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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX TERRAIN OF CANCEL CULTURE: UNDERSTANDING ITS DYNAMICS AND CONSEQUENCES

AUTHORED BY - DR. PARAS CHAUDHARY¹

Abstract:

This article delves into the intricate landscape of cancel culture, examining its origins, mechanisms, and societal impacts. Through a comprehensive analysis, the article explores the dynamics of cancel culture, including the role of social media, public discourse, and collective action in shaping its manifestations. Furthermore, it investigates the consequences of cancel culture on individuals, institutions, and broader societal norms, shedding light on issues of accountability, censorship, and freedom of expression. By offering insights into the complexities of cancel culture, the article aims to facilitate a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon and its implications for contemporary discourse and social dynamics.

Introduction:

In the digital age, where every keystroke can reverberate across the globe, the phenomenon of cancel culture has emerged as a potent force reshaping public discourse and individual destinies. Born from the intersection of social media activism and the relentless scrutiny of public figures, cancel culture operates as a digital jury, adjudicating the perceived transgressions of those in the spotlight. At its core, cancel culture embodies a cycle of condemnation and consequence, driven by a series of steps that unfold with alarming swiftness and intensity.

Step one: A public figure, whether a celebrity, influencer, or high-profile individual, commits an act or utters words that ignite the ire of the collective consciousness. This transgression could range from a seemingly innocuous statement to a grave ethical breach, but in the eyes of the online populace, it becomes a rallying cry for accountability.

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Step two: The followers and supporters of said figure react with a cacophony of dissent, withdrawing their allegiance and inundating digital platforms with a deluge of denunciations. Social media feeds become battlegrounds, where hashtags serve as weapons and comment sections morph into arenas for ideological combat. The digital mob wields its power with a fervor bordering on righteous indignation, demanding retribution for the perceived offense.

Step three: Confronted with the tempest of public outcry, the embattled figure faces a pivotal choice: capitulation or defiance. Some opt for contrition, issuing apologies fraught with sincerity or laden with strategic calculation. Others dig their heels into the ground, refusing to yield to the tide of condemnation, and instead, doubling down on their stance with unyielding obstinacy.

Step four: The aftermath unfolds with a mathematical precision, where the seriousness of the allegation, juxtaposed with the level of hypocrisy exhibited by the accused, is weighed against the appropriateness of their response. This formula, as enigmatic as it is unforgiving, yields the approximate degree of cancellation, determining the extent to which the individual's reputation is tarnished, and their standing in the court of public opinion irreversibly altered.

This equation encapsulates the essence of cancel culture, a phenomenon where reputations hang in the balance, and the trajectory of one's life can be irrevocably altered by a single misstep in the digital sphere. Yet, beneath the surface of outrage and recrimination lies a labyrinthine landscape fraught with nuance and complexity. What constitutes an unforgivable offense? Who holds the power to decree absolution or condemnation? And what are the far-reaching implications of this digital reckoning on the fabric of society?

As we navigate the tumultuous terrain of cancel culture, it becomes imperative to interrogate its mechanisms, challenge its assumptions, and seek a path forward that balances accountability with compassion, justice with mercy. For in the crucible of public scrutiny, where reputations are forged and shattered in the blink of an eye, lies the potential for transformation, redemption, and the enduring pursuit of a more equitable and empathetic world.

Origin and Development:

Cancel culture's roots extend far beyond the realms of social media, with origins tracing back to appearances in movies and songs as early as 1991, predominantly within African-American Vernacular English. While its proliferation on social media, particularly through Black Twitter, has garnered significant attention, its conceptual groundwork predates this digital era. Linguist Anne Charity Hudley notes in a Vox interview that the notion of "being canceled" is deeply ingrained in Black culture, stemming from experiences long preceding the digital age.²

The distinction between cancel culture and call-out culture is crucial. Cancel culture, evolving from the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 60s to its contemporary online manifestation, intersects with the practice of doxing—a term originating from the early 2000s, referring to the dissemination of personal information online for various purposes.³ Despite doxing typically carrying negative connotations, its alignment with calling out politically problematic behaviors blurs ethical lines, elevating the moral status of those exposing such individuals.

This ethical ambiguity invokes philosophical debates, such as the Slippery Slope argument, commonly discussed in bioethics. This argument suggests that individuals initially retain control over their actions but may reach a point where they lose control, leading to inevitable catastrophic outcomes. Thus, cancel culture's ethical trajectory becomes increasingly precarious, highlighting the complex interplay between accountability, morality, and the digital landscape.

The Perils of Cancel Culture:

Shakuntala Banaji fittingly says, “Discovering that we have harmed someone because of an unexamined group prejudice or a tendency to speak for others rather than to listen can be profoundly discomfiting.”⁴ Social media's omnipresence has ushered in a sense of invisibility, blurring the lines between the online world and reality. This fusion can have severe consequences, particularly for privacy rights and mental well-being. The internet grants anonymity to those with malicious intent, enabling them to dox and "cancel" individuals without accountability. Even if accusations are

² Romano, A., 2020, Why we can't stop fighting about cancel culture. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>.

³ Hooks, A. M., 2020, Cancel Culture: Posthuman Hauntologies in Digital Rhetoric and the Latent Values of Virtual Community Networks. University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

⁴ Banaji, S., 2021, “Cancel Culture' and Historical Silencing.” Media @ LSE, blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2021/07/20/cancel-culture-and-historical-silencing/.

unsubstantiated, victims face relentless online hate, resembling bullying. This coercive behavior has led to tragic outcomes, including suicides, underscoring the internet's capacity for harm.

Cancel culture operates on the premise of immediate condemnation without room for growth or dialogue. Individuals are swiftly ostracized for offensive remarks, often without a full understanding of the context. The bandwagon effect amplifies public condemnation, fueled by the anonymity afforded by the internet. Stereotypes and exaggerated generalizations about canceled individuals stem from the "Kernel of Truth" concept, highlighting the internet's lack of moderation. Inaction also carries consequences, as bystanders contribute to the harmful dynamics of online discourse.

Cancel culture, a phenomenon where individuals or groups are ostracized or boycotted for behavior or beliefs deemed offensive or inappropriate, has garnered significant attention and criticism in recent years. While its proponents argue that it serves as a mechanism for accountability and social justice, others highlight its perils and potential negative consequences.

One of the main perils of cancel culture is its tendency to prioritize public shaming and punishment over constructive dialogue and education. Instead of engaging in meaningful conversations to understand different perspectives and address underlying issues, cancel culture often leads to the vilification and dismissal of individuals or groups without offering them the opportunity to learn from their mistakes or change their behavior. This can create a culture of fear where people are hesitant to express themselves honestly or engage in controversial topics for fear of being targeted or canceled. Moreover, cancel culture can contribute to the erosion of freedom of expression and diversity of thought. When individuals are afraid to voice dissenting opinions or challenge prevailing narratives out of fear of being canceled, it stifles intellectual discourse and innovation. This can lead to echo chambers where only certain viewpoints are allowed, hindering the exchange of ideas and the pursuit of truth.

Another peril of cancel culture is its potential for mob mentality and the spread of misinformation. In the age of social media, outrage can quickly escalate as individuals band together to condemn perceived transgressions, often without fully understanding the context or facts surrounding the situation. This can result in the spread of rumors, false accusations, and the unjust targeting of innocent individuals or organizations.

Furthermore, cancel culture can have serious consequences for individuals' mental health and well-being. Being subjected to public humiliation and online harassment can take a significant toll on a person's psychological state, leading to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. Additionally, the fear of being canceled can create a culture of self-censorship, where individuals constantly monitor and filter their thoughts and actions to avoid backlash, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation.

In addition to its impact on individuals, cancel culture can also have broader societal implications. By focusing on symbolic gestures of accountability, such as apologies or resignations, rather than addressing systemic issues, cancel culture can perpetuate surface-level change while failing to address deeper structural inequalities. This can divert attention and resources away from meaningful efforts to address issues such as racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

Finally, cancel culture can undermine the principles of forgiveness and redemption. While accountability is important, the goal should be to encourage growth and learning rather than punishment and exclusion. By permanently branding individuals as irredeemable for past mistakes, cancel culture denies them the opportunity to demonstrate genuine remorse and make amends, perpetuating a cycle of judgment and condemnation.

In conclusion, while cancel culture may have emerged as a response to legitimate concerns about accountability and social justice, its perils are significant and wide-ranging. From stifling free expression to perpetuating mob mentality and harming individuals' mental health, the consequences of cancel culture can be severe. Moving forward, it is essential to strike a balance between holding individuals accountable for their actions and promoting dialogue, understanding, and forgiveness.

The Evolution of Political Influence in Digital Spaces: Implications for Cancel Culture

In digital environments, our moral values often shape our political affiliations, leading us to curate our online feeds with content that resonates with our beliefs. This process results in the formation of communities sharing similar moral and political identities. Acknowledging the evolving political

landscape, it's essential to recognize the impact of new media and the internet. Previously, traditional media like radio and television, often with political affiliations, monopolized information dissemination, leading to one-sided and biased news coverage. However, the rapid rise of social media has revolutionized participation in social and political contexts, challenging the dominance of traditional media outlets.

Georgiou (2012) highlights the intensified struggles for control over media and representation with the emergence of various actors in mediated communication, facilitated by new technologies. While traditional media still wield influence, social media's integrated engagement allows for unprecedented influence over public opinion and narrative shaping.

The internet's vast reach enables the rapid dissemination of ideas, facilitating collective identity construction. Understanding the collective political sentiment of social media users is crucial in comprehending the potency of these affiliations in driving cancel culture. Norris's (2020) study explores how generational differences correlate with political alignment.⁵ Baby Boomers and Generation X, typically conservative, tend to view cancel culture negatively, believing it has gone too far. In contrast, Millennials and Generation Z, characterized by progressive ideologies, are more supportive of cancel culture, actively participating and assuming prosecutorial roles in online punishment systems.

Cancel culture often denies individuals the opportunity to defend themselves or explain their actions, prompting concerns about free speech. In the case of public figures, the aim is often to deplatform them for perceived offenses. However, when a democracy imposes restrictions on citizens' freedom of speech, it raises questions about the balance between accountability and expression.

The Intermediary Guidelines issued by the Indian government aim to regulate online content, requiring social media platforms to swiftly remove posts and disclose message originators upon legal requests. This move infringes on both privacy and free speech, fundamental aspects of social media networks like Twitter. While avoiding deep political analysis, it's evident that such measures create a precarious space for free speech, particularly concerning cancel culture. Some argue that the

⁵ Norris, P., 2020, "Closed Minds? Is a 'Cancel Culture' Stifling Academic Freedom and Intellectual Debate in Political Science?" Harvard Kennedy School.

government's actions represent an extreme form of cancel culture by limiting discourse on platforms meant to foster diverse ideas and breaching individual privacy to censor content.

"The younger generation of scholars may be expected to prove both most liberal in their identities and also least concerned about public shaming for socially offensive speech and acts." This generation, deeply connected to the internet, exhibits a greater nonchalance towards shaming and canceling what they perceive as offensive. Instances like the disruption of a Trump rally by K-pop fans and Tik-Tok users demonstrate how online engagement translates into real-life actions without the sense of responsibility or guilt. While disrupting the rally may be seen as justified given the politician's actions, the question remains whether such actions align with principles of democracy and free speech.

The Psychology of Brand Loyalty and the Impact of Cancel Culture:

Similar to how individuals gravitate towards like-minded communities, they also subconsciously align themselves with brands that reflect their identity, establishing a strong brand-consumer allegiance. Brands meticulously study their target audience to cater to their preferences and maintain profitability in a closely networked global community facilitated by the internet.

While some brands maintain their image without change, this can either lead to success or failure depending on market trends and evolving social values. Failure to adapt may result in cognitive dissonance between the brand's image and consumer values, ultimately leading consumers to either adjust their values or abandon the brand. Typically, consumers choose the latter, often accompanied by public condemnation online, signaling the onset of canceling brands.

The 2018 incident involving Victoria's Secret exemplifies how cancel culture can detrimentally impact a business. Comments made by the former CMO regarding the exclusion of transgender and plus-sized models sparked widespread outrage on social media. This backlash, fueled by Twitter's fast-paced nature and simplified discussions, resulted in significant financial losses and store closures for Victoria's Secret. Despite the brand's attempts to address the controversy through apologies and inclusivity efforts, dissenting voices emerged from staunch supporters, illustrating the complexity of

cognitive dissonance.⁶

While Victoria's Secret's experience with cancel culture may be seen as deserved or justified, it serves as a warning to other brands to prioritize inclusivity and ethical practices to avoid similar repercussions. This example underscores the power of cancel culture in pressuring brands to evolve and align with evolving societal values.

Pros and Cons:

Pros:

Ensures Accountability: Cancel culture serves as a mechanism for holding individuals accountable for their actions, especially if their behavior is detrimental to others. It creates a sense of responsibility and consequences for harmful behavior.

Fosters Public Discourse: Cancel culture encourages open discussions on sensitive issues, sparking conversations that may have otherwise remained dormant. It serves as a catalyst for public discourse, leading to greater awareness and understanding of social issues.

Advances Social Justice: By highlighting and rejecting oppressive behavior, cancel culture contributes to the advancement of social justice. It exposes inequalities and injustices, paving the way for a more equitable and fair society.

Cons:

Restricts Freedom of Speech: Critics argue that cancel culture suppresses freedom of speech by creating an atmosphere of fear where individuals are hesitant to express their opinions. This fear of being canceled can lead to self-censorship and the stifling of diverse perspectives.

Promotes Groupthink: Cancel culture can foster an environment where dissenting opinions are discouraged, leading to a homogenization of thought. This pressure to conform to prevailing beliefs can undermine the value of diversity and critical thinking.

⁶ Peterson, H., 2019, "Victoria's Secret Is Closing Dozens of Stores - See If Yours Is on the List." Business Insider www.businessinsider.in/retail/victorias-secret-is-closing-dozens-of-stores-see-if-yours-is-on-the-list/article show/68674366.cms.

Encourages Vigilante Justice: Operating outside formal systems of justice, cancel culture can result in individuals taking matters into their own hands. This vigilante approach to accountability bypasses due process and can lead to unfair judgments.

Potential for Injustice: Cancel culture may unfairly punish individuals for behavior deemed unacceptable in one context but not in another. Moreover, it can penalize individuals for past actions they have already apologized for or rectified, leading to disproportionate consequences.

In summary, while cancel culture can promote accountability, discourse, and social justice, it also raises concerns about freedom of speech, groupthink, vigilante justice, and potential injustice. Striking a balance between holding individuals accountable and respecting fundamental rights is crucial in navigating the complexities of cancel culture.

Conclusion:

Cancel culture, a phenomenon ubiquitous in online discourse, has repeatedly demonstrated its efficacy in combating sexism, racism, abuse, and other forms of societal injustices. Its role in catalyzing global revolutions cannot be overstated. By amplifying marginalized voices and providing them with platforms historically denied to them, cancel culture has facilitated crucial conversations and fostered inclusivity in spaces where exclusion once prevailed. However, amidst its undeniable benefits, it is imperative to acknowledge the adverse consequences it inflicts upon individuals subjected to cancellation.

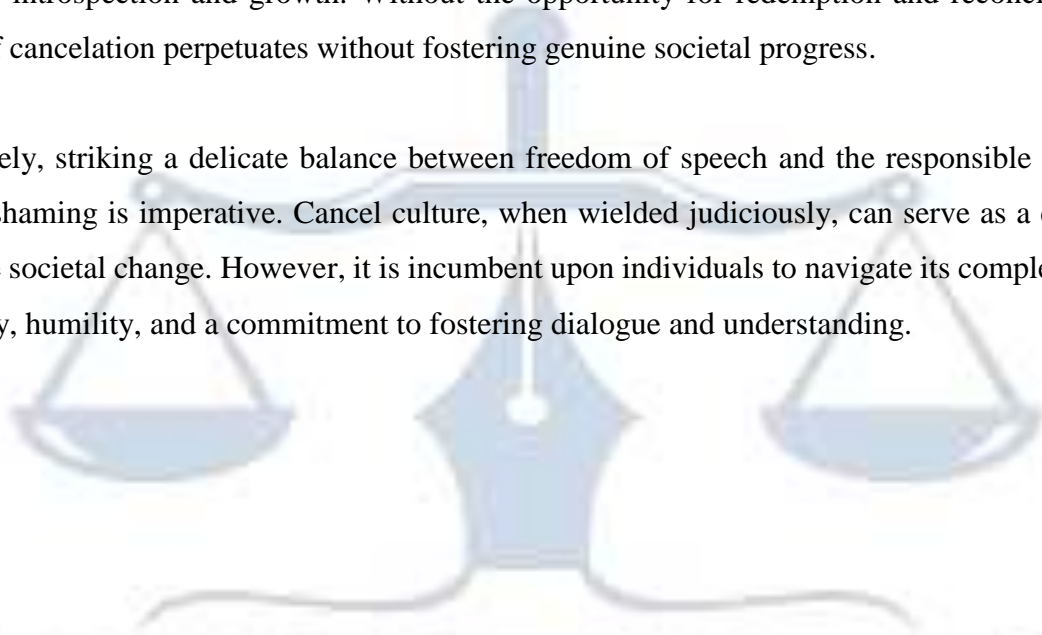
The impact of cancel culture on the mental health, reputation, and livelihoods of canceled individuals cannot be ignored. Beyond tarnishing their public image and undermining their self-esteem, cancel culture has the potential to jeopardize their professional, academic, and personal lives. While offenders certainly warrant accountability for their actions, the indiscriminate nature of cancel culture often ensnares individuals who are misjudged, prematurely condemned, or entirely innocent, leading to long-lasting repercussions.

It is essential for responsible netizens to recognize the profound influence wielded by the internet and media and to wield this influence judiciously. Rather than advocating for a lenient approach towards

offenders, it is crucial to promote a culture of accountability tempered with compassion. Cancel culture should not serve as a scapegoat for avoiding personal growth and learning from mistakes. Instead, it should be viewed as a tool for initiating meaningful dialogue and fostering collective understanding.

Words carry immense weight, and in striving for a peaceful society, it is incumbent upon individuals to exercise mindfulness and respect in their online interactions. While holding others accountable for their actions is necessary, it should be accompanied by efforts to educate and provide space for genuine introspection and growth. Without the opportunity for redemption and reconciliation, the cycle of cancelation perpetuates without fostering genuine societal progress.

Ultimately, striking a delicate balance between freedom of speech and the responsible exercise of public shaming is imperative. Cancel culture, when wielded judiciously, can serve as a catalyst for positive societal change. However, it is incumbent upon individuals to navigate its complexities with empathy, humility, and a commitment to fostering dialogue and understanding.



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