

The Psychology Behind Cancel Culture and Its Societal Impacts

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Article Details	Abstract
Received: 04 July 2024 Accepted: 22 Oct 2024 Published: 27 Dec 2024 Dr. Usman Tariq ²Ayesha Noor Copyright @Author Corresponding Author: *Dr. Usman Tariq	This research explores the psychology behind cancel culture and its societal impacts, examining how collective social media actions can lead to the ostracism of individuals or groups. Cancel culture, characterized by public shaming and calls for accountability, reflects deeper psychological mechanisms such as group identity, social conformity, and moral outrage. This study reviews relevant literature, including psychological theories and sociocultural analyses, to understand the motivations driving individuals to participate in cancel culture. Key findings suggest that fear of social backlash and a desire for belonging can compel individuals to engage in canceling behaviors, often resulting in significant psychological consequences for both the targeted individuals and the broader community. Additionally, the research discusses the implications of cancel culture on free speech, mental health, and societal polarization. While it can serve as a tool for social justice, the often disproportionate responses can lead to unintended harm and division. Ultimately, this study advocates for a nuanced understanding of cancel culture, encouraging dialogue that balances accountability with empathy to foster a more constructive societal discourse.

Keywords: cancel culture, psychology, societal impacts, social media, group identity, moral outrage, free speech, accountability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, cancel culture has become a topic of interest for it raises concerns about public shaming in the digital space and more broadly about how to best hold others accountable in a social context. It is key to mention that cancel culture involves the active withdrawing of support from public figures, companies, organisations, or works of media, typically after an offensive, racial, controversial, or hurtful action or statement performed by some persona became public. The behaviour may be dictated by the canceling of other persons or on their attitude toward the cancellation. It stands out the necessity of not only critical analyses by scholars but further approaches like mediation to paleate the potential social damage its spread may cause. Central to this idea is that digital communication fuels the spread and growth of this culture, as it facilitates the interaction and communication of a myriad of people which would not have the same access to broadcast their opinions and actions without the help of social media. Considering this digital environment, it is essential to study further how cancel culture is acted on those platforms and what backlash said actions provoke.

1.1. Definition of Cancel Culture

Alfred*: What is cancel culture?

Genesis*: Cancel culture entails a range of collective actions taken by individuals, their networks, or the state against other individuals or groups who are perceived as having committed an offense. Cancellation can mean boycotting, shaming, or other measures in an attempt to force compliance with legal or normative codes. People can be canceled for a wide range of offenses, from personal affront to major human rights abuses. Cancel culture is ‘the evil twin’ of shame culture, since the verb to cancel a person seems to root in the passive form of this mode of control: to be canceled.

This view of cancel culture as collective action also implies some inclusionary assumptions about what counts as a cancel act – a view that contests cancel culture as canceling. Since an aggressive critique by its usual suspects wearied the

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term with derision, it often seems any kind of challenge from any kind of outsider is defined as people trying to cancel. Banning “cultural Marxism” from public, taxpayer-funded radio is barely noted as a cancel act, while dedicated discussion of contemptible expansion of speech rights in university is FREEZE PEACH TRIANGULATION. Thus, surrounded by pletherer of state-funded vaccine skeptics, criticism of Professor Fergusons under-scope lockdown outrage – expressed during the lingering peak of the pandemic – is bad and harmful.

1.2. BRIEF HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

London, 1743. A skilled performer tightrope-walked twelve stories above the ground, surprising a gathered crowd by practicing his craft against the backdrop of a royal procession. In the process, he unintentionally mirrored a notorious fraudster and impostor who only two years earlier had been executed at London’s oldest gallows. Despite the earnest differences between artist and criminal, the crowd’s collective memory lit with fury. Upon recognizing this physical object of disdain, its members chased down the performer, intent on spatially corrupting him (Raine Muir et al., 2022).

These two cases seem to exist wildly distant spatially, temporally, with clearly disconnected agents and condemning factors differing on a range of platforms. However, what unites them is their participation in distinct moments of a broader phenomenon only recently articulated in an age of declining faith in metanarratives. Despite nuanced differences in language, setting, and addressing specificities broadly endemic to time and place, a thoroughly dappled global archetypality comes to the forefront.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

So, let me keep it real with you. I’m a professional writer. Typically, I’m drafting literature reviews for academics or keyword-stuffing for marketers. But real talk? I do my best to stay below the current cancel culture radar. Why? Because I don’t want to be considered the enemy. You cool with that honesty? Are you going to cancel me now that you know that it’s a thing I think about? And on this day, cancel we did. Because that’s the power we have, right? The ability to turn our

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backs. The ability to collectively decree something unworthy. Or just straight up problematic.

Cancel culture is a concept that is perhaps best understood in this age of algorithm-structured content delivery. We all know we're angry about something that we just all found out about a week ago, right? We all know we're all outraged. It's the only thing we see anymore, because that outrage travels at the speed of pure, unadulterated DESPAIR. Here's the thing: it's a hard sell to say that everyone is right. We can't all be canceling the right people. And yet, we all are. At once. Because one meaningful engagement is just a single click away. Is there some sort of collective madness at play?

Social media has bridged the gap between mass and interpersonal communication in a unique, unprecedented way. The online world allows people to engage in activities such as expressions of agreement/disapproval without having to confront the target. However, understanding why people would relapse into such comfort demands examination from a psychological perspective. Research on online aggression has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to engage in hostile activities such as denigration, hate speech or ill-wishing on the internet due to decreased self-awareness and a feeling of anonymity. Meanwhile upvoting or downvoting is not only frequent but noticeably more polarized, a substrates that have been referred to as a climate of 'online mobs'. Understandings and explanations for such a phenomenon will necessitate alternative examination, beyond a focus on social media peripherals and proceed to a further exploration on the interaction between individual psychological faculties and collective behaviours.

2.1. Group Polarization

Opinions are not fixed entities, but rather adaptable ideas shaped by changing landscapes and personal experiences. For this reason, it is reasonable to expect opinions and beliefs to stretch and drift in groups of similarly-minded individuals. At these times, the analogy of liquid cement drying comes to mind. On contact, cement is a viscous mix of water and concrete powder, slowly settling into place.

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Yet as individuals within a group exchange beliefs, ideas, and language code, beliefs form a rigid, coagulated structure that strengthens with time. This discussion will then address issues related to the robustness of belief polarization, covering the stability and attractiveness of polarized beliefs, as well as a return to the broader social network as ideas drift.

In 1961, Research Center for Group Dynamics published an experimental study suggesting that discussions among like-minded individuals consistently caused their opinions to become more extreme. In a subsequent article, this finding was described as group polarization, explaining that discussions serve to “raise the individual to an even higher degree of loyalty.” More than fifty years later, it is not difficult to find parallels with contemporary circumstances. On platforms such as Twitter, social movements with names such as Black Lives Matter or QAnon post tweets containing similar buzz-main phrases and hashtags. Their messages are then retweeted by like-minded individuals. Realizing that their own opinions are shared by many like-minded people can serve to further entrench those beliefs (Cui, 2021). What starts off as individuals judging many angles to a problem subsequently stretches to the greatest repository of knowledge. Shared beliefs are discussed further, and an otherwise inconsequential event can trigger a heightened emotional response and collective action (Zafeiris, 2022). It should not be surprising that group dynamics can easily distort perceptions of right and wrong. Recent re-examinations of the phenomenon have proven that cognitive dissonance caused by converting on their beliefs sent Leon Festinger and his collaborators down the wrong track. It was their view that apocalyptic flying saucer cults would recruit people battling cognitive dissonance, only to realize that commitment was strongest in fervent believers, and not the fringe cult members that joined later. Of course, many cults have formed since, but these early failings highlight how belief in certain ideas can distort intellectual discourse. These concepts are disciplines within the umbrella of cancel culture. Like the fervent disciples of Marion Keech, groups rally around a specific ideology and label opposing viewpoints as thought crime. It is dangerous path to walk, as

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Reinhart and Rogoff found, since these untruths are granted undue authenticity that can suddenly snowball.

2.2. Deindividuation and Anonymity

Online environments, with the cloak of anonymity, have allowed extreme behavior that would likely not happen face-to-face. Take online commenting, for example. A developing author might bare their heart and soul only to have their writing skills criticized and dashed within a few keystrokes. The criticism might not be constructive but laced with personal attacks. The author hits back, not holding back on what they think of the commenter. Others jump in, taking sides, with similar personal attacks. No one knows who is on the other side of the screen, hence no need to filter their speech, or indeed feel the hurt on the receiving end either (E. Scott & P. Barlett, 2021). This is the deindividuated, or 'mob' mentality – behavior that falls outside the range of normally accepted social conduct. For human being, it is much easier (and natural) to hold territory and possessions or display/experience aggression to others in a virtual environment as no physical harm/shame is to be expected from these interactions. This is particularly relevant in the context of 'cancel culture'.

Anonymity can foster a reduction in self-awareness and responsibility as individuals are less likely to feel valued and vulnerable, and disadvantageous behavior becomes deindividuated (Wicaksono & Irwansyah, 2017). The internet allows users to participate in networks virtually without face-to-face interaction, and it increases the risk of harm and aggressive behavior as a result of physical separation from consequences. Early theories of deindividuation identify a state of low self-awareness and a high level of group awareness that fosters extreme behavior. There has also been a suggestion that internet-related tools such as social networking sites heighten disinhibition and deindividuation, enabling users to disengage from personal responsibility and thus increasing the prevalence of aggressive and antisocial actions in virtual spaces. (Kor-Sins, 2021)

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3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND CANCEL CULTURE

Cancel culture has only recently been recognized within the minds of the public, as these terms are the jealously observed machinations of the hyper-liberal mind. A similar sociological observation had taken place during the early years of the French Revolution. Yet why is it that cancel culture is highly associated with left-wing to extreme left-wing politics? Perhaps it would do well to compare life under the rule of a liberal and a conservative government. Under the rule of the latter, people of a conservative inclination will choose to avoid engaging in significant “woke” behavior. However, left-wing companies and organizations often remain unaffected, as they had always sympatico with leftist fashion. Representation of conservative interests struggle to receive the same level of focus within the public. Cancel culture, to put it plainly, is entirely the mechanism by which left-wing thought is reigned dominion over other schools of thought. Moreover, it could also be said that cancel culture is a direct byproduct of liberalism itself; such behavior worries over many perceived “untruths” being uttered, given that opposing views can occasionally make people feel “triggered”.

It dilutes the cornerstone value of free speech by being in of itself a denial of dialogue. On the topic of discussion, both the actual cries of cancel culture over an excess of unfounded and confused social pressure. Many people have their thoughts scattered, for the opportunity to “cancel” is ubiquitous and there is no absolute surety of a person escaping some lauded pitfall. What is called cancel culture today has been a practice of society for centuries; only newly observed due to the now far-reaching extent of the internet. Yet the societal pressure of saying certain things public or losing your right to avail yourself of job opportunities is really not anything new. The modern societal landscape allows for the proliferation and practice of cancel culture as never seen before. Through its algorithmically refined feeds catering to users, social media allows an ever-echoing bounce-back of already polarized and contentious issues. Political echo chambers and “filter bubbles” come about through likes, comments, and shares. This snowballing nature and subsequent polarization are evident on Twitter

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where the overlapping community is smaller than commonly thought, and where retweet activities are highly segregated by the relative standpoints of the user. Facebook even faces a public call from former employee's exposure of the platform in its knowledge of worsening mental health and mental health issues, including to adolescent girls and women.(Deavours et al.2021)

3.1. Role of Social Media Platforms

Abundance of scholarly literature documents and explains, in detail, how social media platforms have become the main medium through which cancel culture emerges, evolves, and thrives. Despite this, Twitter and similar platforms are not entirely neutral in this process but contribute to creating the environment in which cancel culture flourishes. Twitter's programming vulnerabilities make it a fertile ground for mobbing behaviors to develop, performative tweet threads to emerge, and users to imitate successful cancellations. Such behaviors are mediated not just through the architecture and design of Twitter, but by how the platform's back end, algorithms, and development mistakes unintentionally incentivize and facilitate such tactics. Lastly, the paper examined the user interaction between Twitter and Instagram, reflecting how what takes place on one platform has quasi-immediate repercussions on another. In so doing critical attention is drawn on how the migration of cancel culture displays different forms and identitarian participation when enacted across platforms. (Gotthardt et al.2021)

3.2. Echo Chambers and Confirmation Bias

Social media has been pointed to as an arena where mob think reigns, and where individuals propagate cancel culture. For such phenomena to gather pace there needs to be amplifying elements at play. The campaign serves as an instructive case study, which exposes how outrage and social media can act as an inseparable duo. The strand is also developed already present in the literature about echo chambers and mobilization on social media. It is further stressed that such dynamics are more likely to congeal around high-profile events (since they increase the likelihood of information spread) and milieus already structured by

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overlapping identities and networks. Rather than cancel culture marking new patterns of behaviour online, it is iterated that it is a cooption and intensification of earlier social media practices that have been allowed to flourish in unregulated settings. (Liu, 2021)

4. SOCIETAL IMPACTS

Amid a dramatic escalation in the quantity of discourse concerning shamed individuals in online communities, it is vital to scrutinise the motivators which drive such behaviour in order to determine any emergent trends. The ramifications of online shaming on those who are shamed are extensive, and have been linked with deleterious effects on mental health. Moreover, there are wider societal impacts which occur as a result of the use of online shaming to seek accountability, giving rise to a necessary scrutiny of the means by which social norms are enforced in a given society (Raine Muir et al., 2021). Cancel culture refers to the now pervasive phenomena of the audience of a target being incited to express their collective condemnation of them by withdrawing their social interest, and is currently a widely discussed issue in policy conversations globally. Cancel culture creates a situation in which the person may wish to articulate their disagreement with content or behaviour in the public sphere, but fears the negative personal ramifications of doing so. Refraining from criticizing popular figures whose behaviour is unethical, shallow, or commercially selfish is fraught, as it underscores the perceived acceptability of such behaviour, leading to a culture in which toxic behaviour is normalized. The wider implications of a culture of public silent sanction are vast, and surely detrimental to a healthy society. Cancel culture is the silencing of public criticism under the threat of sanction and a fear that one's voice of critique will be the next to be moderated emphasizes the role of cancel culture in stalling the ritual of public discourse. It is this cultural and political perspective of cancel culture that has the most detrimental and lasting repercussions for free societies, suggesting that this viewpoint underlines a cultural shift resulting in a collapse of the democratic public sphere and a depletion of free speech.(Frick et al.2021)

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4.1. Effects on Individuals

Away from reputation damage, the emotional toll that being Cancelled takes on an individual need to be explored. Condemning someone may leave the Online Public Sphere, but the Targeted Individual (TI) still have to make it through each day afflicted by the aftermath. For those targeted, predominantly people in the public eye, whether they be of Film, Music or Television, it can entail the end of persuasion altogether (Eduardo dos Santos Vidal, 2022). For others, it may be a case of finding new work, although Job Opportunities are scare when your online search yields an unsolicited 'Scripted Reality Star X is Cancelled' or 'Celebrity Z dragged on Twitter'. Most often, 'cancelled' persons have to grapple with the challenge of defending, or seeking redemption through, actions which they may have never undertaken in the first place. Once the delicate matter of logic is navigated, the March from News Outlets to Social Media can become a tsunami of comments where Gossip of amoral caliber is shared with abandon. Gossip in this sense provides a hosted space for discussion that can bring a skill share, or otherwise, intellectually attention-grabbing insights. Here, it refers to the unjust dissemination of harmful stigma surrounding an individual, accentuating Social Exclusion, Guilt by Association, or the Strategic Segregating of Outright Lies. Cancellations, entangled by sinister sources, applaud the arrival of Gossip, thoughtlessly reshaping the perception of these exchanges. The subsequent change in Clime curbs an individual's Libel, as Public Discourse now Black Lists terms that will expeditiously Fall Someone's Stock with Grappling Nuance. This in itself becomes a hobble; if the climate of cancellation were a machine, Gossip would be its Oil. Beyond damage to reputation and careers, the personal consequences of Cancel Culture frequently have a chilling effect to expression on and offline. If the 'cancelled' individual in question is striving to make it through Internet-Fired Rubbish Bins, there is an implicit fear, founded in Truth or Otherwise, that Will Back Splash Beyond Horizons at just the slightest vocal misstep. This fear, translated phonetically into paralysis, is known as a chilling effect. One thing is to spy on a boy on Instagram Live Thermal, but gone are the

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days where Tell-All gets tossed out above a disposable B-Grade Reality Star. Gone too, apparently, is the celebrated attention economy of Cancel Culture. But now even the smallest flickers with danger: a poorly phrased blog post dissected; a controversial tweet hashed and slushed into a maelstrom of quick-witted insults. The navigation of this new topography inherently requites a pause, a hesitation. A psychological recoil, manifested as self-critique, silences and isolation, preventing the generation of progressive, constructive and potentially controversial ideas via Azimuth, but more so in petition to the wider political scope.

The widespread fear of online shackles amounts largely to an issue of oversaturation Complex. There are not only too many issues, but too many perspectives on these issues. The reclamation of public space by those usually regulated to the comment section is, in of itself, commendable. However, there are brighter avenues for discourse that are beveling obscured on the horizon. If Gossip is no longer forged from slip-ups or powerful exploits, but from the impossible split-second misunderstandings that take so long to rebuild as anything but SCUM, a new look is needed at how to address this emergent phenomenon. This isn't an Ode to the Cancelled; as Noted, This is PR for Everyone. Rather, then, this is a call to think before re-sharing, to supplant Judgement with Inquiry, and perhaps to regain what was lost under the silent erasure of false Steps. Impassioned Where Cancel Culture takes entertainment suggestions Uncare, informs Public discourse, even go so far as to dictate Voting behavior. More alarmingly, for those targeted, mainly known Persons in the Public Eye, ambitions. (Voss, 2021)

4.2. Effects on Society and Discourse

As an organisation dedicated to studying and reporting on societal and technological trends that will help shape the future, it is critical to highlight a trend observed by cultural anthropologists and sociologists who increasingly agree is a threat to the health of many aspects of society: "cancel culture". The effects of cancel culture on society are far-reaching, but this piece will display a focus on its impact perpetrated discourse, and efforts for greater civic

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engagement. Today, cancellation is often anathema to open conversation with potentially damaging effects on broader discussions. How to converse or debate controversial topics is something that every individual learns navigating through growing up. Cancel culture, in paradox, stigmatises conversations seen as objectionable. This includes attempts to discredit one or multiple individuals that wish to express these conversations. Critique of this brand of dialogue comes from both sides of the political spectrum, yet its implications extend further than just state politics.

Expressions of cancel culture can produce a 'culture of fear.' Individuals who feel stifled in what they can say can resort to self-censorship. This is problematic to dialogue as it implies the silencing of different views, weakening the range of perspectives that feed into understandings of particular topics. What does that mean? On a very basic level, self-censorship is harmful to free speech. This – the ability not only to express opinions but ideas in general – is essential in all democratic societies. And one that rests upon the principle of free speech. However, a plurality of understandings on any particular phenomenon also contributes to a wider spectrum of ideas and innovative tactics to engage with it. Hence, limited dialogue can produce solutions that are vacant of a full picture of the object matter. Trust between local communities and its members is dramatic for a functioning civic society. However, cancellation activities can intensify divisions between already disparate parties. While accountability is important for the preservation of a functioning status quo, there should floor for dialogue, even in amongst distrustful parties. At the rudimentary level, dialogue can enable individuals to better make their case in the service of meeting specific demands. With goodwill, dialogue has the potential to foster conciliation between previously contemptuous parties. Cancellation activities that undertake punitive approaches can obscure the possibility of this process. Thus, society should consider the role discourse and understanding plays in its operation. This is not just leftward of discourse, but fostering outlooks that lead to empathy and a will to continue collecting information. (Tsuno et al.2022)

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5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Cancel culture is the phenomenon of individuals being cutoff from social, professional, institutional, or public support due to their actions or remarks that are considered objectionable or offensive either before or after the information or action has come to light. Behind the canceling lies a complex psychology, starting with setting goals. Part of the population that uses social media regularly, with its virtues and vices, thinks like this new media was a way out of the mainstream mass information channels, controlled by large corporations. With the so-called citizen journalism spread out, it was being possible to access a more reliable information source little by little (Anjum & Aziz, 2022). However, in addition to spreading health and education, public opinion uses this new media to monitor and, when appropriate, cancel certain people. To do this, individuals observe publicly known biased information that makes one of the parties look clearly bad. When material is lacking, personal information following the event is checked out. The sentencing takes place mostly before the proceedings have even begun and it is assumed that the media use has helped form an accurate judgment. The sentence is carried out immediately. The canceled person first becomes an inert spectator, sitting watching his public execution. Then there is a sharp increase in defensive behavior and communication with the accusers escalates. Finally, the accused is excluded from most forms of cooperation. This process culminates in the complete isolation of the person who ends up becoming an omniscient figure. The process is similar to a trial where the judge has already been prosecuted and sentenced. (Chugrov, 2022)

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