

# Influence of Cancel Culture on the Freedom of Expression of University Students in Metropolitan Lima

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**Abstract.** Cancel culture, originating on social networks and widely spread, is a social phenomenon of great magnitude. Its apparent objective is to point out and discredit those who deviate from socially accepted ideas or attitudes. Although it was born with the intention of promoting justice and making unnoticed situations visible, it has received criticism for its potential to standardize discourse by marginalizing dissidents. This study delves into its complexity, focusing on the freedom of expression of university students. The objective of this research is to analyze the impact of cancel culture on the freedom of expression of young university students in Lima, exploring the reasons and consequences of cancel culture and its limitations on freedom of expression in academia. Adopting a qualitative approach, an interview guide with 18 questions organized into two categories is used: cancel culture and freedom of expression. Critical analysis includes diverse perspectives on cancel culture, some see it as digital activism against harmful behavior, others criticize it for restricting dialogue and diversity of opinions, reflecting a dichotomy of views. This study seeks to understand how cancel culture affects the freedom of expression of young university students in Lima, with the goal of offering recommendations to foster environments of free expression and constructive dialogue in Peruvian academic institutions.

**Keywords:** Cancel culture; freedom of expression; censorship; self-censorship; social networks.

#### 1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, the world has experienced significant transformations in the way society is organized, operates and relates. These structural changes are largely attributed to the influence of the Internet, which is shaped by society according to its needs and interests [1]. One of those needs is to be able to interact with others; thanks to the Internet, interpersonal relationships have increased with the creation of social networks [2]. These virtual spaces allow and encourage connection between users through the option of sharing multimedia content such as texts, videos and images in a matter of seconds [3]. The constant exchange of information online promotes the formation of digital cultures and the emergence of social movements [4]. A clear example of this is the creation of cancel culture, a controversial movement that aims to publicly punish and criticize those who violate social norms or engage in nefarious behavior [5].

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P. C. López-López et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Communication and Applied Technologies 2024 (ICOMTA 2024)*, Atlantis Highlights in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities 28, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-596-6\_39

The origin of cancel culture is located in Black Twitter, an online collective that addresses issues relevant to the black diaspora, being used as a method to combat racism [6]. Soon, this movement evolved towards other types of complaints, no longer focusing solely on racial discrimination [7]. This movement operates mainly on social networks, where offensive content is spread to expose the author [8].

At first glance, cancel culture can be perceived as a type of activism that protects the integrity of minorities, punishing individuals or organizations for inconsiderable comments or actions [9]. However, those who practice it do not always act with good intentions; some may be motivated by revenge, and others by having been influenced to join the collective [7]. Likewise, it is highlighted that cancellations go beyond the online sphere, affecting careers and reputations, regardless of the social status or fame of the individual [11].

The controversy increases when different authors affirm that cancel culture can contribute to the criminalization of freedom of expression, the presumption of innocence and self-censorship [11]. With this in mind, cancel culture can be detrimental to academics who hold ideas not aligned with mainstream opinion [13], [14].

The dichotomy of opinions on cancel culture includes pro and con perspectives. Its usefulness to eliminate harmful behaviors is argued, and on the other hand, the risks to freedom of expression by limiting dialogue are discussed [15]. Its effects vary according to culture and society, which is why it is necessary to develop interdisciplinary and regional research [14]. Regarding the academic field, self-censorship and the fear of expressing oneself in these spaces are a recurring issue that is insufficiently addressed, therefore, it is important to urge institutions to address this problem and promote an open dialogue [17].

This research analyzes the impact of cancel culture on the freedom of expression of young university students in Lima. It seeks to understand how this culture influences their behaviors and attitudes on campus, identify factors that contribute to self-censorship, and offer recommendations to promote an environment of free expression and constructive dialogue in the country's academic institutions.

The relevance of this research lies in its ability to provide a deep understanding of how cancel culture operates and impacts contemporary society by exploring motives, repercussions and its impact on freedom of expression. Likewise, this analysis can contribute to regulating cancel culture, raising awareness among its supporters about the consequences and associated negative aspects.

## 2 Methodology

Within the scope of this study, a comprehensive systematic investigation was conducted to analyze and synthesize the outcomes of various studies pertaining to cancel culture and freedom of expression. Systematic methodology involves an organized and structured approach to reviewing scientific literature related to a specific topic [16].

The investigation commenced with a search on the Web of Science database, using the phrase "cancel culture" in quotes. The initial search yielded 75 results spanning from 2020 to 2023. The search was iteratively refined to include only articles with open access, resulting in 26 investigations. Further refinement narrowed the focus to articles, yielding 22. Subsequently, the selection was meticulously curated, narrowing down to

a final set of 7 articles. To identify additional relevant bibliographic sources, a thorough examination of the references at the conclusion of the selected articles proved instrumental. This supplementary approach ensured a comprehensive review and incorporation of pertinent literature, contributing to the robustness of the research findings.

A separate search focused on the exploration of freedom of expression resulted in 204 investigations. To ensure relevance, the review was narrowed down to articles discussing both freedom of expression and self-censorship. This deliberate process aimed to understand the fears that lead individuals to withhold their opinions. The analysis of selected articles involved specific keyword searches within the text, employing the Ctrl+F function to identify and extract pertinent information.

Building on the foundation of meticulous source selection, semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data, utilizing a guide that consisted of 18 open questions organized into four sections. This encourages flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewees. This approach facilitates an environment of trust and fluid dialogue with participants [18], [19].

This study is framed in the interpretive paradigm, focusing on understanding the behaviors and ideas of the participants through interaction with the researcher [20]. The researcher asks a diverse series of questions divided into four segments to address the research problem by interpreting the participants' responses.

The research adopted a qualitative approach with the purpose of analyzing and understanding the various subjective perspectives of the group studied [21], [19]. This allowed the researcher to explore in depth the individual realities of the participants [22]. To facilitate obtaining detailed information, open-ended questions were used in the questionnaire, giving participants the freedom to express their views on the topic.

The research adopted a phenomenological design to explore individual perspectives on cancel culture and its influence on freedom of expression [20].

The sample for this study consisted of 17 young university students between the ages of 18 and 25 from Metropolitan Lima who are familiar with cancel culture. Participants were selected based on homogeneity and convenience using a non-random approach [23]. Inclusion criteria required that participants be university students of both sexes between the ages of 18 and 25 who reside in Metropolitan Lima and who were familiar with cancel culture. Exclusion criteria included people who were not familiar with cancel culture, were outside the specified age range, and were not enrolled in a university or institute.

The data collection process involved both in-person and virtual interviews. Half of the interviews were conducted in person at the Peruvian University of Applied Sciences, where participants were contacted on campus and screened using two preliminary questions: "How old are you?" and "Do you know what cancel culture is?" Those who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate. The remaining interviews were conducted via Zoom calls with peers of one of the in-person interviewees, who met the inclusion criteria. All of these participants were from San Martin de Porres University.

In this research, priority was given to ethical considerations supported by Cohen et al [23] and the Spanish Data Protection Agency (AEPD) [24]. Informed consent was essential, ensuring that each participant understood and accepted their participation. In

addition, data anonymization was applied following ethical guidelines, minimizing identification risks and ensuring the reliability of the results.

#### 3 Results

Sailofsky [5] offers a comprehensive definition, characterizing cancel culture as endeavors to marginalize individuals for violating social norms. It involves the practice of orchestrating mass boycotts to express disapproval and exert social pressure on both companies and individuals. Furthermore, Berman [24] underscores the escalating nature of this phenomenon, emphasizing its role in promoting the boycott and figurative "lynching" of people, companies, and systems deviating from accepted social norms. The essential role of social networks in exerting social pressure and inducing embarrassment, as highlighted by the participants in this research, finds support in Velasco's insights [4]. Velasco posits that these digital platforms play a pivotal role in stripping influential individuals of their power. This, in turn, fosters a more diverse and less monopolized public discourse, contributing to the democratization of information and viewpoints [4].

#### 3.1 Motives of cancel culture

The participants involved in this research project emphatically highlighted the intricate dynamics surrounding the phenomenon of cancel culture. It is discerned that this pervasive trend often rears its head when one or more individuals make comments that are not only inappropriate but also run the risk of being widely perceived as unpopular, sometimes without a full understanding of the potential sensitivity of these remarks towards various societal groups. Building upon Norris's insightful perspective [13] and echoing the sentiments articulated by Saint-Louis [8], it becomes evident that those who find themselves subjected to cancellation often resort to the use of offensive expressions specifically directed at minorities, thereby substantiating and reinforcing the responses gleaned from the insightful interviews conducted.

Furthermore, a nuanced layer in the fabric of cancel culture is uncovered during the meticulous scrutiny of the interview data. This layer reveals that the roots of cancel culture can be traced back to a direct response to historical oppressions, such as racism, misogyny, homophobia, and harassment, perpetrated against groups that are commonly perceived as vulnerable. This pivotal revelation aligns seamlessly with the comprehensive review presented by Clark [6], as well as the astute observations made by Burgos and Hernandéz [7], both of whom cogently argue that cancel culture, in its essence, was conceived as a defense mechanism against systemic and ingrained discrimination. In this vein, the movement not only takes on the character of online activism but also becomes a form of citizen participation that focuses on deliberate disengagement or support for public figures, as cogently stated by Gomez [9].

However, it is imperative to acknowledge the dissenting opinions that have emerged within the research cohort. Some participants challenge the prevailing ideas, asserting that cancel culture is primarily driven by ephemeral factors such as trends, social influence, resentment towards public figures, the domino effect of influence on others, and the inherent human desire for affiliation with specific social groups. In concordance with this alternative perspective, Marmulla [24] theorizes that cancel culture may derive

from societal pressures exerted to suppress or 'cancel' not only individuals but also works of art, events, or even entire institutions.

Despite these divergent viewpoints, a consensus emerges within the majority of participants, emphasizing the need for a measured and judicious application of cancel culture. This consensus contends that the phenomenon should be reserved for extreme situations, particularly those linked to egregious offenses such as sexual harassment, always accompanied by due process and a sense of responsibility. This viewpoint finds support in the assertions made by Cammaerts [25], who suggests that cancel culture, when applied with discernment, can serve as an effective tool for holding individuals accountable for harmful comments and attitudes. Taking a more neutral stance, Cabrera and Jiménez [11] argue that "Cancel Culture" seeks to address equity concerns in situations where conventional justice mechanisms may fall short in regulating harmful behavior or ideologies. However, they also caution against the potential for cancel culture to disproportionately punish individuals who may not have committed legal transgressions but engaged in acts deemed socially unacceptable. In essence, the discourse surrounding cancel culture remains multifaceted, encompassing a spectrum of perspectives that underscore its complexity in contemporary societal dynamics.

#### 3.2 Consequences of cancel culture

Cancel culture, as perceived by the participants of this research, is an intricate societal phenomenon with profound emotional ramifications, leading to severe mental health issues among the canceled individuals. Echoing the sentiments of Ramsey et al. [26], the participants underscored the prevalence of emotional distress, encompassing isolation, depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem, not only affecting the canceled individuals themselves but also rippling into the lives of their families. The deleterious impact on mental health is further underscored by Jusay et al. [27], who emphasize the toxic online environment fostered by cancel culture on social networks, contributing to constant conflict, criticism, public humiliation, cyberbullying, and violent reactions, thereby exacerbating mental health challenges. Sultan et al. [28] elucidate how online platforms, initially envisioned as spaces for healthy discourse, are increasingly becoming breeding grounds for digital violence, with cyberbullying permeating not only online spaces but also individuals' daily lives.

A poignant revelation from the participants is the acknowledgment that canceled individuals, often compelled to apologize or admit to mistakes, may be driven more by the fear of professional consequences than genuine remorse or authenticity. Saint-Louis [8] explicates how cancellation, by isolating and marginalizing individuals, triggers tangible professional repercussions. The involvement of third parties such as employers, advertisers, licensees, compliance agents, state authorities, or business partners, who respond to public complaints, further exacerbates the professional fallout [8]. Building on this, Burgos and Hernandez [7] emphasize the enduring damage inflicted on the canceled person's public perception and the subsequent erosion of others' positive regard for them.

Moreover, participants highlighted cancel culture's ominous threat to freedom of expression, contending that it induces fear, self-censorship, and the homogenization of ideas. Norris [13] elucidates how cancellation stifles freedom of expression, with individuals resorting to self-censorship due to the apprehension of negative consequences, including the loss of social approval, status, or power. Meesala [29]

reinforces this notion, noting a substantial portion of the populace refraining from exercising their right to freedom of expression, fearing repercussions and actively suppressing their beliefs, perspectives, and ideas. Drawing a vivid metaphor, Burgos and Hernandez [7] liken the canceled individual to a ghostly silhouette, robbed of their voice. Cabrera and Jiménez [11] express their apprehension about cancel culture's non-institutionalized nature, making regulation challenging and posing inherent risks to fundamental rights such as freedom of expression.

#### 3.3 Limits of freedom of expression

The unanimous consensus among all participants in this comprehensive study underscores the fundamental importance they attribute to the right of freedom of expression. This intrinsic right, considered by many as the cornerstone of democratic societies, is, however, subject to diverse perspectives within the study participants.

While some staunchly advocate for an unrestricted freedom of speech, contending that societies should autonomously regulate what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate, others posit that certain limitations are necessary, especially when expressing opinions with the explicit intent of causing harm to others. This divergence of opinions resonates with the ideas of Shattuck and Risse [30], who assert that no entity, not even the state, should interfere with, silence, or censor the freedom of citizens to express themselves, as it is safeguarded by their legal status. Concurrently, Silva [31] and Menzer and Traunmüller [32] align with these sentiments, emphasizing that freedom of expression is not only a fundamental right for the effective functioning of a healthy democracy but also a shield against harassment or victimization based on one's opinions, recognizing the freedom to seek, receive, and disseminate information.

On a contrasting note, Stjernfelt and Lauritzen [33] posit that constitutional protections for freedom of expression are not absolute, varying across countries with different rules and regulations. However, Hietanen and Eddebo [34] clarify that these variations are exceptions, reinforcing the notion that in modern democracies, freedom of expression is perceived as a fundamental ideal to strive for, constrained only by explicit and specific legislation.

In a nuanced exploration of these perspectives, the majority of participants in this study underscored the pivotal role of empathy and respect in defining the boundaries of freedom of expression. They emphasize that each individual should exercise self-restraint, avoiding the propagation of violence, baseless speech, or degrading comments. This nuanced approach, blending the recognition of fundamental rights with a commitment to responsible expression, highlights the complexity inherent in balancing the principles of free speech with the societal responsibility to prevent harm and foster a respectful discourse.

To conclude, the study reveals a rich tapestry of opinions on freedom of expression, ranging from absolute autonomy to nuanced considerations that account for the potential harm caused by unrestrained speech. The multifaceted nature of these perspectives underscores the need for an ongoing dialogue to shape legislation and societal norms that strike a delicate balance between the protection of essential rights and the prevention of harm in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

#### 4. Conclusions

The comprehensive exploration of cancel culture's impact on the freedom of expression among young university students in Metropolitan Lima has unearthed multifaceted dimensions that warrant in-depth consideration. As we delve into a thorough analysis of the findings and embark on a nuanced discussion of the results, various salient aspects come to light, each adding layers to our understanding of this complex cultural phenomenon.

The genesis of cancel culture, as elucidated by the students interviewed, appears to be rooted in a response to harmful statements on social media, driven by a desire to shield vulnerable groups from historical oppression. However, participants introduce additional motivations, suggesting that cancel culture might also be fueled by trends, influence, and resentment, thereby expanding the spectrum of its driving forces. This nuanced perspective opens avenues for further exploration into the intricate dynamics that give rise to cancel culture and the diverse motivations that propel its momentum.

Turning our attention to the consequences of cancel culture, the participants' narratives shed light on the significant emotional turmoil experienced by canceled individuals, echoing the findings of previous research. The profound impact on their psychological well-being becomes evident, with a particular emphasis on the toxic online environment fostered by cancel culture, characterized by perpetual conflict and criticism. Moreover, the study underscores the severity of professional repercussions, emphasizing the detrimental effects on the careers and public images of those subjected to cancellation. This revelation sparks concerns about the menacing nature of cancel culture, as it not only instigates fear of expressing opinions but also fosters self-censorship and homogenizes ideas. The study posits that cancellation poses a tangible threat to freedom of expression, potentially stifling the diversity of thought essential for a vibrant intellectual landscape.

Exploring the boundaries of freedom of expression reveals a spectrum of opinions among the interviewees. While some advocate for unrestricted freedom, recognizing its intrinsic value, others acknowledge the importance of limitations, particularly in the context of harmful opinions. The interviews accentuate the relevance of empathy and respect when contemplating individual boundaries within the realm of freedom of expression. This nuanced understanding highlights the complexity of balancing the preservation of open discourse with the responsibility to curb harm.

In response to the overarching inquiry regarding the influence of cancel culture on the freedom of expression of university students, this study unequivocally concludes that this cultural phenomenon exerts a substantial influence. The findings expose a palpable fear of cancellation, significantly shaping the way these students express themselves. The reluctance to be honest about controversial topics, the pursuit of approval, conformity to politically correct views, and the adoption of others' opinions as a precaution against cancellations collectively indicate a discernible loss of identity among the youth. The insidious impact of cancel culture on the authentic expression of ideas among young minds paints a concerning picture of the limitations placed on intellectual exploration.

In summary, while cancel culture may ostensibly serve as a tool to promote equity and penalize harmful behavior, both the literature review and participant responses suggest potential risks to freedom of expression and mental health for those who face cancellation. Consequently, the influence of this movement engenders an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among young university students in Metropolitan Lima, raising poignant questions about the balance between accountability and the preservation of robust intellectual discourse.

Despite the considerable efforts invested in this research, it is imperative to acknowledge and address limitations that may have influenced the scope and interpretation of the findings. Firstly, variations in attitudes towards cancel culture across academic disciplines must be recognized, as they impact exposure to related debates. Temporal constraints should also be considered, as the study captures a specific moment in time and does not encompass subsequent changes in cancel culture. The sensitivity of the topic might lead to self-censorship among participants, potentially affecting the sincerity of their responses. Lastly, the qualitative interpretation is inherently subjective, influenced by the researcher's perspective and the dynamic nature of the phenomenon under scrutiny. These considerations are vital for a comprehensive evaluation of the obtained results.

Future research on cancel culture's impact on university students' freedom of expression proposes multidimensional analysis, exploring coping strategies against cancellation fear. Longitudinal studies on canceled individuals' mental health are recommended. Investigating cancel culture's influence on creativity and innovation among students aims to assess if fear constraints unconventional idea exploration. Lastly, a comparative analysis across academic disciplines is suggested to identify variations in cancel culture perception.

### Acknowledgements

To the Research Directorate of the Peruvian University of Applied Sciences for the support provided to carry out this research work through the UPC-EXPOST-2024-1 incentive.

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