Cancel Culture's Torrent: The Challenges Faced by Celebrity and Brand

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Abstract: In the digital era, cancel culture has become a potent social force, influencing brands and celebrities. With the increasing prevalence of social media platforms accelerating its spread, this research aims to unearth the drivers and consequences of cancel culture for both brands and celebrities, employing case studies of IVE and L'Oréal, it utilizes the power within relationships theory, and Heuristic typology in congruence theory to do the research. Findings reveal that cultural missteps or value breaches, like IVE's cultural misrepresentation and L'Oréal's controversial dismissal, trigger cancellations. Consumers' power perception and value congruence shape responses. Brands and celebrities can rebound through transparency and value realignment. The study concludes that while cancel culture poses risks, entities can safeguard themselves by embracing accountability and diversity. Moreover, understanding the generative reasons behind cancel culture is crucial in an age where public opinion wields significant influence, and it offers a strategic compass for brands/celebrities and a foundation for future research on this complex cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: Cancel Culture, Brand Recovery, Celebrity Boycott, Consumer Behavior

1.   Introduction

Cancel culture first arose from a variety of effects and big hits on shows, and has flourished with the popularity of social media, is often defined as the mass withdrawal of support from consumers and audiences due to the controversial actions or statements the brands or celebrities made, which trigger the public anger [1]. Originating on platforms such as Black Twitter, it has evolved from a simple response mechanism between acquaintances to a powerful tool for holding public figures and entities accountable for offensive behaviour.

The previous research has largely skimmed the surface of cancellation culture, focusing either on celebrities or brands in isolation. The lack of in-depth exploration of the underlying causes and few studies linking the two domains have left a significant research gap. This study endeavours to fill this gap by applying the consumer cancellation culture framework, power theory in relationships, and heuristic typology from coherence theory. This paper dissects the phenomenon of celebrity and brand cancellation. Through in-depth case studies of IVE and L'Oreal, this essay has constructed a comprehensive framework that reveals the underlying factors and influences. This study lays the cornerstone for future scholars by providing a methodological blueprint and theoretical springboard for further inquiry into the complex dynamics of cancellation culture and provides implications for celebrities and brands, as well as their communication practitioners in the future.

2.   Overview

2.1.   Cancel Culture: A Double-Edged Sword

Cancel culture refers to the mass withdrawal of support from public figures or companies due to their controversial actions or statements. It can hold the powerful accountable. Illustrations from 2019 abound; R. Kelly, under suspicion of being a sexual predator, was confronted with audience accusations. Entertainers such as Kanye West and Scarlett Johanss bore the brunt of boycotts following their offensive expressions. Comedians Kevin Hart and Shane Gillis, too, faced public censure when their erstwhile homophobic and racist jests emerged on social media platforms. It is the removal of all forms of support for those judged to have uttered or done things that are unacceptable or seriously problematic [2]. To be specific, cancel culture involves actions like boycotting, ostracizing, or publicly condemning individuals, brands, and their cultural products that are seen as going against social norms, ethical standards, or political correctness by customers and audiences. Cancel culture is an expression of social accountability[3], holding individuals and institutions accountable for their actions through the power of the public, and also providing a platform for those who are usually marginalized or silenced to have their voices heard [4].

2.2.   Relevant Theories Employed

The Power within Relationships Theory and Heuristic Typology in Congruence Theory are crucial for cancel culture study. Instances like a celebrity's offensive remarks or a brand's ethical lapse can trigger cancellation. Anxious/avoidant consumers, sensing threat or value misalignment, act. When a celebrity's views oppose fans' or a brand's actions clash with its image, consumers, guided by these theories, withdraw support, revealing cancel culture's roots in consumer perception and value congruence. In past studies, these two theories were more commonly used to analyse the reasons behind the cancel culture.

2.2.1. The Power within Relationships Theory

The power within relationships theory posits that consumer personality is regarded as a personal trait and can be either anxious or avoidant, anxious consumers show greater sensitivity and concern, vigilantly monitoring interactions for threats [5]. When consumers feel a lack of mastery and control over a brand or celebrity, such as when a brand does not do what they want, they often respond by cancelling the boycott[6]. A common result of this cancellation activity is a decline in loyalty and overall connectedness. For brands, this usually leads to a depletion of financial resources, and for celebrities, this usually leads to a complete loss of loyalty and support from the public. Conversely, if consumers discover a return of control over the brand, they will choose not to cancel the brand or celebrity and ignore the effects of the previous negative event.

2.2.2. Heuristic Typology in Congruence Theory

Table 1: Heuristic Typology

| | Dominant Societal Culture | |
| | Socially Conservative | Socially Liberal |

Table 1: (continued)

Individual Ideological Values	Socially Conservative	Congruent	Non-congruent: Perceptions of Silencing
	Socially Liberal	Non-congruent: Perceptions of Silencing	Congruent

Heuristic Typology, which will also be adapted to analyze the cancel culture phenomenon, was first introduced as a concept within the framework of congruence theory in social psychology [7]. Table 1 illustrates the heuristic typology by comparing the dominant culture within society with the dominant ideological values of an individual, to be specific, Table 1 shows a simplified classification framework in Heuristic Typology which assists in comprehending and anticipating social behavior. It places significant emphasis on the fact that individuals strive for consistency among cognition, emotion, and behavior. For instance, when an individual's behavior fails to align with their self-categorization, they may experience a sense of discomfort and subsequently take measures to re-establish consistency [8].

3. Analysis and Debate of Case Studies

Cancellation culture manifests itself in two main ways, fans cancelling celebrities and customers cancelling brands. For celebrities, their public image and fan dynamics shape unique cancellation patterns. For brands, their market positioning and consumer loyalty matrices experience different cause-and-effect relationships. By analysing both, we can gain a holistic perspective that reveals common causal factors and different responses,. By delving into two case studies (artists with the IVE group affair on the 29th, April, 2024, as a representative example, and brands with the most learnable example of L'Oreal), it can be painted as a comprehensive picture of the distinct but interconnected areas of cancellation culture. Thus, it provides strategies for individuals and businesses to navigate this turbulent phenomenon.

3.1. Cultural Misrepresentation: The IVE Conundrum and Fan Disenchantment

Chinese fans resisted the music band IVE as it was charged with the claim of presenting Chinese traditional culture as if it were Korean. This incident underlined the significance of showing respect and having an understanding of various cultural backgrounds.

3.1.1. Background

The global proliferation of K-pop culture, spearheaded by groups like IVE, has been meteoric. Originating from South Korea, K-pop culture has permeated international borders, captivating audiences far and wide with its unique blend of music, choreography, and visual aesthetics. However, this rapid expansion has not been without friction, particularly in its interaction with other rich cultural heritages.

The incident involving IVE's "HEYA" album and music video serves as a poignant example. On the 29th, IVE released their second EP, along with the music video for the title track "HEYA". But a backlash has emerged on Chinese social media platforms like Weibo, with some users accusing the video of "blatantly stealing Chinese culture"

As K-pop endeavors to diversify its creative palette by incorporating elements from various cultures, the misrepresentation of Chinese traditional culture within this album has sparked a significant backlash. In an era where cultural identity and heritage preservation are of paramount importance, such appropriation has struck a nerve among Chinese fans and cultural custodians alike.

This controversy has not only strained the relationship between the group and its Chinese fan base but has also kindled a broader debate about cultural sensitivity and authenticity within the global entertainment landscape. It has spotlighted the need for a more nuanced understanding and respect for diverse cultural roots, especially when art forms traverse international boundaries. The implications of this incident reverberate beyond the immediate fan reactions, seeping into the fabric of cross-cultural exchanges and the ethical considerations that underpin the creative industries. Chinese enthusiasts are fueling the triumph of numerous groups by means of procuring albums, engaging in digital streaming, and actively partaking in social media initiatives. However, cultural sensitivity, like IVE's misstep in representing another culture, led to the audience boycott.

3.1.2. The Power within Relationships Theory

A rift emerged in the relationship between IVE and its fans. The cancellation and boycott actions triggered by the controversy surrounding IVE's "HEYA" video demonstrated clearly how the perceptions of power can have an impact on consumer behavior as well as their attachment to a celebrity as the group's new album sales have plummeted and all advertisements in China have been cancelled. The result of this power imbalance was that initially, IVE had power over its fans due to its popularity and its emotional connection to its musical work and public image. However, the controversy over music videos perceived as cultural appropriation quickly eroded this power.

As the Chinese fans perceived the group's actions as being disrespectful to their traditional cultural heritage, such as hairpins and embroidery as Korean culture, they felt less control over the group and their emotional connection to the group began to weaken. This weakening manifests itself in the form of decreased resistance and support, such as reduced sales and criticism on social media, signalling a weakening of the relationship and connection between the audience and the star. The Chinese audience came to believe that they lacked power when it came to influencing the relevant object (in this case, the celebrity group). As a result, their emotional attachment to the celebrity decreased. This decline further led to a reduction in consumers' tolerance and acceptance of the influenced object, ultimately resulting in their decision to take cancellation actions.

3.1.3. Heuristic Typology in Congruence Theory

In the case of the IVE cancellation, a clear dichotomy of roles evolved: the cancelled celebrity, IVE, and the force that drove it, the audience, especially the target audience in China. Cognitive dissonance emerged when Chinese fans felt that IVE's conduct deviated from ethical social norms and failed to meet their expectations. Given that IVE had previously targeted the Chinese market but was now perceived as disrespecting Chinese culture, the Chinese fans were understandably disappointed and angry. As a result, they have resorted to actions such as publicly censuring and boycotting related products, participating in a cancellation culture, and making IVE answerable for their deeds in an attempt to mitigate this inconsistency.

3.2. Value Dissonance: L'Oréal's Dilemma and Consumer Backlash

The culture of cancellation is not only associated with celebrities but also appears in the field of brand management. The second case will examine L'Oreal's reaction to the public uproar following the sacking of Munroe Bergdorf. It will also explore the subtleties of brand recovery, highlighting the impact of corporate responsibility, social responsibility and consumer cancellation on shaping brand

stories. The case of L'Oréal was deliberately chosen because it provides a rich narrative of the transformation process in the saga of cancellation culture. Unlike previous studies, it vividly documents the brand's descent into the abyss of public condemnation following Bergdorf's dismissal and the arduous journey to redemption. This exploration of space and time provides a rare window into how brand perceptions change over time. The L'Oréal case thus serves as a paradigmatic study, illuminating the perils and potential pathways for brands navigating the tempestuous seas of cancel culture, highlighting the critical interplay between corporate actions, public perception, and the pursuit of social justice within the marketplace.

3.2.1. Background

L'Oréal, a worldwide cosmetics brand, encountered a substantial public outcry subsequent to the termination of Munroe Bergdorf. It had made incisive remarks on Facebook regarding racism and "white racial violence". L'Oréal's decision to terminate her employment, ostensibly due to a perceived misalignment with the company's professed values, triggered a seismic public outcry. It is the dismissal of Bergdorf that led to consumer-initiated cancellation. Social media platforms were inundated with critical remarks, and a large number of consumers declared their intention to boycott L'Oréal's products. The hashtag #BoycottL'Oréal became a trending topic, indicating a unified consumer reaction that could have a substantial influence on the brand's standing and sales figures.

But after 3 years in 2020, L'Oréal managed to rebound from the cancellation. The brand's new president, Delphine Viguier, extended an apology and extended an invitation to the black transgender model Munroe Bergdorf to return to L'Oréal.

It could be viewed as an effective case study showcasing a brand's journey of recovery from being canceled [9]. L'Oréal's reactions and the corrective measures it took within three years offer a persuasive demonstration of the possibility for a brand to recover and also underline the crucial importance of aligning with the values held by consumers.

3.2.2. The Power Within Relationships Theory

Consumers thought L'Oréal lacked power in terms of ethics and inclusive practices. This power imbalance led to a decline in consumer attachment and tolerance for the brand. As a result, there was a power imbalance, the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand declined. This then brought about a reduction in consumers' tolerance, which was exhibited through public boycotts.

However, three years later, consumers regained their support. Consumers show favor towards celebrities or brands if they perceive them to have qualities that benefit the public, such as engaging in socially responsible corporate behavior and providing support for social projects. In this case, consumers decide to forgive and forget. This not only resisted further cancellation boycotts but also helped L'Oréal to regain the warmth and trust of its audience.

L'Oréal's remedial measures have resulted in a growth in consumers' attachment to the brand. Subsequently, this led to an enhancement in consumer tolerance and inclusiveness, as demonstrated by the vanishing of resistance and progressive acceptance.

3.2.3. Heuristic Typology in Congruence Theory

Applying the Heuristic Typology in Congruence Theory to the L'Oréal cancellation event reveals key insights. L'Oréal, a global brand, had long projected an image aligned with diversity and social progress. However, the sacking of Munroe Bergdorf, who spoke out against racism, created a jarring dissonance. Consumers, accustomed to the brand's purported values, perceived a significant mismatch between L'Oréal's actions and its professed stance. This violated the principle of cognitive consistency within the congruence theory framework.

The dominant societal culture increasingly values social justice and equality, while L'Oréal's decision seems contrary. Consumers, striving for coherence between their beliefs and the brand's behavior, thus initiated cancellation. Their self-categorization as advocates for equality clashed with L'Oréal's actions, causing discomfort. Only when the brand realigned with these values through apologies and corrective measures did consumers' trust and attachment begin to be restored, reestablishing congruence and mitigating the cancel culture's impact.

4.   Implications

According to the cases above, a brand or celebrity must adopt a transparent and accountable stance while wholeheartedly embracing diversity and inclusivity. These elements are the cornerstones for fostering consumer trust and fostering a strong bond, thereby erecting a protective shield against the threat of cancellation. When accusations surface, enterprises invariably need to vindicate their actions and clarify the divergence between their deeds and public anticipations before the public, media, and stakeholders [10]. This endeavor serves to mollify the adverse ramifications of cancellation. Corporate self-defense, manifested through purposeful speech acts, is instrumental in preserving the company's image and standing. L'Oréal's exemplary display of transparency and accountability during the issue's resolution was pivotal in alleviating the harm inflicted on its reputation.

For those engaged in communication, respecting the cultural fabric of the target market and audience is non-negotiable. Scheufle and Moy's extensive exploration of the spiral of silence theory reveals that cross-cultural disparities significantly influence audiences' inclination to voice their opinions [11]. This notion has been further elaborated and deepened by numerous studies within the modernization theory framework. When brands and celebrities accord due deference to cross-cultural divergences and execute culturally apt marketing communications, the peril of cancellation can be substantially mitigated. Such an approach nurtures a harmonious environment, fortifying their position within the cultural and commercial spheres.

Practitioners must exercise extreme prudence when navigating the minefield of sensitive topics on social media, as these can potentially incite a public boycott. Any inadvertent misstep is liable to mar the brand's image and precipitate a slump in sales. Contemporary research on online communication attributes the escalation of culture wars to the proliferation of activists interconnected via digital social platforms [12].

Besides, for brands, the instances of L'Oréal and Munroe Bergdorf offer illuminating perspectives on the power dynamics between consumers and brands within the cancel culture milieu. They accentuate the imperative not only of rectifying mistakes but also of instituting profound and enduring alterations. The cases vividly demonstrate the significance of brands expeditiously and efficaciously addressing consumer apprehensions.

5.   Conclusion

This paper delved into the impact of cancel culture on brands and celebrities triggered by cultural misrepresentation and value dissonance, it unearthed how actions breaching values trigger consumer withdrawal. IVE's cultural misrepresentation and L'Oréal's controversial dismissal spurred boycotts, yet both could recover via transparency and value realignment.

The findings spotlight the potency of consumer perception in cancel culture. However, the study could be enhanced by integrating more quantitative data to fortify conclusions and explore cancel culture's role in shaping industry-wide ethical standards. Future research could focus on cancel culture's long-term brand equity effects and its intersection with emerging tech like AI in shaping public sentiment. Also, cross-cultural comparisons of cancel culture's manifestations and remedies

would enrich understanding, guiding brands and celebrities to adeptly navigate this volatile cultural terrain.

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