

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CANCEL CULTURE AND COLLECTIVE AGGRESSION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstrak

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Social Identity Theory

The phenomenon of cancel culture has emerged as a dominant instrument of social sanction in the digital era; however, it frequently culminates in destructive forms of collective aggression. This study aims to examine the psychological mechanisms that drive mass participation in public shaming practices and to evaluate their impact on individuals and the broader digital ecosystem. Employing a library research method with a descriptive qualitative approach, this article systematically analyzes scientific literature to identify social psychological patterns underlying the phenomenon. The findings indicate that cancel culture behavior is driven by a combination of internal and external factors. At the individual level, primary motivations include the need for moral validation, social narcissism, and the practice of virtue signaling. These mechanisms are reinforced by the Online Disinhibition Effect, Moral Self-Licensing, and deindividuation, which reduce psychological restraints and provide moral justification for aggressive behavior in cyberspace. At the group level, Social Identity Theory and peer pressure foster loyalty to the in-group, while social media algorithms create echo chambers that accelerate the escalation of collective moral outrage. The impacts of this phenomenon are multidimensional; targets frequently experience chronic stress, anxiety, and social isolation. Conversely, perpetrators tend to gain moral satisfaction and social validation, although they risk reinforcing black-and-white thinking patterns and heightened aggressiveness. Systemically, cancel culture has the potential to cultivate a culture of self-censorship that erodes deliberative dialogue. This study concludes that a holistic understanding of the interaction between personal motivations, group dynamics, and digital structures is essential for mitigating negative consequences and formulating ethical frameworks of social responsibility in digital spaces.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, cyberspace has fundamentally transformed the ways in which individuals express moral disagreement, build solidarity, and impose social sanctions. The concept of the Online Disinhibition Effect, introduced by Suler (2004), explains how anonymity, invisibility, and the absence of nonverbal social cues encourage individuals to act more impulsively and expressively in digital environments than in face-to-face interactions. This transformation is further elaborated by Graham (2020), who argues that social media functions not merely as a communication space, but also as a performative and competitive arena for moral articulation.

Within this context, cancel culture has emerged as one of the most controversial forms of digital social sanction. Norris (2021) views it as a form of contemporary political participation that enables the public to directly demand accountability from elites. Meanwhile, Tan (2022) conceptualizes it as a network-based mechanism of social control in which reputation serves as the primary currency in the digital ecosystem. Initially, cancel culture was often understood as a corrective response to violations of social norms, discrimination, or abuses of power. However, the dynamics of virality and the algorithmic logic of social media platforms render such practices highly susceptible to escalation. Velasco (2020) demonstrates that collectively diffused moral outrage can evolve into disproportionate forms of mass aggression. Similarly, Haryanto (2021) emphasizes that the rapid dissemination of information frequently eliminates opportunities for clarification and contextual nuance.

Psychologically, cancel culture reflects a shift from formal legal sanctions to instantaneous and large-scale digital social sanctions. Bouvier (2020) highlights that the “court of public opinion” operates through exposure, repetition, and reinforcement of collective narratives. Wijaya (2023) further underscores the imbalance between wrongdoing and digital punishment, which often unfolds without clear mechanisms of rehabilitation.

A fundamental issue lies in the blurred boundary between constructive criticism and cyberbullying. Vogels (2021) notes that many internet users report difficulty distinguishing moral advocacy from personal attacks. This finding is reinforced by Pratama (2024), who argues that online community norms are often unstable and susceptible to rapid shifts in majority opinion. From a social psychological perspective, participation in cancel culture can be explained through social identity and group conformity theories. Individuals tend to align with dominant opinions to maintain a sense of belonging and avoid exclusion. In this context, canceling someone is not merely an expression of moral judgment, but also a performative act demonstrating loyalty to one’s group.

Beyond affiliation motives, moral outrage plays a central role. Moral anger provides subjective legitimacy for individuals to publicly attack perceived transgressors. However, without critical reflection and regulatory mechanisms, such emotions may lead to the dehumanization of cancellation targets.

Social media algorithms further intensify these dynamics. Content that evokes strong emotions—anger, disgust, or shock—tends to receive higher visibility. This pattern creates a feedback loop between exposure, mass participation, and conflict escalation, amplifying the psychological impact on targeted individuals. The consequences for victims of cancel culture are substantial. Research (Rochmawati, 2022) indicates a correlation between digital ostracism and increased anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Continuous exposure to massive public criticism may trigger chronic stress and long-term mental health disturbances.

More broadly, Smith (2023) identifies systemic consequences for the digital ecosystem, particularly the emergence of self-censorship. Fear of cancellation discourages individuals from expressing controversial opinions, thereby reducing diversity of perspectives in online public discourse. This phenomenon also transforms the relationship between power and the public. Whereas formal institutions once monopolized mechanisms of sanction, digital publics now possess the capacity to collectively produce and distribute reputational punishment. Although this shift reflects decentralization of power, it simultaneously raises the risk of majoritarian

tyranny.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that cancel culture is not entirely negative. For some marginalized groups, it functions as a tool to demand accountability for discriminatory or unethical conduct that previously escaped formal sanction. In this sense, cancel culture may be interpreted as a form of restorative justice emerging from dissatisfaction with existing systems. However, the tension between accountability and collective aggression remains central. Without clear ethical mechanisms, cancel culture risks intensifying polarization, reinforcing echo chambers, and eroding deliberative dialogue. Consequently, analyzing this phenomenon requires a multidisciplinary approach integrating psychology, digital communication, and social ethics.

Given this complexity, the present article aims to comprehensively examine the psychological mechanisms driving mass participation in cancellation practices and to evaluate their impact on individual mental health and the quality of the digital ecosystem. By integrating empirical findings and relevant theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to contribute conceptually to understanding the dynamics of power, morality, and social responsibility in the era of digital media.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The phenomenon of cancel culture in cyberspace represents a manifestation of complex interactions among technology, individual psychology, social norms, and group dynamics. To understand it comprehensively, this theoretical review integrates key perspectives from cyberpsychology, social psychology, and digital communication.

The primary framework in cyberpsychology, the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004), provides an essential foundation for understanding human behavior in digital environments. This concept emphasizes that characteristics of online media—such as anonymity, asynchronicity, minimal nonverbal cues, and perceived detachment from immediate social consequences—reduce individuals' psychological restraints. As a result, individuals are more likely to express emotions openly, articulate extreme opinions, or engage in aggressive behaviors rarely exhibited in face-to-face contexts. Subsequent research suggests that perceived digital impunity and limited social oversight further amplify tendencies toward online aggression (Lapidot-Leffler & Barak, 2012; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). This phenomenon not only affects individual interactions but also provides a psychological basis for more complex social practices, including public shaming (cancel culture), trolling, and digital ostracism. Moreover, online disinhibition can intensify group dynamics, as group pressure and resonance of extreme opinions reinforce aggressive behaviors, creating cycles of escalation that are difficult to control.

Within social psychology, deindividuation explains how individuals may lose their sense of personal identity and moral accountability when embedded in large or anonymous groups. Initially developed by Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb (1952), and expanded in contemporary research (Reicher et al., 1995; Postmes & Spears, 1998), this concept is highly relevant in digital contexts. In cancel culture, deindividuation enables individuals to conform to group norms without fully considering personal consequences, thereby increasing the likelihood of aggression toward targets perceived as norm violators (Diener, 1980; Zimbardo, 2007). Digital platform features—such as trending hashtags, viral campaigns, and mass retweets or likes—create a virtual “crowd effect” that intensifies social pressure to participate and align with majority opinions. This mechanism contributes to opinion homogenization, where individuals suppress personal doubts to maintain conformity with online groups.

Moral Self-Licensing further strengthens internal justification for aggressive conduct. Individuals who perceive themselves as morally righteous may feel entitled to act offensively toward others (Monin & Miller, 2001). Research also indicates that moral outrage reduces self-control and increases aggressive tendencies, including active participation in cancel culture (Merritt, Efron, & Monin, 2010; Efron, 2022). This mechanism enables individuals to frame

aggressive digital sanctions as manifestations of justice.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how group identity motivates social behavior, including hostility toward out-groups. In digital spaces, in-group identity shapes individuals' efforts to assert group morality and values. Empirical research suggests that cancel culture is often driven by group pressure and the need to demonstrate moral loyalty to digital communities (Hogg, 2020; Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Brown et al., 2022). Social identity differences may intensify polarization, stereotyping, and online aggression (Levine & Reicher, 1996; Branscombe et al., 1999).

Digital vigilantism represents a collective extension of cancel culture, wherein digital publics assume the role of moral adjudicators outside formal legal frameworks (Trottier, 2017). Practices such as doxxing, boycott campaigns, and rapid public mobilization illustrate how moral outrage, combined with digital infrastructure, can produce swift and intense reputational sanctions (Bernstein et al., 2011; Kasra, 2019).

Closely related is call-out culture, which emphasizes public exposure or criticism of perceived norm violations. Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) argue that call-out culture flourishes in morally sensitive environments, where public denunciation aims to uphold ethical standards. However, research indicates that it may also heighten polarization and promote self-censorship (Mueller, 2021).

METHOD

This study employs a library research approach with a descriptive qualitative design, aimed at understanding the phenomenon of cancel culture from a social psychological perspective. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to systematically review relevant literature, analyze empirical findings, and identify psychological patterns underlying cancel culture behavior without conducting primary data collection.

Research Design

The research design is descriptive qualitative in nature, emphasizing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon based on secondary data derived from scholarly literature. The study focuses on examining individual psychological motivations, group dynamics, and the impacts of cancel culture behavior, as well as explaining the interaction between psychological and social factors within digital contexts.

Participants

As a library-based study, the "participants" consist of relevant scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and other academic publications addressing cancel culture, social psychology, online behavior, moral outrage, and group dynamics. Literature selection was guided by inclusion criteria, namely topical relevance, publisher or journal credibility, and recency of publication. This ensured that the analyzed data reflected current theoretical developments and empirical findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic searches of academic databases, including Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and JSTOR. The data collection process began with the identification of relevant keywords such as cancel culture, online disinhibition, moral outrage, digital vigilantism, social identity, and virtue signaling. Retrieved literature was subsequently evaluated based on topic relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to understanding cancel culture behavior. All sources meeting the inclusion criteria were systematically documented to facilitate structured analysis.

Data Analysis

The literature was analyzed using a stepwise Thematic Analysis approach. The first stage involved initial coding, in which each selected source was examined in depth to identify primary psychological themes, such as moral validation, social narcissism, group pressure, and psychological impacts on both targets and perpetrators. The second stage consisted of theme categorization, grouping similar codes into broader thematic categories aligned with the study's

focus. The final stage involved interpretative analysis, whereby the identified themes were examined within established social psychological theories and prior empirical findings, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, group dynamics, and psychological consequences of cancel culture.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity and reliability, the selected literature was cross-compared and examined against established social psychological theories and supported by recent empirical research. The thematic analysis process was conducted systematically and thoroughly documented to enhance transparency and reproducibility. The entire research process was undertaken critically and holistically, taking into account the interaction between individual factors, group pressures, and digital mechanisms, thereby ensuring that the conclusions drawn are academically sound and scientifically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review and thematic analysis, this study finds that cancel culture behavior is shaped by a combination of individual psychological factors, group dynamics, and the structural features of digital media.

First, individual psychological motivations include the need to affirm moral validity, the expression of social narcissism, and the practice of virtue signaling, all of which encourage participation in online social sanctioning. These mechanisms are reinforced by the Online Disinhibition Effect, Moral Self-Licensing, and de-individuation, leading individuals to perceive moral legitimacy in executing offensive actions against targets considered to have violated social norms.

Second, group dynamics intensify this behavior through the mechanisms described by Social Identity Theory and peer pressure. Echo chambers formed by social media algorithms accelerate the spread of moral outrage and pressure individuals to conform to in-group norms, thereby increasing the likelihood of collective participation in cancel culture. The interaction between group loyalty, social validation, and peer pressure generates a cycle of escalation that is difficult to interrupt.

Third, psychological consequences emerge for both targets and perpetrators. Targets frequently experience stress, anxiety, social isolation, and moral distress. In contrast, perpetrators often gain moral satisfaction, social validation, and reinforcement of self-image, although their involvement may also contribute to heightened aggressiveness and rigid black-and-white thinking patterns.

These findings demonstrate that cancel culture is not merely a social phenomenon but rather the outcome of complex interactions among personal motivations, psychological mechanisms, group norms, and digital structures.

Overall, the results underscore the multidimensional nature of cancel culture, integrating internal (psychological) and external (socio-digital) factors. Accordingly, a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon requires a holistic approach that encompasses individuals, groups, and the online media environment.

Discussion

Psychological Motivations: Moral Validation, Narcissism, and Virtue Signaling

The phenomenon of cancel culture is not solely driven by moral outrage, but also by individuals' psychological motivations to affirm their moral and social legitimacy. Drawing on the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) and Moral Self-Licensing (Monin & Miller, 2001), individuals tend to feel freer to express extreme opinions or engage in aggressive actions toward targets perceived as norm violators because they view themselves as occupying the morally "right" position. This process generates internal moral legitimacy, rendering online offensive actions subjectively justified and aligned with one's ethical values.

Moreover, such behavior is closely associated with dimensions of social narcissism and the need for recognition within digital environments. De-individuation and group-based social

identity processes (Festinger et al., 1952; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) enable individuals to express collective opinions as representations of group morality while simultaneously reinforcing their self-image as ethical or principled actors. In this context, cancel culture, call-out culture, and digital vigilantism often function as mechanisms of virtue signaling—that is, the public of moral positioning to gain recognition, status, or validation from in-group members (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Mueller, 2021). Digital affordances such as likes, shares, retweets, and supportive comments provide additional psychological rewards and further reinforce social pressure to uphold group norms.

Thus, the psychological motivations underlying cancel culture represent a convergence of the desire to affirm personal moral validity, expressions of social narcissism, and the practice of virtue signaling. Individuals are driven not only by moral consciousness but also by the psychological need to be perceived as ethically correct within their online communities. The interaction among moral validation, narcissistic reinforcement, and virtue signaling helps explain why cancel culture spreads rapidly, intensifies quickly, and generates substantial social pressure for both targets and group members.

Group Dynamics and Echo Chambers

Group dynamics play a central role in amplifying cancel culture behavior, particularly through the mechanism of echo chambers shaped by social media algorithms (Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011). Echo chambers confine individuals within digital environments that reinforce their existing views and group norms. Consequently, information that supports moral outrage or cancellation narratives is amplified, while alternative perspectives or contextual nuances are marginalized.

Within this environment, peer pressure becomes a critical factor. Individuals may feel compelled to participate in collective actions—such as sharing, liking, or commenting on cancellation content—to avoid being perceived as supportive of the alleged transgressor or as deviating from in-group norms (Asch, 1951; Baron, 2020; Sari, 2024).

This phenomenon can be further explained through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that in-group identity forms the basis for asserting moral alignment and loyalty. The process is strengthened by deindividuation (Festinger et al., 1952), which reduces personal accountability and promotes conformity to group norms. During escalations of collective moral outrage, individuals are motivated not only by moral conviction but also by the desire for social validation and the avoidance of in-group stigma—dynamics consistent with virtue signaling and Moral Self-Licensing (Monin & Miller, 2001; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

Therefore, echo chambers and peer pressure create conditions under which cancel culture can spread rapidly and intensely. The interaction among algorithmic reinforcement, social identity, deindividuation, and the pursuit of moral validation strengthens collective behavior, increases polarization, and reduces individual resistance to dominant cancellation narratives. This explains why cancel culture actions often become viral and difficult to contain, as each individual act is psychologically amplified by broader social and structural digital contexts.

Psychological Impacts on Targets and Perpetrators

Cancel culture not only shapes group dynamics but also significantly affects the psychological well-being of both targets and perpetrators. For targets, cancellation practices may trigger psychological stress, social anxiety, and digital isolation due to moral condemnation, public judgment, and potential doxxing or social exclusion (Trottier, 2017; Bernstein et al., 2011). These effects are intensified by the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004), which facilitates the rapid spread of aggressive comments and hostile interactions, often resulting in overwhelming and unpredictable waves of attack.

For perpetrators, participation in cancel culture can produce moral satisfaction and social validation, consistent with the mechanisms of Moral Self-Licensing (Monin & Miller, 2001) and virtue signaling (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Active engagement in public shaming allows individuals to perceive themselves as ethically justified and socially accepted within their

in-group, thereby enhancing self-image and digital status. However, such involvement may also generate negative psychological consequences, including increased aggressiveness, rigid black-and-white thinking, and internal pressure to continuously uphold a publicly displayed moral identity.

Furthermore, group dynamics and echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011) intensify these psychological effects for both parties. Targets experience escalating social pressure, while perpetrators are encouraged by group norms and peer expectations to sustain participation, forming cycles of recurring digital conflict and opinion polarization.

Taken together, cancel culture produces complex psychological consequences encompassing stress, alienation, moral validation, and the reinforcement of social narcissism. These outcomes must be understood as products of the interplay among individual motivations, group dynamics, and digital structural mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of psychological motivations and digital social dynamics, cancel culture behavior can be understood as the result of complex interactions among individuals, groups, and online media structures. At the individual level, primary psychological motivations include the need to affirm moral validity, the expression of social narcissism, and the practice of virtue signaling, whereby participation in public cancellation provides moral legitimacy and social recognition. This phenomenon is reinforced by the mechanisms of the Online Disinhibition Effect, Moral Self-Licensing, and de-individuation, which lower personal inhibitions and increase aggressive tendencies toward perceived norm violators.

At the group level, Social Identity Theory and peer pressure explain how in-group loyalty drives collective participation, while echo chambers formed by social media algorithms strengthen cancellation narratives, accelerate the spread of moral outrage, and reduce opportunities for critical evaluation. These dynamics generate cycles of escalation in which individuals feel compelled to conform to group norms in order to gain social acceptance and recognition.

The psychological impacts of these interactions are bidirectional. For targets, cancel culture may result in stress, anxiety, social isolation, and moral distress. For perpetrators, engagement in cancellation practices yields moral satisfaction, social validation, and reinforcement of self-image, although it may also foster black-and-white thinking patterns and heightened collective aggression.

Overall, cancel culture constitutes a complex psychological and social phenomenon emerging from the interplay of personal motivations, group pressures, and digital mechanisms, producing significant consequences for both individuals and online communities.

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