

The Social Plague: Analyzing the Rise of Cancel Culture

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## Abstract

This paper aims to examine potential reasons behind the recent intensification of cancel culture amongst young people. Cancel culture refers to a modern phenomenon that takes place online in which individuals are publicly called out for their mistakes. Previous studies have recognized the role of social media in the rapid development of cancel culture; however, there lacked discussion on the reasons why cancel culture is so present in society today. The research gap was addressed through a case study of social media influencer Charli D'Amelio and the backlash she received from a controversial YouTube video. After analyzing the video and netizen opinions surrounding this event, it was found that both contextual factors (Charli's verbal language, tone of delivery, and past reputation) and social factors (the ease of taking things out of context online, loneliness, and boredom) all contributed to the intensification of cancel culture. This study also highlights the importance of obtaining balanced perspectives before making judgements and discusses whether cancel culture is an effective practice for holding individuals accountable for their mistakes.

**Keywords:** cancel culture, online shaming, social media, digital activism, accountability, user participation

## Introduction

The development of digital technology has significantly altered the way humans interact with one another. Social media has created a platform that encourages user participation and self-expression that would not be possible elsewhere (Human & Orehek, 2016). However, the ease of spreading opinions online has also given rise to negative consequences, such as the development of cancel culture.

Cancel culture refers to a modern phenomenon in which individuals are publicly denounced and humiliated for doing or saying something considered “unacceptable or highly problematic” (Ng, 2020, p. 623). These events often take place on social media before being picked up by traditional news outlets (Bouvier, 2020). It is characterized by a collective withdrawal of support for the targeted individual through deprecating comments that call out his or her misconduct (Chiou, 2020).

This topic was chosen because cancel culture has experienced rapid growth amongst young people in recent years (Spielberger, 2020). Given that young people aged 16 to 29 now spend an average of three hours on social media daily (Henderson, 2020), it is important to understand the causes and implications of constant exposure to negativity online. This study is significant because it will highlight the role of social media in shaping public opinion and provide a greater understanding of human behavior within the digital space.

## Literature Review

Previous studies have discussed the common debate behind the morality of cancel culture and whether it does more good or harm. Some claim that cancel culture can be likened to activism and positively contribute to “social and political justice” (Bouvier, 2020, p. 1), as it gives marginalized communities and ordinary people a platform to easily hold powerful people

accountable for their mistakes. For example, the #MeToo movement was created in 2006 to expose sexual harassers and empower women who have fallen victim to these crimes. This event is recognized to be one of the earliest forms of cancel culture and has led to global shifts in gender equality and power dynamics (Ng, 2020).

In contrast, others argue that cancel culture can become excessively brutal. In some cases, the extent to which individuals are criticized online exceeds the gravity of their original wrongdoings (Bouvier 2020). Cancel culture is a powerful weapon, as individuals have lost their careers and experienced safety threats after being “canceled” online. In these cases, cancel culture can be likened to “digital vigilantism” (Chiou, 2020, p. 298), as many netizens now feel justified in utilizing aggression as an immediate response towards those who have committed mistakes. The exacerbation of cancel culture can be attributed to the technological affordances of social media (Muir, Roberts, & Sheridan, 2021; Tellis et. al., 2019). Rapid online exchanges have given users “limited control over the information diffusion process” (Pantano, 2021, p. 117), which has fostered the spread of exaggerated and misleading news in the media.

However, beyond the technological affordances of social media, there is a lack of academic discussion surrounding the evolution of cancel culture and why it is so omnipresent in society today. Existing studies have yet to explain why young people are so quick to form a consensus to “cancel” an individual over his or her wrongdoings without enough justification for doing so. Therefore, this essay will address the identified research gap by seeking an answer to the research question: *What factors have contributed to the intensification of cancel culture amongst young people?*

## Methodology

To answer the research question, a case study has been done on American social media influencer Charli D'Amelio. The sixteen-year-old is currently the most followed person on the video-sharing app TikTok with over 112 million followers. In November 2020, Charli was “canceled” for being ungrateful and rude in a video uploaded to her family’s YouTube channel entitled “Our First Mystery Guest | Dinner with the D'Amelios” (The D’Amelio Family, 2020). This particular case of cancel culture was chosen because it exemplifies a minor offense that received unjustified negative attention online. Her actions were harmless, yet she was heavily criticized, lost over one million followers in 24 hours, and received death threats. Furthermore, this study aims to investigate cancel culture amongst young people, and this demographic makes up Charli’s primary following. This event also received a large amount of attention online, which made this case a fitting choice for the purposes of this research.

Data triangulation was achieved to investigate why Charli was canceled so harshly from a variety of perspectives. Content analysis was performed on Charli’s spoken words and body language in the video to infer why viewers were so upset with her. To explore netizen opinions on this event and provide emic perspectives, YouTube comments (The D’Amelio Family, 2020), Twitter posts (Osifo, 2020), reaction videos (Jadyn, 2020; Reed, 2020), and Quora answers (Jay 2020; Upadhyay, 2020) have been analyzed through textual analysis. Common themes and ideas were identified in news articles such as Insider (Spielberger, 2020) and Times Now News (Singh, 2020) to provide etic perspectives on this event. Lastly, quantitative data from Google Search Trends was used to make visual observations of interest surrounding this event over time.

## Findings

The video showed the D'Amelio family having dinner with family friend and fellow social media influencer James Charles as their guest. While their personal chef was describing the menu, Charli was seen making disgusted and sarcastic facial expressions (Figure 1) and was heard asking for chicken nuggets out of dislike for the food. Viewers commented that Charli was “rude”, “disrespectful” and “spoiled”, especially during a time of crisis when many were struggling to afford food. These screenshots further portrayed her in a negative light, as they were repeatedly used as cover photos for news and magazine articles.



*Figure 1: Charli's facial expressions (The D'Amelio Family, 2020)*

Later in the video, the family reflected on Charli's growth in the past year, especially highlighting how quickly she gained a following on TikTok. This prompted Charli to comment, “Ugh, I wish I had more time because imagine if I hit a hundred million [followers] a year after hitting a million,” to which guest James Charles sarcastically replied, “Was the 95 [million] not enough for you?” While some viewers recognized this as Charli simply wanting to “achieve a goal,” her frustrated tone of delivery, slouched posture, and James' response are what may have led others to interpret this as “complaint” (Jadyn, 2020) and a lack of gratitude for her fans. One viewer commented that she “sees her followers as numbers on her bank account” (The D'Amelio Family, 2020) and should instead be happy with the large following she already has.

Furthermore, James Charles' presence in the video allowed viewers to easily compare Charli's behavior to his. Comments from viewers that praised James for being "humble", "unproblematic", and "respectful" (The D'Amelio Family, 2020) received the most likes, with one reaching over 31,000 likes. Therefore, there seemed to be a general consensus among viewers that although James was like Charli, a teenager who quickly gained fame online, he repeatedly expressed his gratitude for the opportunities that came along throughout his career. This led viewers to perceive Charli as more ungrateful relative to James.

Second, short clips taken from the video were widely circulated around social media, which made it easier for users to take things out of context and form biased judgments against Charli. For example, people who watched these clips instead of the entire video would not understand that the chef was a good friend of the D'Amelio family and purposely served Charli escargot (snails) for entertainment purposes, knowing she would dislike the food and react negatively. Moreover, an influx of social media users shared their negative opinions and memes ridiculing Charli (Osifo, 2020). This may have pressured social media users to fall into a bandwagon-like effect and immediately lean towards a popular opinion of hate towards Charli, rather than watching the video and evaluating the situation themselves (The Decision Lab, n.d.).

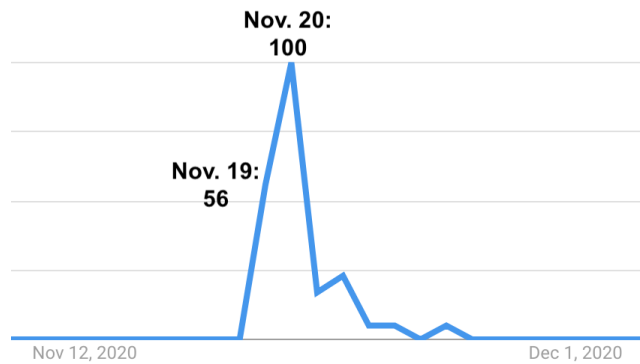
Third, Charli's reputation as a TikTok influencer (TikToker) may have also contributed to the excessive hate she received. Several Quora users expressed their dislike for TikTokers because many of them receive views with minimal effort. Compared to YouTubers who film and edit their videos for days, most TikTokers become famous simply by filming 15-second lip-sync videos (Upadhyay, 2020). Others believe that Charli is undeserving of fame because she does "basic dance moves" that anyone can imitate, and there is "nothing unique or special about her" (Jay, 2020). Just like the majority of her viewers, Charli was just a regular teenager before she

gained fame. Many young people do exactly what Charli does; they also own a TikTok account and post videos of them dancing in their bedroom, but when they do not reach the same kind of success, many “feel like they do not belong or have value” (Perkins, 2020). Therefore, a general dislike and jealousy towards Charli may have led young people to take advantage of this video and use it as a reason to project insecurities and frustration towards her (Reed, 2020).

Lastly, because this event happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people were struggling with stress, anxiety, and boredom. Psychologists believe that they used cancel culture as a way to find comfort and a sense of community during times of isolation (Spielberger, 2020). With so many people staying home during quarantine, there was a reported average of one to two additional hours spent online amongst social media users (Tankovska, 2021), which gave them more time to follow public figures more carefully and scrutinize their every move (Singh, 2020). In particular, Charli is a celebrity who shares her personal life online through daily posts and livestreams across various social media platforms. As a result of gaining so much insight into Charli’s life, viewers may have fostered a “false sense of intimacy” with her and felt “validated in calling her out” when she made a mistake (Aroshi, 2020).

Furthermore, because young people could no longer interact with their peers at school, they were lonely and “more responsive and vulnerable to negative things on social media” (Perkins, 2020). As observed in Figure 2, Google Trends revealed that there was a 44% increase in searches related to Charli a day after the controversial video was uploaded. Therefore, anyone who posted about the event during this peak in interest was almost guaranteed to receive likes and engagement on their posts, which gave young people instant gratification in knowing that their voice was recognized by others (Perkins, 2020).





*Figure 2: Searches related to Charli D’Amelio over time (Google Trends, n.d.)*

As demonstrated by the case of Charli D’Amelio, her verbal language and facial expressions resulted in a vast misinterpretation of her actions. Factors such as the ease of taking things out of context online, a general dislike towards TikTokers, and loneliness during COVID-19 contributed to the large amount of hate she received. Therefore, to answer the research question, the interplay of various contextual and social factors contributed to the intensification of cancel culture amongst young people.

## Discussion

This paper explored reasons behind the intensification of cancel culture amongst young people as demonstrated by the case of Charli D’Amelio. After examining existing literature on the topic of cancel culture, a knowledge deficit was identified and addressed through analyzing both etic and emic perspectives on this event. Several contextual and social factors were found to have contributed to the increased amount of hate Charli received for one video. I believe that this study was successful in achieving its goal of investigating cancel culture from the case of Charli

D'Amelio. However, future studies could determine whether the factors determined in this study could be applied to other cases of cancel culture.

The YouTube video was reviewed by the D'Amelio family and their publicity team before publication, yet they remained unaware of the large amount of backlash it would receive soon after. While some recognized that the video was “clearly semi-scripted” (Reed, 2020), and that “the faces and general theatrics” were purposely exaggerated in an attempt to entertain viewers (Jennings, 2020), the majority of viewers perceived the situation in a very different manner. Therefore, these findings can contribute towards better informing prominent online figures and publicity teams on how to avoid unnecessary drama online. Influencers often produce content with the goal of attracting as many viewers as possible, but they must keep in mind that their words and actions can be widely misinterpreted if communicated ineffectively.

Moreover, the question of whether cancel culture does more harm than good remains unanswered. While several young people agree that while Charli should be “criticized to help her learn from her mistakes” (Jadyn, 2020), cancel culture is extremely toxic, and using aggression would not allow her to properly grow from her mistakes (The Learning Network, 2020). Therefore, this study demonstrated the importance of obtaining balanced perspectives before making judgments on whether canceling someone is appropriate for a given situation.

This study has several limitations. Due to ethical constraints, data collection was limited to secondary sources, and the majority of data used in this study stemmed from netizen opinions gathered on various social media platforms. Therefore, they are prone to biases and may have affected the accuracy of this study's findings. Furthermore, because of time constraints, the relationship between the pandemic and the rise of cancel culture could not be fully observed.

Longitudinal studies can be performed in the future to confirm the validity of this statement.

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