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Participation in Cancel Culture: An Exploration of the Antecedents

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Abstract

Cancel culture is a new phenomenon that recently has received considerable attention from researchers in psychology and sociology (Chiou, 2020; D. Clark, 2020; Mueller, 2021), but not in Information Systems. Social media has afforded the capabilities for widespread dissemination of information and emotions that come with it. However, research examining the magnitude and specifics of how individuals and organizations' social network relationships suffer is limited (Chung & Zeng, 2020). "'Cancel culture' is defined as the withdrawal of support for individuals who have acted in a way deemed to be unacceptable or problematic related to social media, viewership, or the purchase of products or services" (Mueller, 2021, p. 1). Cancel culture originated in "…queer communities of color…[and] [b]lack Twitter…made the language of being 'canceled' into an internet meme" (D. Clark, 2020, p. 89). With the widespread use of social media, companies and individuals are increasingly in the public view (Mueller, 2021); every post is scrutinized, every tweet is analyzed, and can become a meme causing potential damage to the reputation resulting in being "canceled". Uniquely, being "canceled" can lead to a large number of users severing their relationships or behaving antagonistically toward the individual being canceled. Thus, the outcome of being canceled, which means users withdrawing support via various means, can have a significant and adverse impact on the individual's reputation or the organization's bottom line and competitiveness. Each individual that aims to participate in cancel culture needs to have an opportunity, motivation, and ability to do so. The sociotechnical importance and complexities associated with users' decision to partake in a campaign aimed at canceling an entity provide a research opportunity that can enrich the IS extant research in human behavior on social media, its antecedents, and its wider societal and cultural impacts. We root the theoretical and conceptual foundations of our study in allied areas such as ambient awareness, social media theory, social capital theory, and stigma theory. Utilizing such a relevant and diverse set of theories to ground our study will allow us the opportunity to conduct a broad examination of the cancel culture phenomena. We posit the question: what motivates social media users to "cancel" an individual or organization? This study aims to present an exploratory framework that include social media affordances such as message and network transparency, to enable us to better understand the numerous factors and their interactions that have an impact on an individual's participation in cancel culture.

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