellation is heavily critiqued. This is because the masses on Twitter have had plenty of time to form their opinions, inform themselves of the catalyst and cancellation, and discuss the cancellation with others. Spacey's response received a lot of criticism that led to the majority of cancelers to reject the

apology. Twitter user @PlaineBlaine demonstrates this through their tweet “Kevin Spacey is canceled forever. Also, coming out does not absolve the fact that you are a predator and neither does your apology.” Similarly, Twitter user @iloveme1779 tweeted “Kevin Spacey needs to go away quietly he had an opportunity to really apologize instead he blamed it on the liquor and being gay. Canceled.” @iloveme1779’s tweet expresses that Spacey’s apology was not an apology, but instead an opportunity to blame the catalyst on being drunk and distracting the masses by coming out as gay. @iloveme1779 includes that Spacey is canceled in their tweet, confirming that the cancellation is continuing regardless of Spacey’s apology. Twitter users who utilize this strategy can use the response as more means to enforce the cancellation.

Because Spacey’s apology included his coming out, the LGBTQIA+ community worked quickly to separate Spacey’s actions from the community. The queer community is often sexualized to the point of their existence being equated with sexual perversion. Because Spacey took his response as an opportunity to come out, he conflated his queerness with his actions of sexually assaulting a minor. Twitter user @JackSmartWrites expressed this frustration through their tweet “Sick to my stomach that Kevin Spacey would choose NOW to come out, conflating pedophilia and homosexuality in the process. Canceled. Bye.” Twitter user @basiletheworld agrees with @JackSmartWrites as seen in their tweet “Kevin Spacey potentially fueled more homophobia while coming out and therefore he’s canceled. Goodbye.” @JackSmartWrites and @basiletheworld’s tweets condemn Spacey’s response because of the repercussions the LGBTQIA+ community could face because of it. Tweets like @JackSmartWrites and @basiletheworld do not accept Spacey’s apology and criticize its

lackluster attempt of accepting responsibility. Instead, Spacey's response deflected his actions on his closeted status and his inebriated state, which led to Twitter users who utilize this strategy to criticize the sincerity of the response. Without the masses on Twitter accepting the cancellee's response, the cancellation continues.

### **Comparing Cancellations**

A cancellation of someone with high social standing can also serve as precedent for future cancellations. By comparing catalyst events and resulting consequences, the masses on Twitter utilize cancellations to negotiate future cancellations and create discourse of those who committed similar acts but didn't get canceled in the past. By doing this, the masses on Twitter use cancellations to prove the effectiveness in reaching a common goal of removing the social capital of those in high social standing who commit acts that the majority do not support. This provides examples of successful cancellations that can be used to drive forward future ones.

During Spacey's cancellation, the #MeToo movement was gaining traction and holding predators accountable for their actions. Many celebrities were in the midst of being canceled with varying degrees of severity when it came to their loss of social capital. Because Spacey's cancellation gained so much attention due to the severity of the catalyst and the resulting consequences, Twitter users began comparing Spacey's cancellation and catalyst to others. Spacey's cancellation provided Twitter users with an array of information resulting from the cancellation process which prompted discourse on how other cancellations should take place. Comparing cancellations also revamps discourse surrounding a cancellation, reminding the public that a cancellation took place due to a catalyst. This is a strategy that aids the cancellation in remaining active.

If Spacey Got Canceled, So Should...

Twitter users use this strategy to compare catalyst events that may warrant a cancellation. By doing this, other potential cancellees are discussed in comparison to other active cancellee's. Harvey Weinstein, Donald Trump, Bill Cosby, R-Kelly, and many other perpetrators of sexual assault began getting compared to Spacey and his cancellation. Twitter users utilized this strategy in order to get those who dodged getting canceled or who's cancellation did not have sufficient consequences, back in to the discussion of what is considered acceptable behavior. Attention drawn to these individuals creates discourse about possible cancellations or lackluster cancellations. Twitter user @rxbylm tweeted "Chris Brown has repeatedly abused women. Yet we let his career continue as tho nothing has happened. House of Cards is canceled and Kevin Spacey's career is over. Rightly so. But you can't just say "well he can sing." Yes he can sing, but he can also disrespect and abuse women." @rxbylm's tweet is effective in discussing the repercussions of a cancellation, directly referencing the masses on Twitter's power of being able to end a career after the reveal of a catalyst. @rxbylm refers to Spacey's cancellation and resulting loss of his role in *House of Cards* and compares it to the lack of Chris Brown's consequences for his actions.

Twitter user @anuradha\_kush discusses Donald Trump in comparison to Spacey in their tweet "Netflix has canceled House of Cards after Kevin Spacey sexual abuse allegation. Waiting for America to cancel trump now." Twitter user @butterflyxgirl also compares Trump to Spacey when they tweeted "Kevin Spacey is an admitted child molester, his series is canceled. Well done HBO, yet the pussy grabber-in chief still in WH. SAD!" Through this strategy, Twitter users attempt to hold those who escaped the

consequences of their cancellation and maintained their social capital and support of the masses, accountable. By comparing the consequences that Spacey received to the lack of consequences others received, Twitter users attempt to negotiate or establish how a cancellation takes place.

These comparisons pose questions on who can be canceled and what acts are cancel-worthy offenses. Twitter user @FaithPennick expresses this ambiguity in their tweet “I don’t get how Kevin Spacey is HELLA CANCELED but Bryan Singer still has a career (at least for now).” This strategy points out inconsistencies in canceling and requires others who see this strategy being used to question their own ideas of who can be canceled and why. This strategy is important because those who are actively involved in canceling are attempting to come to understand the power canceling has to hold those with high social capital accountable for actions that they otherwise may not have been.

### **Discussing the Victim**

There is not always a clear or recognized victim during cancellations. Cancel worthy offences vary, and do not necessarily require there to be a singular victim. Depending on the situation, the identity of victims may not be revealed at all. Anthony Rapp’s decision to work with Vary on the exposé that thousands of Twitter users would read and retweet, effectively put him in the spotlight- but not for long. Spacey’s name and career dominated the conversations taking place about the catalyst and resulting cancellation. The few times Rapp’s name was used in tweets revealed three strategies.

#### So Brave

One strategy that Twitter users utilized when discussing Anthony Rapp was to compliment his decision to discuss his experience, especially in such a public way.

Rapp's accusations and detailed account of Spacey's assault revealed in Vary's BuzzFeed article came as a shock to many. The article provided an in-depth look at Rapp's life before, during, and after the assault and how Spacey's continued climb to fame effected Rapp. How Rapp discussed the assault and his life afterwards were unapologetic, emphasizing the importance Rapp felt about coming out about Spacey, in order to hold perpetrators responsible, giving voice to other victims who may have experienced something similar. Many Twitter users rallied around Rapp, commending him for his bravery especially talking out against someone with such high social standing. Rapp putting himself in a vulnerable position by associating his name with the story he provided Vary left Rapp open to many responses from the public.

While some Twitter users blamed Rapp for the cancellation of *House of Cards* and ridiculed him for coming out about Spacey's assault, other Twitter users swooped in to support Rapp and call out those who spoke out against him. Twitter user @filmguy619 tweeted "This is why victims of sexual assault are afraid to come forward. They get called liars and people start victim blaming and making them feel guilty. Leave Anthony alone. The show got canceled because Kevin Spacey is a garbage person suffering the consequences." By discussing the narrative of victim blaming in the status quo, @filmguy619 emphasizes the importance of supporting victims of sexual assault instead of making them feel guilty for their coming forward and exposing their perpetrator. @filmguy619 goes on to defend Rapp and shifting the responsibility of the assault and the consequences that come along with it back on to Spacey.

Twitter users who utilize this strategy express their understanding of the difficulty of coming out against a perpetrator. These Twitter users utilized their platform to discuss

these issues and defend Rapp against Twitter users who felt otherwise. Twitter user @showtunesrock tweeted “What unquestioned respect I have for @albinokid...his bravery in talking truth about Kevin Spacey’s duplicitous life...his standing up to social media trolls more concerned about a show being canceled than calling out sexual predators...noble and courageous.” @showtunesrock’s tweet critiques those who are attacking Rapp for exposing Spacey, specifically those who are “more concerned about a show being canceled than calling out sexual predators.” Twitter user @mandy\_velez utilizes this strategy to shift the blame back onto Spacey in their tweet “House of Cards wasn’t canceled because Anthony Rapp came forward. House of Cards was canceled because Kevin Spacey was inappropriate.” This strategy aims not only to support the victim, but to shame the perpetrator and those in support of them, clearly stating what the perpetrator is responsible for and how the public should be responding.

### Really? This Kid?

Another strategy Twitter uses utilized to discuss Anthony Rapp was to shame him. The majority of the anger Rapp faced was due to *House of Cards* being canceled. Fans of the show decided to express their anger towards Rapp for coming forward. This strategy does not acknowledge the catalyst as factual or worthy of Spacey being canceled. Instead, this strategy focuses on ridiculing Rapp to either discredit his story, or to bully him into being silent or revoking his accusations. Twitter user @DanielAttwater tweeted “Absolute joke that @HouseofCards has been canceled, all because of some weirdo from StarTrek #KevinSpacey @netflix @KevinSpacey.” @DanielAttwater’s tweet communicates their stance as defending Spacey. They do this by expressing their displeasure of *House of Cards* being canceled and simultaneously blaming Anthony

Rapp. How @DanielAttwater refers to Rapp is a clear demonstration of this strategy. @DanielAttwater does not use Rapp's name in this tweet but instead calls him "some weirdo from StarTrek" referring to one of Rapp's early acting roles. By referring to Rapp this way, @DanielAttwater does not acknowledge him or the catalyst and the accusations are viewed as coming from a faceless accuser for no reason. Twitter user @AlexESPN tweeted similarly "I'm fucking annoyed some gay dude got house of cards canceled because a drunk kevin spacey hit on him in the 80's wtf." Fans of *House of Cards* that utilize this strategy are not viewing Rapp not as a survivor of sexual assault, but as someone responsible for their favorite show being canceled.

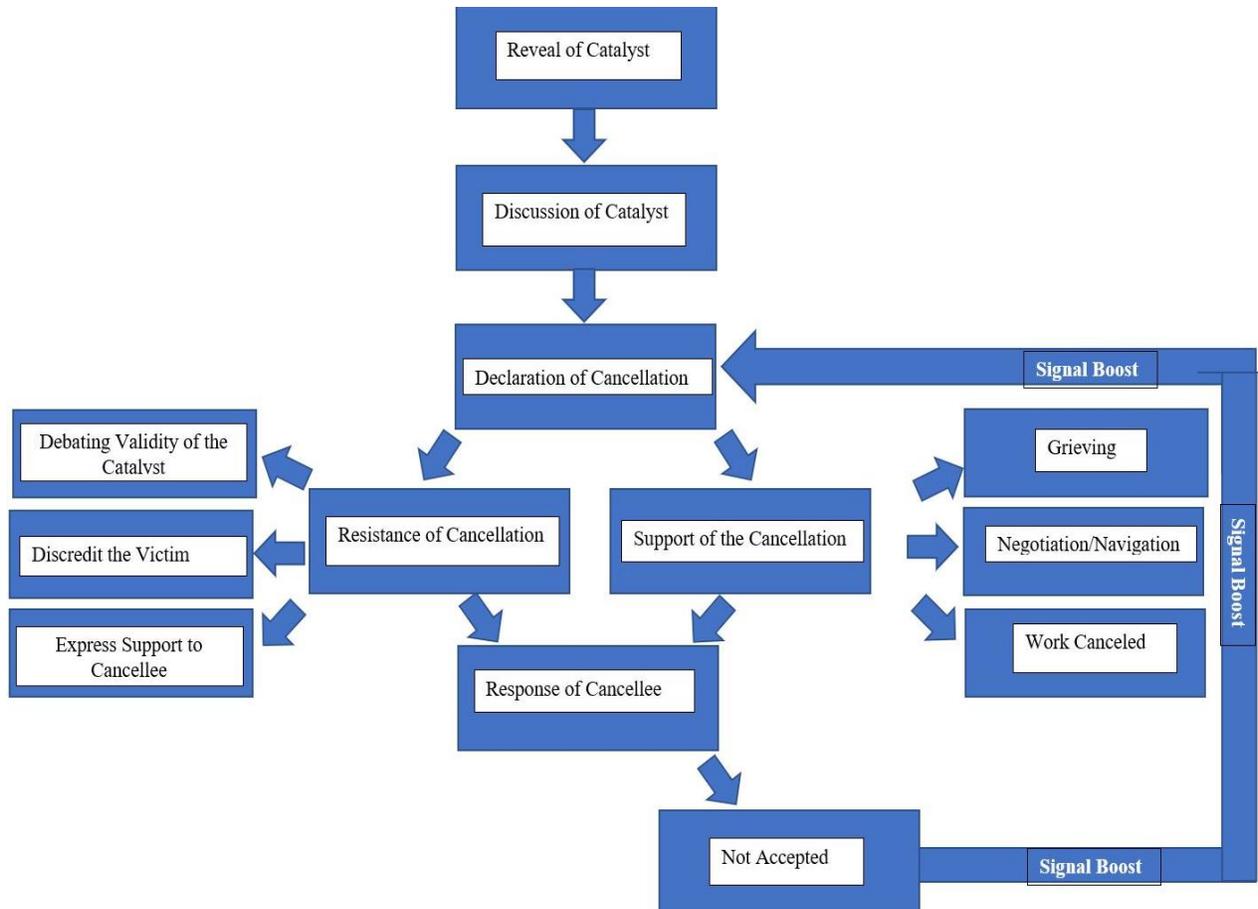
Rapp faced tweets that attacked his career, his trustworthiness, and his appearance. All of these tactics are classic trolling techniques, aimed at discrediting and bullying. This strategy attempts to hurt the accuser in the hope that they will cease bringing attention to the cancellation. In Rapp's case, Twitter users who utilized this strategy shifted the blame on to Rapp, making him responsible for the future of *House of Cards*. Twitter user @delicatus tweeted "when house of cards gets canceled because some ugly decided over 30 years later that kevin spacey attempted to sexually assault him." @delicatus repeatedly discredits Rapp in their tweet, not only insulting him but denying the actuality of the catalyst. By doing this, @delicatus defends Spacey and blames Rapp for the cancellation of *House of Cards*. Tweets like @DanielAttwater and @delicatus's do not discuss the catalyst in a way that acknowledges its actuality and therefore support Spacey and deny the validity of his cancellation.

### Not Mentioned

Even though Rapp was key in revealing the catalyst and suffered from Spacey's actions, Rapp's name is hardly mentioned in the tweets discussing Spacey's cancellation and the catalyst. Rapp's name was most associated in the title of Vary's article, without extra commentary from Twitter users in their tweets. Rapp's screen name, @albinokid, was used several times when Twitter users wanted to directly communicate to Rapp. Even fewer tweeted using Rapp's full name. Less than 50 tweets out of 1,785 mentioned Rapp's name or user name. Rapp's name and experience were quickly replaced by discussions about *House of Cards* and Kevin Spacey's career.

## Pilot Model

### Model



**Figure 1. Pilot Communication Model**

### Components of Model

This model illuminates the key aspects of a cancellation and the strategies that are used to support or resist a cancellation. The cancellation process has multiple steps that determine whether or not a cancellation is happening. This model shows that a cancellation is not the product of simply saying that someone is canceled, and instead highlights the requirements for the process to take place: a catalyst, resistance, support, and the strategies unique to the process of canceling.

### Catalyst Reveal

Cancellations begin with the reveal of the catalyst. As the prompting for a cancellation, a catalyst must be revealed for the warrant of the cancellation to begin. The reveal of the catalyst can be accomplished in several ways, and can take place either on or off social media. However, social media becomes the prominent platform for discourse surrounding the catalyst. The reveal of the catalyst becomes a source that is used as evidence to support the claims that begin a cancellation. The reveal is focused on the actions of the potential cancellee in order for the public to be aware of the action that is prompting a possible cancellation. By documenting the catalyst, social media users have a foundation of understanding that leads them to the next part of the model: discussing the catalyst.

### Catalyst Discussion

The discussion predominately takes place on social media, where the ability to disseminate the discussion and evidence is at its most effective. Sharing sources, responding to others, and creating hashtags lead the discussion of the catalyst. Utilizing social media provides the opportunity for social media users to capture as many people's attention as possible in order to inform them of the catalyst and the possibility of a cancellation. This is vital for a cancellation because what the majority on Twitter decides to believe is the determining factor in whether or not a cancellation takes place. For example, if the discussion of the catalyst does not create enough discourse that persuades others that a cancellation is justified, then the process begins to fizzle out. But if the discussion is successful in creating discourse then the process continues. If the discourse surrounding the catalyst and the potential cancellee is successful in gathering support,

and as demonstrated in this model, determines that the cancellee is indeed worthy of a cancellation, then the next step begins.

### Declaration of Cancellation

These declarations use terminology that communicates that a cancellation is taking place. Social media users declare a cancellation through posts that specifically state that the cancellee is “canceled.” Hashtags are also utilized when declaring a cancellation. Hashtags serve to categorize and organize specific discussions which aids other social media users in contributing to the cancellation. Cancellation hashtags often include the cancellee’s name along with some variation of the word “cancel.” When searching for a hashtag, clicking it will show every post that includes the hashtag, allowing social media users to find previously posted information and other social media users participating in the cancellation. Trending hashtags are effective in disseminating information and gathering support and provide the opportunity for a cancellation to go viral which gains more attention to the cancellation. Once a cancellation is declared, the impacts of a cancellation take shape.

### Resistance

There are two routes that social media users take after a cancellation has been declared: resistance to the cancellation or support of the cancellation. When resisting a cancellation, social media users have a goal of disrupting the cancellation process in order for it to end. By not supporting the cancellation, resisters are communicating that they do not accept or agree that the cancellation is happening. This is demonstrated through several strategies that resisters utilize during the cancellation process.

### Debate Validity of Catalyst

Resisters debate the validity of the catalyst in order to either diminish the severity of the catalyst or deny its existence. The goal of this strategy is to cause doubt that the cancellation is valid. Resisters discuss the catalyst differently than in the second step of the model. After the catalyst is revealed, resisters regard the catalyst as unproven either due to a lack of evidence or by critiquing canceling as a disadvantageous form of justice, preferring established justice systems to determine the guilt of someone instead of it taking place on social media. This can be attributed to resisters not believing that social media or the public have the right or means to determine a verdict that leads to a punishment via canceling.

### Discredit the Victim

During a cancellation that involves a victim, resisters discredit the victim in order to create doubt about their experience or the severity of the catalyst. This is accomplished through blaming, shaming, and bullying the victim. The goal of this strategy is to quiet the victim in hopes to diminish the perceived severity of the catalyst. Silencing the victim would impede on the pathos provided by the victim sharing their story and taking part in the discussions of the catalyst. When the victim is discredited, the warrant for the cancellation suffers. If the trust in the victim and their story falters, resisters are dismantling the severity or likelihood of the catalyst. Because a cancellation relies on a catalyst, if the person who revealed the catalyst is invalidated, the catalyst is questioned too. This disrupts the cancellation process because of its specific targeting of the victim which leads to the questioning of the trustworthiness of their account of the catalyst.

### Express Support to the Canellee

Resisters reach out to the cancellee on social media by making posts and/or directly tagging the cancellee in order to share their support. Seeing resisters express support to a cancellee disrupts the cancellation by shifting discourse from the catalyst and the victim to the cancellee. Sympathetic posts regarding the cancellee provoke discussions that question the cancellation taking place. This strategy works to alter the focus to rallying support for the cancellee instead of discussing why the cancellation is taking place. Expressing support also attempts to exemplify the contributions and positive attributes of the cancellee. This creates doubt that the cancellee participated in the catalyst because of the resisters work to distract from the negative discourse of the present and focusing on the positive aspects of the cancellee's past. These strategies that social media users who resist a cancellation utilize attempt to disrupt the cancellation process.

### Support

The second route after a cancellation is declared is "supporting the cancellation." When supporting a cancellation, social media users utilize several strategies in order for the cancellation process to continue. The goal of supporters is to hold the cancellee responsible for the catalyst through strategies that diminish the value of the cancellee. For the cancellation to be successful, there must be support for the cancellation. This leads supporters to utilize strategies that aid a cancellation receiving attention so more supporters join the effort. This part of the model demonstrates how those in support of a cancellation continue the cancellation process. When supporting a cancellation, social media users utilize several strategies in order for the cancellation process to continue.

### Grieving

Social media users' expressions of grief include posts that share their disappointment of the cancellee's role in the catalyst, the loss of content that the cancellee provided, and grieving the catalyst itself. Expressions of grief are communicated when social media users agree that the cancellation impacts the value of the cancellee. By sharing their grief this way, social media users are demonstrating to others that the cancellee is the one responsible for the cancellation and not the victim. This is an important aspect because it shows a direct contrast from cancellation resisters who do blame the victim.

### Negotiation/Navigation

Those who support the cancellation also rely on others participating in the cancellation to negotiate the cancellations effects on the public, and how they should navigate through the cancellation. These social media users may be unclear on what a cancellation means when it comes to the cancellee's content and whether or not viewing that content expresses support to the cancellee. Social media users communicate with each other to determine what a cancellation means to them and share how they participate in a cancellation. This part of the model illuminates how social media users navigate through a cancellation and how they utilize social media to form solidarity and clarity of how the public should treat the cancellee and their content.

### Work Canceled

A cancellation also makes previously potential professional or personal relationships difficult to gain or maintain. Once a cancellation takes place, others become wary to associate themselves with the cancellee in fear of being canceled as well. A

cancellation tarnishes the cancellee's reputation and the continued value of their contributions. Those who support the cancellation are key in the cancellee not receiving opportunities for future work and hindering relationships the cancellee has built, either personally or professionally. This isolates the cancellee and impacts their ability to remain socially relevant due to not being in the public eye. This further isolating the cancellee signifies that the cancellation is creating tangible consequences for the cancellee. This ostracization makes it difficult for the cancellee to maintain a positive image in the public eye, especially if they are not able to provide something of value to the masses.

### Response of the Cancellee

#### Not Accepted

When a cancellee responds to their cancellation, their response plays a key factor in the cancellation process. The cancellee's response is utilized in the discourse of the cancellation and aids the cancelers in defending and continuing the cancellation. The response is judged by the masses on Twitter to determine the sincerity and usefulness. If the masses on Twitter do not accept the response, then those in support of the cancellation continue to use the strategies developed throughout the cancellation process to reinforce the need for the cancellation and its continuance.

#### Signal Boost

The signal boost functions as a way to reinforce the cancellation through continued posting, sharing, and use of hashtags. Signal boosting the cancellation reinforces its continuance by repeating the strategies within the "support of the cancellation" section of the model. Repeating these strategies reminds people that the

cancellation is still active and reinvigorates the discourse surrounding it. Signal boosting can take place multiple times during a cancellation. Its purpose is to make sure that the consequences that the cancellee is facing do not falter, and in making it difficult for the cancellee to reenter the public eye due to their image being associated with their cancellation.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### **Limitations**

#### Method

When studying a specific phenomenon, a case study narrows down its wide breadth into a direct observation of a specific instance that takes place within it. Through an in-depth investigation, a case study provides context. This method allows for direct observation of how the phenomenon exists through data collection and rich analysis and explores how it functions when practiced. The complexity of a phenomenon can be usefully represented through the study of those who exist within it. Case studies are especially useful for those who do additional research, for case studies provide data that can be referred to and expanded upon.

While case studies can collect quantitative data, the qualitative nature of the method makes it almost impossible to recreate. How the researcher decides to collect, sort, and analyze the data is going to differ depending on who is completing the case study. When conducting scientific research, the ability to replicate is what establishes a phenomenon from being a single instance or fluke. If similar results are collected through multiple studies then there is evidence of the phenomenon's existence outside of a vacuum and instead, acknowledges its existence as a lived reality. This lends itself to the limitations of researcher bias which is an inherent factor of the method. The researchers lived experiences and world view will ultimately influence how they interpret the data.

This is unavoidable, even if the researcher acknowledges this as a limitation and works to avoid their bias influencing the study.

By completing a case study, I am unable to compare and contrast the possible differences of the process and impacts of a cancellation. Strategies used by social media users when participating in a cancellation may vary depending on the cancellee, but this research does not illuminate those differences. The process of a cancellation is likely determined by the nature and severity of the catalyst alongside several intersectional factors, such as race, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, other cancellee's experiences and the strategies social media users utilize in order to cancel, may vary a considerable amount. Any variations in the process or strategies utilized that are dependent are beyond the scope of this research.

### **Implications**

#### The Justice Alternative

Cancel culture serves as an alternative form of seeking justice. Cancellations happen in order to punish someone for acts that the masses on Twitter deem unacceptable. Not all catalysts are able to be judged in the court of law, as seen with Kevin Spacey's catalyst. This prompts the masses on Twitter to step in and provide consequences for the cancellee if they are not receiving them from an established justice system. The process of canceling functions as a trial, starting with discussing the crime, then providing evidence, leading to determining a verdict, and imposing consequences. The difference is that instead of the court system being involved, this alternative form of seeking justice is administrated by the masses on Twitter. Cancelers believe that just

because someone isn't charged as guilty in the court of law does not mean that they are innocent nor should they not face consequences for their crime.

Cancel culture puts power in the hands of the people to decide if those who violate expectations or do not uphold the values that the masses on Twitter believe should be maintained, should continue to have privileges that exist because of the public's support. Canceled individuals gain social capital through support of the public, and if the public decides that the canceled individual is no longer deserving of that social capital and the privileges that come with it, then the public removes their support in order to remove the social capital. Cancel culture illuminates how the masses on Twitter utilize canceling as a form of balancing power. Those with high social capital are perceived to hold all of the power, however, cancel culture shows us that the power is actually in the hands of the public. Without support, those with social capital will face difficulties in maintaining or gaining social capital. What this means is that those who have previously viewed their social capital as a form of power that protects them, now have to consider the repercussions of actions that they may have previously been able to get away with. Cancel culture is functioning as a form of checks and balances, keeping those with social capital aware that their value to the public is determined on their actions aligning with the public's ideas of what is right and wrong.

### Social Capital

This research implies that a cancellation leads to the depletion of one's social capital as a consequence for participating in a catalyst that the masses on Twitter have deemed unworthy of continued possession of that social capital. Social capital is the canceled individual's access to privileges, their ability to maintain relationships, and economic

success. These aspects are reliant on the value that society determines the cancellee has. This social capital is negotiable and is dependent on the continued support of the cancellee. When that support is disrupted, the cancellee will lose privileges they once had access too especially if those privileges were previously accessible due to the cancellee's social status. The relationships that the cancellee has built, and the ability to form future relationships are impacted during a cancellation, further reducing their social standing. The cancellee's economic success is also jeopardized during a cancellation due to the negative image that a cancellation leads to. Losing social capital communicates that the value a cancellee once had to the masses on Twitter has lessened. This is demonstrated by removing the cancellee from a position where they are able to access privileges that their social standing and support from the masses on Twitter had previously provided, to diminish the strength and numbers of the cancellee's relationships, and prevent the cancellee from work opportunities that would lead to further economic success and being in the public eye.

### Goal of Canceling

A goal of canceling is to one day not have to cancel anyone. Through canceling, the the masses on Twitter are demonstrating that there are consequences for behavior that has been deemed unacceptable. Those who have been canceled serve as a precedent of what is and is not acceptable. If someone is canceled for sexually assaulting another, then it is clear that the the masses on Twitter do not accept this as appropriate behavior and communicates this through a cancellation; this is especially so if the catalyst does not get its time in court. Canceling serves as both a punishment and demonstration of the values of the masses on Twitter. This is also true for cancellees who have been exposed saying

racist, homophobic, sexist and other derogatory remarks. Cancelers are serving as the judge and jury, establishing a social contract created by the masses on Twitter that is enforced through canceling.

### Usefulness

As seen through the case study of Kevin Spacey's cancellation, cancel culture *is* effective. That effectiveness may be defined as "good" or "bad" to some, but more importantly, cancel culture has the potential to be very useful. Social media users view cancel culture as a tool to balance power dynamics between those with varying degrees of social capital. Instead of those with similar amounts of power determining what acceptable behavior is for each other along with the consequences that follow if not observed, those who have been key in putting those in power in the positions they hold are now the ones determining what acceptable behavior is and the consequences for not demonstrating acceptable behavior. This leads to the necessary discussion of those who do not support cancel culture and critique its use. Based on the tweets collected in this research that resist the cancelation, those who speak out against canceling do not believe that the masses on Twitter are the right choice to determine the innocence or guilt of someone, nor punish them. This shift in power is frightening to those who have high social capital, and to those who are supportive of their justice system being the only way to determine one's innocence or guilt.

### Social Significance

Through this research, a pilot model that demonstrates the process of a cancelation was created. The case study conducted on Spacey's cancelation provided necessary data to be able to demonstrate how a cancelation takes place. This model can

be used to discern when a cancelation is actually happening. According to the model, we know a cancelation is happening if there is a catalyst event, support and resistance of a cancelation, and several strategies being utilized that communicate that resistance and support. We can determine that a cancelation is occurring if the steps shown in the model are present during a cancelation taking place on Twitter.

People fear cancel culture because it holds them accountable for their actions on a mass scale. We are judged by our peers and strangers alike, our actions critiqued and blasted over social media. This fear stems from the ambiguous nature of cancelling. There is no list of cancellable offenses, and the ones that have been established receive pushback because of their social justice nature or “political correctness.” Cancelling’s ambiguity sparks fear because people think that anything can lead them to be cancelled, putting them on guard to defend their actions and view of the world.

These fears about cancelling effects how we view social media and its usefulness. As established in the review of literature, use of social media has led to many cultural moments that have led to social change such as #BlackLivesMatter. Cancel culture is a catalyst for change, where the values of the masses on Twitter are upheld over those who have used their power to oppress. This is a unique phenomenon bred by social media.

Even though social media has been successful in creating social change, as seen in movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Arab Spring, #MeToo, and more, social media is still viewed as less reputable when compared to traditional media. This is in regard to social medias use being orchestrated by the masses on Twitter instead of news conglomerates who’s long held power is equated to its reputability. This infers that the masses using social media are not seen as trustworthy or capable of discussing social

events to the same caliber as traditional media, even though Twitter users are more likely to have a college degree alongside higher income compared to the general public (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). However, those who hold this power over the masses would be prime targets to be canceled, so recognizing the pushback to canceling as no accident is vital when discussing the perception of cancel culture. These critiques work to defend the status quo before canceling and we must question that defense in terms of who it serves and who it oppresses.

What it means to be cancelled is that you lose resources and opportunities. It's a type of ostracization from society administered by the masses on Twitter. Cancelling is a negotiation of power and by not acknowledging its process and impacts, we may lose the potential for future advocacy and social change that the masses on Twitter have shown they can accomplish.

### **Areas for Future Research**

#### Future Case Studies

##### Intersectionality

The role of Spacey's sexuality as a queer man should be considered in the resulting severity of the impacts Spacey's cancelation had on him, along with the discourse surrounding the catalyst that utilized his queerness as a key role in his actions and his response to the cancelation. Additionally, Spacey's whiteness should also be considered especially when cancelations including People of Color have resulted in different impacts and discourse surrounding their cancelations. For instance, long-time actor and comedian Bill Cosby, a Black man, was cancelled when it was revealed that he drugged and sexually assaulted multiple women. Similar to Spacey, the statute of

limitations for these crimes had expired. Unlike Spacey, who faced one civil lawsuit that was dropped before going to trial and faced no prison time, Cosby faced several civil lawsuits and was faced with criminal charges that resulted in him serving time in prison. Those who were assaulted by Cosby were encouraged and supported to come forward and share their stories. In Spacey's case, those who came forward or discussed similar instances regarding him were dismissed. While Spacey's cancellation resulted in him losing his career and social standing, Cosby faced not only that but prison time as well. The consequences that a Black man may face during a cancellation compared to that of a white man should be acknowledged, along with others. These positionalities and others can and will provide differences in the cancellation process. Each cancellation and cancellee is unique. While the model provided demonstrates the foundation of a cancellation, and can be applied to determine if a cancellation is happening, the uniqueness of a cancellation will be demonstrated through the discourse.

#### Other Types of Cancellations

This case study demonstrates a specific kind of cancellation. Kevin Spacey's cancellation was in result of a catalyst that had a physical action against another person, Anthony Rapp. What this means for Spacey's cancellation is that there is a known victim that is involved in the discourse of the cancellation, which is not always the case. Additionally, Spacey's catalyst was sexually assaulting Rapp, an act that cannot be rescinded, and is established in the status quo as heinous and against the law. This influences the response of the cancellation, especially compared to cancellations that begin due to a cancellee saying or posting something that is viewed as problematic. Catalysts that do not involve a physical act increases the cancellee's opportunity to

demonstrate education and growth, appealing to the values of the public. These opportunities are more difficult for a cancellee whose catalyst is a physical act because while someone can change how they will speak in the future, someone who has a physical catalyst cannot take that action back. Depending on the catalyst, whether it is a physical act or a spoken one, parts of the cancellation process established through Spacey's case study will differ. Spoken catalysts also differ in terms of who is affected. Compared to a physical catalyst where there is a specific victim, a spoken catalyst may be more broad and target a certain group of people rather than an individual. There is a need for case studies that collect and analyze data on cancellations that do not involve a physical catalyst. This is not to say that a spoken catalyst is any less harmful or is less severe than a physical catalyst, but it is *different*, and that difference must be studied.

#### Permanence

During the time of this research, Kevin Spacey's cancellation is active meaning that he is still canceled and living with the impacts the cancellation has had on his career and personal life. However, not all cancellations are permanent. New evidence that combats the original understanding of the catalyst can appear at any time which requires social media users to review the cancellation and determine how it will proceed. There have been cases where a cancellee has been proven innocent and their cancellation is reversed such as beauty influencer James Charles. Cancelees may also reappear in the public eye regardless of their cancellation in an attempt to regain their previous social standing. This results in the masses on Twitter to revisit the cancellation and the implications of the cancellee regaining attention and opportunities that the cancellee had previously lost, aiding in determining the amount of success the cancellee will have in

reversing their cancellation. How a reversed cancellation effects the life and career of a cancellee is a unique subset of canceling that must be further explored. This would give key insight to what the masses on Twitter value and how they determine guilt and innocence and resulting punishments and freedoms for a cancellee. This would also aid in defining what a cancel worthy offense is. The public has a general understanding of what leads someone to being canceled and what a cancellation looks like, but given the case study of Spacey's cancellation, what is missing from the model is how to stop or prevent a cancellation. This is vital information for those who are in positions that risk being canceled, and for those who participate in cancel culture.

### **Conclusion**

Through this research I completed a case study which identified the steps of cancellation, determining how the masses on Twitter engage in cancel culture, answering the research question: How do social media users participate in cancel culture on Twitter? This research illuminates the process of cancel culture, specifically in how social media users discourse of a cancellation reveals strategies that determine if a cancellation is taking place. This provided the necessary data to form a pilot model for canceling, which demonstrates the steps of a cancellation. These steps were derived from the case study of Kevin Spacey's cancellation and were key in determining the strategies Twitter users employ in order to take part in canceling.

Through qualitative content analysis I identified common themes that appeared in Twitter users' tweets discussing Spacey's cancellation. This analysis determined that Twitter users utilize social media to communicate with each other about canceling and have a common understanding of what a cancellation works to accomplish. By

participating in cancel culture, Twitter users are not only creating discourse, but are also taking action. The current understanding of what cancel culture entails is surface level at best: a group of people determining the continued value of someone who has violated social norms. This research illuminates this process further, identifying *how* canceling takes place and *how* the masses on Twitter participate in the practice. Determining these “how’s” furthers understanding of what a cancellation means to those who participate in the practice and what tools are used when canceling.

This research is significant because it reveals information about cancel culture that does not exist. By completing this research, I was able to create a model that shows the steps of a cancellation which can be utilized for future research on cancel culture. The case study of Kevin Spacey’s cancellation was a deliberate choice because of the attention it received along with it’s still occurring consequences. The amount of data that was collected from tweets discussing Spacey’s cancellation provided a rich data set that produced the information needed to determine how a cancellation takes place on Twitter. Spacey’s cancellation was a prime choice for the beginning stages of cancel culture research not only because of the breadth of available data, but because the cancellation played a pivotal role in establishing norms and expectations of following cancellations. This research gives us a tool to be able to determine if a cancellation is happening by applying the model to possible cancellations. This is important, for cancel cultures previous ambiguity causes people to mislabel something as “canceled,” which leads people to discredit the potential usefulness and effectiveness of cancel culture.

Like a snowflake, the structure of a cancellation is the same, but no two cancellations are identical. This means that there must be more research conducted on

cancel culture in order to determine what the differences are and what that means for canceling. The model included in this research is a foundation for what the cancellation process can look like, but the discourse surrounding cancellations other than Spacey's may reveal more strategies that social media users utilize when canceling. This research presents the opportunity for people on and off social media to understand cancel culture as more than a buzzword used to threaten the livelihoods of those in the public eye. Instead, we can now recognize that cancel culture is an evolution of public shaming, inherently unique to social media in which social media users develop strategies to demonstrate what they value, and determine the consequences one receives when those values are not upheld.

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