



**HWA CHONG INSTITUTION (HIGH SCHOOL SECTION)
2-2 2A-25 PROJECT WORK WRITTEN REPORT 2021**

Topic: Difference in the eye of the Labeller

Slant: Literature

Student's Name: Ryker Tan

Class: 3i4 (30)

Name of Teacher-Mentor: Ms Loh Wei Ling

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 General Background:

Since the dawn of time, humans have tried to make sense of the chaotic world we reside in. We fumble our way through the landscape, forming connections and categorizing to organize the things around us in order to simplify our understanding of the seemingly incomprehensible world. One such manifestation of the incessant

need we have to feel in control is through labelling. Labels are everywhere, from the stickers placed on our fruits, to the epithets we hurl at each other in our daily speech. Labels and categories are our unique way of order, but in a world so heavily governed by these labels as defining characteristics, it is thus extremely important to consider - what other effects do labels have? Concomitantly, we need to examine the impact on the labelled and the labeller, as well as the dynamics between both groups.

Oxford defines social labels as “a classifying phrase or name applied to a person or thing, especially one that is inaccurate or restrictive” Rather than its intended outcome of helping members of a particular community band together and create order, it has instead brought about separation and prejudice. Labels have deep seated roots in human history, some of the most popular and earliest occurrences of this being witchcraft and its consequent label “witch” - how far does the background and profile of this group affect their vulnerability? Similar to this spate of labelling, in recent years, debate surrounding the nature of mental illnesses and the assertion that labelling someone as mentally ill ascribes a new identity to them(Becker,1963) has arisen. The arrival of “woke culture” in the newer generations have also effectuated a certain renunciation of harmful labels, for example racial slurs, and this has certainly called such labels to attention and placed them under scrutiny.

1.2 Rationale:

It can be observed that labels have taken on a form of a powerful method, gaining the power to create social stigmas(Link and Phelan,2001), as well as stereotypes. This research thus intends to explore the effects of labels in our world and the role they play besides being just a form of organisation, as well as explore the reasons for why labels have such effects in order to heighten our understanding on the effects of labels on human identity amongst many other applications, such as the response to behaviours in society, especially from those in power. This is perpetuated by the power dynamic labelling creates; those labelling have the power and influence to affect those who are being labelled. As such, this topic needs to undergo a deeper analysis.

1.3 Research Questions:

Suggestions (for a more focused research):

1. How did Howard S. Becker's book 'Outsiders' popularise the labelling theory?
2. How far is one's behaviour influenced by how other members in society label them?
3. How do labels engender alienation and stigmatisation?

1.4 Thesis Statement:

Social labelling is not merely a way for members of a community to connect, but rather on a larger scale, has adverse influences. This is most prominently related to the ironic engendering of division and hostility, contrary to the "intended" purpose of labels as a system for identification. This has manifested itself in many ways in society throughout history.

1.5 Scope of Research / Delimitation(s):

For this research paper, I will be looking at the effects of labels through the lens of theories including Labelling Theory(Becker, 1963), Stigmatisation(Link and Phelan, 2001) as well as Othering(Husserl, 1931). This paper will also study instances of labelling and deviant behaviour throughout history. In order to provide insights into the evolution of labels, a comparison regarding the gradual shift of usage, purpose and effects of labelling will be carried out, so as to draw links spanning time.

1.6 Significance of Research / Usefulness:

This research serves to shed light on labels, which are becoming more prominent in society - many are paying more attention to social labelling, hence it serves as an analysis on a topic which is both relatable and applicable to every individual. It is a contentious subject, and there are many interpretations of labels and their effects by different experts on the topic, hence this paper can bridge the gap between existing scholarship, differing views and theories as well as tie the phenomenon in with modern contexts such as social media. Simultaneously, an interdisciplinary study will be conducted through the examination of labels and its evolution throughout history, serving to open up discussion on something that has not been explored deeply.

1.7 Limitation(s):

As this research paper explores a social phenomenon, it may require some field study and survey. It may be difficult to look at labels from a historical perspective as certain pieces of information such as specific details may have been lost over time. Hence, only a few instances will be selected, which may not be fully representative. Even so, doubt may be cast upon the credibility of these documented instances as it may be difficult to acquire a completely objective understanding of labels, them being susceptible to the biases of those labelling and those labelled. Another possible limitation is that it is important to note that labels have different effects on different people, therefore a **completely encapsulating take** will not be realistic.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Labelling Theory(Becker, 1963)

Labelling theory provides a perspective that focuses on the role of social labelling in the development of crime and deviance. The theory posits that although deviant behavior can be attributed to a myriad of reasons, once individuals have been labelled or defined as deviants, new problems surrounding identity arise from the reactions of self and others to negative stereotypes that are attached to the deviant label (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). For example, labelling someone as a murderer, one may be more likely to commit such acts due to a process of internalisation. These problems in turn can increase the likelihood of deviant and criminal behavior. What this could possibly mean is that despite certain criminological attempts to

reduce crime, which are intended to benefit the offender (such as rehabilitation), they can push criminals closer to a life of crime due to the labels they apply to those who engage in the behavior. In the words of Lemert (1967), deviant behavior can become “means of defense, attack, or adaptation” (p. 17) to the problems created by deviant labelling. As a result, being defined or labelled as a criminal offender by others could cause increased or stabilized participation in crime and deviance, regardless of the behavioral patterns or social and psychological conditions that existed prior to the labelling.

Stigmatized characteristics have sometimes been conceptualized as “master statuses” that override other attributes in reactions to the individual such that others view the person only in terms of the stigmatized label (Becker 1963; Blinde and Taub 1992).

Becker grouped behaviour into four categories:

1. Falsely accused represents those who have engaged in obedient behaviour but have been perceived as deviant
2. Conforming represents those individuals who have engaged in obedient behaviour that has been viewed as obedient behaviour.
3. Pure deviant represents those who have engaged in rule breaking or deviant behaviour that has been recognized as such.
4. Secret deviant represents those individuals who have engaged in rule breaking or deviant behaviour but have not been perceived as deviant by society.

2.2 Stigmatisation(Link and Phelan, 2001)

Link and Phelan (2001) specify four steps that lead from characteristics that differentiate individuals to unequal outcomes:

1. People distinguish and label human differences.
2. Dominant cultural beliefs link labelled persons to undesirable characteristics.
3. Labelled persons are placed into categories to accomplish separation of “us” from “them.”
4. Labelled persons experience status loss, discrimination, rejection, and exclusion, which lead to negative outcomes such as demoralization, restricted social networks, and reduced earnings (Link et al. 1989).

Early labelling theories posited that societal reaction to deviance created a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the original or primary deviance became heightened and stabilized (Lemert 1974). For example, Scheff (1966) proposed that when residual deviance becomes labelled as mental illness, social pressures to behave in accordance with stereotyped expectations of a person with mental illness can result in the labelled person’s acceptance and enactment of the role of a mentally ill person.

However, seemingly in opposition, Link developed his modified labelling theory (Link 1982, 1987) based on a lack of evidence for such a self-fulfilling prophecy in the case of mental illness. Despite this controversy, there is still a recognition of the validity and importance of other aspects of labelling theory, namely, the role of societal reaction, such as altered social relationships and exclusion from opportunities (Becker 1963; Lemert 1967) in producing negative life outcomes for people labelled as being mentally ill.

Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualization shows that there are significant social and psychological consequences for people with stigmatized labels. This includes the low strength, low reputation, and social influence that are typical of people with devalued diffuse status characteristics.

2.3 Othering(Husserl, 1931)

The term "othering" refers to labelling and defining an individual or group as "intrinsically different or alien from the Self"(Husserl,1931). The practice of othering excludes persons who do not fit the norm of the social group, or persons who are difficult to understand. This form of labelling creates a scenario whereby there is an imposition of certain social norms upon individuals. If one exhibits behaviour not considered as normative, they are labelled as the "Other".

This has many manifestations in our society today, one of the most prominent being "Orientalism" by Edward Said (1978). Historically, by labelling the Orient as the "Other" to the Occident, or the West, there have been many negative implications for the Orient presented as the Other. Negative stereotypes and alienation arose based on the preconceived notions formed by the labelling and portrayal of the Orient as the "Other", such as the impressions formed in the West of the Chinese populace. "In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing the relative upper hand."(Orientalism, p.90) This historical example spotlights the power system established as a product of labelling and Othering, which at its root stems from the misalignment of the two cultures.

2.4 Social Media - A modern manifestation and outlet for social labelling and its effects

The Ultimate Terms Theory (Weaver, 1953) suggests that there are words that have special meaning within each culture and carry power where they are used. God (good) terms represent words and phrases that people enjoy, words that have an “inherent potency” in identifying what one supports. Weaver used the examples of “progress” and “freedom” as words that we took as unquestionably good. On the other hand, ‘devil terms’ such as “communist” and “terrorist” are terms used to evoke disgust and contempt, and to help frame what one’s audience should be against.

These are commonly used as tools in order to influence people’s perspectives, and are most prominent in social media sites whereby succinct messages are needed to catch attention. In the words of Weaver, they are words “to which the populace, in [their] actual usage and response, appears to attribute the greatest sanction.” It is also important to note that such terms fluctuate depending on the culture of the audience, and thereby what the terms are associated with or connote for them. This has great implications when such terms which are commonly social labels are used, in order to refute or support a particular argument or case.

Social labelling thrives on modern platforms like social media where it has become extremely easy to leave behind comments or influence others behind the cover of anonymity, resulting in instances of cyber bullying.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Firstly, the effects of labels will be explored through the different theories listed above. Different facets of labels and their effects will thus be shown. Next, a few prominent instances of labelling will be selected in order to conduct an interdisciplinary study in the branch of history by investigating the evolution of labels from both a literary and historical point of view. From this, relationships can be drawn in order to provide insights into labels, namely its causes and effects - do links spanning time exist?

Chapter 4 Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Howard S. Becker and the Labelling Theory

Howard S. Becker can be regarded as the forefather of the Labelling Theory(1963), driving many works later on building upon his ideas, such as Bruce Link's modified Labelling Theory (1989) and Reintegrative Shaming (Braithwaite, 1989) The theory and its subsequent works were popularised due to a myriad of factors. Firstly, in the 1960s, criminologists were extremely interested in the core of what made certain acts or individuals deviant, driving many researchers to become 'labeling theorists'. The 1960s were one of the most tumultuous and divisive decades in world history, marked by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and antiwar protests, political assassinations and the emerging "generation gap", and perhaps it was this spike in

these “deviant” behaviors which sparked interests in this domain. It was also characterized by the various pushes for change, such as gay rights movements, student and women's movements, a push by the courts to expand general rights, as well as the anti-war movement. In a similar vein, the labelling theory revolutionized the criminological scene and brought about policy changes such as deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and juvenile diversion programs. Another reason for its popularity was due to the areas of contention. Whilst it managed to influence and educate many, it also drew fire from many experts in the area who claim that his theory is in fact not a real theory and question the substantiation of his claims, of which a lack of empirical evidence was present. This also drove later scholars to delve deeper into the realm Becker presented to back up/denounce his claims.

4.2.1 Labelling and its effects

Firstly, labelling perpetuates the viewing of those labelled as one-dimensional; they are only viewed based on the label given to them and the connotations it carries. Labels have the effect of overriding original identities (Becker 1963; Blinde and Taub 1992) as well as formulating self-fulfilling prophecies that may push forth unwanted agendas; the act of labelling is in and of itself problematic due to the stereotypes associated which will indubitably cause other adverse effects, such as low-reputation and low-strength (Link and Phelan, 2001). In addition, it may even create more participation in crime and deviance (Becker, 1963).

Secondly, people might be pushed into a relapse of criminality due to the potential blockage of conventional and non-criminal pathways after being labelled. Raphael

(2007) describes several challenges faced by former inmates who try to find stable jobs, including stigma against ex-offenders by potential employers, less extensive work histories, or behaviors unsuitable for workplaces outside prison, which were developed while incarcerated. Moreover, a conviction might have a negative impact on educational attainment, which in turn might increase offending, as revealed in the Rochester Youth Development Study.

Several studies have also pointed towards the negative impact of labels regarding future behaviour. According to *Labelling Theory: Empirical Tests* (Murray, 2013), Farrington (2006) systematically compared the assumptions of eight major developmental and life-course theories, and found that six explicitly assumed that official processing caused an increase in later offending. Terrie Moffitt (1993) also proposed that "snares" such as conviction and incarceration amplified antisocial behavior, and Robert Sampson and John Laub (2005) argued that incarceration could cause labeling and poor job stability, which in turn predicted continued offending. All of these showcase how labelling can in turn lead to more participation in crime as outlined above.

Those ostracising and rejecting others outside of what is perceived as normative are instead placed in an elevated position of power. They are able to dictate where others should be placed, making themselves feel safe whilst those at the receiving end suffer.

4.2.2 Certain groups of individuals are more susceptible to labelling and its effects

Individuals who belong to disadvantaged groups originally are more likely to suffer greater adverse effects from labelling. According to *Stigmatisation* (Link and Phelan, 2001), the first step leading to stigmatisation is when humans distinguish and label human differences. Intuitively, for those who are already 'different' from their peers,

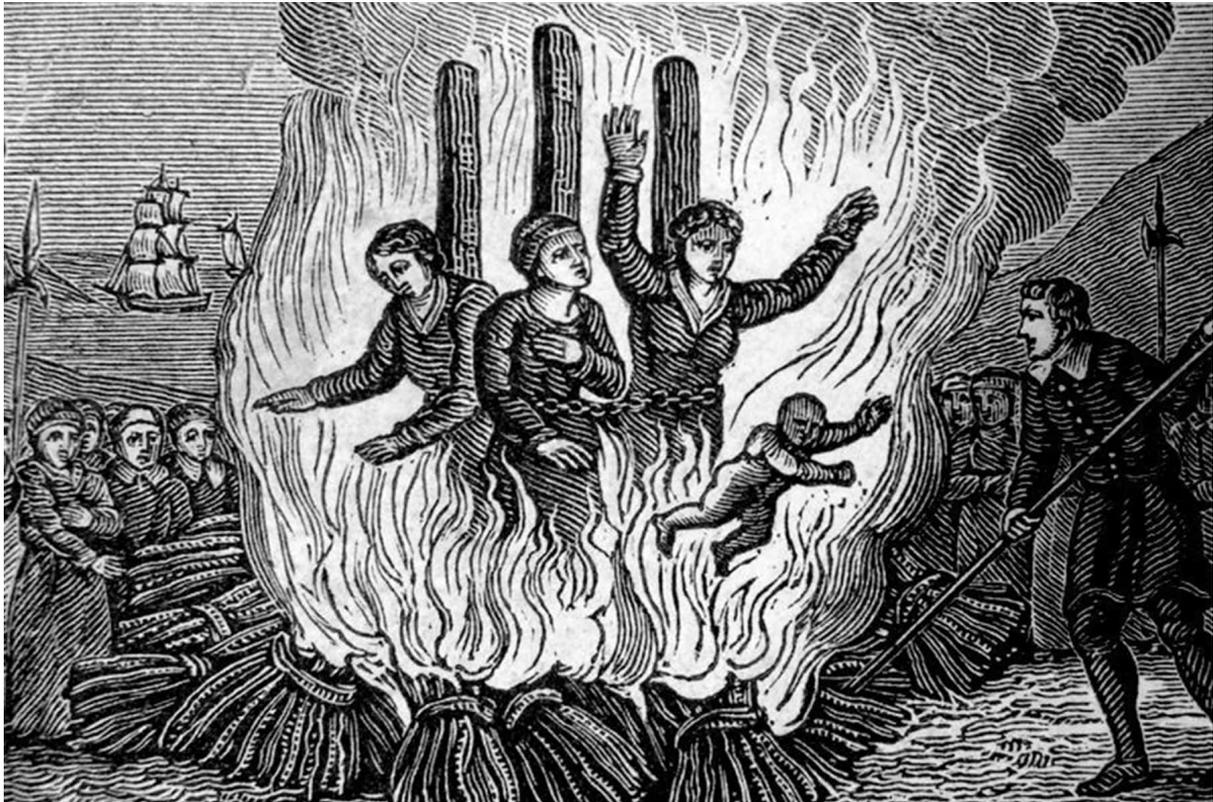
be it regarding skin colour, socioeconomic status or the like, they are more prone to be labelled in the first place compared to others, in addition to the fact that prejudice surrounding these groups is already present. The Theory of Cumulative Disadvantage(Merton, 1988), posits that small differences early in life can widen over the life course, that is, advantages and disadvantages give rise to additional and accumulating disadvantages. This can also be applied to the phenomenon of social labelling whereby one's original disadvantage not merely makes one more susceptible to be labelled but also widens the harmful repercussions of said labelling in the future.

4.3 Labelling is at its core, the same, regardless of specific label or time period.

Historical instances of labelling such as the Salem Witch Trials, can serve to offer more insight into labelling. The Salem Witch Trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts between February 1692 and May 1693. "Belief in the supernatural—and specifically in the devil's practice of giving certain humans the power to harm others in return for their loyalty had emerged in Europe as early as the 14th century, and was widespread in colonial New England. In addition, the harsh realities of life in the rural Puritan community of Salem Village at the time included the after-effects of a British war with France in the American colonies in 1689, a recent smallpox epidemic, fears of attacks from neighboring Native American tribes and a longstanding rivalry with the more affluent community of Salem Town. Amid these simmering tensions, the Salem witch trials would be fueled by residents' suspicions of and resentment toward their

neighbors, as well as their fear of outsiders. In January 1692, 9-year-old Elizabeth (Betty) Parris and 11-year-old Abigail Williams (the daughter and niece of Samuel Parris, minister of Salem Village) began having fits, including violent contortions and uncontrollable outbursts of screaming. After a local doctor, William Griggs, diagnosed bewitchment, other young girls in the community began to exhibit similar symptoms, including Ann Putnam Jr., Mercy Lewis, Elizabeth Hubbard, Mary Walcott and Mary Warren. In late February, arrest warrants were issued for the Parris' Caribbean slave, Tituba, along with two other women—the homeless beggar Sarah Good and the poor, elderly Sarah Osborn—whom the girls accused of bewitching them. [5] "As can be seen from this excerpt, those afflicted by the unknown condition labelled others as witches and blamed their situation on them. What can be noted is that those who were scapegoated belonged to disadvantaged groups, namely the poor, elderly, slaves, persons of colour and homeless. Witch trials often also displayed a gender dynamic, with men leading the hunt persecuting powerless and defenseless women; effectuated by the religion of the Puritans who viewed women as subservient and upheld traditional conventions where women were expected to be housekeepers. Be it falsely accused or pure deviant (Becker, 1963), those convicted and labelled as witches suffered the status loss, discrimination, rejection, and exclusion, which led to negative outcomes such as condemnation or even execution. (Link et al. 1989). As outlined in Stigmatisation (Link and Phelan, 2001), the dominant cultural beliefs of the supernatural in Salem during such a time period linked these labelled persons to undesirable characteristics, in this case, being a witch. These labels were then perpetuated by hateful notions and doubts of others around them, accounting for the spate of witchcraft accusations, lending the label in

order to doom those they perceived as unsatisfactory or exhibiting deviant behaviour categorised as suspicious.



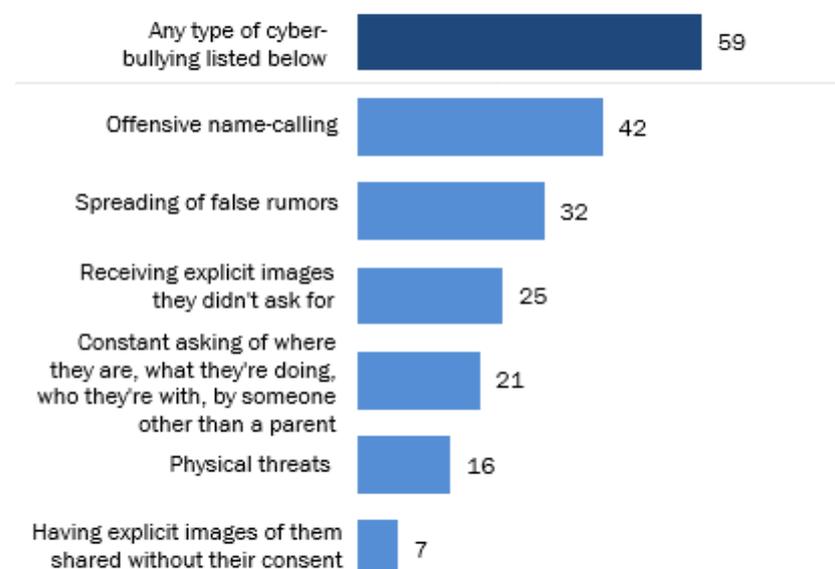
Depiction of Salem Witch Trials

In the modern era, there has been a recent uptake of social media, with over 4 billion users worldwide and 9 out of 10 teenagers on at least one out of the many platforms. This particularly impressionable demographic is particularly susceptible to the dangers of social media, exemplified by the increasing rates of cyberbullying and social media addiction. In relation specifically to labelling on social media, 42% of American teens alone have reported being offensively name-called on social media according to a Pew Research Centre survey. This has many negative consequences for those at the receiving end of these negative labels, contributing to a lowered self esteem and lowered self worth. In relation to the Ultimate Terms Theory (Weaver, 1953), 'devil terms' are commonly used in order to label others and humiliate them

on social media. This is further exacerbated by social media’s cover of anonymity and the ease to comment hurtful remarks, providing a playground for cyberbullying and hateful speech. In an article in the journal *CyberPsychology and Behaviour*, Psychology professor John Suler describes anonymity as one of the principal factors creating disinhibition on social media. According to Suler, when people have an opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosure and ‘acting out’ roles. In a process of dissociation, the online self becomes a compartmentalized self, enabling them to have no qualms when negatively labelling others. On social media, many are subject to the judgement of others, with some even creating special accounts in order to venomously attack those they do not favour in real life.

A majority of teens have been the target of cyberbullying, with name-calling and rumor-spreading being the most common forms of harassment

% of U.S. teens who say they have experienced ___ online or on their cellphone



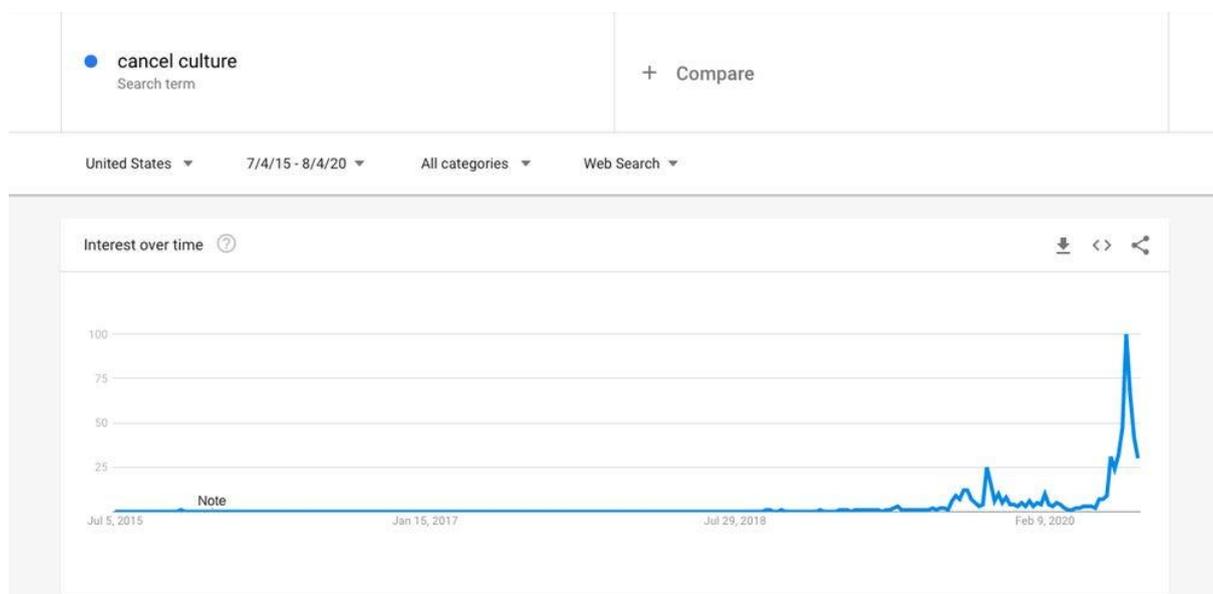
Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple options. Those who did not give an answer or gave other response are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted March 7–April 10, 2018.

“A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying”

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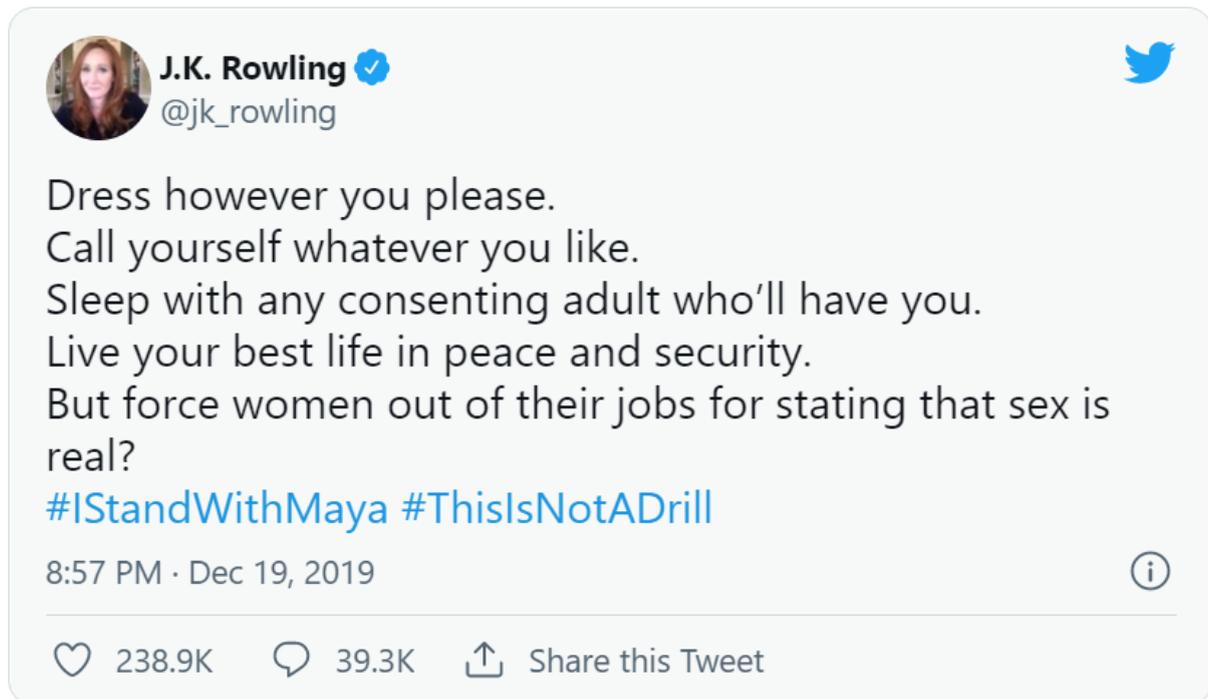
Another branch of social labelling popularized by social media lies in “cancel culture”. “Cancel culture” came into collective consciousness in 2017, and originated as a movement by those belonging to marginalized communities against those who committed wrongdoings, especially celebrities or public figures. It was a call for the very same people who built up the fan bases of these celebrities to assert themselves after shedding light on their misconduct, and stop supporting such people who should be held accountable instead of keeping their platforms and successes despite their actions.



Google Trend of Cancel Culture

Oftentimes, cancel culture involves labelling those affected as certain terms meant to discredit them as an individual, such as “racist”, “homophobe” and “misogynist” amongst many others. These are all common labels applied onto those being accused, which leads to the formation of stigmatized characteristics, which have sometimes been conceptualized as “master statuses” that override other attributes in reactions to the individual such that others view the person only in terms of the stigmatized label (Becker 1963; Blinde and Taub 1992). This is harmful in that it perpetuates feelings of shame; rather than encouraging people to turn over a new

leaf, an unforgiving mob of netizens are instead turning towards public denunciation, oftentimes not offering space or sympathy for apologies and or defense. Apart from this, it is common for celebrities' pasts to be pulled up from the dirt from many years ago in an attempt to tear down these platforms, disregarding the fact that the individual discussed at hand is someone who may now be a different person. Similarly, there is a lack of concern for the human side of these celebrities. Certainly, coming under public scrutiny all of a sudden and losing one's fan base is scary and can take a toll on their mental health. Whilst it is good to stand up for injustices, cancel culture does not tolerate even the slightest misgivings or transient foolishness. One such example is popular author Joanne Rowling, more commonly known as J.K Rowling, who wrote the bestselling series of all time, Harry Potter. Recently coming under fire for her Twitter post openly supporting transphobia. Her hashtag used "#IStandWithMaya" shows her support for Maya Forstater, who received a complaint from a judge regarding her series of tweets that many saw as advocating for transphobia. As a result, many followed to criticise Rowling herself, labelling both her and Forstater as "transphobic", with many advocates replying to her tweets to condemn her transphobia, at the same time leaving the many Harry Potter friends disappointed. Despite once being praised for her support of the LGBTQ community; with her shutting down transphobic tweets by American commentator and television host Tomi Lahren, she is now portrayed as merely a "cancelled" individual who is "transphobic" and should not be supported. Once again, it demonstrates how labelled persons experience status loss, discrimination, rejection, and exclusion, which leads to negative outcomes such as demoralization, restricted social networks, and reduced earnings (Link et al. 1989).



In another case, Carson King held up a sign during a football game in Iowa, USA which said “Busch Light supply needs replenished” with his Venmo address as a joke. However, perhaps in a stroke of luck, a photo taken of him and his sign went viral, with donations beginning to flow in. As the donations slowly grew, King pledged to use the money for donations towards the University of Iowa Stead Family Children’s Hospital, earning the title of “Iowa Legend”. Anheuser-Busch even promised a year of free beer and wanted to make him an ambassador. However, once racist tweets from when he was just sixteen years old resurfaced, Busch rescinded their offers and acclaim died down. Despite the fact that the tweets were made a long time ago, and his benevolence in donating for a good cause, the label “racist” was now associated with his name, resulting in the conceptualisation of a “master status” (Becker, 1963)

Chapter 5 Conclusion

What has been found to be constant in instances of labelling regardless of time period is that it often appears to be a tool used by people to undermine others, especially those already disadvantaged. In a seemingly paradoxical relationship, those that hold power/wealth are also groups which are prone to being labelled and subsequently questioned, especially in our modern era. Labels and their negative connotations indeed seem to have the ability to override the positive, resulting in a myriad of negative effects. At the same time, labels seem to have the power to not only perpetuate dissent within the community, but encourage more of such behaviour in the future.

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