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From Yeezus to Jesus: Kanye West's Demagogic Tendencies

The phenomenon of demagoguery has resurfaced in the media after the 2016 Presidential Election when Donald Trump won the Presidency. Demagoguery is often times related to politics because there is a structure in place to help demagogues become powerful. In other words, there will always be a president and political leaders, but what makes someone become powerful outside of a structure? In today's society celebrities have more power than ever before. They are able to build their own platforms through social media, directly impacting their fans. They are given money to "influence" their followers and in return are praised as idols. Society and chance choose who to give this power to as there is no protocol when choosing who will become a celebrity. One celebrity in particular has taken his fame and has gone through a sequence of demagogic tendencies. That celebrity is Kanye West. West has used his influence to demand attention, create an ingroup/outgroup and generate a cult like following for over fifteen years. Demagoguery has been defined by Roberts-Miller as "polarizing propaganda that motivates members of an ingroup to hate and scapegoat some outgroup(s), largely by promising certainty, stability, and what Erich Fromm famously called "an escape from freedom". Roberts-Miller later simplified her definition by saying it is "us versus them". In *A Social Movement Perspective on Demagoguery: Achieving Symbolic Notice* by Steven R. Goldzwig, he points out the synonyms of a demagogue being "rabble-rouser," "haranguer," "malcontent," "opportunist," "soapbox orator," "fomenter," and "agitator"(pg. 204). Within both of those definitions and synonyms, Kanye West's behavior is clearly defined. Throughout this paper, I will highlight demagogic

behavior that has contributed to the large following he has gained making him one of the most influential stars today.

Kanye West has created an empire that is unlike other celebrities. He has taken over almost every industry he has worked in including fashion, music and record producing. Kanye West has had a lot of outbursts throughout his career, turning the attention towards himself instead of his work. The first big outburst that caught the media's attention was during the 2009 VMA's when he jumped on stage during Taylor Swift's acceptance speech. Afterwards the media would not stop talking about him and the world saw his fans defend his blatantly wrong decision showing their dedication to him. Kanye's fans became a devout group that has continuously followed West along his journey of changing. If you are not part of this group then you were nothing to them. After the VMA's a video came out of West's fans yelling "F*CK TAYLOR SWIFT" while he sang one of his songs that included a diss at Taylor. This following that he had gained, the media referred to him as having a "deity-like presence" according to Rolling Stones Magazine (Michael Arceneaux, 2018). Arceneaux includes in the article a quote Kanye said in an interview saying, "I'm not a celebrity, I'm an activist. The fact that when I see truth it's really hard for me to sit back and just allow it to happen in front of me on my clock makes me, a lot of times, a bad celebrity" (Michael Arceneaux, 2018). This was one of many times Kanye claimed to be confrontational towards what he thinks is right. Kanye has built his platform making promises that he is transparent and "real", which has built an undeniable trust between him and his fans, giving them a sense of reliability. There has been a distrust between the media/celebrities and citizens which gives Kanye an advantage since he has been making

claims that he always speaks up for the truth for years now. This promise of speaking the truth is what a lot of fans seem to be holding on to because of the genuine distrust with others.

This idea of trust and believing Kanye advanced to a new level when he came out with the album *Yeezus*. This created a large controversy throughout not just America but the world. Kanye had become a public figure throughout the world impacting many people with his art. One track on the album is called “I Am A God” claiming that he is a god himself. This created a direct divide between those that followed him and those that were offended by this claim. The ones that followed him became more intensely engaged with his behavior, worshipping him. The intention behind this album seems to be for self gain and gratification because he already had a following but took it to a new level by claiming he is a god. This rhetoric can be dangerous when it begins to infringe on religious ideologies. Although he made such a controversial statement through his album and new “nickname” he still had his following. This showed the world that Kanye could get away with saying just about anything.

One of the most recent claims that he has made that has caught the world's attention is his support for Donald Trump as president. Kanye has made his political views known by meeting with Trump and wearing a Make America Great Again hat. This support came as a shock considering his live television outburst in 2005 when he utilized a benefit for Hurricane Katrina victims to call George W. Bush a racist and saying “he doesn’t care about black people” (Eltagouri, 2018). West began mimicking a lot of Trump’s actions that won him a spot in the White House. This includes sporadic tweeting which Trump is also known for. West had a stream of tweets expressing his opinion in an interesting way. In one tweet he defends why he is wearing his MAGA hat by saying “One of my favorite of many things about what the Trump hat

represents to me is that people can't tell me what to do because I'm black". This tweet specifically made the scapegoat the democratic party implying that they have expectations for African Americans that West does not agree with. However, after endorsing Trump and being open with what he is standing for, West tweeted again saying "I don't agree with everything Trump does. I don't agree 100% with anyone but myself," quoted in the Washington Post article written by Marwa Eltagouri (2018). This bold support for a controversial political figure was exactly what Kanye needed to get the attention back on himself and reiterate that he is still the most trustworthy person in the spotlight. He took the media attention and ran with it by contemplating the idea of running for president in 2024, presumably as a Republican.

The most recent outburst that Kanye has made is his new found identity in Christ. Going from calling himself a god to claiming that he has been born again and is rededicating his life to Jesus. This sparked a lot of concern to those that question Kanye's intention. Despite the debate over intention, his album Jesus is King has been number one on multiple billboards. His album was also pictured in Times Square in New York City. Among his recent changes he holds Sunday services every Sunday. The entry to his church service costs money and every Sunday it is packed. Kanye has changed his identity once again and this could all be a move to gain even more followers before he supposedly steps deeper into politics.

The rollercoaster of Kanye's career has one thing in common: he has a devoted group of supporters that defend him through all stages. Each stage that Kanye has gone through he has used rhetoric that has created a specific ingroup and out group whether that is Taylor Swift supporters vs him or Democrats vs his support for Trump. This behavior of forming an "us vs them" environment is what can be credited most towards his demagogic tendencies. West has

used his rhetoric to transition the stages of his life making fans defend him with sayings such as "well that is just Kanye being Kanye ". It seems as though West is going to continue changing what he is standing for and only time will tell if he actually takes his personal fame into a political office, furthering his demagogic tendencies.

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