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Emory University Hospital
Midtown, Atlanta, GA, USA

Correspondence to:
Vincent Adeyemi,
vincrayun@gmail.com

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The Psychological Impact of Cancel Culture: Anxiety, Social Isolation, and Self-Censorship

Vincent Adeyemi

ABSTRACT

In the era of social media, cancel culture has spread widely and affected people from all walks of life. Its psychological impacts are significant and include increased anxiety, social isolation, and self-censorship despite the fact that it is frequently described in terms of moral accountability. People who are the targets of cancel culture experience severe emotional suffering as a result of cyberbullying, reputational harm, and public humiliation. These experiences subsequently foster a vicious cycle of fear and repression of free speech. Individual well-being and societal advancement are at long-term risk due to cancel culture's societal repercussions, which include heightened polarization and a reluctance to have candid conversations. This article examines the psychological repercussions of cancel culture, highlighting the necessity of resilience-building techniques and restorative measures to lessen its negative impacts.

Keywords: Cancel culture, Psychological impact, Social isolation, Self-censorship, Anxiety

Introduction

The widespread use of social media has brought changes to interpersonal communication, idea dissemination and sharing, and accountability practices among individuals. Alongside these changes is the evolution of a significant phenomenon referred to as “cancel culture.”¹ In July 2020, *Harper's Magazine* characterized cancel culture as a novel array of moral perspectives and political allegiances undermining our standards of open discourse and acceptance of diversity in favor of ideological uniformity. Cancellation of individuals, locations, or entities is a socially mediated phenomenon with origins from the queer communities of color.² Although it is mainly done via social media, cancel culture and canceling have roots in Black emancipation and protest, predating the internet.^{3,4}

Being canceled is often associated with celebrities, businesses, and other unattainable individuals. Politicians, commentators, celebrities, scholars, and the general populace have transformed the concept of being canceled into a moral panic, often compared to genuine physical injury. The online audience typically interpreted the panic as a final plea for justice. This neologism is believed to have resulted in an unjustified apprehension of censorship and suppression.^{2,5} Cancel culture has been perceived as having more harm than good. We have concerning claims of tenets, where supporters argue that cancel culture reinstates representation and accountability; however, critics focus on the disproportionate humiliation and overblown consequences. While cancel culture seeks to eliminate bias,

it reinserts bias at another recipient by the use of the “we versus them” mentality.³

The extent and severity of canceling can vary depending on the cultural context, with certain groups accepting it as a social norm. Others, however, might see it as punitive or polarizing. Cancel culture can enforce social justice, encourage group responsibility, and hold people and organizations accountable for damaging actions. It elevates under-represented voices by questioning established power structures and providing a forum for usually ignored people. It can occasionally result in significant change, including heightened awareness of racism, sexism, or other types of discrimination, which forces offenders to examine their behavior and make reparations. However, cancel culture differs greatly depending on demographics, society, and situation.⁶

Some thought has been given to the psychological effects of “cancel culture” and even fear of the mere existence of the phenomenon. Some of the new concerns that have emerged from the cancel culture are an increase in the levels of anxiety, social isolation, and self-censorship.^{7,8} The consequences of cancel culture are psychological and often profound. The impact of cancel culture on people's mental health has been widely discussed in scientific research. At an individual level, various targets of cancel culture are likely to develop high levels of anxiety because their marginalization is public, and the impacts of cancel culture are often unpredictable in terms of apparent reach. This is usually followed by social isolation, as canceled people are commonly rejected by their peers and employers. Lastly, there is a more observed rise in cases of self-censorship, where people will avoid expressing themselves to prevent a backlash. These psychological effects are not limited to those directly canceled; observers and potential targets may also internalize these risks, leading to widespread caution and suppression of dialogue.^{7,9}

There is currently much said and written about the ethical and societal consequences of cancel culture. Still, there are few discussions about the psychologically profound implications that cancel culture has on its subjects and society. This article focuses on the significant gap in the observance of “cancel culture” that is linked to several psychological effects, including anxiety, social isolation, self-censorship, and oppression of one's voice. While many authors provide a social perspective on cancel culture, there is a dearth of research on the long-standing and vast psychological and social consequences for both the individuals targeted and others who may be at risk of targeting. Consequently, this article aims to explain the complex

psychological implications of the cancel culture phenomenon to individuals and society.

What is Cancel Culture?

There is no definitive consensus on the exact meaning of cancel culture. Cancel culture refers to an organized boycott of individuals, groups, or organizations to punish or correct them over perceived offenses, typically via social media platforms. It is a process through which a coordinated group of critics targets an individual's or organization's career or reputation due to an opinion deemed dishonorable or unworthy. Extensive discussions of the "cancel culture" phenomenon in society have emerged over the past few years. This is a result of scandals related to the use of what is considered by some people morally reprehensible language and behavior, including racism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sexual harassment and assault, misogyny, ageism, anti-lesbian, and gay sentiment.⁵

The term "cancellation" broadly means a form of public shaming of someone whereby one or many users on social media platforms announce a boycott or condemnation of a particular individual or organization. One of the key features of cancel culture is how fast it operates. In an era of the wide use of social media, there is a timely distribution of information. This can result in a rapid emergence of online mob groups akin to hysteria, leading to quick and unpredictable consequences of being "canceled." Quite often, an innocent-looking tweet or comment sparks something much greater, leading to significant personal and professional repercussions.¹⁰

The Psychological Impact of Cancel Culture

The psychological consequences of cancel culture for those who receive the brunt of the backlash and those who stand in the shadow and witness their peers get canceled are short-term and long-term. Three key psychological impacts noted include increased levels of anxiety, social isolation, and self-censorship. These effects often interact and reinforce each other, making the overall impact on mental health even worse. For instance, anxiety may result in social isolation, and this can subsequently increase feelings of fear and helplessness. Likewise, the pressure of the possibility of cancellation from an audience can make people refrain from sharing their opinions. Such a vicious cycle fosters conditions whereby individuals are very sensitive when making their moves and utterances, reinforcing fear, shame, and self-suppression. In the long run, they lead to things like chronic emotional distress, decreased quality of life, and feelings of insecurity pervading one's entire life.⁹

Anxiety: A Core Consequence of Cancel Culture

The most immediate psychological impact of cancel culture is anxiety. The American Psychological Association defines anxiety as a state of heightened arousal and apprehension. It is often exhibited by people implicated in cancel culture. Social media platforms increase the stringency of public scrutiny, which usually puts immense pressure on the parties accused of

committing a vice. When individuals are canceled, they experience extreme pervasiveness, a high magnitude of fear, and distress linked to public condemnation and potential societal erasure. In this case, anxiety stems more from the uncontrollability of the reaction and the speed of events in the digital age.¹¹ The possibility of being publicly humiliated, losing one's job, or facing other career or personal consequences creates a heightened sense of vulnerability.¹²

Cancel cultures can cause anxiety to people who experience cancellation and also witness such events. As cancel culture increasingly finds a place in society, people are always on the lookout for something that may get them canceled. Such vigilantism helps explain why this general culture of cancellation fuels anxiety in those who are not even involved in any form of cancellation.⁷ Anxiety can manifest in a variety of ways for those who are specifically targeted. These include anticipatory anxiety, which is the worry of what may happen next, and social anxiety, which is the worry of being judged by others. Existential anxiety is the worry of losing one's identity or place in society. Thus, canceling imposes mental harm, which involves significant disorders such as depression and powerlessness.⁹

Mechanisms of Anxiety Induction in Cancel Culture

The mechanisms through which cancel culture induces anxiety include public shaming, cyberbullying, and reputational damage. The public shaming process is one of the primary reasons why cancel culture is coupled with levels of anxiety. Public cancellation of individuals tends to provoke almost unanimous indignation and criticism, often shared on multiple social media platforms. It can be wearisome having to face this public exposure and feel judgments from one's immediate social circle and all the other people on the platform. The feeling of being "shamed" publicly is terrifying and causes some forms of anxiety. Public shaming often creates much concern for the social status, interpersonal relationships, and future career impacts that an individual is likely to face. The distress that is caused by public shaming rises when the criticism is either in the form of an attack or involves elements of hostility.¹³

Cyberbullying also acts as a tool that induces and amplifies anxiety with regard to cancel culture. People get to be anonymous, and this helps foster toxic behaviors like cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying supports aggressive and negative comments, threat messages, and undermining rumors, which a victim can receive at any time. The constant exposure causes and intensifies the level of anxiety and hopelessness since people begin to feel that they are trapped within the cycle of constantly being condemned and verbally assaulted. Online trolls and critics remain faceless, promoting fear, since distinguishing the real intent of the attackers becomes difficult.^{3,5}

Reputational damage significantly contributes to anxiety within the framework of cancel culture. Cancellation frequently results in enduring harm to an individual's reputation, regardless of whether the

cancellation stems from misunderstandings or inflated assertions. A damaged reputation can lead to significant repercussions, especially for public figures like celebrities, politicians, and influencers, who depend on their image and public perception for career sustainability. Reputational damage may result in the loss of endorsements, employment opportunities, and social connections, thereby exacerbating anxiety. People can begin to feel uncertain about their ability to repair the public image, which can increase general anxiety about the future.^{14,15}

The Role of Social Media in Amplifying Anxiety

Today's prevailing era of digitalization has resulted in heightened superimposing effects on the generation of anxiety related to cancellation, especially through social media. The findings show that perceptions of public exposure and permanence of content play a crucial role in escalating the anxiety level of persons involved in cancel culture. It only takes one person to make a specific post that receives high traffic, and within a few hours, millions of individuals have "liked," shared, and commented on the post. This creates a permanently open exposure where one's behavior and words may be put under public comment regardless of the motives.^{13,16}

A new behavioral pattern called "always online," which is characterized by the expectation of being constantly connected to social networks, further aggravates the psychological pressure on individuals. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and other such platforms are used as judgment and/or discourse sites where people, their opinions, and actions are often evaluated in real time. People know that at some unforeseen point, their utterances or actions, or things that they have done wrong in the past, can be unfavorably commented upon. The "always online" culture sustains a culture of risk; the individual now more often assumes that they can be exposed to being caught performing ineptly in the event that their judgment or evaluation is quizzed. The feeling of being watched brings in constant anxiety, and this has profound consequences for mental health.^{14,17}

Social Isolation: The Aftermath of Cancellation

Social isolation, defined as the absence of meaningful social connections, is a significant psychological consequence of cancel culture. When exposed to public ridicule, people often get barred from their social, work-related, and other circles of friends. This exclusion has highly negative consequences, significantly affecting an individual's feeling of connectedness, getting support from others, and overall psychological well-being. Whenever a person gets canceled, it becomes challenging to maintain friendships and see family members, and often, even the support from the workplace evaporates, thus leaving a person very lonely.^{18,19}

For many, the initial reaction to cancellation is often shock and disbelief, which gradually shifts into a more profound sense of social dislocation. The experience of public ostracism can disrupt an individual's personal

and social identity, which is often anchored in their social and professional affiliations. This compounded sense of alienation can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, further isolating individuals from seeking support or reintegrating into their community.^{20,21}

Empirical Evidence: The Extent of Social Isolation

Studies on the effects of ostracism have shown that social exclusion triggers the parts of the brain that respond to physical discomfort, revealing the crucial emotional and psychological consequences of exclusion. In cancel culture, rejection is not just from close circles of friends and contacts but also from professionals and even at the community level. Self-exclusion in a community or an organization or, in general, social isolation enhances emotional suffering and a sense of homelessness.²¹

It is essential to understand that the process of being "canceled" is not always fast or clearly defined. In most cases, individuals are demoralized through a slow process where their actions or words are scrutinized over time, and their reputations are tarnished through persistent negative publicity. As the cancellation process continues, shunning (an intentional and often public act of rejection) is likely to occur, which solidifies the individuals' sense of rejection. Social exclusion, particularly in the age of social media, takes on an amplified dimension: the wider the online audience, the harsher the bullying and isolation, and the more detachment an individual faces, and this strengthens their social exclusion.²⁰

Social isolation creates a vicious cycle, which further compounds the psychological impact of cancel culture. As individuals become more withdrawn, the refraining makes their mental health worse since it is challenging for them to start fixing their relationships, reconstruct their privacy, or get back into social life. The more time they spend in isolation, the worse their psychological state worsens and can get as far as PTSD, anxiety disorders, or even suicidal tendencies.²²

Self-Censorship: A Coping Mechanism with Broader Implications

Self-censorship is suppressing or modifying one's opinions or behavior to evade social repercussions. It is a common reaction to cancel culture. Being self-censored keeps some people from immediate repercussions, but it comes at a price for personal expression, creativity, and societal discourse. After observing how trivial actions and speech get destroyed by speculation of guilt, many start to censor their speech and behaviors, aiming to act to prevent the accusation of wrongdoing. This often inhibits free expression at many levels—often subconsciously—creating a climate of self-surveillance in which people do not say what they believe, either in dissent or in a contrary way. This may lead to a chilling effect on dialogue over time, suppressing creativity, critical thinking, and diversity of thought, which are all important for both individual and societal development.³

Self-censorship poses significant concerns in academic and professional environments, where the free

exchange of ideas is crucial. The fear of cancellation makes people afraid of expressing their opinions about political, social, or cultural things for fear of retribution. Speaking comes with the apprehension that it can adversely impact personal development and career progression as individuals tend not to take certain risks and show who they indeed are. This self-censorship also affects the larger society because free expression is impeded, and this is against democratic values, particularly the value of open dialogue and debate.^{23,24}

Fear of judgment and potential reputational harm are significant drivers of self-censorship. Research shows that 73% of social media users worried about being “canceled” and changed their online behavior for that reason. The modifications were avoiding drawing controversial topics or sharing personal opinions at all. Self-censorship may result in internal conflict and reduced self-esteem as individuals perceive an inability to convey their true identities, and this has been found to increase anxiety and stress.^{25,26}

Case Study on the Psychological Impact of Cancel Culture

J.K. Rowling’s case serves as an example of the anxiety caused by cancel culture. She is the author of the well-known Harry Potter book series. She was widely criticized for the remarks she made about the rights of transgender people. Rowling’s endorsement of TERFism in a tweet sparked the issue. TERFism holds that a person’s gender is solely determined by their biological sex and that trans women are not women. She then further supported her viewpoint by making fun of a transgender news headline on Twitter. Rowling received a flurry of internet criticism after making remarks that many saw as transphobic, with many urging boycotts of her films and novels.^{27,28}

Rowling went through a great deal of anxiety in reaction, and she openly discussed the psychological effects of being widely criticized. Rowling’s concern stemmed from both the instant criticism and the continuous fear of more cancellations while her opinions were being examined and questioned. Rowling’s example demonstrates how cancel culture can create a widespread feeling of vulnerability and anxiety.^{5,28} The anxiety experienced by public figures is exacerbated by the awareness that their reputations and careers are at stake and that any mistake or perceived transgression could have dire repercussions. People struggle to strike a balance between their freedom of expression and personal convictions and the fear of public retaliation, which increases their emotional load.²⁹

The Broader Impact of Cancel Culture: The Psychological Effects on Society

Cancel culture has profound psychological impacts on people, which also have broader societal repercussions. More moral division along ideological lines has resulted from the rise of cancel culture, which has increased societal polarization. People dread being “canceled” due to their acts and words, which is evident in everyday encounters and political discourse. Communities are unable to communicate and establish

common ground when they are surrounded by the fear and separation that cancel culture has created.³⁰

The psychological ramifications of cancel culture could have long-term impacts on the welfare of society. Individuals who experience anxiety, social isolation, or self-censorship may become less resilient as a group, making them less able to handle issues in the future. People may be reluctant to take chances, share ideas, or even challenge the status quo if there is widespread fear and disengagement, which will hinder a society’s ability to innovate.^{8,9}

Mitigating the Psychological Impact of Cancel Culture

Since cancel culture does cause such severe psychological effects, it is important to study the structural methods of building a more positive public dialogue. Improving digital literacy is essential to lessening cancel culture’s effects. Teaching society more about the intricacies of online interactions and the potential impact of being publicly humiliated may promote a more positive online environment. Restorative methods can be promoted as an alternative to the punitive cancel culture by emphasizing accountability and reconciliation above punishment. Restorative methods aid in the psychological healing of both victims and offenders.^{31,32}

Building psychological resilience is crucial for those at risk of cancellation or who have been canceled. The effects of cancel culture on mental health often require the use of strategies such as social support, mindfulness, and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to rehabilitate the individual. Social media companies and users should follow ethical conduct to strike a balance between responsibility and empathy. Cancel culture’s occurrence and extent can be reduced by adopting strategies such as content moderation, encouraging context-based decisions, and eliminating cyberbullying.³³

Conclusion

Anxiety, social isolation, and self-censorship are some of the major psychological effects of cancel culture. Beyond people who are specifically targeted, cancel culture has an impact on society at large by reducing communication and deepening divisions. Building psychological resilience, encouraging restorative justice, and cultivating empathy are essential to lessening these effects. The negative effects of cancel culture can be lessened by a move toward more deliberate and responsible online contacts, which will promote social cohesiveness and individual well-being.

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