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ONLINE CANCEL CULTURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON DIGITAL SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Kinza Ishaq

BS, Department of CS Computer Science, The Cosmic Degree College (For Women) ,University of Okara

ABSTRACT

Online cancel culture has become a significant phenomenon in contemporary digital society, influencing how individuals communicate, develop relationships, express opinions, and respond to controversial behaviour on social media platforms. It generally refers to the collective criticism, public condemnation, rejection, or withdrawal of support from individuals, celebrities, organizations, or public figures because of statements, actions, or behaviours considered offensive, unethical, or socially unacceptable. Although cancel culture can promote accountability, raise awareness of social injustice, and encourage responsible communication, it may also produce negative consequences for digital social relationships, including social exclusion, online harassment, damaged reputations, emotional distress, and the breakdown of interpersonal trust. The rapid circulation of information through social media platforms enables controversial incidents to reach large audiences within a short period, often before complete information or alternative perspectives become available. This research article examines the influence of online cancel culture on digital social relationships, with particular attention to online communication, friendship networks, trust, social belonging, public opinion, and conflict resolution. It also considers how digital platforms contribute to the formation of collective judgments and how individuals experience social pressure when participating in online controversies. The article adopts a qualitative, literature-based research approach to examine relevant academic discussions published between 2023 and 2026. It synthesizes research concerning online shaming, digital participation, social media communication, and the social consequences of public criticism. The discussion highlights the importance of distinguishing legitimate criticism from disproportionate punishment and emphasizes the need for digital empathy, contextual understanding, responsible platform practices, and constructive dialogue. The article argues that healthier digital relationships require accountability alongside fairness, privacy, and opportunities for explanation, learning, and reconciliation.

KEYWORDS: *Online cancel culture, digital social relationships, social media, online shaming, digital communication, social exclusion, online reputation, cyberbullying, digital empathy, social accountability.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has transformed the ways in which individuals communicate, establish relationships, share opinions, and participate in public discussions. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, and YouTube allow users to express their views, respond to controversial events, and organize collective reactions to the behaviour of other people. Within this digital environment, online cancel culture has emerged as a recognizable form of public Chen, A. T., Dunn, L. H., Fan, W., & Agrawal, N. (2025).found that , criticism in which individuals or organizations may experience widespread rejection because of statements, actions, or opinions considered offensive or unacceptable. Unlike traditional forms of criticism, online cancellation can spread rapidly across interconnected communities, reaching audiences far beyond the original context of an incident. Screenshots, short video clips, reposts, hashtags, and commentary can circulate widely, encouraging users to participate in collective judgments.

Although public criticism is not a new social practice, digital platforms have increased its speed, visibility, and potential consequences. A single controversial statement may influence professional opportunities, friendships, personal reputation, and an individual's sense of belonging within an online community. Consequently, cancel culture should be understood not simply as a temporary internet trend but as a social process that can reshape communication patterns and relationships in contemporary digital life Greig, M. A., & Hogg, R. C. (2025).explain that..

Online cancel culture involves collective expressions of disapproval that may lead to the withdrawal of attention, support, recognition, or social acceptance from a person or organization. It can arise in response to discriminatory statements, offensive jokes, unethical conduct, misinformation, political disagreements, or perceived violations of community standards. However, the meaning of cancellation varies according to the circumstances, the seriousness of the behaviour, and the reactions of the people involved. In some cases, collective criticism draws attention to genuine harm and encourages individuals or institutions to acknowledge their responsibilities. In other cases, criticism becomes excessive, involves personal attacks, or continues after an individual has apologized or attempted to correct the original behaviour. Online cancellation may also occur when information is incomplete, misleading, or removed from its original context. The involvement of large audiences makes it difficult to distinguish between proportionate criticism and punishment driven by anger, group pressure, or misinformation. Therefore, the concept requires careful examination because not every expression of disagreement constitutes cancel culture, and not every public demand for accountability necessarily produces social exclusion. Understanding these distinctions is essential for evaluating its effects on digital relationships.

Digital social relationships include friendships, professional connections, family communication, online communities, and relationships formed through shared interests or social identities. These relationships depend on communication, trust, mutual respect, emotional support, and a willingness to understand different perspectives. Online cancel culture can challenge these foundations when individuals feel compelled to distance themselves from someone associated with a controversial statement or action. For example, friends may unfollow one another, group members may remove a participant from an online community, and professional contacts may avoid interacting publicly with a person who has become the subject of criticism. Such responses can create uncertainty about whether relationships are based on genuine understanding or on conformity to collective expectations. Individuals may also hesitate to express personal opinions because they fear being misunderstood, criticized, or excluded from their social networks. At the same time, people affected by harmful behaviour may use public criticism to establish boundaries and seek support from others. The effects of cancel culture are therefore complex: it

may strengthen relationships among people united by shared values while weakening relationships across groups with conflicting interpretations of an incident.

Social media platforms play an important role in shaping how cancel culture develops and affects relationships. Features such as reposting, commenting, trending topics, recommendation systems, and public engagement metrics can make controversial content highly visible. Users may encounter a dispute repeatedly, even when they have limited knowledge of the original event. The rapid circulation of emotionally charged content can encourage immediate reactions rather than careful consideration of evidence. Furthermore, online discussions often involve large numbers of participants who do not personally know the individuals being criticized. This distance may reduce the sense of responsibility that people ordinarily experience during face-to-face communication. As a result, criticism can escalate into insults, threats, humiliation, or coordinated harassment. However, social media also allows affected individuals to explain their experiences, challenge harmful practices, and find supportive communities. The relationship between platform design and cancellation is therefore important because digital communication systems influence which information becomes visible, how users interpret controversy, and whether discussions develop into constructive conversations or hostile exchanges.The consequences of online cancel culture may extend beyond public reputation and influence an individual's emotional well-being and social participation. People who become targets of widespread criticism may experience embarrassment, anxiety, isolation, loss of confidence, or concern about future interactions.

The permanent or repeated circulation of online content can intensify these difficulties because individuals may feel unable to move beyond a controversial incident. Friends and acquaintances may also experience pressure when deciding whether to support the criticized person, remain silent, or publicly distance themselves. These situations can create tension within digital communities and weaken the sense of safety that supports meaningful communication. Moreover, users who observe cancellation campaigns may develop a fear of making mistakes or expressing unpopular opinions. This fear can encourage self-censorship and reduce the diversity of perspectives shared online. Nevertheless, the social consequences are not identical in every situation. Outcomes depend on the nature of the original behaviour, the intensity of public reactions, the availability of social support, and the opportunities provided for clarification or reconciliation. A balanced analysis must therefore consider both the protective role of collective criticism and the risks associated with disproportionate public punishment.

The relationship between online cancel culture and digital social relationships deserves systematic attention because social media has become an important environment for maintaining friendships, developing professional networks, discussing public issues, and forming social identities. While public debates frequently focus on whether cancellation is justified, less

attention is sometimes given to how these disputes affect everyday communication, trust, belonging, and the possibility of restoring damaged relationships. Examining these outcomes can contribute to a clearer understanding of the social responsibilities of digital users and the importance of fair communication practices. The present article explores how cancel culture influences interpersonal relationships, how social media environments shape collective responses, and why accountability should be balanced with proportionality and opportunities for personal growth. It also considers the significance of media literacy, contextual evaluation, respectful disagreement, and platform responsibility in reducing unnecessary harm. By reviewing relevant literature published from 2023 to 2026, the study aims to develop a balanced conceptual understanding of cancellation as a social process rather than treating it as entirely beneficial or entirely harmful. The article ultimately emphasizes that healthy digital communities require mechanisms for addressing harmful behaviour without making humiliation, permanent exclusion, or uncontrolled harassment normal features of online interaction.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the effects of online cancel culture on digital social relationships, particularly its influence on interpersonal trust, online communication, social inclusion, emotional well-being, and the possibility of reconciliation.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How does online cancel culture influence digital social relationships, particularly in terms of interpersonal trust, communication, social inclusion, and conflict resolution?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online cancel culture has attracted increasing scholarly attention because it combines public criticism, moral judgment, collective action, and informal social punishment within digital environments. Lendvai et al. (2025), in their mapping of research on cancel culture in the social sciences, contribute to understanding how the phenomenon overlaps with related concepts such as call-out culture, online shaming, deplatforming, and digital boycotts. These concepts are connected, but they are not identical. Call-out culture generally involves publicly identifying or challenging problematic behaviour, whereas cancellation may involve the withdrawal of support or efforts to exclude an individual from a community. Digital boycotts focus more specifically on refusing to support a person, product, or organization. These practices may serve legitimate purposes when they draw attention to discrimination, exploitation, or abuse of power. However, they may become harmful when accusations spread without adequate evidence or when criticism becomes disproportionate to the behaviour involved. The conceptual distinction is important because the effects on relationships depend on whether online responses encourage

accountability, facilitate discussion, or produce lasting social rejection. Research on cancel culture therefore requires attention to the motivations of participants, the structure of digital networks, and the consequences experienced by both the targets and the wider community.Online shaming is closely related to cancel culture because both involve public responses to behaviour perceived as violating social norms. Muir et al. (2023) examined the moral, emotional, behavioural, and personality-related factors associated with online shaming. Their mixed-method study surveyed 411 participants and investigated factors associated with willingness to engage in shaming and judgments about whether such treatment was deserved. The researchers found that the factors examined collectively explained meaningful variation in online-shaming intentions and perceived deservedness. Their qualitative findings also highlighted different public interpretations of online shaming, including accountability, destructive consequences, anonymity, entertainment, and the possibility that an incident may involve more than one perspective. This research is relevant to digital social relationships because collective moral judgment can influence how users decide whom to trust, support, avoid, or criticize. When people participate in a shaming campaign, their actions may reflect genuine concern for others, but they may also be influenced by emotional reactions and social expectations. These dynamics can make online discussions unpredictable and may encourage users to judge an individual before examining the full circumstances. A balanced interpretation should therefore distinguish responsible criticism from humiliating behaviour and recognize the potential interpersonal consequences of collective condemnation.

Network structure also matters because different digital environments create different conditions for discussion, accountability, and social control. Her analysis of Twitter, Wikipedia, and Reddit suggests that the organization of online communities can affect how public criticism develops and whether it produces constructive or destructive outcomes. This perspective is important because digital relationships operate through networks of friends, followers, colleagues, and communities that may overlap in complicated ways. In a closely connected community, members may have contextual knowledge that helps them evaluate an incident, while a loosely connected audience may encounter only a brief post or a viral accusation. When information moves beyond its original community, people may repeat judgments without understanding the history of the relationship or the seriousness of the alleged conduct. Such processes can damage trust, encourage social distancing, and make reconciliation more difficult. Consequently, the impact of cancellation depends not only on the content of an accusation but also on the network through which it circulates and the social relationships connecting its participants. Hobbs, M. J., & O'Keefe, S. (2024). Audience emotions influence how people interpret controversial content and decide whether to like, share, comment on, or reject it. Chen et al. (2025) investigated audience responses to online public shaming through a mixed-method study involving 742 completed participant responses. The study found that perceived social acceptability was

associated with greater engagement, while emotional reactions were also related to the likelihood of interacting with content. The qualitative analysis further indicated that people interpret online messages through several considerations, including the surrounding environment, their understanding of the situation, the message itself, and its tone. These findings help explain how online controversies can expand beyond their original audiences. When users perceive a public criticism campaign as socially acceptable, they may be more willing to share it or add their own comments, potentially increasing the visibility of the incident. Such participation can strengthen collective opposition to harmful behaviour, but it can also intensify reputational damage or encourage others to join without carefully assessing the evidence. For digital relationships, this process can create pressure to demonstrate agreement with a dominant opinion and may discourage users from defending someone who has become unpopular. Emotional engagement should therefore be considered alongside accuracy, fairness, and the possible effects of public interaction on the individuals involved. Kim, D., & Kim, Y. S. (2026).An additional issue concerns whether individuals can restore their reputations and rebuild relationships after becoming involved in an online controversy. Witmer (2025), in a study of TikTok vigilante videos and audience comments, examined how public exposure can function as a form of informal justice.

The analysis of 50 videos and 244,600 comments identified functions that included seeking retributive action, transforming experiences of shame into collective empowerment, and building protective networks. Tippett, A. (2024).These findings illustrate that public exposure does not have a single social meaning: it can empower people who have experienced harm while also creating difficult questions about punishment, fairness, and the consequences of viral attention. Similarly, research examining reputational repair in cancel-culture cases indicates that outcomes may differ according to the nature of the perceived transgression, public responses, and the strength of relationships between public figures and their audiences. However, further attention is needed to everyday digital relationships, particularly friendships and online communities where users must decide whether to maintain contact, withdraw support, or allow reconciliation. The present study addresses this concern by bringing together literature on online shaming, digital vigilantism, social network structures, emotional responses, and reputational repair. It argues that the quality of digital social relationships depends partly on how communities balance accountability with contextual understanding, respectful disagreement, and opportunities for change.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a literature-based methodology to examine the effects of online cancel culture on digital social relationships. Rather than collecting new survey responses or conducting interviews, the article draws on published academic research concerning cancel culture, online

public shaming, digital vigilantism, social media participation, and reputational repair. A literature-based method is appropriate because the research question involves several connected social processes that have been examined through different theoretical and empirical approaches. Relevant studies published between 2023 and 2026 are considered to maintain a recent perspective on the development of online cancellation and its consequences. The review focuses on research that explains how users participate in public criticism, how digital platforms facilitate collective responses, and how these responses may influence interpersonal trust, communication, social inclusion, and emotional well-being. Particular attention is given to peer-reviewed journal articles, empirical studies, and scholarly reviews that provide clear information about their research objectives, methods, and findings. The literature is examined critically rather than treating every published claim as equally conclusive. Differences in study populations, research designs, platform settings, and definitions of cancel culture are considered when interpreting the available evidence. This approach supports a structured understanding of the topic while acknowledging that the literature does not necessarily establish the same effects across every online community or social context.The literature-selection procedure focuses on studies that directly address online cancellation or closely related phenomena. Search concepts include online cancel culture, cancel culture and relationships, online public shaming, digital vigilantism, social media accountability, reputational damage, and online social exclusion.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a descriptive research design to explain the major characteristics of online cancel culture and its possible effects on digital social relationships. Descriptive research is appropriate because the article aims to organize and explain existing knowledge about how online criticism develops, how audiences respond to controversy, and how public reactions may influence social connections. The design allows the research to describe recurring features of cancellation, including the circulation of accusations, collective expressions of disapproval, withdrawal of support, reputational consequences, and attempts at reconciliation. It also supports an examination of the circumstances in which public criticism may be perceived as socially beneficial or harmful. For example, the literature may describe situations in which collective criticism increases awareness of misconduct, alongside cases in which public condemnation contributes to harassment or social exclusion. These patterns are considered in relation to the research objective rather than treated as proof that every cancellation produces the same outcome. The descriptive design therefore provides a structured foundation for explaining the phenomenon, identifying its main dimensions, and presenting a coherent account of its relationship with digital communication and interpersonal trust.A comparative element is incorporated into the research design to examine the different perspectives presented in the selected literature. The study compares research that emphasizes the positive role of collective criticism with research that highlights the risks of public shaming and disproportionate

punishment. This comparison is important because cancel culture can simultaneously provide a means of challenging harmful behaviour and create opportunities for unjustified social exclusion. The literature is also compared according to the processes it examines, including audience participation, emotional reactions, network structure, public reputation, and social recovery.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis is based on a qualitative thematic synthesis of the selected academic literature. In this context, the data consist of the arguments, reported findings, and interpretations presented in published studies rather than newly collected responses from participants. The analysis begins by identifying recurring concepts associated with online cancel culture, such as moral judgment, public criticism, collective participation, emotional reactions, reputational damage, and social accountability. These concepts are then organized into broader themes that relate directly to the research question. Research on online shaming, for example, helps explain why people may participate in public condemnation, while research on audience responses helps clarify how emotional reactions and perceived social acceptability influence online engagement. Studies of social media networks provide additional insight into the conditions under which criticism may spread through different communities. By examining these findings together, the analysis identifies relationships between online participation and possible changes in interpersonal trust, communication, and social belonging. The purpose is not to assume that all studies reach identical conclusions but to understand how their findings collectively contribute to explaining the complexity of online cancellation.The second stage of analysis compares the potential benefits and harms associated with cancel culture. On the positive side, collective criticism may provide visibility to neglected concerns, encourage institutions to respond to misconduct, and create supportive networks for people who have experienced harm.

FINDINGS

The literature synthesis indicates that online cancel culture can influence interpersonal trust by changing how individuals evaluate the behaviour, credibility, and social acceptability of other users. Public criticism may encourage people to reconsider their relationships with individuals whose actions conflict with their values. In situations involving genuine harm, withdrawing support may represent an effort to establish boundaries or demonstrate solidarity with affected people. However, when criticism spreads without sufficient context, users may make decisions about relationships based on incomplete or misleading information. Public controversies can also create pressure to express agreement with the dominant position, making individuals reluctant to ask questions or offer alternative interpretations. Research on online shaming and audience participation demonstrates the importance of moral judgments, emotional reactions, and perceived social acceptability in shaping online engagement (Muir et al., 2023; Chen et al.,

2025). These findings support the interpretation that digital communication is influenced not only by the original incident but also by the responses of the surrounding audience. The synthesis therefore suggests that healthy digital relationships require careful evaluation of information, respectful disagreement, and opportunities to understand the circumstances before making lasting judgments about another person.A second major finding is that cancel culture may produce both solidarity and exclusion, depending on the circumstances and the way collective criticism is expressed. People who share concerns about discriminatory or harmful behaviour may develop stronger connections through collective advocacy and mutual support. Public exposure can also help individuals communicate experiences that might otherwise remain ignored. Witmer's (2025) analysis of TikTok vigilante videos illustrates how online exposure can be used to seek accountability and create protective networks..

CONCLUSION

Online cancel culture represents an important feature of contemporary digital communication because it influences how individuals express disapproval, respond to perceived wrongdoing, and maintain relationships within online communities. The literature reviewed in this article indicates that cancellation can serve as a means of collective accountability by drawing attention to harmful behaviour, supporting affected individuals, and encouraging public discussion of social responsibility. At the same time, online cancellation can create difficulties when criticism becomes disproportionate, accusations circulate without sufficient context, or collective responses develop into personal harassment. These contrasting possibilities demonstrate that cancel culture cannot be understood as entirely beneficial or entirely harmful. Its consequences depend on the behaviour being criticized, the reliability of available information, the reactions of online audiences, and the opportunities for constructive resolution. The study also highlights the importance of digital networks in determining how criticism spreads and influences people's perceptions of one another. Overall, online cancel culture should be examined as a social process that can change interpersonal trust, communication, social inclusion, and reputational standing. Understanding these dimensions is necessary for developing more responsible and respectful digital communities.The study concludes that maintaining healthy digital social relationships requires a balance between accountability, fairness, empathy, and the possibility of personal growth. Individuals should be able to criticize harmful conduct without resorting to humiliation, threats, or the unnecessary exposure of private information. Similarly, users should consider the reliability and context of online claims before sharing accusations or joining public condemnation. When a controversy arises between friends, colleagues, or members of an online community, respectful discussion may help clarify misunderstandings and identify appropriate responses. Apologies and explanations should not automatically eliminate responsibility, but genuine behavioural change and appropriate corrective action can sometimes create opportunities for rebuilding trust.

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