

#DragThem:

THE TOXICITY AND PROBLEMATIC ART OF CANCEL CULTURE



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ABSTRACT

In the age of digital media, Twitter has helped individuals find their virtual third place and find people who have similar ideologies and viewpoints, which gives them a community to discuss subjects they are passionate to speak on. These characteristics birthed the phenomenon of cancel culture; this thesis will discuss the toxicity and problematic issues it has encompassed and how it is detrimental to social justice progress. Networked communities and a virtual third place have allowed users to speak out about injustice in social and political terms and allowing their voices to be heard on a global platform. It will mainly discuss the spread of misinformation, harassment of average individuals, and the involved participatory ethos; cancel culture has raised questions about blurring the lines between freedom of speech and harassment. As a fairly new matter within the digital world, it raises questions and concerns as to whether it does more harm than good since it grants distortion of the truth to escalate without thinking of the repercussions.

Introduction

Cancel culture has become a massive phenomenon in recent years, especially now that social media has allowed a space for people to amplify their voices on subjects that have been difficult to broach. Cancel culture is understood to be “the practice of withdrawing support for (or cancelling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered to be objectionable or offensive” (Lizza, 2020). The art of “cancelling” is having a public figure with a questionable opinion that does not fit society’s ideology and placing them in a court of public opinion; the cancel culture is particularly prevalent on Twitter, a platform where celebrities and brands are easily accessible. It first began to hold public figures and celebrities accountable for their actions, but it now has targeted ordinary people living average lives. Cancel culture has a detrimental effect on their core cause and growing to become a problematic spectacle. While Twitter has given marginalized silent voices, it has provided a space and platform to speak deafeningly of social injustice that has plagued our society, giving these voices a community with similar ideologies to belong; however, the movement has led to the fundamental issue losing its meaning due to the harmful and toxic nature that comes with cancel culture.

Cancel Culture Phenomenon

The phenomenon of ‘cancelling’ has become increasingly predominant within social media circles. Twitter, especially, gives users direct access to celebrities and global brands on a platform where you can broadcast your opinion to millions of users. The art of cancelling is not a new occurrence; it is a new-age form of public shaming, a notion that has been present for many years. It is akin to the Salem Witch Trials but in a digital space where people use social media as a platform to hold people accountable for their misbehaviour and shines a light towards injustice within our society (Chiou, 2020, p. 297). It has prescribed users a third place and a community to amplify voices that have been traditionally ignored, allowing it to force difficult conversations across the digital space. Virtual third places have become a space for interaction between equals, where individuals can find an online community specific to their interests.

Virtual third places are a hangout for those who want to be connected to others with similar interests and viewpoints. McArthur (2009, p. 62) states that a third-place delivers “an opportunity for would-be members of cultural groups to seek like-minded individuals”. It acknowledges a “method of self-selection into digital communities [which] allows groups to emerge, form, and prosper” (McArthur & Wright, p. 2). Castells (2006, p. 12) discusses that as a social structure, the development of networked individualism has evolved to fit into the mould of building sociability that aligns with the dominant culture of our societies. By building a communication network, it has helped individuals find a commonplace to discuss current social issues. In terms of the emergence of cancel culture, it has given silent voices a public place to speak out and force discussions on topics that are considered

taboo.

Cancel culture hit its peak during the #MeToo movement in 2017, where people took to Twitter to voice their experiences with sexual assault and how they have been silent for too long. Harvey Weinstein was the movement's driving force, where a staggering eighty-seven women came forward with damaging allegations against him (Moniuszko & Kelly, 2018). Weinstein was acrimoniously vilified online, which led to him fired from The Weinstein Company to his arrest and conviction. Weinstein's ceremonious fall from grace demonstrates the positive consequences of cancelling in the age of social media, holding someone with power accountable for their unjust actions in the eyes of the public. Weinstein's downfall exhibited the workings of a networked public and how influencers lead the movement, the movement was led vigorously by celebrities who were affected by the accusations. The influence that celebrities had in this situation is paramount, actresses and models who spoke out using Twitter and Instagram as their platform such as Rose McGowan, Cara Delevingne and Kate Beckinsale were one of many big names who spoke out and therefore had a role in the influence of the #MeToo Movement. Cancel culture has helped combat sexism, racism, and other social issues that need to address. However, it has now reared an issue where it has negatively impacted discussions where social movements lose their definition by forming an intolerance of opposing social views.

Exposing Fake News

Misinformation has become prevalent, especially with "fake news" becoming a cultural reset in the digital world. Cancel culture does not allow for fact checks when it spreads virulently across the 'Twitterverse', allowing an all-out witch-hunt towards the subject. It is a dangerous movement where it is a robust measure for users to find a community with like-minded people allowing a pack mentality to come out in full force. Cancel culture has not always been towards influential people, but it has affected 'normal' people's everyday lives. Yglesias (2020) provides an example when political data analyst, David Shor, posted a controversial Tweet where he cites Omar Wasow, a Princeton political scientist, work about the correlation between riots and voting numbers. Shor's Tweet stated that the mass protest that led to violent riots, the protest where George Floyd's death spear-headed the movement, would eventually induce a political backlash that will aid in then President Donald Trump's bid for re-election. The Tweet caused public outrage and widespread criticism, leading to Shor's dismissal from his job. Twitter users alleged that there was an underlying presumption that his Tweet, by consensus, was deemed racist. Delanty (2018, p.219) states that the Internet has challenged democracy due to its depersonalization and the filtering of material that is being shared (Sunstein, 2001). The treatment of Shor is an example of the filtering of information that was being broadcast and concrete opinion was made through the networked publics within Twitter.

Chiou (2020) argues that “such public shaming on many occasions can be excessive and simply becomes a way of judging and rejecting anyone who holds a socio-political viewpoint”, in the case of Shor, he provides research and data on how past protests that lead to riots became detrimental to the opposing political party. Somehow, his Tweets were viewed as racist and characterized as anti-Blackness leading to his public denouncement and the loss of his job. The collective participatory behaviour that users performed intensified Shor’s Tweet, allowing others with similar viewpoints to join in and chastise him as his Tweet was deemed offensive.

Social media has become a powerful force in modern life, promoting the “rise of digital participatory cultures and social movements” (Velasco, 2020, p. 2). This participatory behaviour plays a large part within cancel culture, giving a collective group of people a channel to policing public figures’ misconduct by using social media. In Shor’s case, his condemnation was because of a Tweet he posed during a sensitive time. Velasco (2020, p.4) argues that the public act as the judge, jury, and executioner against an individual, where it then spreads like wildfire across social media and become “virulently uncontrollable” (Lu, 2019). Once a movement is uncontrollable, it becomes challenging to maintain, leading to misinformation and individual victimization. Chiou (2020) states that this phenomenon has detrimental effects on society, especially on younger users; the “mentality behind cancel culture is some forms of ‘moral righteousness’ that people believe that is morally justifiable to denounce someone who is morally inferior” (Chiou, 2020). The cancel movement’s mob mentality forces people’s ostracization for their wrongdoings and their livelihood is over with one swift Tweet. The digital age has endorsed victimization due to misinformation and disinformation, spreading a narrative that can be harmful to someone and not allowing people to learn and grow from their mistakes. The narratives are spread rapidly through social networks, particularly Twitter and Facebook, where misinformation ran rampant since there is no method to separate facts from fiction unless optional further research is taken. This then leads to a ‘pack mentality’ when a group of people have settled on their opinion and take on what they believe is correcting injustice.

Escalation of Misinformation

The widespread availability of the Internet, especially in first-world countries, allow the population easy access to the Web, contributing to people globally finding individuals with like-minded perspectives. The meteoric rise of social media grants users a vast amount of information at their fingertips, but this access still allows for incorrect information and misinterpreted messages to escalate. Chang et al. (2020, p. 38) observe that “individuals, who traditionally primarily played a passive role as consumers of information and not as active producers or circulators of content, can now also play an active role creating and circulating information”. These individuals have found a community within Twitter, finding a third place for people where “participants are able to engage with others by answering questions and sharing information specific to that topic” (McArthur & White, 2016, p. 2). The propagated narrative where participants engage in a specific conversation causes outrage that does not allow room for users to make their own decisions on the subject, leading to

misinterpreting messages. Users will “encounter effective flow of outrage, as well as fun and enjoyment, at the expense of an evil other who must be ‘cancelled’, and the pleasures of moral posturing” (Bouvier, 2020, p. 10). Individuals will feel a moral high ground when calling out someone who does not share the same opinion, and it becomes a ‘performative spectacle of ritual bloodletting’ (Bouvier, 2020, p. 1). The cancel movement has blurred the lines between free speech and censorship, giving the inability for open conversations to be discussed by condemning an individual and disallowing them to learn from their mistakes by educating them. It can be argued that cancel culture exists because it has given people a stage to voice their freedom of expression in a third-place and a community for users to discuss similar beliefs and justifies their reasoning to “call out” unacceptable behaviour. This leads to questioning the definition of freedom of speech and whether platforms should be controlled.

The cancel movement does not allow for open discussions on polarised opinions and helps educate a person and enable them to grow and learn from what is considered a mistake in society’s eyes. Cancelling has become counterproductive when attempting to stand for social injustice, and it is “creating a society in which punishment is favoured over rehabilitation” (Tucker, 2018). It has created a platform where it has left no room for error; it has become a flawed system where someone’s opinion on an issue does not perfectly align with a social ideology; it places an individual on a public pedestal held in a court of public opinion. There is no such thing as innocent until proven guilty and, there is no redemption opportunity but must face a dominant narrative that Twitter has already written. Anderson et al. (2021, p. 10) explain that “when an opinion is shared and deemed by social media users (or other stakeholders) to be ‘unpopular’ or taboo, this sort of outrage is construed as cancellation, or even a threat to freedom of speech”. Opinions shared on Twitter allows individuals to have “social connectedness, referring to formal memberships as well as informal social network, and generalized reciprocity, social trust and tolerance” (Luoma-aho, 2018, p. 234). The social trust and reciprocity that has been gained through these Twitter communities, presenting toxicity where when one individual speaks out about someone’s wrongdoing, it “can create a large coalition of people on the internet to buy into the same idea, most of the time without any fact-checking being done” (Santangelo, 2020). The collective mass disagreement leads to issues not being adequately handled and causing resentment instead of treating it as a learning experience. Delanty (2018, p. 221) explains that communication technologies that assisted in sharing information enables the expression of belonging, which is a distinctive aspect about virtual communities, it has made belonging become communicative. The opinions shared on Twitter in attempt to fight injustice grants the expression of belonging as individuals who have found a virtual community that shares the same outlook but it leaves it flawed as it does not give any room for open conversations if you are not a part of their virtual community.

The cancel movement’s core definition is to publicly attack and humiliate an individual because they disagree with their opinion under the guise of political and social justice. It has become problematic as the culture uses it to weaponize people’s free-thinking and create a division between individuals. By

becoming a part of hateful rhetoric and partake in the harassment and bullying, cancel culture jeopardizes the true notion of pursuing genuine political and social justice. Individuals who become a target are generally non-powerful people; Creemers (2016) points out that “Twitter can equally be used to disseminate ideas that are of a much less democratic nature and run counter to social justice”. For example, Natasha Tynes, an author from Washington DC, accused of disgracing a Black Metro worker for eating and drinking on the train where rules state otherwise, posted a photo of her because of Tynes’ disgruntlement (Shannon, 2019). Tynes realized the error in her judgement when online ‘activists’ vilified her online and accused her of being racist and claiming she is anti-Black leading to her losing her upcoming book deal. Delanty (2018, p. 205) argues that the virtual communities is beyond unity and that a new form of individualism has developed around de-massified social relations, displaying that cancel culture has divided opinions whether it is right or wrong. Tynes was an unfortunate instance of cancel culture where mass individuals targeted her in a pretence of social justice.

The art of cancel culture may negatively connote, especially in a digital climate that is perceived as socially damaging. However, there is no denying the positive outcomes when cancelling an individual, especially for those who hold high positions such as politicians, celebrities, and influencers; it is imperative that these people are held accountable for their actions if deemed to be socially unjust. Harvey Weinstein and R. Kelly demonstrate that their actions are to be answered; it allows victims to find the strength to speak out and hold people accountable for their actions. Actions that they believed that they could get away with because of their high standing in society. Twitter allows for a space for “issues or objectives may be less of a shared agreement, as well as mobilization around a simple narrative” (Bouvier, 2020). To boycott these celebrities are warranted, but for ordinary people, it is not justified to ruin their lives because we disagree or misinterpreted their message.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cancel culture is a phenomenon that has dominated across social media platforms, particularly Twitter. Twitter provided their users with a community and a virtual hangout to converse about similar topics, a community that is spread across the globe. These communities allowed individuals to speak out about injustice in social and political terms, holding celebrities and public figures accountable for their actions. The cancel culture movement has become a toxic and problematic issue, spreading misinformation, lacking fact-checking, and damaging innocent victims lives who have been a casualty of relentless harassment. Cancel culture is a relatively new phenomenon that has made it difficult to find plenty of reputable sources on the subject, but there was enough to show that it has become a complex subject. Cancel culture will not wholly leave our digital society, especially when speaking out is essential, but there may be a time and need for it to become an impartial and fair movement.

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