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To Cancel or Not to Cancel: Debunking the Surging Cancel Culture Epidemic

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the rebirth of "cancel culture" in today's society. Over time, cancel culture has progressively increased in severity, being seen through popular fields such as comedy, politics, law enforcement, and even horrendous cases of sexual assault. Cancel culture refers to the newly accepted form of eliminating the platforms or popularity of influencers, celebrities, and even those in everyday life through the canceling or disapproving of a past action, comment, or video. Although the term has only been recently introduced, it refers to an action or even a way of living that has become well-known among newer generations. For this study, I conduct primary research in the form of a brief survey, offering both closed-ended and open-ended questions. I analyze the research through a content analysis approach, determining in which field or fields cancel culture is most pervasive and why cancel culture is more prominent or active in that field compared to others. I also look to analyze whether or not age affects a person's understanding or definition of cancel culture. From the results and the studying of prior research, I draw conclusions regarding the prevalence of cancel culture in certain fields and the factors that attract it to be there. Ultimately, I am determining if cancel culture is seen as a positive or negative phenomenon in today's society.

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Introduction

Throughout 2020, our world remained in a state of disarray, to put it lightly, primarily due to the unexpected global pandemic, which completely shattered our notion of what a "normal" way of life should be. Though our country and numerous others persisted to make the best of the situation, what once used to be a normal conversation, appointment, or class suddenly involved communication with others on a computer screen via Zoom. This swift change in the way of everyday life led to the birth of a new digital age; out of boredom, many turned to social media to make their challenging days seem shorter. Subsequently, the newfound surge of social media actively led to what most know as "cancel culture." Because some had more time on their hands than others and may have found themselves scrolling through the past social media posts of their peers, an offensive tweet - or multiple tweets - may have found their way back to the surface. Uniquely, with the resurfacing of offensive comments, questionable actions, or just downright poor behavior, many social media users were quick to include their own opinions on the matter and began using the term "canceled." Cancel culture can be more commonly described as the form of eliminating an influencer, celebrity, or normal person's platform or popularity through the canceling or disapproving of a past action, comment, or video. Undeniably, it is an act that still proves very relevant two years later, as it seems as every social media post or news report tells of yet another person who "got the boot" or was otherwise "canceled."

Whereas many believe cancel culture was born in the year 2020, the act was actually around a long time before the birth — forget that, the thought — of any of you. It could be argued that cancel culture was first seen in the United States around 1692 during the Salem Witch Trials in Salem, Massachusetts (Karaunakar, 2021). In short, the Salem Witch Trials occurred because some townspeople were threatened by women who broke societal norms, so pointing a finger at these women and yelling, "Witch!" (the canceling) to have them killed was

understood as being easier than trying to understand why they might be independent or different. Several centuries later, history repeated itself as Americans witnessed similar behavior during the Red Scare in the 1940s to the early 1950s (Editors, 2020). The Red Scare once again instilled fear in society about individuals, leading many to be labeled as "red" (the canceling) for their alliance to the Soviet Union. During this time, some were sadly falsely accused. Fast forward to today's day and age, we see comedians making racist jokes, politicians supporting extreme rallies, celebrities being discovered as cannibals, or just a neighbor cheating on their partner. Moral of the story, all of these situations have actually happened (kind of crazy to think about), and they have certainly all led to the cancellation of an individual.

This study serves a few different purposes. First, I plan to add to existing research surrounding the fields which experience the most cancel culture, such as comedy, politics, and law enforcement. Second, I plan to introduce other topics that are important to take into consideration when looking at cancel culture as a whole. I want this study to shed light on the various ways cancel culture can be defined as well as the negative and/or positive connotations associated with these terms based on the varying definitions. After all, cancel culture will most likely continue to evolve, as it serves as a forum open to public opinion. This study is one of the first of its kind, offering an opportunity to explore and research a currently developing topic by examining cancel culture through a content analysis approach. More importantly, these results could act as a backbone and be applied to future studies on the topic of cancel culture in many fields, such as psychology, sociology, and several others. Overall, I am glad to serve as one of the matches lighting this conversation because cancel culture is actively in the process of dominating various highly-used social media platforms, so let this article serve as the much-needed enlightenment on the topic.

Literature Review

Evidently, cancel culture is a phenomenon most millennials are acclimated to nowadays. Whether the canceling on social media can be attributed to politics, comedy, or any of a plethora of other factors, cancel culture has spread like wildfire across numerous social media platforms. Previous scholarly articles have addressed how cancel culture has individually affected several areas, such as politics, comedy, sexual assault, and law enforcement; others have explored the ways in which social media platforms have acted as forums for this change. While some articles focus on the power of social media to enable the action, others talk about how the political landscape has changed, or even how comedians can no longer make jokes they used to due to the audience becoming "soft."

Social Media

History shows that cancel culture has been present in our country's history, but it was in fact social media that rebirthed the process into what most are familiar with today. Social networking platforms were originally created with the idea of allowing individuals to engage in varying forms of online interactions (Velasco, 2020). In today's technological world, social networking has become more commonly known as social media and grants the opportunity for one user to connect with millions with only the simple push of a button. Without a doubt, this easy access to the equivalent of a worldwide microphone has become the base for cancel culture today.

The next popular discussion which stems from the very same root is whether the audience believes the action of "canceling" a person is a positive or negative act. The article "Tug of War: Social Media, Cancel Culture, and Diversity for Girls and The 100" claims, "On Twitter, users

may encounter an effective flow of outrage, as well as fun and enjoyment, at the expense of an evil other who must be 'cancelled,' and the pleasures of moral posturing" (Anderson-Lopez, 2021). Furthermore, though cancel culture can carry a negative connotation or be considered toxic, this amplification of sentiment can also evolve into positive calls for change, such as calls for diversity (Anderson-Lopez, 2021). On the other hand, Meredith Clark (2020), an American journalist and scholar, takes a differing point of view in her article "Drag Them: A Brief Etymology of So-Called 'Cancel Culture,'" stating, "The absence of deliberation in chastising bad actors, misconstrued as the outcome of cancel culture, is a fault of the elites' inability to adequately conceive of the impact social media connectivity has for shifting the power dynamics of the public sphere in the digital age." Clark introduces a new idea to audiences that cancel culture is created at the fault of our world's elites for not being updated with the current times. The social elites have become insulted by the normalities of acceptable discourse in everyday life due to their lack of awareness of race, gender, and class issues that comprise the realities of those who struggle in society (Clark, 2020). Though, Clark concludes her point with the reiteration of the power social media holds to simply and swiftly flip a life upside down.

Finally, another point of view is introduced in the article "Eliminating Fear Speech: How Free Speech Can Address the Dual Threats that Cancel Culture and Hate Speech Pose to Individual Liberty." Author Stephen McLoughlin, writing for the Creighton Law Review, expresses, "Those who seek to address the harm of cancel culture are accused of using the First Amendment to protect and promote hate and racism. Conversely, those who advocate for protections against hate speech are often portrayed as seeking to silence dissent and encourage censorship" (McLoughlin, 2022). Ultimately, McLoughlin is claiming there is just no winning in the scenario of believing cancel culture is either positive or negative. The belief of the act being

negative will lead some to imagine an extremist who only cares about their amendments, while the belief of the act being positive will paint an image of a "softy" who believes every single media post should be restrained or censored. This one quote succinctly illustrates the challenge in determining if cancel culture is either positive or negative because believers of each view will experience backlash from believers of the other. All in all, while some previous scholarly articles believe social media can amplify cancel culture in a positive way by allowing users to spread diverse opinions, others argue social media is a powerful and dangerous tool most do not understand the repercussions of, thus allowing cancel culture to harmfully run free.

Politics

Several articles note the effect of cancel culture on politics, some stating more prominently than others how the atmosphere of cancel culture has changed the field of politics worldwide. More specifically, the field has changed from the new overarching fear of speaking out. Politicians have become fearful of expressing their personal views and ideas due to the modern stigma associated with saying "the wrong thing" and the potential threat of being canceled for making a statement determined to be offensive to some members of society. The article "Closed Minds? Is a 'Cancel Culture' Stifling Academic Freedom and Intellectual Debate in Political Science?" focuses on how the immense growth of cancel culture affects not only politics but also higher education across the country. According to Pippa Norris, a political scientist, "Debates about the cancel culture have intensified in recent years as part of deepening ideological and value cleavages dividing progressive liberals and social conservatives… Contemporary media speculation about the shaming of leading public figures in the worlds of popular entertainment, publishing, and politics, as well as colleges and universities, encapsulated

in the 'cancel culture' label, has often generated more political heat than intellectual light"

(Norris, 2020). For this reason, the political field has shifted from debating serious political

issues to debating only who is right and wrong for the statements that have been made, though

the struggle and disagreements between political parties have historically always been present in

our society. The lack of respecting the political opinions of others can potentially transform into

a significant issue that restricts the development of change for both political parties, as cancel

culture is an added stressor that potentially paralyzes advancement of political issues.

In a different article titled "Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?" Norris discusses the

possibility that the lack of political and ideological diversity is also thought to undermine the

validity of social science by limiting the research agenda, strengthening dangers of implicit

confirmation bias (Norris, 2021). Undoubtedly, this statement further validates the points made

above. Many politicians have chosen not to speak out on the ideas they once aspired to in fear of

getting canceled, while others who do not fear backlash have spoken out and in turn gotten

canceled. Evidently, understanding cancel culture has become vital for those who find

themselves in the field of politics. Comprehension of the overlap between political

characteristics and this new culture is crucially important, as political affiliation is one of the two

biggest predictors of whether politicians will engage in the activity of canceling themselves

through their own activities and comments (Marsh, 2022). In brief, the inability of a politician to

grasp the concept of cancel culture can lead to extreme bias in our political system that can

spread to other aspects of life.

Comedy

One area of society affected by Cancel Culture is comedy. Comedy has drastically changed with the recent influx of cancel culture. Comedians everywhere are now under social media users' microscopes. Users watch their every word and criticize what they believe the comedians can and cannot say. Alex Symons (2021), a professor scholar at the University of Nottingham, further elaborates on this point, explaining, "In the case of these comedian-activists, 'Cancel Culture' is a spectrum of risk – determined, in part, by the comedians' star images and the degree to which they challenge proprieties through 'carnivalesque' behavior… Roseanne Barr and Kathy Griffin both broke drastically from expectations, and both did so in a wildly transgressive way. Both suffered the most severe penalties." Griffin and Barr both spoke publicly about their real feelings in their jokes and in return received harsh judgment from many who opposed them; in fact, both comedians essentially lost their careers as a result of making these comments. This point is further supported in the article "Cancel Culture: What is the Real Debate?" by Alexandra Day and Marnie Holborow (2021), who wrote, "Numerous opposers want to take on the 'left-wing snowflakes' who are killing comedy, tearing down historic statues, removing books from universities." Evidently, the discussion of defining what the fine line is between comedy and going too far is still very new as the line has yet to be established.

Furthermore, in an interview conducted by *The Hollywood Reporter,* television host Steve Harvey further elaborated on this shift in the comedy field when he claimed, "We're in the cancel culture now, nobody can say anything he wants to — Chris Rock can't, Kevin Hart can't, Cedric the Entertainer can't, D.L. Hughley can't. I can go down the list… If I had tried to continue as a stand-up, there's no way I could maintain it because political correctness has killed comedy, has *killed* it" (Hibberd, 2022). Clearly, comedians are affected by cancel culture, causing fear among

the very people who use artful joking to entertain crowds in an otherwise stressful society. Given these points, there has been a clear shift in comedy in recent years; what once used to be a playful and free field has shifted to a more conservative and fearful environment in order to prevent comedians from crossing a line that many have already crossed (and consequently suffered being canceled for having done so).

Sexual Assault

Although there are many downsides to cancel culture, journalists Day and Holborow (2021) have noted a few positives; the cancelation of those accused of sexual assault is one of them. Though cancel culture carries a negative association to many, collectively most can agree that sexual assault and the "canceling" of those who have committed sexual assault is a positive. Day and Holoborow discuss how the #MeToo movement has empowered women across the world to speak out about the abuse they suffered from sexual harassment and rape by powerful men, breaking the silence and validating the rights of survivors of abuse.

Similarly, this discussion is taken further in the article "How Can We End #CancelCulture—Tort Liability or Thumper's Rule?" by validating punishment given to those canceled powerful men across social media. Specifically, the article names Kevin Spacey, an Oscar-winng actor who was terminated not only from his film but also from his entire career after being accused of sexual assault in 2017 (Carr, 2020). Apart from Spacey, countless other well-known celebrities such as R. Kelly, Michael Jackson, Ansel Elgort, Armie Hammer, and many others have been removed from the forefronts of not only social media for sexual allegations, but also their careers. In a separate interview, comedian Norm MacDonald expressed his idea on the surge of cancellations when stating, "There are very few people that have gone

through what they have, losing everything in a day... Of course, people will go, 'What about the victims?' But you know what? The victims didn't have to go through that" (Romano, 2019). The victims are now the ones standing up for themselves, as they turn to social media to voice their stories and receive justice for their assault. In brief, this country is seeing history unfold before its eyes. People around the country are turning to social media to voice their opinions; it is giving those who were assaulted and are afraid to speak out a platform on which to do so.

Law Enforcement

Finally, the last field that is significantly affected by the uptick in cancel culture is law enforcement. Law enforcement issues have been on the frontlines of social media for the past several years, with newspapers circulating the question of whether to defund or stand by the police. Cancel culture is not only affecting those who chose to join the force, but rather the entire criminal justice system as a whole. This idea is discussed in the article "A Return to Public Square Trials? How Cancel Culture and Perp Walks May Undermine Trial Impartiality and Criminal Justice," in which the author claims, "Especially in the United States, cancel culture opens the possibility for the general public to produce its own judgement of the perp before the matter is addressed by the judicial system… The 'canceled' individual is tried under laws that have not been established within criminal or civil law" (Oliveria, 2021). This idea of social media users taking on the responsibility of the criminal justice system due to lack of respect for the system, impatience, or just wanting their voice to be heard is discussed in multiple articles.

Author Samantha Haskell seconds this idea when she introduces her thoughts of vigilantism, claiming, "Technology has created limitless spaces for what are called 'digital vigilantes.' Vigilantism is the act of citizens taking law enforcement in their own hands when

appointed law enforcement is not meeting the expectations of the public, usually, but not always, with the intent to right a wrong" (Haskell, 2021). Although worldwide users may believe they are on the right side of the issue by calling attention to the perceived lack of diversity by canceling those who have done wrong, the ways in which they are going about it have been argued to be unjust. Nonetheless, the "canceled" need to be taken to court for serious allegations and tried under the official judicial system of the United States, not only tried by the newly formed cancel culture stigma circulating on Twitter or Instagram. This outburst on social media has actually proven to cause some additional problems for law enforcement; as Marywood University author Richard Duque and his co-authors (2021) argue, "The emergence of the 'Angry White Man' in the wake of social atomization, welfare and affirmative action policies, and the diversification of schools and workplaces has proven a fertile breeding ground for toxic white masculinity." Clearly, the public cancellation of those who have wronged others on social media platforms infuriates those in opposition, ultimately leading many of those who oppose the public shaming to become riled up, guiding them towards committing crimes of their own.

All in all, prior scholarly articles on the topic of cancel culture have illustrated divergent and unique opinions regarding the endless discussion of whether cancel culture is a positive or negative aspect of present day society. Through the depiction of cancel culture in fields and topics such as social media, politics, comedy, sexual assault, and law enforcement, people worldwide have taken their own stance on the emerging phenomenon.

Methodology

To begin, the focus of this research centers around personal opinions, experiences, and knowledge of cancel culture. After completing preliminary research through prior scholarly

articles using a content analysis approach, the groundwork and past findings on the topic were

examined. Once the past research was reviewed, the fields most severely impacted by cancel

culture were identified. To reiterate the topics that were introduced in the research overview

above; social media, politics, comedy, sexual assault, and law enforcement were predominately

affected by the resurgence of the act. Importantly, from this discovery of prior research, a survey

was designed to address to an audience surrounding their personal opinions on these fields and

the topic as a whole. The survey consisted of eight short answer and multiple choice questions

designed at gauging a better understanding of the participant's age, past knowledge on the topic,

their definition of the act, if the participant has witnessed the act first-hand or through social

media, and if the participant believes cancel culture is negative or positive. In a final analysis,

from these results the discussion of similarities between various definitions of cancel culture

from the participants was compared. Also, to add to prior research on the topic, the fields in

which more participants have seen the act of canceling was also examined. Lastly, the

conversation of whether or not participants believe cancel culture is a negative or positive act

was introduced. Ultimately, throughout the findings section, graphs, charts, and diagrams of the

results found were introduced to make the data collected more comprehensible.

      The recruitment plan for the survey that was sent out was fairly simple. The survey was

created using Google Forms, an easy and acceptable option for all devices. The survey was

completely anonymous, so it did not involve the collection of names or links to any participant's

email or Google account. The survey link was shared on Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn. On

LinkedIn, the survey link was shared only once, including the original communication. On

Instagram and Snapchat, the survey link was shared every Monday for a span of three weeks

between October 3 and October 17 of 2022. Additionally, the same communication piece was

shared on Instagram and Snapchat each week it was posted. The survey consisted of a few restrictions, the most essential being that every participant had to be eighteen years old to complete the survey. The survey ended with a closing statement thanking participants for their time and participation in the survey.

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Findings

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Demographics

In total, 90 survey responses were received over the three weeks the survey was published and shared on various social media platforms. In addition, all survey responses were analyzed based on several factors. In the first section of the survey, demographics such as the participant's gender, age, and level of familiarity with the term "cancel culture" were examined. Figure 1 conveys in detail the wide range of ages of participants who filled out the survey; the minimum age to complete the survey was 18 years old, but the survey spanned to the age of 65 years old, making the range 47 years. The median age of participants in the survey was 21, as a greater portion of participants who completed the survey were around 20 to 21 years of age. Similarly, the mode or participant's age that occurred the most in the data was 20 years old, which appeared 35 times among participants. Equally important, this age range is clearly illustrated in figure 1 due to the graph almost looking top-heavy from the skew. Lastly, it is not surprising, then, that the mean or average age of participants was 26.62 years of age. On the contrary, the outlying ages of participants were established to be 37, 38, 43, 45, 48, 53, 55, 57, 59, 62, 63, and 65. Figure 1 clearly shows the stagnation of participants' age once the participant hits the age of 30 or above since there is no longer any movement among participants around that

age, until 57. Ultimately, though there was a significant age range between the 90 participants who completed the survey, most participants were in their early twenties.

Figure 1

Age Demographics Observed Throughout the Survey
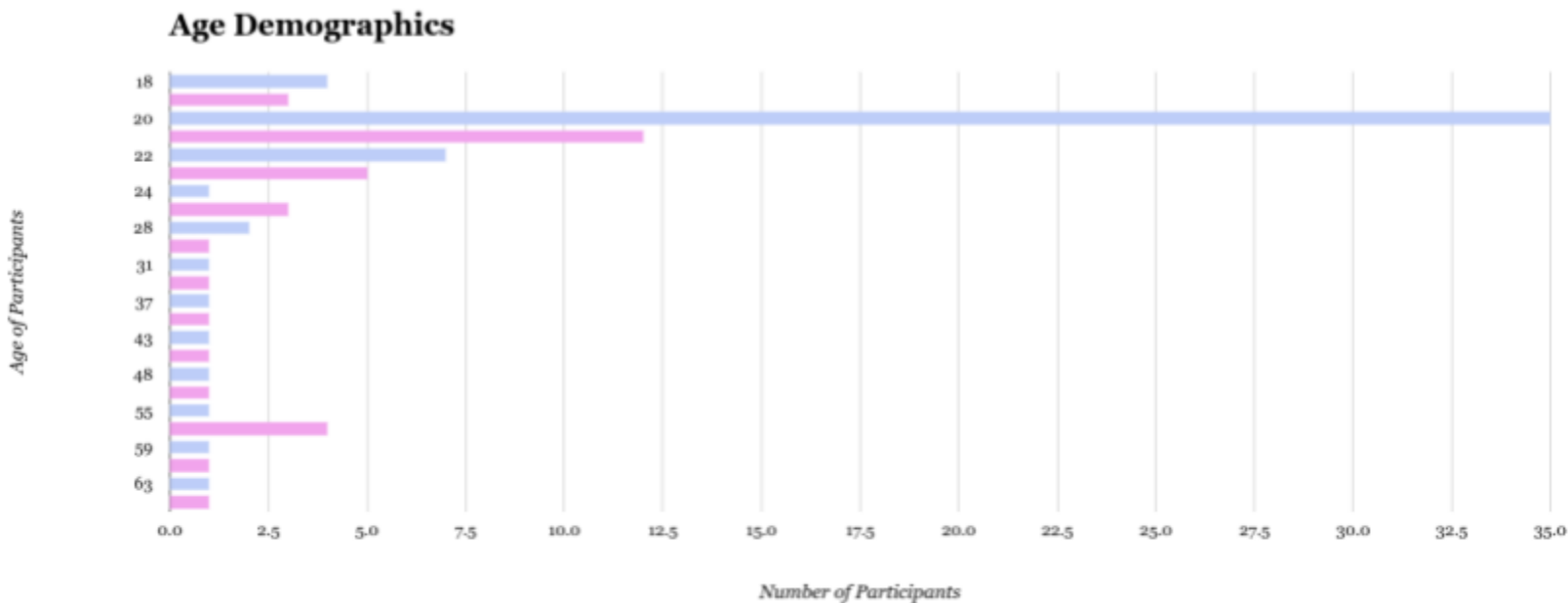
Next, there were some differences in the gender of the 90 participants who took part in the survey. First and foremost, 63 participants identified as female, which calculates to approximately 70% of all participants. More importantly, this data exemplified that females were the most common gender of participants who completed the survey, which can be seen in Figure 2 since they are represented as the most prominent group. The next portion consists of 28.9% of participants, or 26 participants total, who identify as male. The number of male participants who participated in the survey is half that of female participants, as is clearly represented by the data

shown in Figure 2. The last group, making up 1.1% of the total number of participants and

represented by the color green in Figure 2, is the single participant who identifies as non-binary.

Accordingly, the data clearly shows that although the participants were predominantly female,

data was still spread across the board.

Figure 2

Gender of Participants Who Completed the Survey

Key for Graph

Female (Pink): 63
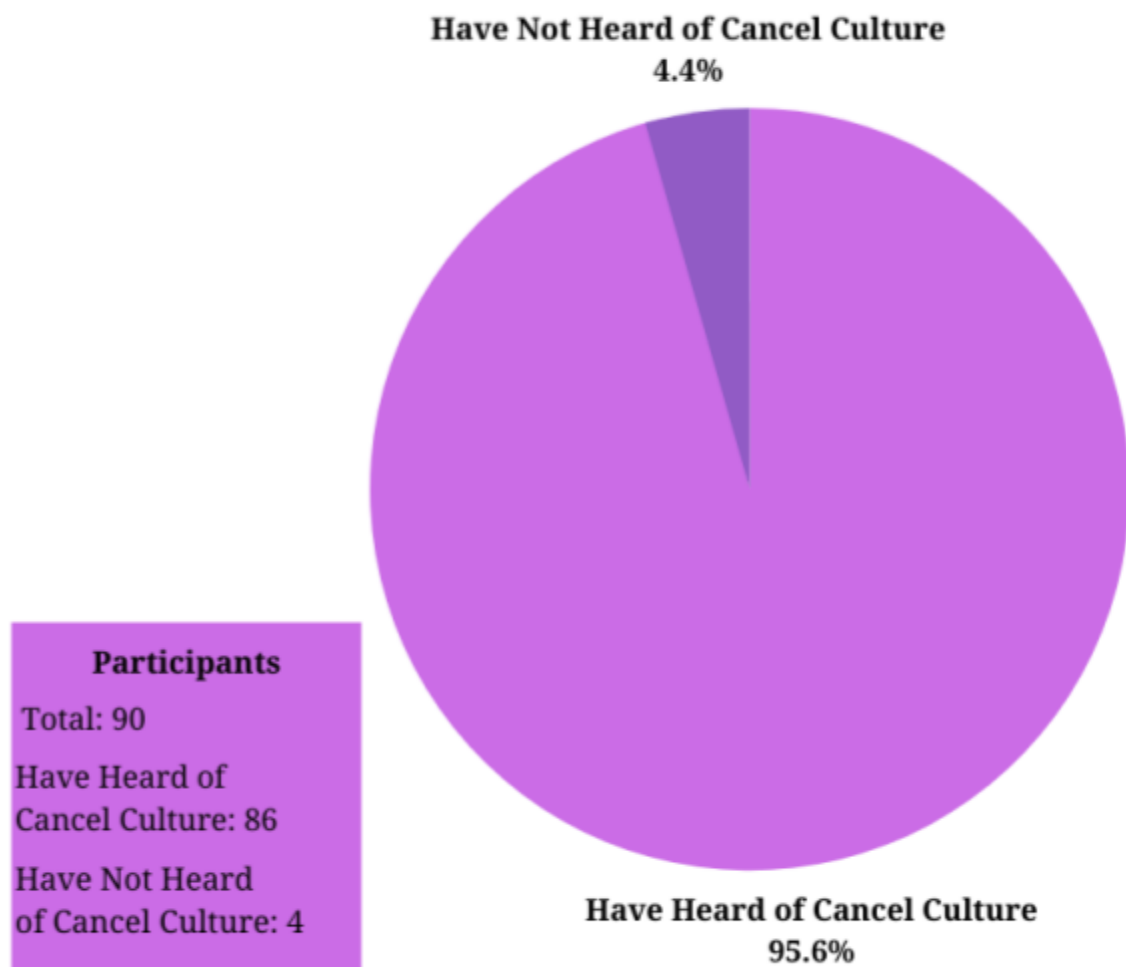Male (Blue): 26
Non-Binary (Green): 1
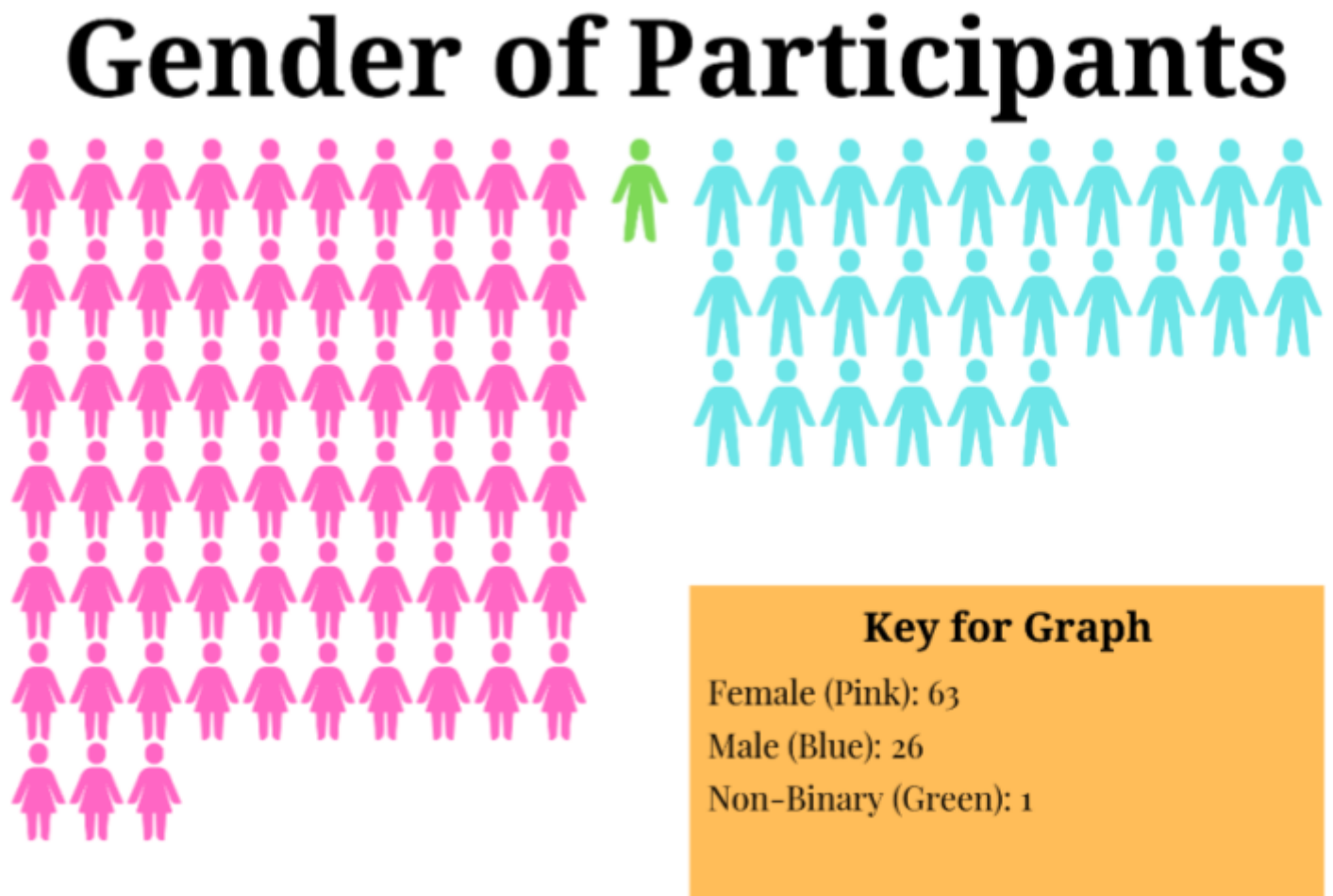
Surprisingly, against popular belief, most participants had previously heard of cancel culture before and some were even able to provide a definition describing the phenomenon; Figure 3 provides an illustration of this prior knowledge of cancel culture from most participants. Out of 90 total participants, 86 participants had previously heard of the term cancel culture. In other words, 95.6% of all participants had some knowledge of cancel culture before completing the survey. On the other hand, only four participants who completed the survey had never previously heard of cancel culture, constituting a mere 4.4% of the total number of participants.. The participants' prior knowledge of cancel culture was shocking, as the results were not at all anticipated due to the wide range of ages. Moreover, due to this wide age range, it was expected that older participants may have been out of touch with the current times and phenomena. This discovery led to the conclusion that age and knowledge of cancel culture had absolutely no correlation or drawbacks, as most participants knew about the topic. After a participant was marked as having no prior knowledge of cancel culture, their survey ended. The reason for this was that if the participant had no prior knowledge of the topic, they would not be able to fill out or answer the following questions since they were all centered around opinions, personal experiences, or experiences they had previously heard of as related to cancel culture. Likewise, after this question was answered, the majority of participants (86) moved on to answering the next section of questions, leading to the findings of the participants' personal understanding of the topic. In short, most participants knew about the topic of cancel culture prior to the survey and were able to provide not only an adequate definition but also personal experiences or opinions regarding the recent outburst. The recent outburst on social media and on television has led more people, not only the participants of this study, to become up-to-date with recent times and societal issues.

Figure 4

Knowledge of Cancel Culture

Knowledge of Cancel Culture

Have Not Heard of Cancel Culture
4.4%

Participants

Total: 90

Have Heard of
Cancel Culture: 86

Have Not Heard
of Cancel Culture: 4

Have Heard of Cancel Culture
95.6%

Understanding of Cancel Culture

Consequently, the second part of the survey focused chiefly on the experience or knowledge the participants previously had regarding the topic of cancel culture. Once in this section, participants were asked to provide the best definition of cancel culture based on their previous understanding, recall if they have known or witnessed anyone in the media get canceled, explain the cause for the cancellation, and provide their opinion regarding whether or not they personally believe cancel culture is positive or negative. Accordingly, the definitions of cancel culture provided by participants were significantly diverse in both meaning and understanding of the term. As a result of the vastness of definitions, Figure 4 was created to express and illustrate the words that were most common in participants' definitions. For instance, words such as "internet", "celebrity", "platform", "inappropriate", "shunned", and "disapproval" were among some of the words that appeared the most in participants' definitions. As mentioned prior, definitions varied greatly in the connotation they illuminated, as well as the choice of words participants decided to include.

To begin, some definitions took a more neutral approach, such as when one participant described the term as, "The societal concept of 'ending' someone's reputation due to a statement made, action taken, or opinion they hold. Someone who is 'canceled' typically has a platform and following, but after the event which causes them to be 'canceled' they lose their followers and have to rebuild their platform." Similarly, another participant wrote, "Cancel culture is the act of society or large group (typically the younger generation) widely 'cancels' or disassociates with a person, place, or thing for various reasons. Not all individuals have a bad association with said person, place, or thing; but they place trust in the few individuals that think the 'canceling' is appropriate." Multiple participants described cancel culture as a phenomenon, as exemplified

by the following comment provided by one participant: "Cancel Culture is a social phenomenon when a community of people based around a subculture on the internet, or a particular community on the internet target or fixate on a person with the intent to deplatform them, based on a controversy that this person has found themselves in." Another participant described cancel culture similarly when defining the term as "a phenomenon where we (as a culture) decide to 'cancel' someone based on their actions or words." The term "deplatform" is one that was common amongst numerous definitions as well, as another participant wrote, "Cancel Culture is an idea that individuals or groups who commit acts that are morally reprehensible based on a group's subjective moral compass, deserve to be deplatformed and removed from certain spaces." From these definitions as well as the words consistently used by participants as displayed in Figure 4, it is clear where the majority of the participants stand regarding the issue of cancel culture.

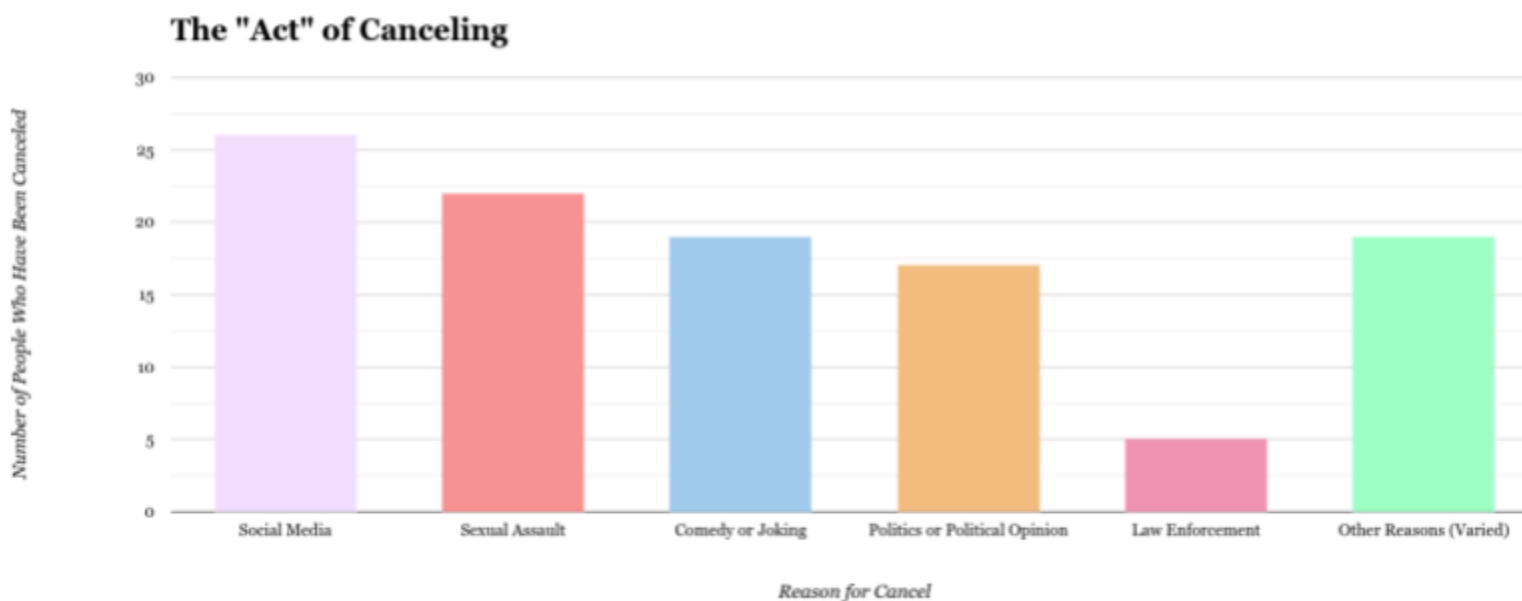**Figure 4**

Definitions of Cancel Culture

Likewise, other participants also made their stance known, as slivers of their opinions managed to be shown in their definitions of cancel culture. In these definitions of the phenomenon, words such as "boycott" and "mass" were prevalent. Further, the term "boycott" can be seen when one participant defines cancel culture as, "When a social media star or celebrity makes some sort of mistake, the internet bands together to make fun of this person, then usually boycotts this person in an attempt to destroy their career." A similar definition can be read as, "The boycotting of a person/organization because of something that they said, did, or supported." Finally, another participant defines cancel culture by claiming that it means "when you boycott something due to their beliefs or actions." All these definitions allude to the fact that cancel culture is not only for the canceling of people but also for the canceling of groups and organizations, which expands upon the idea of the topic as a whole. Equally as important, the term "mass" also appeared regularly in participants' definitions, the first being seen when one participant defined cancel culture as "a way of the public expressing their disapproval for things that people have done, they get a massive withdrawal of support from other people." To add to this topic, two more participants described cancel culture as "the mass canceling or deleting of a group" and "mass disapproval of a person or their actions usually on social media." Importantly, several other definitions given from participants' past knowledge stood out, one being, "When a celebrity or someone in the public eye does something that is not good or does not fit the 'brand' and random people on the internet tear them down for it." Two other participants defined the term as "finding mistakes that people have made in the past and using them to impact their life negatively" and "when people get shut down from speaking freely in a public or private domain due to their differing ideologies, even if radical or not." Lastly, a unique definition of cancel culture was given when a participant wrote that it involved "the removal of history from today's

society in order to protect the feelings and views of others." Without a doubt, this definition

diverges from the others in that it brings a consideration of history into a conversation which is

traditionally focused solely on people. Above all, the definitions provided by participants from

their prior knowledge of cancel culture vary in range, connotation, and meaning.

After providing definitions for the concept, participants were asked to recall the reason

why someone they knew or a celebrity that they followed had been canceled. Participants were

given a choice between six categories to explain the cancellation. Those categories were social

media, sexual assault, comedy or joking, politics or political opinion, law enforcement, or other.

All categories were chosen to advance the study from the literature review. Out of 90 total

participants, 76 participants were able to provide a reason or think of a time a celebrity they

follow or another in their personal life had been canceled.

Figure 5

The "Act" Of Canceling

As seen in Figure 5, results for the cancellation participants provided were staggered and spread out almost evenly between all categories. The category that saw the most activity was social media, as many participants claimed it served as a primary source for the cancellation of others. According to Figure 5, respondents denoted 25 instances of people suffering from being canceled due to social media. Participants explained they have witnessed friends or influencers on various platforms being canceled for reasons such as offensive and old tweets, YouTube videos that are now out of touch, racist social media posts, and even opinions shared regarding court cases and/or modern news. On the other hand, the category that saw the least amount of activity was law enforcement, as only a handful of participants claimed this was the reason for the cancellation of another (5 people total). The category of sexual assault was the second highest in reasoning for being canceled, as 23 respondents had lost their status for this reason. Most participants claimed that a celebrity was canceled for either trying to coerce younger victims into sexual activity or engaging in activity deemed inappropriate by the general public. Next, comedy or jokes were another significant reason for canceling not only celebrities but also ordinary citizens. Participants explained that jokes being made by comedians were carefully analyzed, just as jokes that their friends made were scrutinized by the general public. Ultimately, nearly 20 respondents were canceled for that reason. In addition, in the world's recent politically divided climate, politics was another reason participants claimed for the cancellation of another. Politics today has become tremendously cutthroat, and even making one comment that is deemed "out of line" could result in the loss of a friend and/or implosion of one's personal life. Figure 5 illustrates that approximately 18 people whom participants knew or followed were canceled for a political opinion or reason. Lastly, the fact that 20 participants claimed that "Other Reasons

(Varied)" were the cause of a cancellation proves that the canceling of a person or group occurs for manifold reasons.
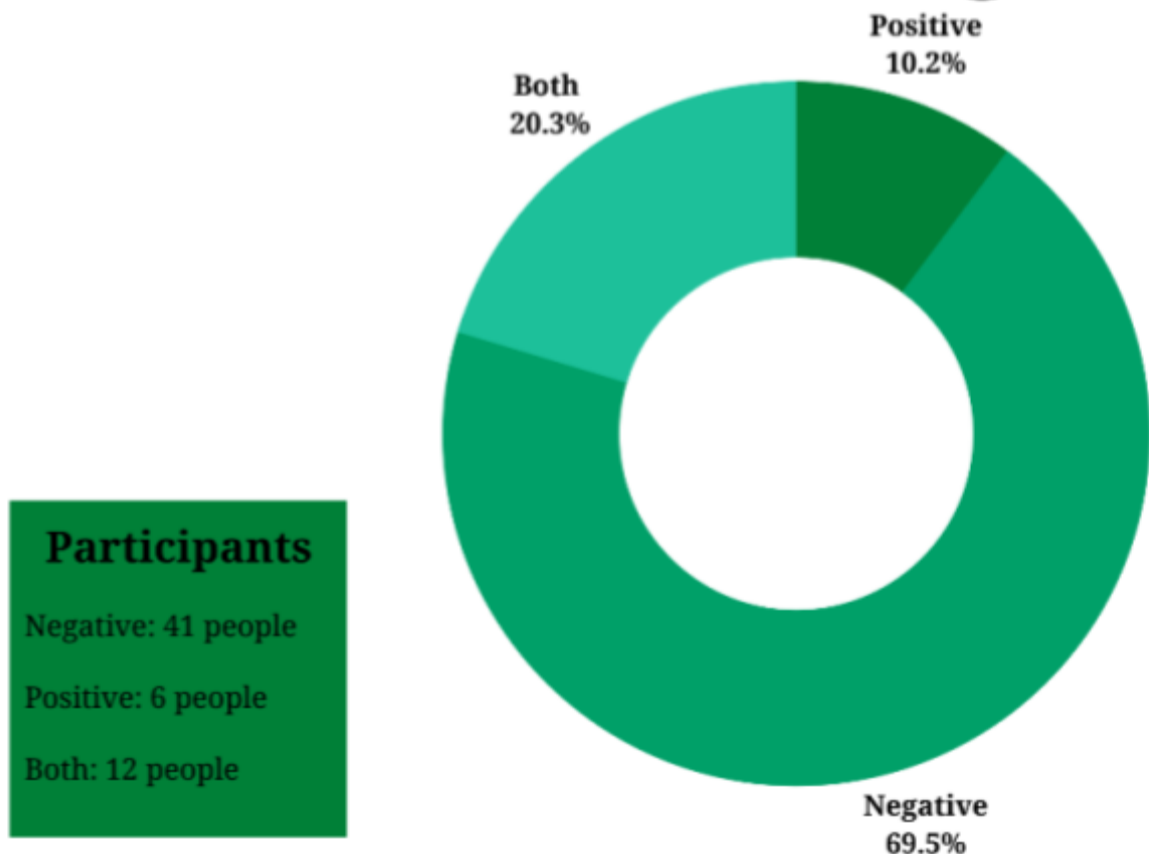
Last but not least, the final question in the survey centered around participants sharing their views and opinions regarding whether or not they believed cancel culture was positive or negative. From the responses of the 86 participants who answered the question, it can be inferred that many participants share the same view on the question, as seen in Figure 6. A total of 41 participants claimed cancel culture is negative, which comprises 69.5% of participants overall. The reasoning for this answer varied greatly as some participants mentioned cancel culture as negative for ruining others' lives, removing historical aspects from society, being harmful to society, being punitive rather than rehabilitating, and basically disrupting the basic societal need for people to respect opinions that differ from their own. Alternatively, 12 participants, constituting 20.3% of all participants, believed that cancel culture was both positive and negative. The main reason across all participants' responses was that cancel culture is positive since it holds others accountable for their wrongdoings, but in many circumstances goes overboard and then becomes counterproductive due to the punishment of cancellation. Lastly, only 6 participants, accounting for a mere 10.2% of all participants, believed that cancel culture was beneficial. Particularly, these participants reasoned that cancel culture should be acceptable because it holds those who have included another person, group, or organization accountable for their wrongdoing; in other words, it helps to control the words and actions of toxic people in society. Moreover, these participants believe it serves as a warning or "guide" to what is acceptable behavior and wording in society, which they believe everyone should learn from and follow.

In short, the majority of participants believe cancel culture is a negative action and phenomenon that harms and limits our world as a whole since the limitations affect what individuals can say, do, post, or even how they can act in fear of retribution. Overall, the survey findings aid in understanding the ways in which demographics such as age and gender as well as prior knowledge and opinion affect the general understanding and comprehension of the cancel culture phenomenon.

Figure 6

Is Cancel Culture Positive or Negative?

Is Cancel Culture Positive or Negative?

Positive
10.2%

Both
20.3%

Negative
69.5%

Participants

Negative: 41 people

Positive: 6 people

Both: 12 people

Discussion

Implications of Findings

Generally speaking, this research and study suggested many implications on the topic of cancel culture, the most important implication being that most people find the phenomenon significantly negative and harmful to our society. After reviewing the research, it is clear that many respondents want the newfound trend of canceling others to come to an abrupt end, as it adds more stress and toxicity to a world already on fire for more prominent reasons than an old tweet. Moreover, many have started referring to the topic of cancel culture as "woke capitalism" (Sailofsky, 2022). The term was coined due to the fact that many people, corporations, organizations, or others use cancel culture or call-out culture to point fingers at others for what they may have said or done in a fight to hide themselves from the spotlight of cancellation. Cancel culture has taken our world by storm and induced worldwide fear of the potential for anyone in the public eye to lose everything they have worked for or built in their lifetime. This study proves that no matter one's age, gender, or background, numerous people are tired of living in fear and believe the venomous trend of cancel culture should come to a conclusion, as everyone should learn that being a member of society demands respecting the opinions of others.

Cancel Culture Moving Forward

Though the damaging act of canceling needs to be terminated, cancel culture is still a relatively new development that could serve as a good source for research moving forward. In addition to cancel culture ruining friendships, careers, and even lives, it has also affected and wreaked havoc on the mental health of countless onlookers worldwide, as many have become

too overwhelmed with anxiety to fully express themselves in fear of being turned off by society (Toler, 2022). In fact, various healthcare professionals have backed the recent up-tick in anxiety, as some claim that cancel culture encourages entertainment and shame more so than it does accountability (Dubin, 2022). By the same token, professionals have made multiple statements regarding the negativity of the topic since it has also been a clear instigator of online bullying, threats, and even violence (Britannica, 2022) - actions that not only our nation but also the world have been working so hard to steer away from to benefit future generations. Thus, a study focusing on the impact of cancel culture on national and worldwide mental health would serve as valuable research moving forward to further instill the overall negativity of the topic.

Limitations

Overall, there were a few main limitations of the research conducted in this study of cancel culture. The first limitation was in connection with the populations surveyed. Only 90 total participants took part in the survey, all centrally located in one area. If more participants had completed the survey nationally, the greater number of responses would have allowed for a more accurate representation of the public's opinion on the topic of cancel culture. The second limitation was in connection once again to those who completed the survey. The median age of participants was 20, as discussed prior. If there had been more representation from a greater variety of age groups, a broader picture of how people raised in different generations perceive cancel culture could have been measured. The last limitation of the research completed was related to the time restraints restricting the research. If there had been more time to collect the data, the results would have been strengthened, as more results would have been accumulated

since there would have been a longer period to collect and analyze data. All in all, the limitations of the study did not harm the data that was collected but might have enhanced the data if they had been accounted for.

Conclusion

Overall, the data and findings of this study provide an interesting perspective regarding the ways in which one act of disapproval can transform into a bandwagon effect of a life being forgotten. This research shows that the fields of social media, politics, comedy, sexual assault, and law enforcement all experience rippling effects from the aftermath of cancel culture, though social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have seen the most activity related to the issue, as they are the primary locations where cancel culture is taking place. Additionally, this research also proved that age does not affect a person's understanding or definition of cancel culture. Altogether, the research conducted in this study reveals that an overwhelming amount of people in our society believe that cancel culture is a negative phenomenon that is harmful not only because it will silence the voices of our youth and celebrities but also because it threatens to silence the voice of public opinion across the world.

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Appendix

Survey Preamble and Disclaimer

The Cancel Culture survey preamble used as an introduction to the survey for participants is listed below:

"Hello, Everyone! The topic of "cancel culture" is quite prevalent nowadays. We might see it in social media or everyday life; either way, repercussions are felt throughout the community. The purpose of this survey is to analyze the depth of everyone's knowledge when it comes to "cancel culture". Results of the survey will be used as the leading data in my honor's thesis. This survey poses absolutely no risk to participants or the general population. The survey should take no more than 10 minutes. If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to either me, my advisor, or the Institutional Review Board for answers. I deeply appreciate your participation in the survey; thank you."

Contact Information:

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- Honors Thesis Advisor: Karen Shea (Karen.Shea@jwu.edu)
- Institutional Review Board (Insitutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu)

The Cancel Culture survey disclaimer listed on the front page of the survey that needed to be acknowledged before proceeding is listed below:

"To take part in and complete this survey, **_you must be 18 years of age or older_**. Participation in the survey is optional, and no responses will be linked to a Google Gmail account or email. No names, personal information, etc. which may be used to answer a question in the survey will be included in or specifically used in the thesis."

Survey Questions

The questions that were asked in the Cancel Culture survey completed by participants to collect results for the research are listed below:

1.) What is your gender? (If other, please specify)

2.) What is your age?

3.) Have you ever heard of "cancel culture"?

4.) Define "cancel culture" in your own words.

5.) Have you, someone you've known, or a celebrity/influencer you've followed ever been "canceled"?

6.) What was the cause of the "cancel"? Explain. (Ex: social media, sexual assault, joking/comedy, politics/political opinion, law enforcement, other)

7.) Briefly, were the effects of the cancel on you or the other person's life positive or negative?

8.) Generally speaking, do you believe "cancel culture" is positive or negative?

Recruitment Statement

The following statement was sent out with the link to the survey on Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn:

"Hello everyone. This semester at JWU, I am writing my Honors Thesis. The topic is "Cancel Culture," and whether or not you know what "Cancel Culture" means, I would be sincerely grateful if you could take part in the survey, as my survey will be enhanced by every response submitted. Please note that you must be 18 years or older to complete the survey, participation in the survey is optional, and no responses will be linked to a Google Gmail account or email. Also, please feel free to share the link with your family/friends. Thank you!"