

GETTING THE JOB DONE IN A SOCIAL MEDIA AGE:
AN ANALYSIS OF HOW YOUTH CULTURE IS FURTHERING SOCIAL
ADVANCEMENTS BY BREAKING DOWN RACIST MISINTERPRETATIONS OF
'CANCEL CULTURE'

by

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ABSTRACT

Due to the United States' long history of racist narratives from white supremacists, a cultural war has erupted between people of color and their white counterparts. In recent times, this original idea of "cancel culture" was then brought into light through the black community of Twitter through the same notion that people of color were not going to support the spread of harmful ideas to these marginalized groups. However, as more minorities have spoken out and cancelled ideas that have negatively impacted them, white supremacists have created their own version of "cancel culture" by rejecting the original foundation of what cancel culture had first been. With the introduction of social media applications like TikTok and Twitter, a younger generation has stepped up to shed some light into the original concept of cancel culture to help increase efforts for social advancements that white supremacists have tried to break down. It then comes to question whether or not this younger generation is able to effectively diminish this misinterpretation of cancel culture by reshaping the idea of free speech and cancelling racist rhetoric to further constructive dialogue that the first amendment promises to uphold.

I. Cultural War Between POC and White Supremacists (racist rhetoric)

The issue of racism and how it continues to silence and oppress people of color, minority groups, and marginalized identities begins with psychology. By looking through the lens of a hegemonic ideology, one is able to grasp how a dominant ideology was formed and how it has negatively impacted people of color every single day that followed after. Conceptualizing rhetoric through power dynamics gives an insight in how oppressive behavior targeting at people of color gained popularity since the introduction of enslavement. Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci helps the reader understand how such control is possible through his theory of hegemony. In order for an ideology to gain dominance within a set cultural environment, it must dominate its antagonistic forces through coercion.¹ It is that same dominant ideology that then gives birth to the power dynamic of the oppressor and the oppressed, which ultimately allows it to thrive. But in order to maintain that dominance, one must find ways to keep that power. Hitting every point Gramsci made about hegemonic identities, the dominant ideology made from the white male body had thus always favored the interests of white male body since the founding of the United States of America, even at the expense of people of color. In other words, it is the exact same hegemonic identity that the U.S. had been founded upon that has been continuously used throughout history to justify racist rhetoric, which created a cultural war between people of color and white supremacists.

Through the historical lens of the white male body, social advancement seems unjustified and unnecessary. Through the opposing perspective, POC groups have been left out in the lurch as they had yet to actively participate within a system that did not

¹ Carrie Crenshaw and David R Roskos-Ewoldsen, "Rhetoric, Racist Ideology, and Intellectual Leadership," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1999): pp. 275-302,

recognize its existence as a citizenry. For so long, the constitutional framework within the United States existed for the well-being of the nation; however, these rights that swore to protect its citizenry only extended to those who identified as white. Because of such setbacks, POC groups have had to break those patterns of constant oppression, but even the slightest bit of effort to change any kind of systemic change has been met with major backlash. That major backlash is rooted upon fear among these white extremists over losing their dominance because of that hegemonic ideology that allows them to think of themselves as superior. For example, if furthering social advancement efforts were to occur and it meant equalizing the playing field for POC, racist sentiment would increase among those who feared losing their white privilege.

The priority of privilege has hindered any sense of equality between the two because people of color were still simply seen as an ‘other’. This could be seen through pieces of legislation that negatively impacted people of color. Such a piece holding a major attack towards a certain community was passed by the US Congress as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which held the title of being the first immigration policy that had been based solely on race. The act had barred Chinese immigrants into the United States for a complete 10-year period. In passing the Chinese Exclusion Act and prohibiting entrance of a certain race into the U.S., the image of what once was a beacon of hope with democratic ideals had shifted and contradicted themselves. It allowed racism to be justified by creating a white privileged atmosphere that would continue to be seen in the years that followed.² This atmospheric narrative would create a sentiment that would target people of color by only having to label them as different. Once POC groups were

² Patrick Fisher and Shane Fisher, “Congressional Passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,” *Immigrants & Minorities* 20, no. 2 (2001): pp. 58-74

labeled as different, they automatically did not meet the criteria to be included within the United States.

Even after the dissolution of the Chinese Exclusion Act, racists continued to push their ideological perspective by further impacting POC. It was now trying to figure out how to further that racist narrative to maintain it in place without it being so direct though congressional policy. While still wanting to have the repertoire for having some kind of equality, the concept “separate but equal” was created. This concept of having separate institutions for different races still held that racist sentiment but because there were still institutions for POC, the dominant white ideology firmly believed that equality was finally at its prime. Little could white communities see that segregation was impacting black communities in harmful ways that it affected them psychologically. When *Brown v. Board of Education* was being decided upon by the Supreme Court of the United States, the majority opinion reasoned that the act of isolating black communities had instilled a sense of inferiority.³ After black communities had protested for the same equal access to a proper education, whites were then able to make it their issue because of their inability to tolerate such decision. Once integration was forced to occur by the federal government, white communities felt the need to protest the legality of it as they had found the decision to be offensive towards their privilege.

As time progressed, racist sentiment had evolved into new methods. Now the oppression was more of an indirect issue rather than as direct as segregation had once been. This wave of new means to oppress POC had shifted into silencing them. No matter what efforts minorities would try to advance, racist sentiment still found a way silence

³ *Brown v Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (May 1954)

people of color since they had a lack of representation. Alice Augusta Ball was a black chemist who had found a cure for leprosy in the early 1920's but had unfortunately passed before she published her research. Her cure, however, was published by the dean of the university as he had claimed her work as his own, therefore making her contribution untold until recently in the early 2000's.⁴ These circumstances have thus shown just how methods for oppressing minorities have still found a way to indirectly oppress and silence them.. These loopholes have obviously infuriated POC to understand that for any kind of societal change to occur, this hegemonic ideology that whites have so long used had to be challenged. Social advancement was now about reclaiming an equal status that white communities continuously prevented by holding them accountable for pushing their racist rhetoric.

II. Response: Cancel Culture and its Intentions

As an extension of free speech, cancel culture exercises just that. When cancelling someone, democratic discourse is practiced. How? Cancelling is a manifestation of free speech because marginalized groups utilize their constitutional right to freely express themselves to amass a perspective that holds racism accountable for its consequences. People of color can publicly state that they refuse to participate or support any kind of racist speech, oppressive behavior, or discriminatory political narratives by simply saying, "You are cancelled." A simple phrase like that then creates pressure on not only that individual but onto the institution that has protected that discriminatory behavior to continue. Minorities are cancelling their oppressors so that social advancement can begin and thrive.

⁴ Timeline, "This Phenomenal Young Woman Found a Cure for Leprosy, but the Man She Worked with Got the Credit," Medium

In other words, this method of cancel culture means culturally blocking an entity from further impacting an audience with their agenda and in this case – being able to hold white privilege accountable for negatively inflicting racist practices onto POC. The concept of cancel culture, says Anne Charity Hudley from the University of Southern California, “is a survival skill as old as the Southern black use of boycott”⁵.

Through this correlation that Hudley states, cancel culture equates to the same idea as boycotting did throughout the Civil Rights Movement. The historical background of cancel culture promoted the idea that blacks could use this as a sense of empowerment to reject the spread of harmful ideas that were being promoted through societal culture. “Canceling is a way to acknowledge that you don’t have to have the power to change structural inequality,” said Hudley. “You don’t even have to have the power to change all of public sentiment. But as an individual, you can still have power beyond measure”⁶. In other words, the purpose for cancel culture relates strictly to erase those who have prolonged oppressive behavior targeted towards minorities. These POC groups are now holding white privilege accountable by cancelling the negative effects historical racist rhetoric had sought to advance.

Cancel culture is the action that POC have now begun to exercise because of how it is able to challenge that dominant ideology that maintained racist rhetoric. Minorities are now able to stand their ground and publicly announce that because of the long-endured racist behavior, they are going to participate in democratic discourse as they should have done so from the very start. This notion has now surpassed what was once considered traditional means of discourse by shifting platforms.

⁵ Aja Romano, “Why We Can't Stop Fighting about Cancel Culture,” Vox (December, 2019)

⁶ *ibid.*

III. How the Cultural Boycott Moved to Social Media

Technological advancements have furthered dialogue between people in the modern era. The increase of media usage has thus flourished in what people communicate and how they choose to communicate it. The most significant advantage has been the ability to give everyone an equal voice. The internet has been able to give all of its users an equal playing field to say whatever they would like whenever they please. This has then been able to not only spread an opinion but to popularize it within a public domain. Therefore, people of color have sought the opportunity to speak out against the injustices institutional racism has caused them through web-based platforms to not only raise awareness, but to push forward their story.

What had first started as a mere joke back in 2015, black Twitter popularized the phrase “cancel culture” within their community as a reaction to something with which they disapproved. After gaining popularity, the phrase began to extend to all people of color. Rather than using it in a jokingly manner, POC groups were cancelling out the systemic racism with which they were forced to live in. Social media made holding white privilege responsible by removing the traditional barriers that had once existed to prevent minorities from actively participating in democratic discourse. For once, minorities were able to voice their opinions on a platform that held equal weight as to their white counterparts. Not only could these marginalized groups share their opinions, they could do so and foster a community with those shared beliefs. It was through these actions that black Twitter was able to ignite the idea of cancel culture. The more ideas that were spread, the more recognition they received. Once these POC groups began to share the injustices they had

faced from the ongoing racism they were having to deal with, they began to realize that they were not alone. They formed groups, organizations, and communities that focused on coming together to change what had been an everyday struggle.

Likewise, as minorities were not the only ones with access to such resources, those who still wanted to continue the racist rhetoric that had existed tried to do so through the same methods. White communities who fanaticized about white privilege and the maintenance of it had established their own platforms on the internet. No matter where POC went, racism always followed to try and silence them. However, the advantage that minorities had through such attempts was that it was their constitutional right to speak their mind over the discrimination they were facing, and so they did. They began cancelling these racist narratives as it was their right to exercise.

Covering the legal precedent, the US Supreme Court recognized this idea of cancel culture through the case *Reno v. ACLU*. The majority opinion emphasized “any person with a phone line can become a town crier with a voice that resonates farther than it could from any soapbox”.⁷ This quote resonates with the same idea that minorities are using cancel culture to push forth an ideological awakening through social media platforms. While this contributed to potentially causing societal change for POC groups, right-winged groups were obviously not too pleased.

IV. Racist Rhetoric Bringing A Misinterpretation of Cancel Culture

As cancel culture became popularized among marginalized communities, it negatively impacted the perspective from white privileged people. Cancel culture began to

⁷ *Reno v American Civil Liberties Union*, 521 U.S. 844 (June 1997)

challenge the hegemonic ideology that had existed for so long by finally holding them accountable for their actions. In return, far right-winged groups began to use cancel culture to their advantage to maintain the status quo of systematic racism. Out of spite, conservatives were angered at the idea that they were losing ahold of the power that they had always exercised and if cancel culture was going to be used for their benefit, furthering social change could cease. In order for cancel culture to work in their favor, they had to give it a new interpretation. Conservatives were now posing as innocent victims from ‘the harmful effects’ that cancel culture had given them. This had now created a new definition for what cancel culture was because of who claimed was being affected and due to what actions. For example, minorities could try and cancel a political candidate for their discriminatory behavior; however, that same candidate could, in return, use “cancel culture” to cancel the initial cancel culture to save face. This act of playing victim has gained momentum among conservatives in recent years as a means to defend the white privilege that they hold. These conservatives then begin to use this rhetoric within their point of view as a way to once again silence minorities, thus continuing the culture war between differing ideological perspectives. The never-ending cycle from these conservatives is running on resentment and is only continuing to impede on any kind of change that allows POC groups to actively participate and let their voice be heard:

The anti-“cancel culture” movement runs on resentment and fear—of the democratization of social authority and influence, which they believe whittles away at their position as the arbiters of morality, justice, and freedom—virtues they have always defined in transparently narrow, self-serving terms.⁸

⁸ Kali Holloway, “The Great Hypocrisy of Right-Wingers Claiming 'Cancel Culture',” The Nation

White privilege is so deeply intertwined with cultural dominance that far right-winged groups get offended when they have to face the consequences of cancel culture because of their underlying fear of their dominant ideology being reversed. The fear of losing that dominance over POC has thus kept going back to the narrative that just never seems to end because of complacency. Prolonging and tolerating this kind of backwards behavior then brings society to question whether or not any social advancement is to be made possible. If that is the case, who is to make it?

V. Younger Generation and Efforts for Social Advancement

Due to the increase of social media and increased web-based interactions, communication through such platforms becomes a more normalized concept. With that, it is logical to say that those who did not have access to such tools are not too familiar or excited with interacting on such a public domain. It is different. But to those with access, there exists more content than ever before seen. This group just happens to be from a younger generation. With the internet being such a normalized entity, the youth have publicized their life story onto social media apps such as Twitter and TikTok in order to spread their content onto a variety of users.

The same way that minorities have publicized cancel culture and the injustices that they have experienced, the younger generation has simultaneously had access to such information. Therefore, the ongoing spread of data regarding the harmful effects white privilege has had onto POC groups has been a topic that not only conservatives have had an opinion on but the youth as well. As the youth is growing up within a society that is publicly announcing the need for social reform and ideological change, younger

communities have been put in a position to make and form a perspective of their own, especially if they themselves are considered to be a minority as well.

Raising awareness by unmasking racism through social media platforms is the goal for many who use apps like Twitter and TikTok. Multiple users within the youth have chosen to strive for societal change by focusing on social activism. Like the black community had used cancel culture to refuse to endorse or support racist agenda on Twitter, younger generations have popularized the idea of taking part in being the change for social reform. “Darnella Frazier, whose smartphone footage of four Minneapolis police officers killing George Floyd provoked outrage around the world, is just 17 years old”.⁹ Actions initiated from these younger generations have been able to shift attention to the discrepancies that still exist within the system that the nation is built upon. TikTok has also played a role in directly capturing these moments of younger generations making the statement on how corrupted America is because of how large of a role systemic racism has played. Due to the app’s ability to create an algorithm that caters to individual and personal interest, social activism and awareness is able to spread easier at the comfort of one’s home. Teenager Kareem Rahma publicly posted a video on TikTok of the Minneapolis policing incident that he had edited to have the song ‘This Is America’ by Childish Gambino playing in the background.¹⁰ Not only did it gain public attraction through the app, but it became a staple to understanding the cultural turmoil the country was going through.

VI. Analysis: Will the Youth Reshape the Concept of Free Speech to Further

⁹ Gabrielle Canon, “I Cried so Hard’: the Teen Who Filmed Floyd’s Killing, and Changed America,” The Guardian

¹⁰ Sophia S Galer, “How TikTok Changed the World in 2020,” BBC Culture

Constructive Dialogue and End the Misinterpretation of Cancel Culture?

As the younger generations keep drawing attention to the structural disparities negatively affecting minorities, they are furthering societal change through social media apps, such as Twitter and TikTok. With how normalized publicizing every idea or opinion has become recently, accomplishing any kind of change is not only possible, but likely. Cancel culture has already created a spark within this community and signifies a beginning that can reach its end of being the change for the future. From the constant narratives that they are able to push from their handheld devices that they carry, they now become the most powerful tools to impact societal change.

This rhetoric can even be seen as recently aligned with the 2020 US Presidential Election. As political candidates began reaching out to their audience through social media, the youth listened and responded. Considering how low voter turnout for this age group had always been in years prior, politicized media was readily increasing through the polls. Data has shown that voter turnout for the 18-24 age group in the 2020 presidential election had more than doubled.¹¹ A large number of TikTok users had been seen to try and get their audience to vote by emphasizing its importance through hashtags and captions. If one was to click upon the hashtags that were being used, one would note that each individual one could have up to 15 billion views.¹² These views signify the large number of people that these TikTok users have had influence over.

Through the use of social media applications, furthering a certain agenda is easy. The primary focus in order to reach any kind of social change then has to be prioritizing equality by negating the dominant ideological perspective of whiteness. As social media

¹¹ Noah Kurkjian , “Youth Voting Population Mobilized by Social Media,” The Ferris State Torch

¹² Ibid.

users have already begun to raise awareness of these racial inequalities that are currently happening, the world is becoming more cognizant about the cultural war that is going on between white supremacists and POC. Not only are the youth beginning to recognize cultural differences, but many are also seeing the consequences that racist narratives have caused and prolonged. Change is happening. For example, the teen who recorded the last minutes of George Floyd's life was credited with supplying crucial testimony that led to former police officer Derek Chauvin's arrest. Darnella Frazier said she "cried too much" after Chauvin was found guilty on all charges in Floyd's murder in Minneapolis on Tuesday.¹³ The ex-cop was found guilty of second- and third-degree murder, as well as second-degree homicide, by a jury. Frazier shot the shocking footage that ignited a series of demonstrations against police violence and racial injustice in the United States and around the world in May 2020 through a post on Twitter. Actions that these youths are taking into their own hands are revolutionary into changing the mindset that the United States has always held.

Another method that the youth has acted against the prolonging of bigoted perspectives was seen through an internet troll directly aimed at former Republican president Donald Trump.¹⁴ The way young people united to troll the president does not impress social media users who have been following current events. They did so on Twitter, Instagram, and even Facebook, in addition to TikTok. K-Pop followers, who have both a large, well-organized online community and a sharp sense of humor, have unexpectedly allied with American Black Lives Matter demonstrators. They've been

¹³ Ashleigh Carter, "'Darnella Frazier Changed the World': Teen Who Filmed George Floyd's Murder Praised AFTER VERDICT," April 21, 2021

¹⁴ Barbara Ortutay, "Did TikTok Teens, K-Pop Fans Punk Trump's Comeback Rally?," AP NEWS

repurposing their typical account feed and hashtags from promoting their beloved celebrities to supporting the Black Lives Matter campaign in recent weeks. Short video clips and memes of their K-pop stars littered right-wing hashtags praising white supremacist contentions and police apps. The efforts made are there to combat the misconstrued idea of what America has become due to national politics means teens are taking advantage of the situation to recognize its harm and playing on it.

With these means to reach their ends, these existing key players are able to win the ability to push social advancement to reach integrating all culture to its full potential. Those within the younger communities that are also minorities have the upper hand in this cultural imbalance. This smaller group of the youth and POC does not only understand the injustices inflicted upon them the best but they are also the essential players that can help others understand and see it from their point of view. This can occur in all kinds of environments from the schoolhouse gate to the privacy of one's own home. These conversations can become normalized that once the thought in mind exists, the body will follow leading to more inclusive actions. If social media were to reflect such actions by this group, social advancement would prosper thus dissolving the misinterpreted construction of cancel culture that white privilege has created. Liberal thought would be initiated and practiced among all races as it was intended to when the founding fathers first spoke about a nation for all. Only then would the nation be a free realm where one would be able to stand proud and say, "This is America".

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