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The Toxicity of Cancel Culture

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INTRODUCTION

- Cancel culture refers to a modern form of social ostracism, in which a controversial individual or group receives public backlash for a behavior that is deemed inappropriate or unforgivable.
 - This backlash entails thrusting a targeted individual or group out of professional and social circles as a means of effectively “canceling” their offensive presence.
 - Any behavior can be targeted and labeled “cancel-worthy.”
- Most often, cancel culture targets celebrities and other individuals with power, and occurs on social media platforms such as Twitter.
- Cancel culture is seen as a radicalized form of public shaming and call-out culture, and is frequently described as “outrage culture” by the media.
- Cancel culture aims to highlight the social injustices committed by an individual or group to establish a greater degree of intellectual conformity and social accountability.
- Cancel culture specifically has ties to African American culture.
 - The first notable use of the term “canceled” (in terms of how its understood today) came from the 1991 film *New Jack City*.
 - The term was then popularized on Black Twitter after cast member Cisco Rosado used it in a 2014 episode of *Love & Hip Hop: New York* to break up with someone.
- Cancel culture is largely recognized as a liberal movement, one that’s inspired widespread criticism over the limitations it places on contrarian and comedic voices.

OBJECTIVES

- The main goal with this presentation is to highlight the negative impact that cancel culture has on social discourse and academic debate.
 - Specifically, cancel culture often leads to a hostile environment with little chance of generating a meaningful discussion on an issue of controversy.
- Additionally, there’s an uneven and hypocritical distribution of social justice that occurs within cancel culture – those without enough power or fame are far more likely to suffer harsher consequences than those with it.
 - This also brings the effectiveness of cancel culture into question, as there have been several instances of unintended consequences arising as a result of attempts to “cancel” an individual or group.
- Finally, this presentation aims to expose how this social phenomenon exacerbates ideological intolerance, comedic subjectivity, and political polarization.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

- Several lists detailing prominent examples of cancel culture were analyzed in order to determine any common trends in controversial behavior.
- These examples were also examined in-depth to reveal the exact scope to which an individual or group was effectively “canceled” and to record the discourse environment that was frequently stimulated.
- Articles and public opinion polls on cancel culture were examined as well.

RESULTS

- Individuals targeted by advocates of cancel culture are most commonly cited as being: misogynistic, racist, religiously intolerant, homophobic, transphobic, or ignorant.
- One of the biggest trends can be seen through the Me Too movement, which specifically targets individuals who have a track record for sexual violence or sexually inappropriate behavior.
- Another common trend has been the removal of blackface from any television programs to feature it, which critics of the practice cite as historically racist and harmful to overall perceptions of the African American community.
 - Additionally, individuals practicing blackface for purposes not directly related to television are usually met with heavy criticism and calls for their “cancellation.”
- In the case of Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, who had a photograph resurface of him in blackface at a costume party from 1984, a near statewide movement emerged on social media demanding him to resign from office.
 - However, he remained in office and later won a standing ovation from a mostly black crowd as he reflected back on his actions and marked the 400th anniversary of the arrival of African slaves.
- Actor Ted Danson, who showed up in blackface to perform at the roast of Whoopi Goldberg (his girlfriend at the time) in 1993, was met with both criticism and laughter.
 - He also used racial slurs such as the n-word more than a dozen times throughout his performance.
 - His career didn’t falter as a result of his racist humor – in fact, he just finished filming *The Good Place*, one of NBC’s most popular and critically acclaimed comedies to date.
- A shot in *The Office* episode, “Dwight Christmas,” was removed for featuring a character dressed in blackface as Zwarte Piet.
 - The sequence in *The Office* episode, “The Dundies,” in which Michael Scott appears in yellowface remains on all platforms.
 - Specifically, Michael puts in false teeth and glasses with squinted eyes on them while speaking in a stereotypical oriental accent (see Figure 1 below).
- Despite becoming a target of cancel culture for comments that were deemed transphobic, J.K. Rowling experienced a surge in popularity within Great Britain.
 - Her publisher, Bloomsbury, said its consumer publishing arm grew by 28%.
- After admitting to the sexual misconduct claims made against him in 2017, comedian Louis C.K. returned to the stage and sold dozens of sold-out shows nationwide.
- Chris Harrison, a longtime host of *The Bachelor*, was widely criticized for defending contestant Rachel Kirkconnell after old photos emerged of her attending an antebellum-themed party.
 - Afterwards, he decided to “step down” from the show and had this to say, “While I do not speak for Rachael Kirkconnell, my intentions were simply to ask for grace in offering her an opportunity to speak on her own behalf.”
- Gina Carano was removed from *The Mandalorian*, fired by Disney, and dropped by her agent after making a comparison on social media between being Republican and being Jewish during Nazi Germany.
 - Since then, she has decided to work with *The Daily Wire*, a conservative website run by political commentator Ben Shapiro.
- Disney removed a brief moment from *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* where two minor female characters share a kiss (see Figure 2 below).
 - This was only done for theatrical showings in Singapore, a country known for its restrictive LGBTQ laws, in order to keep the film’s PG-13 rating.
- A Politico poll on public opinion found that 46% of Americans think that public shaming as a result of cancel culture has gone too far, with 49% believing cancel culture to have an overall negative impact on society.
- A Harvard CAPS-Harris Poll survey concluded that 64% of respondents believed a growing cancel culture to be a threat to their freedom. This survey also revealed that 36% perceived cancel culture as a “big problem,” while 32% regarded it as a “moderate problem;” 20% said it was a “small problem” and 13% said it was “not a problem.”
- A CATO Institute national survey recently reported that there’s been an increase in the general public’s fear to share their opinions over the past three years (see Figure 3 below).



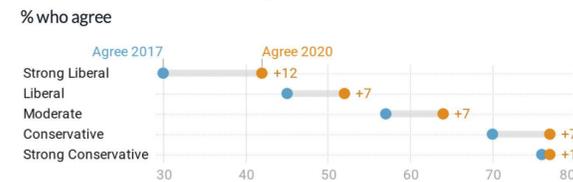
Figure 1



Figure 2

More Americans Have Opinions They’re Afraid to Share in 2020 than in 2017

Agree/Disagree: The political climate these days prevents me from saying things I believe because others might find them offensive.



CATO INSTITUTE SUMMER 2020 NATIONAL SURVEY

Figure 3

CONCLUSION

- Although people note its benefits, cancel culture is still viewed negatively by a majority of the general public.
 - People cite the limitations it places on free speech and the toxic discourse environment it exacerbates as its most problematic issues.
- Cancel culture ignores any notion of intellectual development.
- The distribution of justice for cancel culture is highly uneven.
 - Certain controversies will go unnoticed while others of a similar or less harmful nature are demeritized.
- Cancel culture can often have the opposite effect it intends to have.
- “Canceling” is seen as a necessary form of public shaming, but oftentimes it leads to increased polarization and a mob mentality.

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