

Original Research Article

A social psychological examination of the "cancel culture" on Anglo-American social platforms

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Abstract: Cancel culture is now a familiar feature of online life in Anglo-American digital spaces. Sometimes it begins with a recent public comment; sometimes it comes from an old post, a screenshot, or a decision made by a public figure, company, or institution. After being shared and discussed repeatedly, the issue may no longer remain a single act of criticism, but turn into wider pressure from online users. This paper reads cancel culture through social psychology. Since it does not use questionnaire data or statistical testing, the discussion relies mainly on existing academic views and public examples. The main concern is how a personal reaction becomes collective pressure. Social identity, conformity, moral emotions, and group polarization are used to explain this change. Platform design is also part of the discussion. Recommendation systems and echo chambers may keep similar opinions in front of users, so anger and judgment can appear repeatedly. In some cases, cancel culture helps expose misconduct and forces powerful people or organizations to respond. In other cases, it moves too fast and damages a person's reputation before enough context is considered. This is why platform governance, public opinion literacy, and clearer rules for online discussion are still needed.

Keywords: cancel culture; social media platforms; social psychology; public opinion polarization; moral emotions

1. Introduction

Social media has made public opinion appear faster and travel farther than before. In Anglo-American online spaces, cancel culture is one way this change can be seen. A person or an organization may be criticized not only for a recent statement, but also for an old post, a screenshot, or a decision that users see as morally unacceptable. Once the issue is noticed, it can be reposted, tagged, discussed, and judged again and again. Many users who join the discussion may only see part of the story, but their reactions can still add to the pressure around the event.

This phenomenon is complicated. It cannot simply be described as good or bad^[1]. On the one hand, online criticism can give ordinary users a way to challenge racism, sexism, abuse of power, or other forms of misconduct. On the other hand, the same process can become harsh, emotional, and disproportionate. A person may be judged by a single sentence, an old post, or a fragment taken out of context. This paper therefore looks at how individual moral judgment is turned into collective pressure on social media, and why that pressure sometimes becomes difficult to control.

2. The social psychological foundations of cancel culture

2.1. Social identity and conformity psychology

Social identity theory is useful for understanding why users do not always act as isolated individuals online. In many controversies, users respond as members of a moral, political, cultural, or ideological group. Criticizing a controversial person or organization can become a way of showing where one stands. Once the target is treated as someone who has broken group values, criticism can move quickly from personal opinion to collective rejection^[2].

The reaction of other users can make this process move faster. After someone posts a comment, the number of likes, reposts, replies, or hashtag uses soon shows whether the opinion is being accepted. This kind of feedback may push users to speak in a firmer tone. In some discussions, staying silent or asking

for more context may even be understood as taking the wrong side. Because of this, conformity does not always come from open pressure. It can also come from the need to be accepted by the group and the worry of being left outside it.

2.2. The driving role of moral emotions

Moral emotions are often what make an online dispute move quickly. When users feel anger, disgust, sympathy for victims, or a strong sense of fairness, they are more likely to speak, repost, and ask others to take a position. In this situation, people are not simply sharing information. They are also showing what they think is acceptable or unacceptable. For some users, joining the discussion becomes a way to prove that they are standing on the right side of the conflict.

The difficulty is that these emotions can grow too strong in online spaces. Once anger becomes the main tone, the whole event may be reduced to a simple judgment of right or wrong. Context, intention, and later explanation may be ignored. The target may then face criticism together with insults, humiliation, threats, and lasting damage to reputation. At that point, a demand for accountability can turn into public shaming.

2.3. Group polarization and public opinion reinforcement

Group polarization can be seen when people become more certain after talking mostly with others who already agree with them. This often happens on social media. Users may follow similar accounts, enter similar communities, and see the same kind of posts many times. Gradually, a moderate opinion can sound weak, while a harsher one may seem more acceptable inside the group. In this kind of environment, ordinary criticism may slowly become a demand for stronger punishment.

Recommendation systems may deepen this pattern^[3]. Platforms often show users content related to what they have already clicked, liked, shared, or argued about. During a controversy, this can mean repeated exposure to similar accusations and emotional reactions. A single criticism may then grow into a larger wave of condemnation. People who question the dominant view, or who ask for more context, may also become new targets. This is one reason secondary cancellation can occur.

3. Manifestations and case studies of cancel culture on Anglo-American social media

3.1. Platform types and characteristics

Cancel culture does not spread in the same way on every platform. On Twitter, or X, short posts, replies, reposts, and trending topics can make a dispute visible very quickly. A sentence, screenshot, or short video may circulate before many people understand the full background. Facebook works more through friend networks, pages, and groups, so the reaction may look less public at first but still become intense inside a community. Reddit is different because users gather in topic-based forums where they may already share similar interests, language habits, or moral assumptions.

These differences matter. A controversy may grow quickly on Twitter or X, stay inside a Facebook group before moving outward, or become strong inside a Reddit community before reaching a wider audience. At the same time, none of these platforms is neutral in what it shows to users. Search results, trending lists, group feeds, and recommendations all affect what becomes visible first. When similar views appear again and again, public judgment can move faster and leave less space for other explanations.

3.2. Case-oriented discussion

3.2.1. Public figures

Public figures are often the easiest targets because their words and behavior are already visible^[4]. A speech, interview, social media post, or old comment may be picked up and circulated again. Once the issue becomes a topic of discussion, users may respond through criticism, reposting, hashtags, or calls for boycott. The high visibility of public figures makes the reaction stronger: They are not judged only as private individuals, but also as symbols of certain values, groups, or social problems.

3.2.2. Enterprises and brands

Companies and brands can face the same kind of pressure. A campaign, public statement, hiring choice, or business partnership may be seen by users as offensive, careless, or against certain social values. After that, the reaction may move quickly: People leave negative comments, call for a boycott, ask for an

apology, or tag the company in large numbers. For a brand, this kind of criticism is not only a moral issue. Since reputation and consumer trust are part of its market value, online anger can soon become a business risk.

3.3. User behavior patterns

Ordinary users' behavior on social media also tends to follow several common patterns. Some users leave short comments to show support or disagreement. Others share screenshots, look up old posts, use hashtags, or tag relevant institutions and employers. These actions do not always come from the same purpose. Some users want to demand accountability, some want to stay close to the majority view, and some simply respond to the emotional atmosphere of the discussion. When the recommendation system keeps pushing similar content to users, these separate reactions may slowly gather and become wider public pressure.

4. The social impact of cancel culture

4.1. Impact on individuals

For individuals, the effects of cancel culture can be serious. People who become targets may face open criticism, insults, stigmatization, or social isolation. The pressure is especially heavy when the discussion spreads beyond the original event and begins to affect family, work, or personal relationships. At the psychological level, this may lead to anxiety, self-doubt, fear of expression, or withdrawal from public discussion. At the professional level, public figures, employees, or representatives of organizations may lose opportunities, reputation, or long-term career resources.

4.2. Impact on groups and public opinion

Public discussion can become narrow under cancel culture. In a circle where most people already agree, the same judgment is repeated again and again. After a while, it may sound like the only position that is allowed. The original event is then treated less as a complicated situation and more as a moral test. A person who disagrees, or only asks for more context, may be seen as protecting the target. In this atmosphere, careful discussion is hard to continue, and a complex event is easily turned into a simple label.

4.3. Long-term impact on platforms and society

In the long run, cancel culture creates difficulties for both platforms and digital society. Platforms benefit from fast interaction and high engagement, but the same design can encourage emotional conflict and concentrated public attacks. If this pattern becomes normal, users may become more cautious, less willing to express uncertain opinions, and more likely to judge others quickly. The challenge is to keep public accountability while avoiding cyberbullying, excessive moral scrutiny, and the loss of constructive dialogue^[5].

5. Countermeasures and recommendations

5.1. Platform governance strategy

Platform governance still matters, but it should not be treated as a simple cure. Social media companies decide, in many small ways, which posts are easier to see, which reports are taken seriously, and which kinds of abuse are removed. They can make their reporting rules clearer and act more consistently when harassment, false information, or organized attacks appear. But governance also has a risk. If platforms only try to stop every controversy, they may also weaken public criticism. The harder task is to reduce abuse without closing the space for disagreement and debate.

5.2. User education and public opinion literacy

User education is also necessary. Many users enter online controversies quickly, before they check the source, context, or reliability of the information^[6]. Public opinion literacy is not just the skill of using a platform. It also means slowing down before joining a controversy: Checking where the information comes from, noticing whether the language is trying to provoke anger, and avoiding claims that have not been verified. Users also need to think about what online punishment may do to a real person or organization. Courses, public lectures, and media education programs can help, but these habits also have to be practiced by ordinary users in everyday online discussions.

5.3. Social policy and legal recommendations

Cancel culture is not only a problem for social media platforms. It also raises questions about how far public criticism should go, and how individual rights should be protected when criticism becomes harmful. Laws and policies are needed when online attacks involve cyberbullying, defamation, or false information. But legal control also has to be used carefully. Public criticism can be a form of social supervision, especially when powerful people or organizations are involved. A better digital environment therefore depends on two sides: protecting users from real harm, and leaving enough room for reasonable criticism and debate.

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed cancel culture from the perspective of social psychology. The discussion suggests that social identity, conformity, moral emotions, and group polarization can help explain how ordinary online criticism may grow into wider collective pressure. The operating logic of social media platforms, especially personalized recommendation systems and echo chamber effects, may also make this process faster and more intense. At the same time, this paper has clear limitations. It does not use original survey data, targeted interviews, or systematic content analysis, so its conclusions are mainly explanatory rather than empirical. Future researchers could test these arguments more directly through empirical methods. They could also compare different cultural backgrounds, platform rules, and types of public controversy to see whether these mechanisms work in the same way in different situations.

About the author

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