

#CancelCultureIsOverParty: Why Twitter's 'cancel culture' is toxic and unhelpful to genuine social change

In the last few years, the social media network, Twitter, has become a breeding ground for social activists, ready at all times to call out and cancel public figures if they step out of line. It's becoming more and more common to see a new celebrities name trending for the day; another celebrity who's reputation has fallen due to a terrible action, a feud, or a comment made 10 years prior. In quite a few cases, the 'cancellation' is justified. For example, Ansel Elgort lost the public's support after it was alleged that he sexually assaulted a 17-year-old girl. His upcoming movie, 'West Side Story', set to be released in 2021, is being boycotted due to his presence as the leading man in the film. However, I believe that, overall, cancel culture is a very toxic trend on the Internet. When celebrities are cancelled over a misconstrued comment, they are not given a chance to learn from their mistakes, grow, and continue to use their platform for good. This 'cancel culture' is unhelpful to genuine social change as it doesn't teach the perpetrators anything; it merely erases them from the online network and leaves others fearing what could happen to their reputation and careers if they slip up, even just once. We should be encouraging a network where we let others learn from their mistakes, and give them a chance to grow, without destroying their livelihood. That's when genuine social change happens. In this essay I will be outlining the main issues that lie within cancel culture, and how, as a network, we can respond better.

According to Merriam-Webster, 'cancel culture' is defined as, "the practice or tendency of engaging in mass canceling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure". (*Merriam-Webster, 2021, para. 1*). The term, 'cancel culture' only began being used as a popular term across the internet in 2017, and it's rapidly grown into a controversial trend. One of the most notable first uses of the word, was in regards to controversy surrounding Olympic Gymnast, Gabby Douglas, who was victim-blaming sexual assault survivor's on Twitter. Shanita Hubbard, a writer, tweeted, "Let's talk 'cancel culture.' Personally, I am willing to give a lot of grace to young Black girls simply because the world doesn't" (*Hubbard, 2017*). While cancel culture has been growing exponentially, it managed to escape its original internet confines and reached the political landscape. In a 2019 interview, Barack Obama said of the trend, "That's not activism. That's not bringing about change... If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far. That's easy to do." (*Rueb, E. S. & Taylor, D. B., 2019, para. 10*). I would completely agree with what Obama has said. Social change is brought through the re-teaching and re-learning of others. Others should be allowed to make mistakes, as long as they are willing to accept them and aim to be better. Yet, cancel culture creates an environment where a public figure can make one mistake, even if it was 10 years prior, and no longer be allowed a platform to speak, apologise, or prove they have changed. It is a very common occurrence that after a 'cancellation', if the person does try to apologise, it will be called 'un-genuine' and met with negative criticism. Once the online network has chosen the next target of cancel culture, it's very difficult for the target to escape their fate.

One of the most notable issues with cancel culture is the risk to freedom of expression. The freedom to speak your mind and express yourself is very highly valued in the present-day, but it seems to only apply to people whose opinions align with the majority of progressive, Twitter users. As written by Victor Menaldo in the Seattle Times, "Becoming our best selves is the key to bettering ourselves. This means being free to make mistakes and learn from them. It means the freedom to speak our mind and freedom to give people the benefit of the doubt." (*Menaldo, 2020, para. 12*). In this current day and age, the primarily 'accepted' way of thinking is a progressive, 'left-wing'

mindset. While I myself align with this, which is common amongst Millennials and Gen-Z groups, I do believe in the freedom of expression for everyone. I may not agree with their opinion but I don't have the right to remove them from a platform due to it. However, this seems to be an ever-growing mindset within the cancel culture community. Professor Sigal Ben-Porath commented on cancel culture versus free speech, stating, "They say something on Twitter which may be their views or may be a joke and they lose their job. This is the goal of a lot of these canceling campaigns, for the person to lose their job." (Johnson, G., 2020, para. 11). When the online network has become so strong and so 'politically correct' that it can cause someone to lose their career and livelihood due to exercising their freedom of speech online, it calls for something to change. This isn't creating social change; it is merely silencing user's voices if they don't agree with the generally accepted thoughts of the online network, erasing freedom of expression and causing people to fear sharing their opinions.

A very serious outcome of cancel culture is 'doxxing'. Doxxing, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is "to publicly identify or publish private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge". (Merriam-Webster, 2021, para. 1). It is becoming more and more common to see people's private details such as full names, address, place of work etc. published on Twitter after they have posted an offensive comment or idea. This trend became more well-known when Disney actor, Skai Jackson, began doxxing people on Twitter (including minors) for making racist comments. On July of 2020, she wrote, "Another racist that must be exposed. Her name is ___ and she goes to ___ highschool ! The school knew she did this and did NOTHING about it smh" (Jackson, 2020).* It was further popularised during the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's death, with people taking to Twitter to dox dozens of federal officers caught in photos or videos of the protests. While it is not illegal to repost information that was already public on the internet, doxxing does violate Twitter's rules. No matter what crime has been committed, doxxing should never be the answer, as it puts not only the target in danger, but innocent victims in the situation such as family, housemates and friends. It is clear, though the use of doxxing, that cancel culture has very malicious intent. The intended outcome of 'cancelling' a public figure is very rarely to teach them of their mistake and allow them to learn, especially when doxxing takes place. It is to make it clear that they have made a mistake, and as a consequence they will have their platform and support taken away. In extreme cases, they will be harassed through the use of their phone number or home address, which has been published online as a form of punishment. Professor Amanda Koontz, on the topic of using tactics such as doxxing to publicly shame, "When you have these forms of public shaming...it turns social issues into something that is completely individualized...It puts great responsibility on an individual, and it does not [always] encourage actual societal change. We haven't taken care of the larger institutional or systemic issues." (Dudenhoefer, 2020, para. 30). This summarises the major issue with cancel culture. It is simply a form of public shaming, using the facade of social change, without actually allowing people to change. We should be targeting the major institutions or systems that create views such as homophobia, sexism and racism, rather than shaming and 'cancelling' the individuals who make or have previously made a mistaken comment. This would more effectively create social change without risking the safety and security of others on the internet.

Finally, one of the biggest flaws within cancel culture on Twitter is false allegations. Unfortunately, with the cancelling of public figures becoming seemingly easier, it's become more popular to falsify allegations against celebrities with the intent to cause a scandal. This is unfair both for the celebrity involved, and for victims with genuine allegations, as it makes them seem less trustworthy. This is common with sexual assault allegations due to the #MeToo movement. However, I will be focusing on the false allegations claimed against YouTube creator and beauty guru, James Charles, which

nearly caused the downfall of his career. On May 10th, 2019, Tati Westbrook, another YouTube creator and beauty guru, uploaded a video in which she explained why she no longer wanted to associate with former friend, James Charles. Within this video, one of the most serious issues alleged was that James had been using his celebrity status and power to sexually coerce straight men, branding him a 'sexual predator'. This caused James Charles to lose nearly 3 million subscribers, while Tati Westbrook gained 4 million subscribers. Over the next 8 days, James Charles' former fans jumped ship and he was effectively 'cancelled'. On May 18th, Charles released his response video, in which he was able to prove through screenshots, that the alleged predatory behaviour was falsified. Tati Westbrook came forward, claiming she was pressured to make the video and was fed false allegations from other YouTubers, and James Charles' subscriber count slowly began to rise again. It was a scandal that took over the internet, and caused many major news outlets to begin discussing the toxicity of cancel culture. The outcry from James' fans in the days after Westbrook's video was unlike anything seen from the cancel culture trend before, with people finding ways to demonstrate their disgust with the 19-year-old, destroying his eyeshadow palette product. "One dropped the palette into a bathtub full of water. Another painted a snake over the compact's logo. Still another painted, in what appears to be Wite-Out, the words "Bye Sister" — a reference to the title of the Ms. Westbrook's video." (*Safronova, 2019, para. 11*). This scandal was the very epitome of why cancel culture has to change. Within hours, James Charles' career had been destroyed, with celebrities and brands unfollowing him to protect their own reputations. The situation also severely damaged Charles' mental health, with him speaking of his friend's support in an interview, "I don't think I would have made it through everything that went on without them being with me and making sure that I was okay and waking up in the middle of the night to check on me every 10 minutes to make sure I didn't, like, literally do something dangerous." (*Rodulfo & Walsh, 2020, para. 47*). Twitter's cancel culture creates an environment in which false allegations can live and grow, affecting someone's livelihood, mental health and career. Twitter allows this environment in which people are excited to watch and be a part of someone's downfall, and jump of the bandwagon of hate before allowing the target to explain themselves. This is a large issue that has to be addressed by the online network, such as putting rules against hate speech in place, but also inwardly addressed by the participants in cancel culture. As I've said previously, we have to create a more forgiving environment where we allow others to explain, learn and grow.

Overall, I believe that Twitter's cancel culture creates a very toxic online network that negatively affects the livelihoods, careers, relationships and mental health of the people who are targeted. It displays itself as a form of social change, yet its use of tactics, such as silencing freedom of expression and doxxing, are intended to publicly shame an individual, rather than change their mindset and advance change. Adding to that, the risk of false allegations and the willingness to accept them as truth, creates a dangerous environment that we, as an online network, need to change to become more forgiving of mistakes, in order to enact genuine social change.

*I have redacted the personal details of the individual to protect their privacy.

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