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## **“JOSS IS (NO LONGER?) BOSS”:** FANS’ NEGOTIATIONS AROUND THE “CANCELLING” OF JOSS WHEDON

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The case of Joss Whedon, who has been subject to calls for “cancelling” in light of allegations around misconduct and abuse, is at the heart of a major cultural debate. “Cancelling” refers to a withdrawal of support from someone whose values, action or speech are unacceptable (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020). Yet, the term “cancel culture” has quickly earned a contested status. While social justice advocates see it as a tool advancing equality and inclusion, opposers warn against its consequence in “weakening of the norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity” (Clark, 2020; 88).

Over the past two decades, popular culture has been described as a “new front” of culture wars between liberal and conservative opposing values, with a particular focus on gender. Popular culture can thus be seen as a terrain of struggle between two competing phenomena: popular feminism and popular (or networked) misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Ging & Siapera, 2018; Jane, 2016), both of which rely on the nature of social media for their success. Examining the clash between the two trends on digital platforms, and the way they are used by participants in online discussions, we hope to better understand current cultural power struggles and the role of media audiences in protesting or advancing different agendas.

The aim of this study is to explore how a fan community makes sense of “cancelling” as a cultural phenomenon and how these discussions are used in relation to broader values and ideologies. Using the “cancelling” of Joss Whedon as a case study, this research will ask how audiences perceive, evaluate and employ this concept in their day-to-day relations to popular culture, and how it is used to defend or reject certain values.

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## **Case Study and Method**

The Whedon online fan community has been a key site within this broader controversy, as withdrawal of support for the prominent creator began gradually in 2017 and intensified in 2021, after several allegations of harassment and abuse have been made public. Following a post on Twitter revealing Whedon's anti-feminist views, chauvinistic, toxic and abusive behavior towards women around him, both fans (who shared the post) and those holding power positions in the industry (who decided to fire him from current projects) declared him "cancelled."

This case is particularly enlightening given the fact that Whedon was celebrated for advancing feminist agendas in popular culture, with his high-esteemed feminist works, revolutionary strong female superheroes, as well as his own self-declaration as a 'male-feminist' and promoting feminist movements. Fans' loyalty to Whedon was upended in the context of his "cancellation," and makes an interesting case for a role model of popular feminism that has been exposed in failing to fit this category.

The study will examine how fans perceive the allegations, how they see the status of creators and their contents in light of them, and how they navigate the ambivalences inherent in "cancelling" a previously-valued creator. In order to understand how Whedon fans perceive "cancelling" as a tool to promote feminist ideals, and the perceived effect this practice has on the ambivalent relationship between creators, cultural products and audiences, we will conduct 20 in-depth interviews with Whedon fans and former fans, sampled from the fan community on Twitter.

In the absence of a dedicated platform for a global fan community, we searched for active participants on Twitter, that were involved in the debate around the allegations. Using data scraping tools (TAGS) and the Twitter search engine, the categories for inclusion were:

- a) Users following Whedon's personal account (@joss) or Buffy the Vampire Slayer official (@BuffyTVS).
- b) Users that responded to the allegations posted by Charisma Carpenter's account (@allcharisma) from February 2021 or to Whedon's response to the allegations from January 2022.

From this list, interviewees were contacted by direct messages on Twitter, and agreed to participate in a 45-90 minute interview on Zoom.

Through an in-depth qualitative analysis, we will try to understand how fans view Whedon and his works in light of the recent allegations. Interviewees will not be asked directly about "cancelling" or "cancel culture" as a term; instead, we will search for their own definitions and understandings of this practice.

## **Preliminary Findings and Discussion**

Our preliminary findings indicate that "cancel culture" is indeed seen as a controversial concept among many. While some interviewees perceive its role as a tool for the marginalized to reveal injustice, many carefully separate between their personal choices and "cancelling" as a broader trend. We can identify three aspects in which the

participants expressed their attitude to the phenomenon: (a) cultural trends; (b) complex fan identities; (c) ideological polarization.

### **a. Cultural trends**

“Cancelling” is applied as an individual, economic tool of protest. Participants were usually careful in separating between a personal decision in boycotting a problematic figure (choosing to withdraw financial support for future projects), and the consequences of this action. Many of them explicitly objected to the concept of “cancel culture” and broader institutionalized sanctions, referred to by one interviewer as an “unwanted side effect”. Interestingly, the marketability of feminist/inclusive trends in popular culture continues along similar lines, when threats are met by similar means—preventing the distribution.

### **b. Negotiating complex fan identities**

Many of the participants described a linkage between their own fan identity, perceptions, and (mostly, feminist) ideals, and the objects of fandom. This allowed them to separate between the creator and creation, and so to keep the valued fan objects while rejecting Whedon as a person. Many expressed an almost automatic identification with the offended, which could be connected to their own position as fans. One interviewee provided an interesting justification for “abandoning” Whedon, explaining that the fictional characters would probably side up with her against this “oppressor”.

### **c. Ideological polarization and the role of social media**

The previous aspects were described in a broader context of the digital age, where gender discourse is becoming increasingly dominant at the fallout of #MeToo and other gender equality protests. In numerous cases, participants described the ability of digital platforms to amplify individual voices, and to strengthen polarized opinions. Along the intersection of popular culture and social media, this case can be seen as a key example of the gendered “culture war.”

Examining these findings in the context of two key processes – technological change and increasing use of digital participatory platforms, as well as feminist trends and increased possibilities for online activism – helps us consider “cancelling” as a political-ideological tool and the ways in which popular culture serves as a key arena in today’s “culture wars.”

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