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Tools for Navigating Public Relations

in a "Cancel Culture" Climate

In today's social landscape, consumers expect that artists not only create enjoyable content, but also socially represent and advocate for the greater community's social interests. Digital platforms provide fans, brands, and public figures an opportunity to directly interact, meaning success is not only dependent on the quality of content, but the personality and identity of the creator, as well. In recent years, there have been numerous instances of public outrage in response to political views expressed, behaviors exhibited, or beliefs held by public figures. Disapproval from the public often results in financial ramifications, as well as irreconcilable damage to the public figure's reputation. During this phenomenon, known as "Cancel Culture", betrayal in the eyes of the general public can be career killing, and the smallest social misstep has the potential to result in immediate disengagement from fans and consumers.

"Cancellation" is not the most effective way to inspire heightened social consciousness, because it does not provide opportunity for offenders to reconcile mistakes and evolve, or for constructive dialogue to occur. With Cancel Culture affecting brands, businesses, and celebrities alike, the following has been constructed to serve as a resource for achieving and sustaining publically approved levels of social consciousness, to avoid criticism and being "canceled". This position has been developed after meticulous study of the psychology of individualism and collectivism, and case studies on notoriously positive and negative public response to specific beliefs or behaviors practiced by public figures. I consulted entertainment industry experts practiced in empowering their celebrity clients to maintain healthy public relations, discussing the process of Realization, Reconciliation, and Healing. Celebrities, businesses, and brands play a role in the growth of social global awareness. In questioning their social responsibilities, we will navigate the public perception of social awareness, exploring tools to regain public trust and avoid the pitfalls of "cancel culture".

What is Cancel Culture?

"Cancel Culture", often referred to as "Call Out Culture", is the downfall of a celebrity, brand, or business due to the outcry of an activist demographic of consumers in response to behavior commonly considered socially distasteful. In response to offensive conduct, members of the general public become campaigners, loosely organizing to cause damage to the perpetrator's career, reputation, or revenue.

It is necessary to respond to bigotry, but the "Cancel Culture" approach fails to consider a shared experience amongst humans: our beliefs and opinions are formed over time and are often subject to change. Ideologies evolve over the lifetime of a person, and without an environment that fosters conversation and education; there is less opportunity for us all to experience personal growth. As new social patterns shift our behavior, we are quick to disengage with content and catalog the offenses of creators. "Cancellation" deprives public figures and brands room to acknowledge a mistake was made and learn from the experience. Without constructive exchanges, the offender is prone to recurrence or intensification of distasteful behavior. Reformative dialogue, however, creates solutions based in education, mitigating the probability of a repeat offence and increasing the likelihood of consumer approval and engagement.

Social Consciousness: "Awareness of important social issues" (Webster)

Alongside the advancement of technology, our collective social consciousness has grown. As news, information, and culture become more accessible through digital platforms, there is a universal sense of heightened social awareness as we all become more informed citizens. This rise in awareness manifests as the public holds celebrities and brands accountable to a higher

social standard, often expecting advocacy for common cultural causes. With social movements like #MeToo and Times Up, Black Lives Matter, or climate change on the forefront of public awareness, an offence certain organizations, or their mission, could result in serious repercussions.

In May of 2018 "cancel culture" played out on an international stage when actress Rosanne Barr, star of the recently revived ABC television show "Rosanne", used racist epithets to address Valarie Jarrett, former advisor to President Barack Obama. Immediate outrage followed the social media incident with MSNBC's Joe Scarborough tweeting, "Hey @ABC, Roseanne Barr compared Valerie Jarrett to an ape. There is no apology she can make that justifies @ABC turning a blind eye to this bigotry by airing another second of her show. Even in the Age of Trump, there are red lines that can never be crossed. This is one." In addition, co-star of the show, Sara Gilbert promptly condemned the behavior and distanced herself from Barr, writing, "Roseanne's recent comments about Valerie Jarrett, and so much more, are abhorrent and do not reflect the beliefs of our cast and crew or anyone associated with our show. I am disappointed in her actions to say the least. "Within 24 hours of her tweet, Channing Dungey, Entertainment President at ABC, released a statement stating, "Roseanne's Twitter statement is abhorrent, repugnant and inconsistent with our values, and we have decided to cancel her show." Tolerance for hateful, harmful, or socially unfavorable behavior is at an all time low, a position understood by individuals and corporations alike. "The cancellation [of Roseanne] cost ABC $22.7 million, the amount the network booked in advertising revenue from the nine episodes of the now-canceled sitcom, according to figures from the measurement firm iSpot.tv." (NBC News), highlighting the seriousness of the offence and extent of its repercussions.

While general social awareness has grown, the focus of that awareness is in a state of constant fluctuation. The protection of human rights, gender equality, celebration of diversity, and embracing the queer community were taboo, listed issues 50 years ago, but today they are at the forefront of social awareness. The priorities of culture are constantly changing, and it has become vital to utilize a system based around the evaluation of good and bad that provides open opportunity to change opinions, and evolve one's personal zeitgeist. The social reasons for vilification are inherently subjective and constantly evolve, seen in Actress Ingrid Bergman, subject of one of the earliest instances of "Cancelation". When Bergman had an affair with Italian film director Roberto Rossellini, leaving a husband and child behind and proceeding to bear a child out of wedlock. For the 1940's movie star, the scandal became her greatest legacy and effectively ended her US film career, even inciting criticism from US politicians for her behavior. By today's standards, Bergman would be but one of many story plastered upon tabloids, spoken about but soon forgotten. As society changes, our expectations of those who represent us in commerce and media change as well, providing a difficult social landscape to maneuver.

Implications of Influence

The term 'celebrity' has always carried weight, but with new access to increasing facets of the lives of those in the public eye, there is an even greater push from the public to hold celebrities to a higher moral standard than the average person. Not all celebrities feel this pressure, but those who acknowledge it recognize the unique position they hold creates influence over others. Performing artist turned successful entrepreneur and fashion mogul, Rihanna, spoke on the weight of this influence in a 2009 interview with Good Morning America. This interview

was conducted in the aftermath of her very public domestic violence experience with singer Chris Brown. Brown physically abused then girlfriend Rihanna during a fit of rage, during the aftermath the singer recalls her thought process surrounding reconciliation with Brown. Rihanna stated, "When I realized that my selfish decision for love could result in some young girl getting killed, I could not be easy with that part. I couldn't be held responsible for going back...Even if Chris never hit me again, who is to say that their boyfriend won't? Who's to say that they won't kill these girls?" she said. "These are young girls and I just didn't realize how much of an impact I had on these girls' lives until that happened." (Fenty 2009). She encountered an impactful realization of the power of her influence. Justified or not, celebrities have the power to set social standards, and it creates space for a level of responsibility on behalf of the public figure to act in reverence and accordance with that truth.

Can you separate the art and the artist? That's up to you.

While digital fans and consumers are able to easily discover what a celebrity, brand, or business advocates for; not every person factors that information into their daily decision-making process. Individuals ultimately have the power to determine if they care enough to be deterred from engaging with the entity in question.

Controversial singer and performer R. Kelly has been a key name within the conversation of "cancel culture", spurred by the rise of recent activist movement lead by Oronike Iyabo Odeleye, "Mute R. Kelly". "We were outraged when we discovered that R. Kelly was scheduled to perform at a Fulton County owned facility in Atlanta, recounted Odeleye, "As a local government owned venue, we were upset that Fulton County would let a well-documented sex offender profit from our tax dollars and expanded the petition to include demands that the concert be cancelled. Kenyette coined the hashtag #MuteRKelly, and a nationwide movement

was born." Since then, countless public figures and organizations across the nation have taken up the #MuteRKelly banner, organizing protests and calling for boycotts of his music. In addition to these protests, Barnes and Odeleye are also taking their fight to streaming platforms like Pandora and Tidal, often more lucrative than traditional radio broadcasts in today's market. "They recently launched "ThumbItDown" in an effort to get R. Kelly's music removed from these sites" (MuteRKelly.Org).

While this accurately depicts the depth of outrage at Kelly's personal conduct, many lean to the other side of the spectrum. In response to movements like "#MuteRKelly", digital service providers have updated their hateful content and conduct policies, removing Kelly from all featured playlists, but retaining his music in their catalog. In spite of a symbolic gesture, according to data from Spotify via Consequence of Sound, "From the day Spotify announced its policy change on May 10th to May 16th, Kelly's streaming numbers hit 6,676,000, up from the average 6,584,000 weekly streams his music typically receives." (Kaye) While this might be a small amount of growth in comparison to other industry figures, it's a clear indication that a significant portion of the public remains unbothered by the social contributions or shortcomings of creators. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that public perception of social engagement and consciousness is not the sole defining quality for the success or failure of a campaign. The following is to be used as a resource to help public entities engage with consumers or fans that do factor the social footprint of an artist or brand into their decision to consume their product.

Tools for Navigation

Realization: An act of becoming fully aware of something as a fact."

To experience realization, one must be provided with the opportunity to recognize harmful behavior or beliefs capable of creating a toxic or unsafe environment, or causing negative consequences for others. Public entities must equip their teams with the necessary tools to consider how their words, content, or actions may be socially received. A small investment, this education has the potential to prevent negative publicity and reputational damage. Through proactive systems, this social learning acts as insurance to the entity, and enables them to produce content that is culturally and politically sensitive and commercially productive.

Constant evaluation of the self is a powerful tool in achieving sustainable social consciousness. By taking note of our practices and beliefs in relation to the world around us, we enter radical self-awareness, and we begin to understand the impact our personal practices and habits have on ourselves, and our local and global communities. Self-Awareness depends upon self-perception and our ability to connect with others. Many people want to be something they are not, and while their thoughts, words, and actions do not reflect it, their own perception of self has shifted to align with their ideal self. In our reevaluations, there is the potential for new compassion and understanding of others, and the process of unlearning damaging behaviors, replacing them with intentional practices and routines.

At the center of recent media attention, actor Liam Neeson was featured in an interview admitting to heinous racially charged and bias thoughts, while promoting his film, Cold Pursuit. In an interview concerning the action film about a father seeking revenge for his murdered son,

Neeson attempted to express understanding the need for revenge his character felt. Telling the journalist of his experience as a close friend to a victim of sexual assault, the actor was quoted saying "My immediate reaction was... I asked, did she know who it was? No. What color were they? She said it was a black person." Liam continued, "I went up and down areas with a cosh, hoping I'd be approached by somebody - I'm ashamed to say that - and I did it for maybe a week, hoping some [uses air quotes with fingers] 'black bastard' would come out of a pub and have a go at me about something, you know? So that I could kill him." A never before heard admission of a disturbing and potentially dangerous mentality, even Neeson was shocked by his own reflection. "It was horrible, horrible, when I think back, that I did that...And I've never admitted that, and I'm saying it to a journalist. God forbid." (Michallon). In a moment of explicit vulnerable self-reflection, Neeson faltered, provoking criticism. Popular news media turned to click bait tactics to feed user statistics, igniting further outcry from the general public.

On Twitter: @ZodMagus was skeptical about Neeson suffering significant career damage: "Nothing will happen to Liam Neeson. He's not on social media so the social media outrage won't work. We just need to not support his art for the foreseeable future unfortunately that includes Widows."

@aliciaadejobi spoke for a number of disappointed fans when she wrote, "Never thought I'd have to cancel Liam Neeson but... here goes. How he ever thought he could say this without consequence is mind-boggling." (Deerwester 2019)

While the sentiment of Neeson's statement is inherently distasteful, the backlash left little consideration for his evolutionary realization. Under the effects of cancel culture, the essence of Neeson's message was lost in a media frenzy, shirking what could have been a teachable moment. In the same interview, Neeson is quoted later saying, "I grew up in Northern Ireland in the Troubles," referring to the decades-long strife between Catholics, who wanted to form a united Ireland, and Protestant loyalists who wished to remain a part of Great Britain. "I had

acquaintances who were very caught up in the Troubles, and I understand that need for revenge, but it just leads to more revenge, to more killing and more killing, and Northern Ireland's proof of that. All this stuff that's happening in the world, the violence, is proof of that, you know. That primal need, I understand." (Deerwester 2019). A problematic delivery and knee-jerk reaction from consumers turned into a scandal for Neeson, for which he later apologized for "What I failed to realise is that this is not about justifying my anger all those years ago, it is also about the impact my words have today," he said. "Although the comments I made do not reflect, in any way, my true feelings nor me, they were hurtful and divisive. I profoundly apologise." (Reuters).

It is vital to address the role of the media; examining how their efforts play into popular dialogue around scandal. The Liam Neeson racism scandal began with a promotional interview, quickly distorted to a conversation on race and bias, in observance of headlines from the Guardian asserting "Neeson wanted to Kill a Black Man" or from the Irish Times stating Neeson "Wanted to Kill a Black Bastard". While the actor did make these statements, the headlines framed the situation around his admitted mistake over his self-realization, creating drama and chaos. While competing for views, news outlets fall into the temptation of using click baiting and reaction catalyzing headlines, at times disseminating knowingly false, unproved, or manipulated information. A super-saturation of news and content in the digital era has created numerous opportunities for unreliable sources to share opinions and information. As we struggle to hold media accountable for accurate and trustworthy reports of current events, the consumer becomes responsible for evaluating the credibility of the information we believe and circulate.

In a "cancel culture" climate, individuals are quick to disengage or deliver criticism. In order to give constructive feedback and social education effectively, as consumers, we must abandon the "cancel" mentality to begin a conversation about effective methods to earn

forgiveness. The way criticism is offered must provide an opportunity for it to be heard effectively, space for reflection, and acceptance of their flawed humanity. We must meet differing values and opinions with opportunities for open dialogue, as long as those opinions do not contribute to the degradation of a person or a group of people. No matter the validity of the statements offered, if done so in a threatening way, the probability of the messaging being received is substantially reduced. We ought to commence our efforts with commitment to cancel the behaviors instead of the perpetrator. The solution to dealing with people whose opinions deviate from our own is not to mute them, but to engage in considerate, educational dialogue, providing opportunities for growth to occur and amends to be made.

Businesses and brands would do well to incorporate a strong awareness of institutional integrity as a priority of their business activities. Alluding to the powerful influence of Rihanna, when Snapchat hosted a third party app, hosting a poll asking the user to choose whether to "slap Rihanna" or "punch Chris Brown", the app itself was held accountable by the public and Rihanna. The singer and entrepreneur stated in an Instagram story, "This isn't about my personal feelings, cause I don't have much of them . . . but all the women, children, and men that have been victims of [domestic violence] in the past and especially the ones who haven't made it out yet. . . . You let us down! Shame on you. Throw the whole app-ology away." The protest by the international star cost the stock of Snapchat to fall approximately 4%, resulting in a loss of approximately 800 million dollars (Wall Street Journal 2018). Applying and upholding clear community social standards for what is unacceptable, hateful, or harmful content creates protection for the content creators from future "cancellation", and if presented with care and tact, could provide opportunities for education.

C.H.I.C.

To recognize and address harmful behaviors and beliefs we require practical tools to conduct self-evaluation. In situations where statements will be made, or actions taken, that will be viewed and received by the public, one should consider context, history, intention, and criticism, or reference "C.H.I.C.". CHIC is one of many valuable resources to utilize, to assess whether or not content may be culturally or politically insensitive.

Context

Take note of the social environment? What implications might my words or actions have? What audience and what demographics am I engaging with?

History

Spiritual; Are your actions respectful of religious beliefs or practices?

Financial; Will your actions capitalize on systemic disadvantages minority groups face?

Cultural; Are your actions irreverent to sensitive historical events?

Intention

Are you approaching the situation from a respectful, curious, well-intended place? Is there any sense of malice or disrespect in your practices or actions? Are you aware of the contextual implications of your actions? Have you done your research?

Criticism

Simply stay open and considerate. You do not have to take to heart anything anyone says, nor do you have to act on it, but listen to what people are willing to say to you about how your actions affect them, and be considerate of those feelings.

Before meaningful change can take place, we need to be self-awareness. By taking the time to self reflect, we are enabled to confront toxic behavior, and with resources like the

C.H.I.C. method, there is a sense of social accountability in the thoughts and practices influencing produced content.

Reconciliation and Healing

Beyond recognizing harmful behavior and creating spaces where constructive conversations can occur, the work of rebuilding trust depends on how the public figure or brand seeks reconciliation. By publicly owning up to your mistakes, sincere apology when necessary, and committing to participate in the solution, public entities can enable healing through appropriate reconciliation. In an exchange published ironically on International Women's Day in 2017, critically acclaimed jazz musician Robert Glasper made some unintentionally sexist remarks in an interview. Glasper expresses "women you would think never listen to jazz: Young, fine, Euro chicks ask me, 'I heard this band, the Bad Plus, do you know them? I've seen what that does to the audience, playing that groove. I love making the audience feel that way. Getting back to women: women love that. They don't love a whole lot of soloing. When you hit that one groove and stay there, it's like musical clitoris. You're there, you stay on that groove, and the women's eyes close and they start to sway, going into a trance" (Glasper 2017). Such an ignorant comment from a person of such prominence in the jazz scene and music industry was offensive to many men and women alike, prompting outrage across the globe.

Glasper used the conflict as an opportunity to self-reflect, reconcile with his own community, and turn to the public eye to ask for forgiveness. In doing so, he began the healing process. On March 18th, he offered the following reflection, apologizing to his community.

> "The reality is, I do over a hundred interviews a year - somewhere in there I'm gonna say something that may come out wrong. I apologize that this came out wrong and caused offense – or upset...the way I framed this made some people angry. And that's

real. That's important as hell. This whole thing has been important for me because it's meant I've had conversations and learning moments through others about things I never knew about; spoken to friends and family about things that they experience that I have never experienced. A female friend said to me recently, remember that everybody has their own stories, their own shit that they deal with. And for sure this is something I know, but I'm also still learning about.

How women experience sexism, and how subtle and invisible it can be to others, is something I am hearing, and being educated about…So, I have been looking at what I think, say and do with a kind of new eye, which has, in turn, meant me learning about a patriarchy I can't always experience, and about how it is part of a bigger system of oppression that I have often been subjected to. We can't escape the world we live in – no one can. But we can try and see it, and try and change it – starting with ourselves. Right now, I'm the man in the mirror!....Let's take responsibility for checking our own privilege for a minute, and listening to someone when they say they have a problem, even when that problem is something that involves us. I do understand that as a man, and as a musician that can speak to a whole heap of people, learning is never done – and sometimes I'm gonna need to put in work on things other than music. Let's be clear, I'm not perfect - or pure! But I am listening. And I am learning" (Glasper 2017).

In a brilliant example of authenticity, the artist offered an effective apology and effort to self-explain without dismissing the complaint presented. Glasper embodies the process of self-reflection by acknowledging his damaging behavior and its impact on his fan base. Through this discovery Glasper can evolve into the ultimate form of growth in social consciousness: advocacy. By appreciating this artist's growth, he was enabled to lead his peers and colleagues to be more aware of how their actions might be received, and understand the power they have to effect positive change. The other side to the great unlearning is relearning; acknowledging one's damaging behaviors and then intentionally replacing them with healthy constructive habits. This

educational model creates a "give what you've been given" approach, where the redeemed now becomes an example for others.

A genuine apology and a plea for forgiveness may be necessary to move forward and mend damaged public perception, but just because forgiveness is asked for consumers. are under no obligation to provide it. Lucky for Glasper, his community responded with love and appreciation, but this is not always the case. When previously mentioned Rosanne Barr apologized, it was received as insincere and hollow, having a detrimental effect on the situation. Many public figures, however, become the target of cancel culture multiple times, but retain strong connection and engagement with their fan base, through sincerity, humility, and willingness to grow.

Young Youtuber, Covergirl ambassador, and beauty influencer, James Charles, has found himself "cancelled" by many users of social media after previous fumbles in cultural sensitivity on digital platforms. Most recently, Charles was involved in an internet flurry when prior mentor, Tati Westbrook, publicly renounced their friendship and denounced all involvement with his brand following his endorsement of a product from one of Westbrook's business rivals. The drama cost Charles over 3 million subscribers on YouTube, and – while Westbrook gained over 4 million from the 9-day episode – after a public truce and apology, he gained 2 million subscribers back.

James Charles rose to stardom rapidly at the age of 17, following announcement of his role as Covergirl's first male spokesperson. Entering the public eye at a young age, child and teenage celebrities are at higher risk for insensitivity to cultural and political issues, mainly due

James Charles ✔
@jamescharles

to growth-related inexperience. A year after entering the

"I can't believe we're going to Africa today omg what if we get Ebola?" "James we're fine we could've gotten it at chipotle last year" ....😳

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public eye, Charles posted a tweet, tactlessly joking about the epidemically dangerous Ebola virus. "I can't believe we're going to Africa today omg what if we get Ebola?" Despite immediate backlash from digital consumers, Charles initially defended his comments and

February 16, 2017 at 4:36 PM

Okay, I'm NOT going to post a bullshit apology. I was told what to say and that's not how an apology should work. I am extremely sorry for my tweet and I feel like shit for saying it. I am traveling to Africa today with a few friends for a school trip, ironically enough, it's an educational trip because we all know very little about the country but are eager to learn. I am aware that the tweet was extremely offensive and degrading. I posted it to make fun of my friend's mistake, but did not think about what the tweet as a whole was implying. It was never my intent to offend anyone and I am sorry. As a white cis male, I recognize my privilege and would never want to take that for granted, but I fucked up. I deleted everything before my plane took off, hoping that it would go away, which is completely the wrong way to handle problems such as this. I just landed a little while ago and am just now seeing to where this has blown up to and I don't want anyone to think I don't care or am not sorry. I could not see or say anything while in the air, I passed out and did not buy wifi. I feel awful for posting what I said. I understand why what I said was offensive and ignorant. I look forward to exploring the country and learning much more about the people and culture, because clearly I know very little and have a lot to learn.

blocked critics on Twitter. Later that day, Charles posted a Notes app apology on Twitter, in which he called Africa a country.

"'Cancel culture is a byproduct of our ability to advocate for ourselves on social media,' said Angelica Nwandu, founder of popular Instagram account The Shade Room. 'It comes from a great place, but what I've suggested is that we cancel the behavior and not the person because it's becoming a toxic movement. It's not allowing anyone to make a mistake.'" (WWD) We must accept each other's humanity and grant everyone the opportunity to evolve in order to find peace. Charles has maintained a strong relationship with his fans despite the mistakes he has

made, because he always delivers a genuine apology and remains humble, while asking for forgiveness and education. His efforts are often coupled by a barefaced YouTube video, further intensifying the sincerity of each learning moment for the makeup and beauty blogger.

Conclusion

To allow space for personal growth, we need to be considerate that our evaluation of facts and beliefs will evolve overtime, a reality not appreciated by cancel culture. It is important to confront criticism as an opportunity to reevaluate truth, providing stable, informed confidence in our assumptions and opinions. Although the practice of cancel culture has been successful in capturing attention, and imposing measurable consequence for betrayal of the public's trust, there are more productive ways to incite change.

If public figures, businesses and brands accept the responsibility of self awareness, they will be better prepared to navigate the standards and demands of today's social consciousness when engaging with their consumers. The collective society must respond with a commitment to adjust the collective response, creating constructive dialogue to challenge and question various opinions, without immediate dismissal. These circumstances provide an opportunity for transformative healing, holding influential entities accountable for their actions and satisfying the social demands of the public, while allowing room for priorities to evolve. Celebrities, business, and brands do play a role in the collective social consciousness of our world, creating responsibilities and expectations from the general public to advocate for social issues and remain sensitive to cultural and political matters. Through active tools for realization, reconciliation, and healing, public entities are able navigate social artistry, maintain or regain public trust, and avoiding the pitfalls of cancel culture.

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