Trisha Paytas and the Power of Parasocial Connection:

How Cultivating Intimate Audience Relationships Mitigates the Effects of Cancel Culture

Mandy Holliday

Media and Communication, Miami University

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Professor Andrew Peck

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In the digital age, where social media platforms serve as arenas for both fame and infamy, individuals like Trisha Paytas have emerged as prominent figures, captivating audiences with their unfiltered authenticity and polarizing personalities. However, this exposure comes with risks, particularly in the form of cancel culture, a phenomenon where public backlash can swiftly tarnish reputations and careers. Amidst this landscape, Paytas stands out for her ability to weather storms of controversy and criticism, often emerging unscathed or even strengthened by her dedicated fan base. <u>Trisha Paytas effectively lessens the impact of cancel culture by skillfully fostering close relationships with her audience on platforms like TikTok and YouTube, utilizing parasocial connections to gather support and navigate controversies. This paper delves into the mechanisms behind her resilience, arguing that her cultivation of intimate audience relationships serves as a powerful buffer against the effects of cancel culture, highlighting the significance of personal connections in mitigating the repercussions of online controversies.</u>

Cancel culture, a pervasive force in the digital age, operates as a form of social accountability, holding individuals and institutions to ever-evolving standards of morality and conduct (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024, p. 1). While its intentions may be rooted in fostering social justice and accountability, cancel culture often manifests as a reactionary and indiscriminate force, fueled by outrage and mob mentality (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024, p. 8). In the case of public figures like Trisha Paytas, who navigate the precarious landscape of social media fame, the specter of cancel culture looms as a constant threat, ready to pounce on any misstep or controversial statement. The speed and ferocity with which cancel culture can mobilize presents a daunting challenge for individuals seeking to maintain their public image and livelihoods (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024, p. 6). Even minor transgressions or misunderstandings can escalate into a full-blown crisis, as the court of public opinion renders swift and unforgiving judgments.

Moreover, the anonymous nature of online platforms amplifies the potency of cancel culture, allowing individuals to join in collective outrage without facing any personal repercussions (Lee & Abidin, 2023, p. 4). This anonymity emboldens internet users to participate in mass condemnation, often without fully understanding the context or consequences of their actions (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024, p. 10). Consequently, the targets of cancel culture are subjected to disproportionate punishment, as the severity of their transgressions is magnified by the viral spread of condemnation (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024, p. 9). In this volatile climate, Trisha Paytas's ability to overcome storms of controversy speaks to her resilience and adaptability in the face of relentless scrutiny. As society grapples with the complexities of online accountability and free speech, it becomes increasingly apparent that curbing cancel culture poses a significant challenge (Norris, 2021, p. 146). The phenomenon's entrenched nature as well as the "decentralized" nature of social media platforms make it difficult to implement effective measures to mitigate its negative impacts (Weimann & Masri, 2023, p. 754). So how does 36-year-old YouTube personality Trisha Paytas, who has been entangled in controversy after controversy, mysteriously always remain afloat? First and foremost, we must delve into the strategies that facilitated her establishment on social media platforms.

In the vast expanse of social media, personalities like Trisha Paytas have emerged as pivotal figures, embodying the complexities of modern internet culture. Paytas has acted as a fixture in the expansive realm of social media for over a decade, having first started on YouTube at the age of eighteen (Callahan, 2024). Through candid vlogs, provocative content, and unfiltered commentary, she has forged connections that transcend the virtual barrier, drawing in followers with each new platform she embraces (Beheshti & Gopinath, 2023, p. 1). As she makes appearances on different shows, both online and in traditional media, her ability to

maintain authenticity and engagement remains steadfast, reinforcing her status as a linchpin in the ever-changing landscape of online personalities. Now at thirty-six, she hosts a podcast called, "Just Trish," and stays active on TikTok, making various videos including fast food roleplays, tavern fairy cosplays, and vlog-content with her daughter Malibu Barbie. What's at the heart of Paytas's enduring resilience against cancel culture, then, is her mastery of cultivating intimate audience relationships through platforms like TikTok and YouTube (Rihl & Wegener, 2017, p. 554).

Paytas not only survives through these relentless controversies but *thrives* on them, resurfacing as even more popular in the aftermath of each scandal. As outlined by journalist Kenzie Callahan in *The Post,* Paytas has faced a long past of religious appropriation. From her foray into music with the release of the Christian pop song "I Love You Jesus" in 2017 to accusations of appropriating and fetishizing religions like Paganism, Judaism, and Hare Krishna, Paytas has faced scrutiny for her ventures into various cultural and religious territories (Callahan, 2024). Her openness about her gender identity has been another source of controversy, particularly her declaration in 2019 that she was "1000% transgender" while later identifying with her "natural born identity" and as a "drag queen" (Callahan 2024). This declaration garnered backlash from transgender and non-binary communities, accusing her of exploiting LGBTQIA+ issues for attention (Callahan, 2024). Paytas's involvement in dramas with prominent figures like David Dobrik, Shane Dawson, Jeffree Star, and James Charles, coupled with instances of racial insensitivity, political incorrectness, and tone-deafness, have contributed to her reputation as a polarizing figure in the online sphere (Callahan, 2024). Whether it's her missteps in cultural appropriation or her controversial statements and actions, Trisha Paytas remains a divisive figure whose controversies continue to provoke discourse and debate. To alleviate the potential

backlash stemming from these specific scandals (as well as numerous others), Paytas strategically mobilizes her fanbase to bolster her continued popularity.

To fully grasp the dynamics at play and appreciate the distinctive bond between Paytas and her followers, it is essential to comprehend the concept of parasocial connections. Coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956, "parasocial relationships" describe the one-sided connections individuals form with media personalities (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215-220). At the core of parasocial connections is the illusion of intimacy fostered through consistent exposure to a media persona's content (Rihl & Wegener, 2017, p. 556-557). Paytas excels in nurturing this illusion through her candid and unfiltered approach, which engenders a sense of closeness with her audience. By sharing personal anecdotes, struggles, and triumphs, she invites viewers into her world, blurring the line between creator and fan (Aw & Labrecque, 2020, p. 898). This blurring of boundaries is further intensified by the interactive nature of platforms like TikTok and YouTube, where followers can comment, like, and share content, thus creating a "virtual feedback loop" of validation and engagement (Rihl & Wegener, 2017, p. 555). Through this constant stream of interaction, Paytas reinforces the perception of a genuine connection with her audience, solidifying the foundation of parasocial relationships (Aw & Labrecque, 2020, p. 896). Consequently, when controversies arise, her supporters rally behind her, not merely as passive spectators, but as emotionally invested participants in her narrative. This symbiotic dynamic provides Paytas with a formidable shield against the onslaught of cancel culture, as her audience's unwavering support serves as a buffer against external criticism and condemnation. Thus, her adept cultivation of intimate audience relationships emerges as a potent strategy for resilience in the volatile terrain of social media fame (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 95).

With this in mind, you may be wondering how she was able to foster this community of doting followers in the first place. Trisha Paytas's ability to amass a devoted following can be attributed, in part, to her participation in "negative affect vlogging," as outlined in the research by Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka (2018). By embracing vulnerability and candidly expressing her emotions, Paytas creates an atmosphere of authenticity that resonates deeply with her audience. Rather than presenting a curated facade of perfection, she chooses to showcase her raw and unfiltered self, thus breaking down the barriers between creator and viewer (Berryman & Kavka, 2018, p. 89). There are many vlogs on her YouTube channel that depict her sobbing on her kitchen floor, talking candidly about a breakup she's going through—in fact, these tend to be the most popular videos seen on her channel (Berryman & Kavka, 2018, . 93). This willingness to share her struggles and insecurities fosters a sense of intimacy and connection, as viewers identify with her humanity and imperfections (Berryman & Kavka, 2018, p. 96). In the realm of social media, where polished personas often dominate, Paytas's willingness to embrace vulnerability sets her apart, endearing her to a fan base hungry for genuine connection (Aw & Labrecque, 2020, p. 896). Through her "negative affect vlogs," she transforms moments of emotional distress into opportunities for communal catharsis, inviting her followers to join her on a journey of self-discovery and healing (Berryman & Kavka, 2018, p. 91). Consequently, her engagement in "negative affect vlogging" not only reinforces her authenticity, but also strengthens the bonds of intimacy with her audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2018, p. 85). This effectively lays the foundation for enduring loyalty and support, particularly during times of controversy or criticism.

As we examine the mechanisms behind Paytas's resilience, it's essential to acknowledge the power dynamics inherent in parasocial relationships. While these connections can provide a

sense of community and belonging for both creator and audience, they also raise concerns about manipulation and exploitation (Lee and Abidin, 2023, p. 3). Creators like Paytas hold considerable influence over their followers, shaping their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors through curated content and personal interactions (Norris, 2021, p. 147). In this sense, the intimacy fostered in parasocial relationships can be both empowering and potentially problematic, blurring the boundaries between genuine connection and strategic manipulation (Aw & Labrecque, 2020, p. 896-897).

When looking beyond these power dynamics, it's important to acknowledge the broader societal tensions around accountability, forgiveness, and redemption in the digital realm (Norris, 2021, p. 148). While social media platforms have democratized public discourse, allowing marginalized voices to be heard and injustices to be exposed, they have also created a climate of hyper-vigilance where even minor transgressions can lead to swift and disproportionate punishment (Norris, 2021, p. 149). In this type of digital environment, individuals like Paytas must navigate a precarious balance between authenticity and self-preservation, knowing that any misstep could result in public condemnation and professional ruin. In navigating this delicate balance, creators such as Paytas not only contend with the complexities of their parasocial relationships, but also grapple with the ever-present threat of cancellation (Norris, 2021, p. 148). The power dynamics inherent in these connections, then, intersect with broader societal tensions surrounding accountability and redemption in the digital age (Norris, 2021, p. 171).

Yet, amid the chaos of cancel culture, Paytas's resilience dually offers a glimmer of hope. Her ability to weather controversies with grace and authenticity speaks to the power of genuine connection and community support in diminishing the negative effects of online scrutiny. By cultivating intimate audience relationships built on trust, transparency, and mutual respect, she

has forged a loyal fan base that stands by her side through thick and thin (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 96). However, it's important to recognize that Paytas's experiences are not universal. While she may have found success in navigating cancel culture, countless others have fallen victim to its unforgiving grasp. Marginalized voices, in particular, often face heightened scrutiny and harsher consequences for their actions, further exacerbating existing power imbalances in online spaces (Norris, 2021, p. 149). In examining Paytas's journey, it becomes evident that her resilience is not merely a personal triumph, but also a reflection of broader systemic inequalities in online discourse. The disparity in how cancel culture affects individuals based on factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, highlights the urgent need for greater inclusivity and accountability in digital spaces (Lee & Abidin, 2023, p. 3). As we strive for a more equitable online landscape, Paytas's story serves as both a cautionary tale and a source of inspiration for those navigating the complexities of fame and scrutiny online.

Amidst the growing discourse around online accountability and cancel culture, Trisha Paytas's journey stands as a case study illuminating both the promises and perils of social media fame. While her ability to weather controversies with resilience and authenticity is commendable, it also underscores the need for systemic changes within digital spaces (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024, p. 10). As Paytas continues to navigate the complexities of digital stardom, her experiences serve as a reminder of the unequal power dynamics that shape online interactions. As we reflect on Paytas's journey and the broader implications of cancel culture, it becomes evident that individual resilience alone is not enough to address systemic issues (Hobbs & O'Keefe, 2024, p.9). Platforms like TikTok and YouTube must prioritize the creation of safer and more equitable spaces for creators and audiences alike (Rihl & Wegener, 2017, p. 563). By fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and accountability, we can begin to mitigate the

negative impacts of cancel culture while nurturing genuine connections and meaningful dialogue in the digital realm. In doing so, we honor the complexities of online discourse and work towards a future where all voices are heard and valued.

In the dynamic realm of digital media, Trisha Paytas's journey serves as a compelling narrative illustrating the nuanced interplay between fame, controversy, and resilience. Through her adept cultivation of intimate audience relationships and her unwavering authenticity, Paytas has not only weathered storms of criticism but emerged from them strengthened by her dedicated fanbase. Her story underscores the urgent need for systemic changes within digital spaces, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity, empathy, and accountability in fostering safer environments for creators and audiences alike. Platforms like TikTok and YouTube must prioritize the creation of spaces that promote genuine connections, meaningful dialogue, and the equitable treatment of all voices. By navigating the complexities of cancel culture with grace and integrity, Paytas's journey offers valuable insights into the promise and perils of social media fame, inspiring us to work towards a future where authenticity is celebrated, voices are heard, and individuals are empowered to thrive in digital spaces.

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