

# CANCEL CULTURE IN JOURNALISM?

## TEEN VOGUE'S CONTROVERSIAL HIRING OF ALEXI MCCAMMOND

2020 and 2021 were years marked by the concept of “cancelling.” To cancel someone or something means to stop supporting that person, business, or organization. It could also mean using methods of publicity to harm that person, perhaps through affecting that person’s reputation or their means of income. Whether one finds the practice of cancelling justified or not, there is no doubt that many people’s lives have been turned upside down from being cancelled. One such person includes *Teen Vogue* editor-in-chief elect Alexi McCammond.



McCammond was one of the top rising journalists in the last five years. She was hired by the news website Axios in 2017, covered high profile interviews from the 2020 presidential election, and was named the Emerging Journalist of the Year by the National Association of Black Journalists in 2019 (Spangler, 2021). Based on her rising profile and acclaim, she became the top candidate for *Teen Vogue*'s editor in chief position. However, McCammond's reputation came crashing down when some old but offensive tweets of hers from 2011 resurfaced. During her rise to popularity in 2019, many were shocked and hurt to find out that she previously posted tweets complaining about her “stupid Asian [Teaching Assistant]” and “googling how to not wake up with swollen, Asian eyes” among other racist and homophobic comments (Ellison, 2021). After her posts received warranted backlash, McCammond publicly apologized and deleted the 2011 tweets (Spangler, 2021). However, this would not be the last time the tweets would make headlines.

On March 5, 2021, McCammond was named the editor-in-chief-elect of *Teen Vogue* (Flynn, 2021). Immediately, McCammond's deleted tweets from 2011 returned to haunt her once again (Flynn, 2021). As the old posts recirculated, *Teen Vogue*'s staff condemned her derogatory stereotypes about Asians as well as her use of gay slurs. Moreover, two of *Teen Vogue*'s major advertisers—Ulta Beauty and Burt's Bees—decided to withdraw their campaigns with *Teen Vogue* in response to the controversy (Robertson, 2021). Unfortunately, in addition to the already harmful tweets, McCammond's hiring happened to coincide with increased violence against Asians and Asian Americans. Not only was hateful rhetoric high due to incorrect linkages between Asians and the COVID-19 pandemic, but a gunman also murdered six Asian women in Atlanta just two days prior to the announcement that McCammond was selected as editor-in-chief (Robertson, 2021).

Though McCammond publicly apologized again and *Teen Vogue* executives issued a statement on March 18 that they believed her apologies “showed that she had learned from her mistakes,” many nonetheless felt too hurt to condone her hire—including other staffers at *Teen Vogue* (Robertson, 2021; Flynn, 2021). For example, Jezz Chung—a diversity adviser at New York-based ad agency Anomaly—argued that *Teen Vogue*

merely “saw a woman of color but didn’t do the work to make sure she was the right one for this organization” (Ellison, 2021). Diana Tsui, the editorial director at *The Infatuation*, echoed this position, pointing out that McCammond apologized for the racist tweets “only after people caught them” (Ellison, 2021). Amid this criticism, McCammond decided to resign from the *Teen Vogue* editor-in-chief position, saying that her “past tweets have overshadowed the work [she’s] done to highlight the people and issues that [she] care[s] about” (Robertson, 2021).

Ultimately, McCammond returned to Axios as a political journalist. Of course, since all major media outlets were aware of the old tweets and the controversy they stirred for *Teen Vogue*, Axios editor-in-chief Nick Johnston felt the need to justify McCammond’s re-hire and confront the problem head on, writing:

What’s unchanged is the Lexi we know, the one many of us worked with for four years, who should not be defined by a mistake from college. That’s not to diminish the tweets. They were racist and dead wrong... [but] though the internet does not grant forgiveness, we do” (Byck, 2021).

Similarly, Axios political reporter Jonathan Swan argued in an appearance on Fox News that “If we can’t, as an industry, accept somebody’s sincere and repeated apologies for something they tweeted when they were 17 years old, what are we doing” (Kelly, 2021)?

## Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical tensions are in conflict over the hiring of Alexi McCammond as the editor-in-chief of *Teen Vogue*?
2. How long should our past mistakes follow us? How can you tell if someone has truly learned from their past mistakes?
3. Are some mistakes “unforgivable?” If so, what characteristics distinguish those mistakes from forgivable ones?
4. What, if anything, should McCammond have done differently in the most recent controversy over her teen tweets?

## Further Information:

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