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Intro to Media Studies
MDA10001
Miss Gigi Bui

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| Essay Submission 2 | Weight 20% |
| Celebrities | Due 24 Nov 2024 |
| <p>Choose a person who is famous in contemporary media and explain why they are a star, celebrity, microcelebrity orceletoid using relevant scholarly references.</p> <p>What ideologies are they seen to embody (why/how)? In what ways have they been used as a marketing or moneymaking commodity? What is the relationship between these ideologies and their moneymaking functions?</p> | |

Word count: 1636 words.

Major Changes in This Submission:

- I restructured the entire essay and rewrote most of it.
- My old essay covers Ye's career up to the point of being canceled, but now Ye's career has a phase of being post-canceled.
- I try to strengthen my argument to answer the assignment's questions.

Ye: The Perennial Provocateur

“The Black people Ye most offended didn’t have the power to cancel him; the Black people with the most power stayed silent; the white corporate structure determined that there was still money to be made; and too many in the broader Black population remained in awe of his wealth and his anointing by white corporations and white culture as artistic and exceptional” –Charles M. Blow (2022)

Kanye West, in 2021, legally renamed himself to Ye (no middle or last name). As a perennial provocateur, he is a critically acclaimed star known for his controversial success in music, art, and fashion. This paper aims to make visible Ye’s confounding ideologies and marketing functions. It will explore why Ye is a star by analyzing his star image, experiences with cancel culture, and star bankability.

Ye fits the definition of a star—a leading role in popular culture and media who outshines others in the field and whose personal and professional lives attract massive attention (O’Shaughnessy et al., 2016). He has consistently topped charts and garnered critical acclaim, while his forays into fashion with his Yeezy brand have revolutionized the industry (Caldwell, 2023). Throughout his persona and artworks, Ye embraces antagonism—which has consistently “incited public discomfort” and “bucked against social norms” (Monk-Payton, 2023). All along, his cultural rebellion star image—the qualities, ideals, and values that he represents (O’Shaughnessy et al., 2016)—strikes a chord with critics of our time.

Praised by critics from the start of his career, Ye has always been a baller who is critically self-conscious that he is a product of the existing social power dynamic in a capitalist society (Richardson, 2011). He paradoxically approaches conspicuous consumption and “materialism as liberation” when materialism is at the center of the American ideal (Ciccariello-Maher, 2009). Projecting himself this way, he embodies the contradictions of getting rich while criticizing the American dream—as he raps in the song ‘All Fall Down’ in his critically acclaimed 2004 debut album *The College Dropout*:

“It seems we livin' the American Dream
But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem
The prettiest people do the ugliest things
For the road to riches and diamond rings
We shine because they hate us, floss 'cause they degrade us

We tryna buy back our 40 acres
And for that paper, look how low we'll stoop
Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe”

Ye rose to fame and was then known as a groundbreaking artist. His melancholic, half-sung 2018 album *808s & Heartbreak* revolutionized the sound of hip-hop (Lynskey, 2022). Similarly, his 2010 album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* was hailed as the album of the decade by Pitchfork readers and Rolling Stone critics (Lynskey, 2022). These early successes established Ye as a visionary in the music industry, pushing the boundaries of genre and emotional expression.

Then came the decadence of fame and prosperity. The theme of Ye’s music grew to “sexual decadence, endless money, suicidal thoughts, drugs, objectification of women” (John et al., 2019). He even cries of blasphemy and arrogance in the song ‘I am a God’ in his other critically acclaimed 2013 album *Yeezus*: “I am a god/Hurry up with my damn massage/Hurry up with my damn ménage/Get the Porsche out the damn garage” (John et al., 2019). This growth in themes reflects a deeper commentary on the excesses and moral ambiguities of consumerism.

Through consumerism, Ye rants much about wealth—while being a persecuted Black man in a world that is not made for him. Wealth is not for greed nor competition, it is a way to even the scores and reverse the power dynamic (John et al., 2019). His philosophy of wealth goes beyond need and desire—to a kind of “revenge fantasy” against the dampened social structure that limits mobility (John et al., 2019). This complex narrative of wealth and power has contributed to his critical acclaim.

While his work remains valid, his actions have cast shadows over it, raising questions about how his work should be perceived. He has frequently crossed the line into controversy. There are three important instances that bring to light his testimony to ideologies of individualism and unwavering self-belief, which overall prioritize his nefarious beliefs over societal norms.

Firstly, his interruption at the 2009 MTV VMAs as he drunkenly stormed Taylor Swift's acceptance speech, he was full of rudeness and entitlement (Grady, 2019) but reframed it as a protest against the lack of recognition for Black artists within the music industry (Lynskey, 2022). Later in 2016, he joked on *Famous* about sleeping with Swift and giving her the fame head-start. This was widely criticized as disrespectful and misogynistic (Brandle, 2023).

Secondly, in 2018, Ye made a controversial bassless statement on slavery: “For 400 years? That sounds like a choice.” He meant that Black people chose to be slaves for 400 years and never sought to protest. He sounded like a racist right-wing who believes that Black people are responsible for their oppression (Lee & Beaumont-Thomas, 2018). Anti-Black is what people call him since (Blow, 2022). It is important to stress that, throughout history, Black people resisted slavery non-stop; their resistance led to their freedom (Lee & Beaumont-Thomas, 2018).

Thirdly, in 2022, he had a series of unacceptable antisemitic remarks including praising Hitler and expressing admiration for Nazis. As his political ideologies reached a point of posing dangerous political implications, the world witnessed a turning point in his career: Ye was canceled (Rose, 2023). Cancel culture is when society opts for social cohesion of common values, it stigmatizes individuals who violate the norms. Public figures often lose support after doing or saying something considered objectionable or offensive.

In 2023, cancel culture made Ye farewell to billionairehood—Adidas ended the partnership, along with many other companies working with and sponsoring him (Voytko-Best, 2024); his contracts with Universal Music Group (record label) and Sony Music Publishing (publisher) were terminated; his agency, CAA, dropped him (D’Souza, 2024); and his accounts were blocked on every major platform (Rose, 2023). This backlash was a response to Ye's embrace of anti-Black, antisemitic, and white supremacist language, prompting the majority to vote him out and call for accountability.

However, less than two years later, Ye came back with a collaborative album with Ty Dolla \$ign, *Vultures 1*, which topped number one on the US Billboard 200 chart and reached number two on the UK charts (D’Souza, 2024). His success this time showed the reality of cancel culture in pluralistic and fractured America—and Ye’s enduring appeal. That same year, 2024, China facilitated Ye's comeback concert in Hainan, an obscure island province, to boost consumer spending and promote tourism (Wang, 2024). This was a unique occurrence since China's censors allowed Ye to perform there while many Western artists have struggled to pass Chinese government censorship—Justin Bieber, Bon Jovi, and Maroon 5 have faced bans or cancellations in the past (Wang, 2024). Having China's support not only provided Ye with significant economic backing and access to a vast consumer market but also enhanced his political leverage and cultural impact. Clearly, he has a remarkable capacity to rebound.

Ye's ability to rebound from such significant setbacks underscores his status as a highly bankable commodity in the entertainment industry. In a political economy approach, a star is considered by the media industry as a bankable commodity, valued both financially and culturally (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016). Stars are seen as valuable assets that can attract audiences and generate revenue—through various means, including merchandise, endorsements, and media appearances.

Ye exemplifies this concept by selling desires and ideologies that buttress the mass entertainment industry, thereby appealing to people and gaining popularity (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016). He embodies ideologies of materialism and consumerism, as well as individualism and self-belief. His Yeezy brand, launched in 2013, is a worldwide success. His style of approaching conspicuous consumption in the fashion game mirrors his music. Yeezy's core is to break fashion's extreme classist tendency (Aniftos, 2022). As a result, his high-priced streetwear collections successfully disrupt the globalized luxury fashion market by promoting a non-class-based trendy look (Armitage, 2023).

To illustrate his cultural rebellion in fashion, consider his 2021 collaboration with GAP. His Yeezy GAP hoodies were sold online more than any GAP clothing items ever before (Monk-Payton, 2023). This campaign mocked class hierarchy by placing clothes in look-alike trash bags instead of hanging them on shelves, creating a scene where people sorted through trash bags to find items (Krause, 2022; Monk-Payton, 2023). This act of defiance against traditional retail norms not only reinforced his image as a disruptor but also highlighted his ability to turn controversial ideas into profitable ventures.

Furthermore, Ye's bankability extends into politics as well. He infamously endorsed Donald Trump for president, aligning himself with Trumpism and conservatism. In 2020, he ran for president and gained approximately 60,000 votes (Krebs, 2022). This political shift alienated many fans, as it contrasts with the critiques of government and racial inequality present in his artwork (Krebs, 2022). This placed him at the center of political controversy and highlighted the complex and often contradictory elements of his star image. Although his campaign was not successful, it became a significant cultural moment that showcased his influence and ability to stay relevant. His controversial political actions have only enhanced his role as a provocateur, continually pushing boundaries and sparking debate.

In conclusion, Ye is still around—despite controversies and cancel culture, he continues to rebel gainfully. His ability to navigate and capitalize on ideologies of materialism, consumerism, individualism, and self-belief has solidified his status as a

powerful, influential, and polarizing figure in popular culture, driving both his enduring appeal and financial gain. The way he provokes society with these ideologies is worth analyzing, as he has risen to be a star with a kind of fame that makes him exceptional and poised for even more controversial success.

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