



Cancel Culture as a Punitive Communication Mechanism in the Digital Space: A Sociological Approach

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Abstract:

This study examines cancel culture as a punitive communicative system within the digital sphere, focusing on the analysis of its operational mechanisms, the role of digital platforms and algorithms, and its resulting sociological effects.

The research adopts a descriptive–analytical approach based on a critical review of contemporary literature and interpretive analysis of digital practices.

The findings indicate that cancel culture goes beyond traditional criticism to constitute a coherent communicative system grounded in collective shaming, stigmatization, content recirculation, enforced silence, and symbolic exclusion.

Moreover, digital platforms and algorithms emerge as structural social actors that intensify the dissemination of punishment and convert temporary condemnation into durable digital stigma, directly affecting individuals' symbolic capital, digital social interaction, and public trust.

The study concludes that cancel culture reflects a profound shift in the distribution of digital power and social surveillance, underscoring the need for academic and societal awareness to mitigate its negative consequences and promote responsible digital communication.

Keywords: Cancel Culture; Symbolic Punishment; Digital Communication; Algorithms; Digital Social Stigmatization.



1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the digital space has undergone profound transformations in the nature of social communication. Social media platforms are no longer merely tools for exchanging information; they have become arenas for meaning-making, social behavior regulation, and the exercise of symbolic power.

Within this shift, Cancel Culture has emerged as one of the most prominent forms of informal social punishment, where everyday digital interactions become mechanisms for condemning individuals and groups by amplifying mistakes or actions that violate digital social norms.

This phenomenon is no longer merely an individual behavior or an emotional reaction; it constitutes a comprehensive communicative system combining individual acts, digital audiences, platforms, and algorithms to produce sustained symbolic punishment.

With the increasing centrality of digital spaces in social life, a critical question arises: How does Cancel Culture evolve from a mere communicative behavior into an organized social punitive mechanism, and what are its profound sociological effects on individuals and the digital community?

This research problem is structured around three dimensions:

- Individual digital action as a tool for meaning-making and stigmatization.
- Digital audiences and platforms as intermediaries that reproduce symbolic authority.
- The social and sociological effects arising from sustained digital pressures on reputation, symbolic capital, and social interaction.

Research Assumptions:

- Cancel Culture can be interpreted as a structured communicative system of symbolic punishment shaped by collective and algorithmic interactions.
- Digital platforms and algorithms function as amplifiers of symbolic power, contributing to the persistence of digital stigmatization.
- Cancel Culture contributes to transformations in symbolic capital, social interaction, and trust within digital environments.

Objectives:

This study aims to:

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-Provide a comprehensive sociological analysis of Cancel Culture as both a communicative and punitive phenomenon in digital spaces.

-Explore the structural and technical mechanisms that facilitate the production of collective symbolic punishment.

-Examine the long-term social and sociological effects of this phenomenon on individuals and the digital community.

-Offer practical and theoretical recommendations to enhance understanding and mitigate its negative effects on digital communication and trust.

This study examines digital interactions as constitutive elements of a punitive communicative system, through a structural and sociological reading of the roles played by individuals, digital audiences, platforms, and algorithmic infrastructures in the production and reproduction of symbolic punishment.

This article is organized according to an analytical structure inspired by the IMRAD model(Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion).

Following the introduction, the methodological framework explains the research design, data sources, and analytical procedures. The subsequent sections examine Cancel Culture as a communicative phenomenon, analyze its mechanisms within digital spaces, and explore the role of platforms and algorithms.

The final sections present the main findings, discuss their sociological implications, and provide recommendations for future research and digital communication practices.

Methods:

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive–analytical design within the framework of digital sociology. It is grounded in a theoretical and interpretive approach aimed at understanding Cancel Culture as a communicative and sociological phenomenon in digital environments.

Data Sources:

Rather than relying on a defined empirical sample, this study is based on a critical review and analytical synthesis of contemporary academic literature and documented digital phenomena related to Cancel Culture. The research draws on theoretical contributions, prior empirical studies, and illustrative digital examples to construct a comprehensive sociological interpretation of the phenomenon.



Data Collection:

Data were collected through a systematic review of relevant literature in the fields of digital communication, digital culture, and symbolic power. This includes peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and documented analyses of digital practices associated with Cancel Culture.

Analytical Procedure:

The research process was conducted through the following steps:

- Identifying key sociological concepts related to symbolic punishment and digital communication.
- Reviewing and classifying relevant theoretical and empirical contributions.
- Interpreting digital communicative practices (such as commenting, sharing, and hashtag use) as mechanisms of symbolic punishment.
- Linking these interpretations to established sociological frameworks (Bourdieu, Foucault, Castells).

Data Analysis :

The study relies on qualitative interpretive analysis, combining thematic and conceptual approaches. It focuses on identifying recurring patterns such as digital shaming, stigmatization, and symbolic exclusion, and interpreting them within a broader sociological framework of symbolic power, social control, and digital interaction.

2.Cancel Culture as a New Communicative Phenomenon

In contemporary literature on digital communicative action, social media platforms are no longer just tools for information exchange; they have become spaces for meaning-making and social monitoring.

Here, the power of audiences, algorithmic design, and digital interactions intersect to create new mechanisms of social surveillance and regulation.

Within this structural transformation of digital communication, Cancel Culture emerges as an advanced communicative phenomenon, transcending traditional critique to become an informal mechanism for social regulation and collective punishment.

2.1 Defining the Phenomenon within Digital Communication

According to a recent study published in *New Media and Society*, Cancel Culture is defined as:

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A collective process aimed at imposing social consequences on individuals or institutions perceived as violating societal norms, through communicative practices such as collective condemnation, hashtag campaigns calling for criticism or ostracism, and direct influence on the digital reputation of the actor.

Participants do not perceive Cancel Culture as mere transient digital scandals but as a communicative act reflecting awareness of power imbalance and the desire for social justice, giving it a systemic character with complex psychological and social motivations” (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2024)

It can also be defined as a collective communicative tool enabling individuals, through social media platforms, to publicly enact social withdrawal or boycott against digital actors perceived to have violated communal values, often resulting in digital, professional, or social isolation (EBSCO, 2024)

This situates Cancel Culture within a complex social-communicative system, where seemingly simple digital acts such as commenting, reposting, or hashtagging become instruments of informal collective punishment.

Digital behavior is thus read as a message with a dual punitive function, directed simultaneously at the target actor and the audience, redefining the actor’s position within the digital field as a violator of norms or lacking symbolic legitimacy (Jaafar & Herna, 2023)

From this perspective, Cancel Culture is not merely a reactive moral outrage; it represents organized communicative action, where digital interactions function as mechanisms for producing negative social meaning, reshaping individual symbolic standing through cumulative, network-amplified interactions.

As Tandoc, Lim, and Ling observe, this system reflects a collective perception of digital space as an alternative field for redistributing symbolic authority, especially when legal or institutional mechanisms are perceived as inadequate. (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2024)

In this sense, Cancel Culture constitutes a Compensatory Communicative System, supplementing or accelerating formal justice through collective symbolic pressure outside traditional legal frameworks.

This definition reveals a deep intertwining of psychological motivations (belonging, moral recognition, fear of digital isolation) and social motivations (norm reproduction, defense of collective values, delineating digital moral boundaries). Participation in Cancel Culture targets the



actor while simultaneously reaffirming group identity and establishing what is socially acceptable or unacceptable in the digital community.

This analysis demonstrates a qualitative shift in social punishment: punitive authority is no longer exclusive to formal institutions or legal procedures but is distributed across heterogeneous digital groups through subtle communicative interactions that cumulatively produce sustained and powerful punitive effects.

Thus, Cancel Culture should be understood not only as an ethical or media phenomenon but also as a new sociological communicative structure that reshapes the relationship between individuals, groups, and authority in the digital era.

2.2 Structural Transformation in Digital Communication

From a sociological perspective, Cancel Culture forms part of the structural transformation of social communication in the networked digital society, where social relations are embedded within heterogeneous technical networks interacting across culturally and politically diverse audiences.

Communication scholars describe this as “Context Collapse”, denoting the convergence of diverse audiences within the same communicative space, transforming simple individual acts into collective protest or immediate condemnation (Boyd, 2014, pp. 70-72)

This structural transformation shows how social networks function both as neutral content carriers and as communicative spaces reshaping social relationships. In these environments, the potential audience is virtually infinite, forcing users to navigate complex, multi-contextual audiences, complicating message control or interpretation.

The transformation also extends to the digital public sphere, where digital media forms part of a networked society. Critics argue this represents a new social era in communication and digital culture, with ICTs erasing traditional spatial boundaries, collapsing time and space, and reshaping social experience, power, and meaning (Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 1996, pp. 469-472)

From Bourdieu’s perspective, this digital structure redistributes symbolic authority, allowing small actors, empowered by technology, to generate immediate social impact outside traditional hierarchical structures (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 170-172)

This constitutes a new form of social authority tied to network communication and collective interactions, integral to the structural shift in contemporary digital communication (Castells, 1996, p. 473)



3.Mechanisms of Cancel Culture in Digital Spaces

Cancel Culture functions through a set of interconnected mechanisms that transform ordinary digital interactions into instruments of collective symbolic punishment. These mechanisms operate both at the individual level (user behavior and participation) and at the structural level (platform algorithms, network effects, and audience dynamics).

3.1 Collective Digital Shaming

Digital shaming is the cornerstone of Cancel Culture. Unlike traditional forms of social stigma, digital shaming leverages public visibility, virality, and permanence. When a user posts content that is perceived as violating norms, audiences can rapidly amplify this through likes, comments, retweets, shares, or hashtag campaigns. The result is accelerated reputational damage, often disproportionate to the original act (Ronson, 2015, pp. 54-57)

From a sociological perspective, this mechanism can be seen as a form of informal social control, where participants collectively define acceptable behavior and punish deviations.

Trottier highlights that digital vigilantism often relies on the participation of numerous small actors, each contributing to the cumulative pressure on the target. The collective act produces a stigmatizing narrative, which can lead to social ostracism, job loss, or enduring reputational harm. (Trottier, 2020)

3.2 Hashtag-Based Stigmatization

Hashtags are a key structural tool of mobilization. They enable users to aggregate content, unify campaigns, and amplify messages beyond immediate networks. As Boyd (2014) notes, hashtags create context collapse, where multiple audiences converge and collectively interpret content. The hashtag functions as both a symbolic marker of disapproval and a signal for audience mobilization, allowing a single post to trigger a networked response with global reach. (Boyd, 2014, p. 70)

This mechanism also demonstrates algorithmic amplification, where platforms prioritize trending content based on engagement metrics. Content under high-engagement hashtags gains prominence, increasing its visibility and punitive effect (Gillespie, 2018)

From a Bourdieuan perspective, this amplification redistributes symbolic power from traditional authorities to networked communities, reshaping the digital field of influence (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 170-175)

3.3 Forced Silence and Symbolic Exclusion



Cancel Culture often manifests as forced silence, where the target is excluded from digital discourse. This can occur through explicit harassment, threats, or subtler mechanisms such as de-platforming, shadow banning, or mass reporting of content.

Van Dijck notes that such exclusion produces a double effect: it diminishes the target's participation and signals to others the consequences of norm violations. (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 46-47)

Symbolic exclusion functions as a social learning mechanism, reinforcing collective norms by providing visible examples of punishment.

Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is evident here: the threat of public shaming disciplines behavior across the digital population, even for those not directly targeted. (Foucault, 1977, p. 138)

4.The Role of Social Media Platforms and Algorithms

Social media platforms are not neutral intermediaries in Cancel Culture; they actively mediate, structure, and amplify punitive interactions.

4.1 Platforms as Social Actors

Platforms function as structural actors with the ability to shape normative behavior. They do so by setting rules for content visibility, moderation policies, and community standards.

However, these policies often interact with user behavior in unpredictable ways, creating environments where minor violations can escalate rapidly (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 376-380)

Platforms also enable networked collectivism, allowing individuals to coordinate action efficiently without formal organization. This structural capacity enhances the social power of collective punishment, where digital participants feel empowered to act in a coordinated manner.

4.2 Algorithmic Amplification

Algorithms play a central role in enhancing the punitive power of Cancel Culture. They prioritize content that elicits engagement, often amplifying emotionally charged posts, outrage, or shaming campaigns (Beer, 2017, pp. 5-7)

This results in asymmetrical consequences, where minor incidents can achieve disproportionate visibility and social impact.

Zuboff highlights that algorithms also monetize attention, making the amplification of conflict profitable for platforms. In this sense, the structural-technical design of platforms intersects with



social behavior to institutionalize informal punishment, creating a digital ecosystem that perpetuates Cancel Culture. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 380)

5.Social and Sociological Consequences

Cancel Culture generates multi-layered social consequences that extend far beyond immediate digital interactions. Its effects unfold simultaneously at the individual, collective, and structural levels, producing enduring transformations in identity, social relations, and normative regulation. Rather than constituting a temporary disruption of digital communication, Cancel Culture reshapes the conditions under which social participation, legitimacy, and trust are negotiated in networked societies.

5.1 Impact on Individuals: Reputational damage

5.1.1 Sustained Reputational Damage and Digital Stigmatization

One of the most profound consequences of Cancel Culture is the production of persistent reputational damage. Individuals subjected to collective condemnation often experience a form of digital stigma that exceeds the original incident in both duration and intensity.

Unlike offline stigma, which may dissipate over time, digital stigmatization is reinforced by platform architectures that preserve, index, and recirculate past content. As (Ronson, 2015) emphasizes, public shaming in digital environments transforms mistakes into permanent markers of identity, blurring the boundary between action and personhood.

From a sociological standpoint, this process converts individuals into symbolically “fixed” subjects, whose social identity becomes narrowly defined by a single transgression. Such fixation undermines the possibility of moral repair, social reintegration, or narrative transformation, thereby producing long-term exclusion from professional, social, and cultural opportunities.

Digital stigma thus operates as a form of symbolic immobility, restricting the individual’s capacity to re-negotiate their social position.

5.1.2 Psychological Consequences and the Internalization of Punitive Pressure

Beyond reputational harm, Cancel Culture generates significant psychological consequences. Empirical studies indicate that individuals exposed to collective digital condemnation frequently experience anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2024, p. 1955)

These effects are intensified by the scale and unpredictability of digital audiences, as well as by the absence of clear temporal boundaries to the punishment.



Sociologically, this reflects a process of internalized surveillance, where individuals begin to regulate their own behavior in anticipation of potential public sanction.

Drawing on Foucault's concept of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977, p. 140), digital punishment does not merely act externally; it penetrates subjectivity, shaping emotions, self-perception, and behavioral restraint. The individual becomes both the object and the agent of control, reproducing punitive norms through self-monitoring.

5.1.3 Self-Censorship and the Constriction of Expressive Freedom

A further consequence is the limitation of free expression through self-censorship. The fear of public condemnation discourages individuals from participating in open debate, especially on controversial or morally sensitive topics.

Bovens notes that when accountability mechanisms lack proportionality and procedural fairness, they undermine communicative openness rather than enhance responsibility. (Bovens, 2007)

In digital contexts, this leads to a narrowing of discursive diversity, where only socially "safe" opinions are expressed. Over time, such dynamics weaken the deliberative potential of digital spaces and transform them into environments governed by reputational risk management rather than critical engagement.

5.2 Impact on Digital: Communities Erosion of trust

5.2.1 Erosion of Trust and Communicative Fragility

At the collective level, Cancel Culture contributes to the erosion of trust within digital communities. Persistent punitive dynamics create environments where users perceive one another as potential threats rather than collaborators.

Couldry and Hepp argue that trust is a foundational element of mediated social interaction; without it, communicative spaces lose their capacity to support cooperation, solidarity, and shared meaning. (Couldry & Hepp, 2017)

As trust declines, digital discourse becomes increasingly polarized and defensive. Participants engage less in constructive dialogue and more in strategic positioning, reinforcing social fragmentation and weakening communal bonds.

5.2.2 Norm Reinforcement and the Marginalization of Minority Voices

While Cancel Culture often claims to uphold ethical standards, it tends to privilege dominant moral frameworks. Collective condemnation frequently reflects the values of majority groups, marginalizing alternative perspectives and minority voices.

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From a Habermasian perspective, such dynamics undermine the ideal of a pluralistic public sphere, where norms are negotiated through rational-critical debate rather than imposed through coercive consensus (Habermas, 1989)

As a result, Cancel Culture risks transforming norm enforcement into moral homogenization, where deviation is equated with deviance, and complexity is replaced by binary judgments of right and wrong.

5.2.3 Normalization of Digital Surveillance

Another significant consequence is the normalization of peer-based surveillance. In digital environments shaped by Cancel Culture, users continuously monitor one another's behavior, language, and historical content.

Van Dijck describes this as a condition of permanent visibility, where all digital actions remain open to retrospective scrutiny. (van Dijck, 2013)

This surveillance is not imposed solely by institutions but is collectively enacted, creating a networked panopticon. Such normalization reinforces conformity and suppresses experimentation, fundamentally altering the ethos of digital participation.

5.3 Sociological Interpretation

From a broader sociological perspective, Cancel Culture exemplifies the redistribution of symbolic power in networked societies. It demonstrates how non-institutionalized collective action—enabled by digital platforms and algorithms—can generate social consequences equal to or more severe than formal legal sanctions.

Symbolic punishment is no longer monopolized by the state or judicial institutions but is exercised through decentralized publics operating within technological infrastructures.

This shift raises fundamental questions about justice, legitimacy, and authority in digital society. As Castells argues, networked social movements and digital collectives possess unprecedented capacity to mobilize outrage and enforce norms. However, when such power operates without procedural safeguards, it risks undermining social cohesion and democratic values. (Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, 2012)

In this sense, Cancel Culture represents a transition from institutional regulation to networked normative enforcement, where power is diffuse, visibility-driven, and emotionally charged. Understanding this transformation is essential for rethinking social order, accountability, and moral responsibility in the digital age.



This analytical reading confirms that Cancel Culture is not merely a theoretical construct but a socially observable phenomenon manifested through concrete digital practices. The consistency between theoretical frameworks and analyzed digital interactions reinforces the validity of interpreting Cancel Culture as a structured system of symbolic punishment.

6.Results

The finding derived from the analytical framework Indicate that:

- Digital interactions function as cumulative mechanisms of symbolic punishment rather than isolated reactions.

- Algorithmic amplification plays a decisive role in transforming localized incidents into large-scale social condemnation.

- Cancel Culture produces durable digital stigma, extending beyond the temporal limits of the original event.

- The phenomenon contributes to increased self-censorship and reduced communicative openness among users.

- Symbolic power is redistributed from institutional actors to networked digital publics.

7.Conclusion

Cancel Culture should be understood not as a transient digital controversy or a cyclical media phenomenon, but as a structurally embedded communicative and punitive system within contemporary digital societies, It emerges from the intersection of individual digital actions, collective audience mobilization, platform governance, and algorithmic infrastructures, forming a decentralized yet powerful mechanism of social regulation, Within this system, symbolic punishment is produced and reproduced through everyday communicative practices, transforming ordinary expressions into tools of collective sanction.

The present study contributes theoretically to the sociology of digital communication by reconceptualizing Cancel Culture not merely as a moral or cultural phenomenon, but as a structured system of symbolic punishment embedded in digital interactional dynamics. Rather than focusing primarily on individual accountability or cultural conflict, this article foregrounds the relational and algorithmic processes through which punitive meanings are produced, circulated, and stabilized. By integrating perspectives from digital sociology and theories of symbolic power, the study advances an analytical framework for understanding how ordinary digital interactions are transformed into mechanisms of social sanction operating beyond formal institutional control.

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From a sociological perspective, Cancel Culture represents a reconfiguration of social control in networked environments. Unlike classical institutional punishment, which is bounded by legal procedures and formal authority, digital punitive practices operate through dispersed actors and opaque technological systems.

This redistribution of punitive power shifts symbolic authority away from centralized institutions toward networked publics, where legitimacy is continuously negotiated through visibility, engagement, and collective emotional alignment. As a result, social norms are no longer enforced primarily through law or institutional mediation, but through communicative pressure, reputational vulnerability, and persistent digital memory.

The enduring nature of Cancel Culture lies in its capacity to convert temporary moral judgments into long-term symbolic exclusion. Algorithmic amplification and the permanence of digital traces ensure that stigma is not easily erased, thereby transforming social punishment into a continuous condition rather than a finite event.

This produces what can be described as a form of permanent digital accountability, in which individuals remain perpetually exposed to retrospective judgment. Such dynamics profoundly reshape social interaction, encouraging self-surveillance, strategic silence, and heightened conformity, while simultaneously narrowing the space for dissent, ambiguity, and ethical complexity in public discourse.

At the collective level, Cancel Culture generates a paradoxical outcome. While it may function as a mechanism for norm enforcement and social justice claims, it also risks fostering punitive excess, moral absolutism, and communicative fragility.

The absence of proportionality, procedural safeguards, and temporal limits transforms digital sanctioning into a form of symbolic violence that undermines trust, pluralism, and dialogical engagement.

Consequently, digital public spaces risk evolving from arenas of deliberation into zones of anticipatory fear, where participation is governed less by civic responsibility than by reputational risk management.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, several sociologically grounded recommendations can be proposed:

-At the individual level, there is a pressing need to strengthen digital literacy and critical reflexivity. Users must be equipped not only with technical skills but with sociological awareness



of how collective emotions, algorithmic visibility, and symbolic power operate online, Such awareness can reduce impulsive participation in punitive dynamics and foster more ethically responsible forms of digital engagement.

-At the platform level, social media companies must acknowledge their role as active social actors rather than neutral intermediaries.

Transparent moderation policies, limits on algorithmic amplification of outrage-driven content, and mechanisms that allow for contextualization and proportionality are essential to mitigating the escalation of collective punishment.

-At the level of research and public policy, Cancel Culture should be treated as a structural sociological phenomenon, not merely a cultural or psychological issue.

Longitudinal and comparative studies are required to understand its impact on symbolic capital, social trust, and democratic communication, as well as to design governance frameworks that balance accountability with social cohesion.

-At the societal level, it is crucial to cultivate norms of digital empathy, ethical communication, and tolerance for error and transformation. Recognizing the human capacity for change and the dangers of permanent stigmatization is fundamental to preserving the moral integrity of digital public life.

In conclusion, Cancel Culture constitutes one of the most significant sociological expressions of power in the digital age, It reveals how communication itself has become a site of punishment, how visibility has replaced legality as a source of authority, and how digital memory reshapes the boundaries of forgiveness and redemption.

Addressing this phenomenon requires not only technical solutions or moral appeals, but a deep sociological rethinking of power, responsibility, and justice in networked societies.

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