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RUPTURES, DISSENT AND CANCELLATION: STUDIES ON DIGITAL FANDOMS IN CRISIS

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Scholars working across fan studies, internet studies and politics have noted the increasing use of cancellation practices across media, politics and culture and within digital spaces. Cancel culture is “the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership,

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social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues” (Ng 2020, 623). Cancellation practices might include unfollowing a creator on social media, refusing to buy books or stream films, or boycotting places. Cancelling has its origins in queer Black communities where marginalized groups engaged in “networked framing” (Clark, 2020), discussing the behaviour of the offending party and “prescrib[ing]d a remedy—such as being fired or choosing to resign—through the collective reasoning of culturally aligned online crowds” (ibid, 89). Yet cancel culture has moved beyond the realm of Black Twitter to enable all marginalised voices to discuss, critique and demand accountability: the 2017 #MeToo-movement highlighted this as scores of women took to social media to expose the extent of sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood, “turbocharged cancel culture” (Ng 2020, 623).

Cancel culture has been framed as a form of activism, an activity which has also been linked to fan communities (Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012). Many fans are aware of social inequalities, being members of communities beyond their fandoms which are marginalised by virtue of gender, race or class (Maher, 2020). It is not surprising that fans engage in virtual and physical activism, including charity fundraising, political participation and, increasingly, cancellation. Yet, as Stanfill (2019) points out, cancellation practices can move into the realm of toxic fandom, or even be co-opted by the alt-right as counter-culture (Jurg et al., 2024). To understand these more ambivalent forms of cancel culture we bring together different manifestations and cases of cancellation across the globe.

The panel begins with Paper 1, offering an analysis of the various fan - and anti-fan - factions within Taylor Swift fandom, focusing on her relationship with NFL star Travis Kelce. Through issue mapping, network analysis and qualitative reading of a subset of Reddit posts, the authors examine the ways in which fandom, politics, and anti-fandom clash, driven by politically charged concerns and the gendered nature of Swift and Kelce’s respective celebrity status. Music fandom is also the focus of the second paper, in which the authors examine the case of Brandon Pybos, vocalist of the goth band Sonsombre. Analysing fan comments on Facebook the authors identify three main categories: 1) Racism/Racist/Racism as Fascism; 2) Questioning Cancel Culture; and 3) “Fan Pedagogies” and argue that Pybos was ultimately cancelled by fans whose cancelling practices were used as a means of ideological preservation of the subculture. The third paper in this panel moves beyond Western fandom to consider the cancellation of Spanish actress Karla Sofia Gascón by Brazilian fans and haters, articulating aspects of fan studies (toxic fandom, transcultural fandom and other base concepts), cancel culture, pop culture, polarization, and politics in regard to Brazilian fans’ specificities, particularly their ability to manage online mobilizations and conjectures about media phenomena.

The final two papers in the panel consider the negation of - or opposition to - cancel culture and cancelling practices. Paper four focuses on female fans of Backstreet Boy Nick Carter who support the singer despite sexual assault allegations being made against him. The author analyses 452 comments posted to a Change.org petition

opposing the cancellation of the 2022 ABC Backstreet Boys Holiday Special and identifies three patterns of support for Carter: 1) an ‘innocent until proven guilty’ discourse; 2) perceptions of Carter as a family man, a loving husband, and father, underscored by his social media presence; and 3) believability, in which fans contest the believability of the accusers by digging up digital evidence that disproves their claims. Carter’s thirty-year (parasocial) relationship with his fans provides a support group ready to defend the singer and contest the believability of his accusers. The fifth contribution to the panel examines the ways in which practices of cancel culture are co-opted by the right-wing and reframed as counter-culture. Using Russell Brand as a case study the author analyses Brand’s TikTok and YouTube videos and comments left on them by fans to suggest that attitudes to and perceptions of cancel culture are changing as a result the rise of new platforms and the ‘saleable commodity’ that a contradictory, right-wing position is now becoming.

Overall, this panel brings together interdisciplinary and global case studies which critically discuss the relationship between fandom, activism, cancellation and polarisation across a variety of genres and countries. It offers timely and relevant insights into today’s online media landscape by highlighting fannish practices with real-world consequences.

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CANCELLING KELCE: TRAVIS KELCE ANTI-FANDOM IN SWIFTIE SUBREDDITS

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Introduction to Taylor Swift Fandom

Taylor Swift has achieved such a significant level of cultural saturation, that her online fandom has fractured under its own weight into a number of different communities. Arguably, Swift is one of the few truly mainstream artists in an online world powered by individualised algorithms and siloed, proprietary platforms. Her megastardom has, particularly during 2023/2024, reached peak saturation into anything from news coverage - exemplified by *The Guardian's* Swift Notes newsletter by deputy music editor Laura Snapes (2024) - to analyses of her impact on GDPs. On this backdrop, she and her fans have also received increased academic attention; at the time of writing, a new book (Bentley et al, 2025) has just been published, and Swift's Australia leg of her Eras Tour was greeted by an academic conference - Swiftposium 2024 - dedicated to her oeuvre.

We specifically focus on Swift's fandom (i.e. Swifties) on Reddit, which, with its more open structure and affordances for threaded discussions, harkens back to earlier internet fora, yet is also deeply enmeshed in the Web2.0 format of social media. As Robards (2018) showed, Reddit affords systems of belonging; a kind of community building that fits well with fan cultures' focus on community building (Jenkins, 1992; Stein, 2015). With its unique cultures and the ways in which multiplicity and diversity is encouraged by the platform (there is a subreddit for almost everything, and often more than one), Swifties on Reddit are at once part of wider fan culture and a set of interrelated fan communities, that are distinct from other fandom spaces.

For Swift's artistry - and for her fandom - her relationships have at any given time been important, and are constantly (re)litigated in fandom spaces (Pignetty, 2018) and pop culture media alike. As a female artist, her personal life already draws more scrutiny than that of her male peers, and her propensity for mining her relationships for song material led *E!'s* Natalie Finn (2016) to describe her as having a "relationships-as-performance-art persona". In the case of her relationship with NFL star Travis Kelce, this litigation expanded to much wider circles, and, as we have previously shown (Svegaard & Vilkins, 2024), took on conspiratorial forms, chief among them a US right-wing belief that the relationship was manufactured to engineer support for then-incumbent US president Joe Biden.

Kelce and Swift's relationship coincided with Swift's second political "coming out", something which drove the aforementioned conspiratorial thinking outside her fandom. (Her first coming out in 2020 also drew attention (Driessen, 2022a, 2022b).) Inside her fandom, the critique of the relationship took on a more familiar form, that of the relationship as fake for PR reasons. However, there is also a political angle to Swiftie anti-fandom of Kelce, one that is distinct from the fake relationship discourse, and instead into disappointment and disbelief that this particular man is suitable for an ostensibly progressive woman like Swift. This perception hinges on the opposite side of the conservative conspiracy theory, namely that Kelce is too conservative for Swift, rather than she being too progressive for him. Thus, it cannot be right - or, perhaps, real. Thereby, Swift and Kelce become stand-ins for the idea that women and men are becoming increasingly politically different, to the point that even love cannot reach across that gulf.

It is on this backdrop that we investigate the concept of cancellation. As a prominent woman, Swift incurs much hatred and anti-fandom - some through what Scott (2019) calls "spreadable misogyny", exemplified in NFL fans booing her at the Superbowl this year (Riga, 2025). Here, however, we turn to the anti-fandom of Kelce instead and the idea that Swifties may (attempt to) cancel him. As Jones (2015) has shown, anti-fandom is community building in the same ways as fandom, and Kelce anti-fandom (and fandom!) is constitutive of aspects of Swift fandom. On Reddit, this often takes the form of snark (Haig, 2014) in dedicated subreddits. As Ng (2022) has demonstrated, cancellations have many motivations and expressions; so also does Swiftie anti-fandom of Kelce. The aforementioned scrutiny of Swift's romantic partners took on a new intensity in 2023/2024 on the backdrop of the Eras Tour, her political (if mild) statements, and the fervour of the 2024 US presidential election. Swifties, who, as Donovan (2023) shows, organise themselves according to understandings of her sexuality, had already been outraged at previous boyfriend Matty Healy (Giovanni, 2023), fractured in their Reddit communities over the politically charged nature of the relationship with Kelce. As such, Swiftie anti-fandom of her boyfriends can be understood as an established fandom practice, though in the case of Kelce, it takes on new perspectives, driven by politically charged concerns and the gendered nature of their respective celebrity status. It is also notable that Kelce differs from Swift's previous romantic partners in significant ways, and is, arguably, the one with the largest fandom of his own.

Methodology

We have collected data from eight subreddits related to the Taylor Swift fandom over 1 year, spanning September 2023 to September 2024, bookended by Swift's call for voter registration and her endorsement of Kamala Harris for president. Over this year, we collected from the following subreddits, some of which appear during the period:

- r/TaylorSwift
- r/taylorandtravis
- r/travisandtaylor
- r/swiftlyneutral
- r/gaylorswift
- r/gaylor_swift

- r/tayvissnark
- r/trueswifties

Of these eight subreddits, five are related to either Swift's current relationship or her sexuality, which reflects the relative importance of Swift's relationships at any given time. The remainder are focused on her music, public persona, and general fandom community. Our data includes posts, comments, and derived data such as shared domains or media.

We investigated the fracturing of Swift's fandom on Reddit through a mixed methods approach, creating a timeline of key events in Swift's public life and the appearance of and activity in the subreddits as it corresponds to this. To understand how this fracturing occurred, we also investigated the subreddits' rules and mod posts to understand the contexts in which they appear and function as fandom spaces. We then performed a two-pronged analysis of content and discourses related to Travis Kelce within these subreddits. 1) We used issue mapping and network analysis to understand the prevalence and variation in responses to Kelce - and 2) we performed qualitative reading of a subset of posts (including their comment threads) that were exemplary of the discourses we found. Through this, we examine the ways in which fandom, politics, and anti-fandom clash in what could otherwise be thought of as a third space.

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"FASCISTS DO NOT DANCE IN OUR DARKNESS": FOLLOWING THE DIGITAL CLUES OF A CANCEL CASE INSIDE THE GOTH SUBCULTURE

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Dark Entries, Goth Subculture and Digital Media

This paper analyzes cancel culture within the gothic subculture through the case of Brandon Pybos, vocalist of the band Sonsombre. The objective is to understand how fans and members of the gothic community dealt with the accusations of association with neo-Nazi and racist groups against Pybos and to reflect on canceling practices as an instrument for the ideological preservation of the subculture. The methodology consisted of content analysis of fan comments on Facebook and a literature review on relevant topics, connecting fan studies with subculture studies.

"I don't exist when you don't see me": The relationship between goth fans, artists, and bands on digital platforms

Goth is a musical subculture that originated from the music that filled the Batcave in Soho, London, between 1982 and 1985, namely post-punk, which, in turn, has its roots in the punk subculture, the Do It Yourself (D.I.Y.) ideology, and experimentalism. However, goth music was not restricted to post-punk; its experimental nature enabled the development of diverse subgenres such as darkwave, gothic rock, death rock, electronic body music (EBM), coldwave, among others (Jerrentrup, 2000), which share themes of melancholy and darkness as well as horror and fear in a visceral intensity.

Much of the research on the subculture, when addressing aspects of diversity and internal disputes, focuses on issues of gender, sexuality, and femininity performance (Goulding et al., 2004; Brill, 2007). Few studies address racial issues and disputes within the goth sphere, perhaps because they consider the diversity and libertarian nature of the subculture as pacifying these tensions. An exception is the work of Gomes (2025). Thus, we understand that subcultures are not exempt from reproducing social, economic, and political structures (Thornton, 1995), and they are also spaces where individuals and their bodies are contested.

Given the participatory culture of fandoms, bands and artists have the opportunity to shape their careers with quick and direct feedback from their audience, attract and maintain a loyal fan base. On the other hand, having fans' constant scrutiny on social media requires artists to better perform and represent themselves online, aligning with the subculture they belong to—or that their audience belongs to—the values and ideologies shared within the music scene and fandoms, and fan expectations.

Cancellation Practices of Fandoms

Historically associated with Black social movements such as "Black Twitter" or gender movements like "#MeToo" (Ng, 2022), discussions about the so-called "cancel culture"

have been conducted either from the perspective of platform studies and digital culture, political activism and "culture wars" (Nagle, 2017), or fan culture studies, and even in joint articulations of these approaches.

Authors like Stanfill (2019), among others, have considered cancellation practices as part of what is being called studies on fandom toxicity. Conversely, other perspectives see such practices as linked to playful modes of participation (Nybro Petersen, 2022).

The Case of Brandon Pybos' Cancellation: Methods and Discussion

Due to the specificities of the goth subculture and its fans, we opted for content analysis of materials on the social network Facebook. Facebook was chosen because of the fact that interviews and programs featuring the artist were disseminated through it. Additionally, in the goth and alternative music scene in the U.S. and Europe, Facebook remains a predominant platform.

The band Sonsombre emerged in Virginia, United States. Sonsombre is a project conceived by Brandon Shane Pybos, a vocalist and multi-instrumentalist known in the American heavy metal underground circuit. The first recordings began in 2016, but it was only in 2018 that the band's first album, *A Funeral For The Sun*, was released. The songs, which evoke the sound of well-established goth bands from the early 1990s, such as *Sisters Of Mercy* or *Fields Of The Nephilim*, immediately won over the goth audience and, with the boost of social media, the band quickly became popular among goths worldwide.

In August 2020, vocalist Brandon Pybos was accused of being associated with neo-Nazi, racist, and far-right extremist groups. A fan, upon visiting Pybos' public Facebook profile, found that he had "liked" pages and profiles associated with groups such as Sons Of Confederate Veterans (Official), Confederate History & Heritage Month, Fort Gordon, National Association for Gun Rights, and far-right news channels like The Daily Caller, The First, and The Tea Party Community. The fan privately messaged Pybos via Messenger and had a lengthy conversation, which was later shared, along with screenshots of the "liked" pages, in the Facebook group *Goths Against Fascism*. Pybos explained that these "likes" were not recent and that he had followed these pages during the 2016 presidential elections to stay informed about both candidates and ideological poles. However, no Democratic pages appeared on the list.

Following the exposure, photographer and host Ashley Peel, from the online talk show *Bloodstream*, invited Pybos to her program to discuss the incident. The interview aired on September 9, 2020, where Pybos reiterated his explanations, expressed gratitude for having his attention drawn to the problematic nature of his "likes," and showed openness to dialogue. Subsequent revelations in March 2021 provided evidence of Pybos' continued association with the Sons of Confederate Veterans, sparking further backlash from fans, musicians, and the goth scene at large. The controversy led to the cancellation of collaborations, events, and album releases involving Pybos.

The original post received a total of 765 comments, including text, images, GIFs, and memes. For the analysis, the "most relevant" filter provided by the Facebook platform

was applied, displaying only the comments that the algorithm selects as most relevant to the user. After applying the filter, only textual comments were considered for the study. As a result, 84 comments were selected for analysis, excluding 13 comments containing videos, memes, emojis, or reaction GIFs. Additionally, replies to comments were disregarded. Of the 84 comments, 16 comments supported Brandon or opposed the cancellation, while 68 expressed disappointment with the singer's response.

From this data have emerged 3 core categories: 1) **Racism/Racist/Racism as Fascism**: Racism was the most frequent theme among the comments. It was often connected to fascism; 2) **Questioning Cancel Culture**: The comments also showed disapproval of Pybos's exclusion, questioning cancel culture. Some argued that his art should be separated from his personal beliefs, and that canceling him was just as authoritarian as what it sought to oppose. These comments mainly came from fans who had interacted with the artist, and some pointed out that his compositions contained no racist content. One fan even attempted to find balance in how the community and fandom handled the situation, recalling Pybos's positive contributions; 3) **"Fan Pedagogies"**: The fans suggested in the comments that the singer should educate himself about his errors and consider how he could grow and improve as a result of them. They specifically suggested that by ending his relationship with the Sons of Confederate Veterans, he would stop providing financial support to a group that is ideologically aligned with fascism and promotes a racist historical narrative.

Pybos was cancelled by the gothic music scene due to his actions and explanations. Fans felt this helped keep the scene and community safe and diverse.

Final Considerations

Cancellation was used to protect the goth community and its ideological foundations by preventing the spread of segregationist ideas, ensuring the subculture's continuity as a safe space. Future research could further deepen the discussion within the Gothic subculture by investigating racism, particularly from the perspectives of Black individuals, as indicated by the experiences of Goth influencers (Gomes, 2025). Comparing differences and similarities between cancel practices of different musical scenes or genres fans could also be a productive path forward.

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“KARLA SOFIA GASCÓN IS CANCELLED!”: BRAZILIAN TOXIC ONLINE FANDOM BEHAVIOR AND CANCEL CULTURE TOWARDS THE OSCARS 2025

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Introduction and context

This paper is part of a collective effort to articulate fan studies and cancel culture. After one experience carried out by Govari et al (2024), we decided to follow the same methodological approach with a different object as a case study proposal: the cancellation of Karla Sofia Gascón (KSG) amongst Brazilian anti-fans and haters. We intend to test the methodological protocol suggested by Hooks (2020). Ultimately, we intend to bring up some insights into toxic fandom behavior and challenge the concepts of anti-fans and haters (Monteiro, 2013; Gray, 2019) regarding Brazilian fans' specificities.

According to Amado (2020), this occurs due to Brazilian fandoms' unique organizational practices. Furthermore, Soares (2022) claims that Brazilian fans accumulate significant "speculative capital". They are widely recognized in the entertainment industry due to their ability to manage online mobilizations and conjectures about media phenomena. It

seems that “if you want something to ‘go viral’ you need to ‘mess’ with Brazil and Brazilian fans” (Soares & Sá, 2025).

Still, according to Soares & Sá (2025), the digital engagement so typical in those cases highlights an important feature of Brazilian fan culture which is marked by significantly affective bonds: it oscillates on an extreme between love and hate (Pereira de Sá, 2016) and is anchored in humorous, self-deprecating and deeply self-referential practices (Amaral, 2016).

Literature

As Govari et al (2024) proposed, we also intend to contribute with a few reflections on the crossing between fan studies and cancel culture. So, our research starts with the classic concept of fan and fandom (Jenkins, 1992), especially the media ones (Evans & Stasi, 2014). Then, we intend to articulate them with pop culture, polarization, and politics (Van Zoonen, 2005; Martino, 2011; Barnes, 2022) to rethink the concepts of anti-fans and haters behavior (Gray, 2003; 2019; Monteiro, 2013; Amaral, Souza & Monteiro, 2015) and how they relate to toxic fandom practices and, ultimately, to cancel culture.

Given the argument brought by Chiou (2021), cancel culture is a double-edged sword because, on one hand, we have the “platform activism” on which social media works as platforms where individuals hold someone accountable for behavior considered socially incorrect and contribute to the construction of social justice. On the other hand, this type of manifestation can transform into “digital vigilantism” and raise countless other issues, going beyond the limits of the privacy of network users, both digitally and physically.

So, we shall contribute to both fields: 1) fan studies, by rethinking fan mobilization practices proposed by Monteiro (2013) and to anti-fandom categories proposed by Gray (2019), as well as deepening the research regarding Brazilian fandoms particularities, as started by Amaral (2016), Pereira de Sá (2016), Amado (2020) and Soares (2025); 2) cancel culture as an opportunity to unveil different aspects regarding other kind of object.

Methodology

To carry out this study, we will call upon Hooks (2020). He suggests that cancel culture discourse can be interpreted as a genre that is usually organized by a few principles, described as “six loose situational requirements” (p. 21-23):

1. An offense by the celebrity that can be typified as racist, sexist, or homophobic, resonating with a large number of people with shared values and moral positions;
2. The content that led to the cancellation must be present or accessible in some fashion. Even if it is an offline event, these actions must be captured, uploaded, and archived;
3. Accusatory language by the group that cancels;
4. Support for the group that grows through sharing on social networks or even physical protests;

5. Intimidating and removing individuals from discussions, creating a scenario where they become limited, with no room for dialogue between the parties;
6. The actions, not necessarily the content, of the canceled person are trivial, banal, and typified.

The next step is to start an investigation into the specificities of the case. As we can see next, regarding KSG's cancellation, we were able to identify at least 5 of the six principles listed above and they shall be our guide to further analysis.

Karla Sofía Gascón is canceled

Two key moments may help us understand this case. The first one is about Brazilian mobilization towards "Ainda Estou Aqui" (I'm Still Here) directed by Walter Salles, Brazil's contender in 2025's Oscar race. It all started on November 17, 2024 with a photo of actress Fernanda Torres, posted by the official Oscar Instagram profile during the 2024 Governors Awards. Thenceforward, there was a massive online mobilization of Brazilian fans. The post fueled hopes for her eventual Oscar nomination. The image went viral, surpassing 1 million likes and 280,000 comments in under 24 hours (Sá & Soares, 2025).

The second one is regarding Karla Sofia Gascón. In January 2025, several resurfaced posts by Gascón, shared by Sarah Hagi on X, contained anti-Muslim remarks (Hagi, 2015). The tweets, dated from 2016 to the early 2020s, led Gascón to deactivate her account after online backlash. Other resurfaced posts mocking COVID-19 vaccines and dismissing concern over George Floyd's murder (Pineda, 2025).

So far, we already have at least 3 principles shown by Hooks (2020: 1) the offenses were able to be typified and resonated (firstly as xenophobic, then as racist and other kinds of bigotry); 2) it was available as social media content; 3) it was resurfaced with accusatory language.

Then, both moments become intertwined. Also in late January 2025, Gascón mentioned Fernanda Torres during an interview accusing people who work for the Brazilian actress of orchestrating a hate campaign against her and her film (Capanema, 2025). Later, the Spanish actress clarified that she was referring to toxicity on social media in general. Gascón then deactivated her profile on X and apologized in an interview with CNN (Poder360, 2025).

After that direct attack against the Brazilian actress and her movie, both also nominated for the Oscars 2025, Brazilians did the same as Sarah Hagi and searched for more controversial content on the KSG X page and started to spread the same content found by Hagi and more in a fandom-like practice (Capanema, 2025).

So, at this point, we have two more principles (Hooks, 2020): 4) Brazilians organized themselves online to support each other and other nationalities (especially other Latin Americans); 5) KSG became intimidated and isolated. Nevertheless, there are important details about both points. Despite all the bigotry denounced about KSG's social media content, most of the intimidation suffered by her was not regarding gender issues, in

fact, usually, they focused on her nationality. The other detail is that Brazilians have an agenda: KSG and “Emília Perez” are their “rivals” at the Oscars and they want to promote Fernanda Torres as the best actress and “Ainda Estou Aqui” as the best movie.

It is important to keep in mind that this is an ongoing case, yet to be concluded as we write this abstract, with the events described happening in the first months of 2025. Therefore, the 6th principle (Hooks, 2020) is not yet fully developed, but our main hypothesis about that is that her actions will not be banalized as usual due to her transgender identity. Moreover, given the subjects involved, we also expect this case to bring up a few different insights from the previous one presented by Govari et al (2024) such as alterities, intersectionality, and political polarization.

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#WEVEGOTYOU - EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS OF FANDOM, BELIEVABILITY, AND CANCEL CULTURE (IN A NON-CANCEL CASE?)

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In late 2022, the hashtag #IStandWithNickCarter trended on social media. Nick Carter is the youngest member boyband Backstreet Boys (BSB), who dominated the global pop charts from the 1990s to early 2000s. The band has been active in the music industry for over thirty years now, and just announced a Vegas-residency with the rerelease of their 2000s Millennium album. The hashtag for Carter was trending because American broadcaster ABC announced it was pulling "A Very Backstreet Holiday": a Christmas special featuring the band. This cancellation was due to allegations from former fan Shannon Ruth, who sued Nick Carter for rape. Two more women sued Carter: singer Melissa Schuman, who had blogged about Carter's sexual assault in 2017, and 'family friend' Ashley Repp who alleged three instances of sexual abuse by Carter. Carter

denied all allegations and counter-sued his accusers, claiming they used the #MeToo-movement to vilify and defame him, and sharing a post on X that said “respect and trust the process” (May 8, 2024). While other artists facing similar allegations have disappeared from the public eye awaiting their court cases, Carter continued/s to perform with Backstreet Boys, and on his solo world-tour (2023-2024).

Believability, cancel culture, and digital fandom

Although Carter’s cases are ongoing, he has been neither canceled, nor has his brand been redefined by the cases. Carter is still considered as ‘puppy of the band’ (Jamieson 2007) in the 2025 promotion for the Vegas-residency for example. This paper explores why cancellation of the artist seems fugitive by researching comments fans left on a petition to have ABC air the Christmas Special. This paper illustrates how particularly his digital, global fandom plays a crucial role in his non-cancellation. Doing so, this study adds to academic studies on #MeToo (e.g., Boyle 2019; Orgad and Gill 2019; Kay 2020; Hand and Liu 2024), which often highlight the phenomenon itself centering on a case in which the involved figures are cancelled, or the anger ensuing the #MeToo-cases because of how the victims are not believed or taken seriously. Additionally, Banet-Weiser and Higgins’ (2023) framework of ‘believability’, the capability of being believed, and the quality of being convincing, is used to better understand what happens in a case where cancellation seems to have failed. Cancel culture is here understood as a tool (Ng, 2022) to analyze how one is silenced, boycotted or excluded from the public debate, because they are perceived to have done something morally wrong or unacceptable (Janssens and Spreeuwenberg, 2022). Often, in the case of a celebrity, leading to a de-celebrification of their star status (Mortensen and Kristensen, 2020). Yet, being cancelled does not seem to last forever, nor does it impact those who perhaps publicly already matter less - like Carter (who is not at the top of his career anymore). Carter’s case offers an interesting example showing cancellation is far from automatic, prompting the question what conditions produce or enable cancellation, and why certain objects-of-fandom are able to escape cancellation?

The involvement of a pre-existing fan public is particularly important in cancel cases which involve so-called “trial[s]-by-(social) media” (see Boyle et al. 2024 - discussing Depp vs Heard). Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023: 12) argue “media culture is [...] a space where subjectivity is shaped and believability must be performed”. Different digital practices inherent to our current media culture, like creating memes over a #MeToo-case, or amateur sleuthing for digital evidence on a case: practices that seem playful, but can have severe and harmful consequences (Nybro Petersen, 2022), for example, by influencing women’s propensity to report intimate partner abuse.

Analyzing fans’ petition comments

This presentation explores and discusses fans’ negotiations in a petition after the cancellation of the ABC Backstreet Boys Holiday special in 2022. Fans started this petition on activist-platform Change.org to indicate their disagreement with ABC’s decision. Over 6500 people signed the petition, with many of them leaving a comment explaining why they signed. The papers’ analysis includes comments of over 10 words or longer, which led to a sample of 452 comments. On this sample a (six-step) thematic

content analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006), guided by the research aim to uncover how these comments can help us understand how fans signing the petition give meaning to the reason(s) why the special has been cancelled. Perhaps not so remarkably, across those signing a strong sense of loyalty towards Carter could be identified. Assumably, fans who would support the cancellation of the Christmas special following Carter's sexual aggression allegations would not sign this petition. Still, the sample offers a means to examine how these fans digitally showcase their support and why they do so, which helps us to better understand the phenomenon of cancel culture.

Questioning innocence, parasocial relationship, and contesting believability

Via the thematic content analysis, three patterns of how and why fans remain supportive of Carter were identified: First, they consider him "innocent until proven guilty", which draws largely on their own "forensic fandom" (Keidl, 2022) and sharing. Fans leaving such comments recount their experiences and provide their own evidence to prove their argument (e.g., old photos on Facebook, or on gossip blogs). Second, they consider Carter a family man, a loving husband, and father, which draws on their current perception of Carter due to his active social media presence and he himself posting "digital evidence" to increase these images (e.g., photos of him making pancakes with his children, or mowing the lawn: in addition to his public known persona as Nick Carter the musician - shown through photos of him in the studio or performing on stage). This category also illustrates how fans idealize and idolize the public image of Carter. Third, fans contest the believability of the accusers by digging up digital evidence that disproves the claims or narratives of the accusers. They do so by bringing up old Tweets, blog posts, or interviews with information that might contradict their current narratives.

Final considerations

Despite the ABC-special not being broadcasted and having a withdrawal of some commercial support, Carter himself has not been cancelled by (or because of) his loyal fanbase. The accusers' believability in the Carter-case is powerfully contested by his loyal fandom: via the fan petition, we see the thirty-year labor of Carter and his 'authentic and vulnerable' persona "paying off" as the fans still consider him as an innocent boy (Jamieson 2007) even in his now mature roles as both father and husband. The longevity of the fandom's para-social relationship with Carter seemingly instigates loyalty, reinforces his humanness, and leads (this selected group in the sample of) fans to support him. Fans do not just express this loyalty by signing the petition, they commit to 'forensic fandom' and comment with evidence - their own digital receipts - to disprove claims of the accusers, or at the very least spark feelings of doubt (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023). Carter's thirty-year (parasocial) relationship with his fans enables a support group standing ready to respond when an issue emerges (Boyle et al., 2024). As this study illustrates, fandom is weaponized to contest the believability of the accusers, and therewith reveals the complex intersections of fandom, cancel culture and believability.

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THE PIED PIPER OF TIKTOK: RUSSELL BRAND, POLITICAL INFLUENCE, AND THE CANCELLATION OF CANCELING

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This paper is interested in exploring the ways in which ‘canceled’ celebrities can still be active, and indeed admired, in non-mainstream sections of society. Using the example of British comedian-turned-conspiracy theorist Russell Brand as a case study, it suggests that celebrities’ movements from left to right do not reduce the influence they have on followers; it merely shifts it, suggesting that what may be cancellation in the mainstream can be reframed or remixed as counter-culture in alt and right wing spaces.

“It’s just Brand being brand”: Categorising the comedian

Russell Brand is a difficult figure to categorise. In the 2000s he was best known for being a somewhat controversial comedian: his comedy shows drew on his experiences of being a heroin addict; he was dismissed from MTV after he came to work dressed as Osama bin Laden the day after the September 11 attacks; and in 2008 he and his BBC Radio 2 co-presenter Jonathan Ross made prank calls to the actor Andrew Sachs, including leaving a lewd message on his answer phone where Brand hinted at a relationship with Sachs’ granddaughter, which resulted in Brand’s resignation. In the late 2000s and early 2010s Brand became more known for his political activism. In 2009 he attended the G20 London summit protests; two years later he wrote a column for *The Guardian* criticising the government’s response to the 2011 riots, and in 2013 he was interviewed on BBC’s *Newsnight* where he called for revolution which he described as being “a socialist egalitarian system based on the massive redistribution of wealth, [with] heavy taxation of corporations”. The following year he guest-edited a special issue of *New Statesman* which included an article where he called for a change in consciousness in addition to political and economic measures to ensure a more sustainable future.

In 2014 Brand published his political manifesto, called *Revolution*, where he discussed climate change, corporatization, bipartisan politics and inequality and launched a YouTube series called *The Trews: True News with Russell Brand*, in which he “analyses the news, truthfully, spontaneously and with great risk to his personal freedom”. Yet ten years later Brand is now a born again Christian, appearing on podcasts with Alex Jones, spreading misinformation about Covid and attending Donald Trump's 2025 inauguration. This ideological shift has been accompanied by an increasing, and increasingly right-wing, fanbase - a fanbase that came out in full force following sexual assault allegations made against the star in September 2023. Undertaking a content analysis of Brand’s YouTube and TikTok videos discussing the allegations as well as comments left by fans and users, this paper argues that Brand successfully utilises trending topics in the popular consciousness as a way to remain in the spotlight, while suggesting to his fans that he is, indeed, ‘one of ‘them’ - part of a community of truth-seekers rather than the liberal elite or ‘lamestream media’ - thus reframing his cancellation as counter-culture.

Cancel culture and the cancellation of cancelling

The debate around cancel culture has been ongoing for the past several years as “celebrities, politicians, and other public figures face networked scrutiny, criticism, and the removal of support from fans” (Driessen et al., 2025: 8). Emerging as a term from Black Twitter (Clark, 2020) cancel culture enabled previously marginalised voices to hold the powerful to account, seen perhaps most clearly in the #MeToo movement. Indeed, Janssens and Spreeuwenberg (2022) see canceling as a punishment and moral condemnation, an attempt to remove someone’s access to the public sphere, and upon doing so creating space and recognition for marginalized perspectives. In the field of fan studies some, like Stanfill (2019), suggest that cancellation practices when taken to extremes constitute a form of ‘toxic fandom’ while for others, cancel culture is “an attack on free speech and an attempt to silence, a point most notably made by contributors to the ‘Justice and Open Debate’ letter published by Harper’s Magazine in 2020” (Driessen et al., 2025: 8).

Ng (2022) proposes considering canceling as an analytical concept, allowing us to make sense of what happens when a person or organization becomes canceled yet while cancel culture has been discussed from a range of perspectives, including the “culture wars” (Nagle, 2017) less work has been done on the ways cancel culture are reframed by the objects - and fans of the objects - of cancellation. This paper considers Brand’s response to allegations of sexual assault as what Ng (2022: 75) refers to as second-order discourses on cancel culture, that is, “portraying call-out practices such as shaming public figures as left-wing censorship efforts stifling free speech” (Jurg et al., 2024). Posting on his TikTok channel the day before the sexual assault allegations became public Brand noted that his fans had warned him about “getting too close to the truth” implying that the allegations were an attempt to undermine him and his message. Brand tried to control the narrative around the expose by framing himself as a victim of cancel culture and a left-wing conspiracy. In using the language of what Robert Lawson (2023) calls the “anti-woke” manosphere he was able to garner the support of other right-leaning public figures like Elon Musk, Alex Jones and Andrew Tate, as well as legions of fans who defended him online.

Rebecca Lewis (2018) points out that the audience plays an active role in shaping the ideological trajectory of YouTube: political influences and reactionary and extremist YouTubers often expand their audiences by meeting the demands of ‘fringe audiences’ on the platform. Brand’s increasingly right-wing content is thus both an attempt to maintain his relevance in a progressively polarised society and a way to reframe his cancellation. Following the allegations, which Brand argued were “transparency [about his promiscuity] metastasised into something criminal” he was dropped by his agent, the BBC removed some of his material from their archive and platforms like YouTube demonetized his account. He posted another TikTok video a week after the documentary aired in which he said that the UK government had asked big tech platforms to censor his online content and argued that the UK’s online safety bill and the trusted news initiative was nothing more than a collaboration between big tech and legacy media to target, control, choke and shut down independent media organisations like his (Brand, 2023c). When the House of Commons Media Committee wrote to Rumble, a social media platform popular with the far-right, to ask whether they would also demonetize Brand its CEO refused, calling the request “extremely disturbing” and “inappropriate” and claiming it was “dangerous” for the UK Parliament to ask them to

join a “cancel culture mob” (Youngs, 2023). Brand’s cancellation thus only happened in the mainstream media – a place that he went to great lengths to tell his fans he was no longer part of – and he was vigorously defended on social media platforms especially those popular among more right-leaning members of the audience.

Using Brand as a case study thus highlights the way that cancel culture is changing given new platforms and the ‘saleable commodity’ that a contradictory, right-wing position is now becoming, and asks what it might mean for fandom, political participation and free speech when cancel culture becomes counterculture.

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