

Evaluating the Social and Structural Implications of Cancel Culture

Forum: General Assembly

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Introduction

The occurrence and spread of Cancel Culture have been a few of the most significant trending events in global social media. Although vaguely defined as the “popular practice of withdrawing support for cancelling public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive,” in many sources, Cancel Culture possesses an authoritative power over contemporary society. The original goal of the public to engage in a movement to act for what they believe is right, is certainly laudable.



Depiction of Cancel Culture, by the Time Magazine

However, unlike its intention to form public opinions and carry out actions for the righteous side of the argument, the practice of Cancel Culture has brought numerous problems as well. Issues arising from excessive “cancelling” of certain public figures and companies for a minor statement of offensive- at least presumed to be offensive- opinions have questioned the public whether Cancel Culture is just. The spread of information through social media, which unavoidably accompanies snowballing and fabrication of the truth, is another problem of the worldwide spread Cancel Culture. After all, with the logical fallacy that “majority opinions are the righteous opinions” set as the basis, Cancel Culture will not be able to escape from the social catastrophes it would cause. Thorough discussions on whether Cancel Culture is worth pursuing will be brought as deeds to be evaluated in this committee.

Background

The origin of Cancel Culture, otherwise known as the “Call-out Culture”, cannot be dated to a specific period, but the term coming to the collective consciousness is a very recent phenomenon, dating back to 2017. One may be able to grasp how recent the phenomenon is through the following examples.

1. In June 2020, the Hollywood actor Hartley Sawyer was fired from his cast for the television show “The Flash: Season 7” for his offensive tweets from 2013 resurfacing.
2. In October 2020, the K-Pop band BTS was cancelled in China for them honoring Korean War Sacrifices, which were taken as an offensive opinion by the Chinese public.

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3. In July 2020, museum curator Gary Garrels of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has resigned as a result of the petition that accused him of being racist, claiming that he collected art from white male painters.
4. In 2017, Hollywood Star Matt Damon – known for his appearance in the Jason Borne Series- was accused of making “gross” opinions on Hollywood’s sexual misconduct epidemic.

The most common cancellation involves figures who made words regarding racism that have surfaced during the recent Black Lives Matter protests. However, as seen in the examples of BTS and the trending social media hashtag of “#CancelKorea,” the reasons for cancellations vary globally. The cultural basis on Cancel culture is also largely disparate in different cultures. For example, while the Cancel Culture is treated as a (radical) mode of activism in the North America, it is regarded as a process of exiling a potential danger factor from the society. These differences are vital in realizing how cancellations can be accepted differently in different contexts.

The criticisms tackle that the culture has “gone too far.” The former president of the United States, Barak Obama, stepped into this issue and commented on the danger of Cancel culture and activism on Social Media, that “If all you’re doing is casting stones, you’re probably not going to get that far. That is easy to do,” and “This idea of purity and you’re never compromised, and you’re always politically ‘woke’ and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly.” Similar criticisms point to the lack of credibility in the figures’ cancellation and excessive measures that significantly damage the cancelled figures.

Problems Raised

Economic Damages

The magnitude of damages received by the victims of cancellation is not statistically assessable. Economic damages from boycotts are the most common and yet vary in large degrees: For example, at a brand or corporation level, when the whole Chinese market cancelled BTS in October, the stock prices of their management firm, Big Hit, dropped from 258,000 Korean won to 142,000 Korean won within two weeks and have not yet recovered. Individuals’ suffering worsens as cancelling would result in loss of employment and degradation in their reputations. For example, an American woman, Amy Cooper, was fired in May 2020 after a video showing her filing a false police report on a black birdwatcher went viral on the net and has not recovered her employment after five months.



Amy Cooper, a white woman, called 911 on the black birdwatcher Christian Cooper after he asked her to put her dog on a leash

Emotional Damages

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The Cancellation in Social Media is inescapably chaperon Cyberbullying. Intimidating messages and posts on social Media are posted and sent in a vast amount that aims to offend the victims, as seen in the picture above. The resulting consequences are dreadful to the victims. Katy Perry or Gwyneth Paltrow are just a few examples of people who suffered from depression resulting from the cancellation and malicious comments. British TV star Caroline Flack, and K-pop star Sulli, are also a few examples of figures that have made a tragic decision for suffering from cancellation. No matter if the cancellation was justifiable, the degree of emotional damage that the figures get on their mental health is outrageous as well.

Restriction on Freedom of Speech

Another problem with Cancel Culture is that it restricts the public figures from freely expressing their opinions. The criterion of judging whether an opinion is objectionable or not is vague. Generally accepted that racist or sexist comments could be deemed offensive, some figures are cancelled for an absurd reason. For example, the K-pop band BTS was cancelled in China after honoring the sacrifices of the Korean War.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Guaranteeing such right for the public figures are as important as guaranteeing such result for those who call out on them.

Unconfirmed Accusation



Hollywood star Johnny Depp stepped down from his role in the “Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them” without actually being convicted of his charged crimes.

Another major problem with the Cancel Culture is that some accusations are factually wrong. The most prominent example is Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. In 2016, Amber heard accused his husband, Johnny Depp, of domestic violence and filed for divorce. Johnny Depp was directly cancelled after the trial and was asked to step down from his role in “Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them.” However, in 2019, Depp issued sued Heard for defamation and claimed that it was indeed Heard who has inflicted violence in him. The public went on to cancel Heard and initiated the “#JusticeForJohnnyDepp” hashtag. Heard, in November 2020, is asked to step down from her role in the Hollywood film “Aquaman.” Whether it was Depp or Heard who actually committed violence yet remains a question. However, it is vital to realize that the public has been a bandwagon affecting each other in cancelling them, without any basis on factual evidence.

Hypersensitivity

Hypersensitivity is claimed to be the major cause and at the same time a severe consequence of Cancel Culture. Yet, the concept of hypersensitivity is highly subjective depending on individuals’ approaching perspectives. The judgement regarding the

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hypersensitivity of the following instances are not to be disclosed but left for the decision of the delegates.

1. The billionaire author, J. K Rowling was accused of being a homophobic after posting some comments on social media. The public went on cancelling her and demanded the Warner Brothers Inc. to drop from filmizing her works. The question is whether being a homophobic – a naturally born state- is a justifiable reason for cancellation.
2. Sebastian Stan, better known to the public as the actor of “Winter Soldier” in the Marvel’s Avengers series, was canceled for the following reason: He has not accused his girlfriend of cultural appropriation when she posted a picture of her dressed as a Geisha and wrote “Asian Night” as caption. Is not accusing a girlfriend of cultural appropriation a justifiable reason for cancelling Stan?

Places of High Concern

United States of America

The United States of America holds an important role in the practice of Cancel Culture. The most exemplary cancelled figures around the world are usually from the Hollywood or American Entertainment industry, for the celebrities receives the most attention worldwide. The emergence of Cancel Culture is most severe in the states that it even tackles the comments made years ago. For example, Kevin Hart, an American comedian, was removed from the host of the Oscars Award in 2019 for his homophobic comments on Social Media in 2009. In 2018, a YouTuber named Laura Lee lost over three hundred thousand subscribers as her racist tweets from 2013 resurfaced.

The United States of America is also the place where the issue of cancellation has become very controversial. As the former president Obama said, that those involved in Cancel Culture must “get over them quickly”, the phenomenon is not universally accepted by all. When the Yale University’s professor, Nicholas Christakis, was mobbed by his students for an email sent out by his wife Erica Christakis, and eventually stepped down from his position, the public was nowhere near welcoming this cancellation. He was accused of an email that his wife sent, claiming that students must be able to choose what to wear for Halloween costumes. Similarly, when the Evergreen State College’s professor, Bret Weinstein refused to leave the campus for a non-white day on the campus, the students went viral about this issue and confined the president and professors to demand the firing of Weinstein. The aforementioned cancellations have gone further viral online and resulted in abrupt debates. Observing from how mere expression of opinions regarding an issue has eventuated in an overheated controversy and loss of employment at last, one may infer the severity of Cancel Culture’s influence in the society of the United States.



Kevin Hart was fired from Oscars Host for Homophobic statements from 2009

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The debate regarding cancel culture has stretched to major political institutions as well. The former president, Barak Obama, criticized the practice of Cancel Culture, claiming that “The world is messy” and the idea of being “woke” and therefore cancelling others is a dangerous thought. President Donald Trump has decried Cancel Culture, stressing that it is no different than a “Far-left Fascism” and it is “driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees...is the very definition of totalitarianism.”

Southeast Asia – Hong Kong, Philippines, and Thailand

The Cancel Culture in Philippines have specifically intensified in 2020. #CancelKorea, one of the most trending hashtags on social Media the same year, has originated from Philippines defending against offensive Korean netizens. As a response to racist and intimidating comments against a prominent TikTok star, Bella Porch, the Filipino netizens have cumulated their anti-Korean sentiments and together have trended the aforementioned keyword online. A messy exchange between the strong-voiced netizens of the two nations have then continued, and the heated debate has not ceased until December, three months after the breakout of the incident.

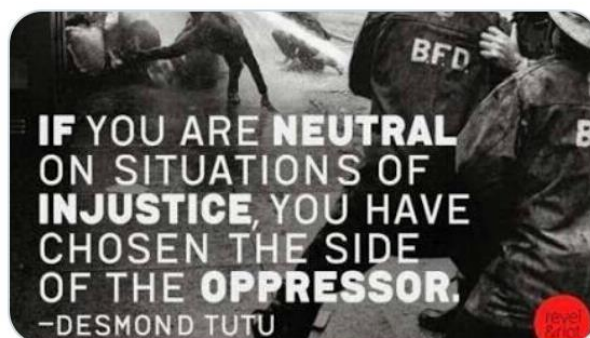
Cancellation resulting from the recent political crisis is another factor that have contributed to the international society spotlighting the Cancel Culture of Southeast Asia. Number of celebrities who has not expressed supporting opinion for the protest has went viral on Social Media and seldom canceled. For example, Hashtag #BanLisa has trended in November after monthlong scrutiny during the pro-democracy protests and as a response to a K-pop star - named Lisa - silencing about the issue. Such cancellation is problematic as it is a representative of public forcing a public figure to speak what they desire to hear from him or her.

In Hong Kong, the similar situation has been prevailing since the initiation of the protests. The most famous example would be the cancellation of the Disney film “Mulan” and related actors involved in the film – including Liu Yifei and Donnie Yen. The main actress – Liu Yifei – has exclusively said that she supports the Hong Kong police who has been perpetrating violence against the protestors. The hashtag #CancelMulan has went viral after her remarks publicized.

Possible Solutions

Internet Censorship

She already chose [#แบนลิซ่า](#)



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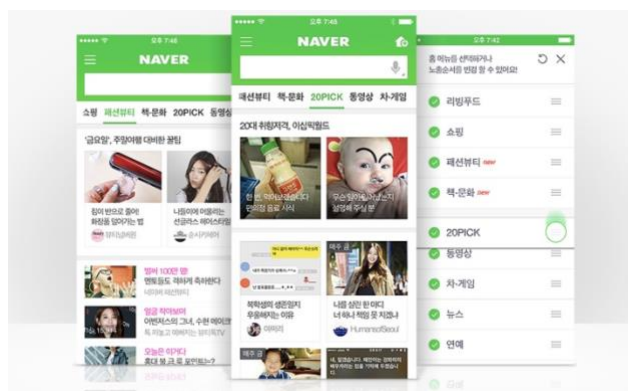
A Tweet that accuses Lisa – a K-pop star – for her silence about the ongoing protest in Thailand

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The most effective measures that prevent the excessive damage created by cancel culture are censoring the internet. The logic is simple: prohibit people from making malicious comments against the victim through regulation.

Yet, such a solution could be highly controversial. One of the most important virtues of the internet is that it must be an open and free place for individuals to share their opinions. Compromise should be made at a level that both the rights of users of the internet and the victims of cancellations' fundamental human rights are protected.

South Korea has taken exemplary measures in finding such a compromise. In 2009, thirty-five Korean websites have implemented a “real-name system” to answer Korea’s amended Information and Communications Network Act. Although the constitutional court rejected the amendment in 2012, the abundance of malicious comments has decreased significantly over the years. The blocking of comments in sports and entertainment-related news on portal sites is another recent measure taken by Korean portals, following the tragic deaths of K-pop figures. Twitter, which has become the main source of cancellation, does not require personal verification of any sort. If measures can carefully tackle it, noteworthy progress could be expected.



Korean Portal Site NAVER discontinues the “comment” section” as a response to continued malicious comments

Self-Regulations

Self-regulations, for both the public figures who could be cancelled and those who cancel them, are essential to impede the malfunctions of cancel culture. Yet, if we were to aggravate the responsibility on the possible victim, brands and celebrities must engage in a critical self-reflection so that their words are not deemed as objectionable or offensive to any parties. This is extremely difficult since the criterion of judging an opinion as offensive or not is vague, as mentioned above.

Promoting self-regulation for the conductors of cancellation is more plausible in this sense. Campaigns and educations regarding the desired use of Social Media and prevention of malicious comments can project a meaningful outcome. In many states, related education and community service are sentenced along with a fine for any of those convicted with cyberbullying and defamation through the net.

Glossary

Cancel Culture: Cancel culture refers to the practice of withdrawing support from and boycotting certain public figures and companies after they have outspoken or committed something considered as offensive or objectionable.

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Cyberbullying: Cyberbullying refers to the use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature, according to the Oxford Library.

Cyberethics: Cyberethics, borrowing quotes from the government of Hong Kong, refers to a set of moral rules or a code of behavior applied to the online environment.



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