



CHAPTER - 12

THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION : PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE SHAME AND CANCEL CULTURE

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Abstract:

Social media has precipitated an essential departure from locally situated methods of social denouncement towards processes of digital shame, as a globalised, persistent and clearly visible form of public liability. Although online shame and cancel culture may indeed be helpful in their own right; highlighting misbehaviour, offering platforms to previously silenced voices and exposing powerful institutions to their errors but they also may result in a more acute, widespread form of public shaming that has serious effects on our psychology, society and ethics. This chapter examines online practices of shaming and cancel culture, investigating the ancestral foundations of these new world cyber phenomena within the multidisciplinary psychological landscape. The chapter maps out the psychological processes that engender collective shaming online : the enforcement of norms, the importance of social identification, moral rage, the online inhibition effect, and learning via social processes. The author then investigates the psychological toll of protracted online shame and cancel culture on people's emotional health, their personal and group identities, and the

relationships between them. Their conclusions, which align with other findings in the field, include that longer periods of exposure to public condemnation are associated with increases in anxiety, depression, guilt, social avoidance, disturbance of identity, suicide, disruption of personal relationships and workplace interactions, and with harm to public discourse. It concludes by weighing the ethical costs of punishment and liability and proposing ways of cultivating a more fair and humane online world, including better digital skills and literacies, better control of online forums, the reform of cyber- law and the development of psychological tools.

Keywords : online shame; cancel culture; digital accountability; cyberpsychology; mental health

1.Introduction

How can one mistake come to define a whole life? In today's interconnected digital world, one ill-timed photograph, misplaced comment or unprovoked allegation can instantly launch an everyday individual into global headlines within hours, where thousands of strangers then proceed to scrutinise, condemn, mock or demand retribution of an individual that they have never even met. A solitary moment then transmogrifies into a digital theatre, leaving psychological, social and professional fallout far longer than its visibility fades (8,13,29).

While this all appears as a quintessentially modern phenomenon, public shaming is certainly nothing new. Indeed throughout the histories of societies across the world, it has been used to police and reinforce the collective consensus around what behaviours and identities are considered acceptable or unacceptable through reputational sanction(4). Yet, the purpose of public shaming has certainly morphed as this practice now, more than ever, enjoys rapid and ubiquitous global propagation, which is now immortalised forever online. Within this ever expanding digital universe, public shaming and cancel culture are both firmly ingrained into the modern discourse, which are both often used interchangeably and yet are distinctly separate, yet intertwined, phenomenon in terms of digital justice (4,21,25). Online shaming centres on the public humiliation or ridiculing of an individual on social media or the Internet in general following their engagement in an act perceived as being unjust or amoral (4,21,25).

Cancel culture is concerned with collective action against an individual with the aim of publicly ostracizing, deplatforming and withdrawing any form of cultural or professional endorsement or engagement(4,21,25).

While online shaming is focused on ostracizing or shaming an individual, cancel culture is more specifically focused on the withdrawing of social support and social and economic sanctions (4,21,25). The role of the public and their moral judgements have also fundamentally transformed since public shaming was a more localized and less immediate affair than its digital counterpart. Many academics have proposed that cancel culture serves as a way to amplify marginalised voices and to combat systemic injustices which may go unchecked by institutional processes (7,25).

Yet, others are more sceptical of cancel culture, warning that it can result in disproportionality in punishment and can lead to disproportionate personal and social consequences for individuals and/or families when individual opinions or judgements begin to spin out of control (4,8,27,28,29). Such different interpretations and applications of cancel culture invite us to consider several critical questions of why do so many individuals participate in the collective moral judgements of the digital world? What factors on digital media are instrumental in enabling this behaviour?

And what is the real cost to those individuals subjected to the process? This chapter explores these psychological, social, and ethical questions, drawing on contemporary academic work to review the rise of cancel culture and online shaming, the psychological processes of engagement, and to discuss its psychological and ethical implications and suggest future directions towards a more balanced and redemptive model for digital justice.

2. Understanding Online Shaming and Cancel Culture

Public shaming has historically been used as a tool for conveying moral expectations, discouraging inappropriate behaviour, and enforcing social order. Via public denunciations, shunning, and damage to individuals' reputations, societies reinforce their shared values and delineate acceptable conduct (4). In most instances, such actions, while potentially severe, were typically bound by space and time, allowing room for explanation and remorse (4, 5).

However, in the digital age, such limitations dissolved.

Internet technology dramatically flattened time and space. With the proliferation of social media, condemnations are now instantaneous, widely dispersed, participatory, and long-lasting (8, 29). Unlike personal critiques, which are contextually situated, digitally shaming content may persist long after an issue has faded from public consciousness, making its repercussions potentially interminable (8, 13, 29). Within this context of limitless exposure, online shaming has become a significant form of informally regulating individuals in online spaces, generally understood as any instance of public

attack, scorn, and ridiculing of individuals who are perceived to have violated moral and/or social standards (4).

This process, whether motivated by the goal of moral expression, of expressing societal approval of good deeds, or holding individuals accountable for problematic behaviours has the potential to evolve from critiques into sustained attacks, harassments, and a lifetime of public ignominy (4, 8, 13, 27, 29).

Closely associated with this but separate is the concept of cancel culture, which represents a collective effort to withdrawal social and economic support from those perceived to have done wrong via practices such as boycotts, de-platforming, and professional shunning (21, 25). In contrast to individual public denunciations of an isolated instance, cancel culture entails sustained, group-based action intended to have tangible social, professional, and economic outcomes for an individual or group. Some scholars (7) caution against reducing cancel culture to simply digital mob justice, citing its historical origins in Black digital vernacular as a means for voicing critiques and raising concerns regarding structural inequities in cases where established institutions failed to act.

Nonetheless, the mechanism is susceptible to problematic shifts from accountability to punishment when outrage occurs without concern for evidence, context, proportionality, or reintegration (4, 8, 27, 28, 29). It has been argued (17) that some individuals may participate in cancel culture in an attempt to signal their values and express allegiance to their peers and moral ideals to enhance the standing within their online communities, especially as they observe the widespread popularity-as signaled by likes, comments, and shares-that such condemnations generate. Online shaming and cancel culture are best viewed as closely related means of digital social regulation that draw on collective judgment and on the affordances of social technologies to both promote collective values and elicit harmful outcomes, raising critical questions about the distinction between accountability and punishment in the digital sphere.

3. Psychological Mechanisms underlying Online Shaming and Cancel Culture

Once we have a good grasp on what online shame and cancel culture entails, understanding why they happen means digging into the psychological machinery that governs human behaviour. But why do thousands of individuals condemn someone they've never encountered in real life? How can online furores spread so quickly? The answer is not entirely driven by technology, but by a complex interplay of moral cognition, social identity, emotion, and the underlying structure of the online platform. Instead of inventing new

behaviours, social media acts as an accelerator for long-standing psychological inclinations, turning individual moral evaluations into broad public shaming exercises(4,5,16).

The first likely reason for this phenomenon, to reiterate, is to enforce the norms and rules of social order. Each of us resides in and benefits from communities that depend on common understandings to coordinate behaviour and foster cooperation. Historically, criticism, rumour and ridicule were informal means of policing undesirable behaviours (4). In an online space, the form of this informal policing takes the shape of publicly decrying someone's conduct and, by so doing, reinforcing common standards and beliefs. Hence, many participants may feel their behaviour is a moral expression of their commitment to community integrity, not an attack on an individual (4,16).

Indeed, norm enforcement is closely intertwined with the principles of social identity theory, which states that an individual's self-esteem and a part of their sense of identity is tied to the membership in the groups to which they belong (24). Any action taken in defense of one's group's values, and indeed any collective disapproval directed toward a norm violation, implicitly reinforces the identity of the participants by demonstrating the validity of the group's core tenets and values.

Given how much of the group identity is on display in online networks, this becomes even more salient (16,17).

Finally, participation is further fuelled by our moral emotions. According to the framework of moral foundations theory, people appraise behaviours using core intuitions about care, fairness, loyalty, authority and purity (10). Negative perceptions, for example, elicit outrage, anger or disgust which drives the need for public expression (6). Social media allows such emotionally charged opinions to circulate rapidly and to be shared with a much wider audience (5). However, moral emotions aren't always about a sense of justice: one can, according to Barron et al. (3), simply seek retribution and satisfaction from seeing the perceived target's suffering (or experience a sensation called "schadenfreude", pleasure at someone else's misery and participate for the psychological rewards of doing so.

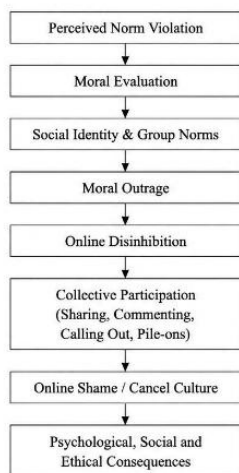
These trends are then further fuelled by the structure of digital platforms. According to Suler's Online Disinhibition Effect, a lack of anonymity, proximity and face-to-face contact reduces inhibitions in individuals, leading to greater willingness to engage in hostile behaviour online (23). In tandem, content with strong emotional resonance attracts greater engagement and thus

spreads faster as Brady et al. (6) demonstrated, moral-emotional content is more readily shared on social media platforms, facilitating the swift spread of outrage.

With increasing numbers, so too responsibility becomes diluted. Deindividuation Theory holds that individuals in large groups develop a reduced sense of personal responsibility (30), thus explaining the process of an online pile-on, where an individual contributes a minimal part to the criticism but collectively the whole is significant. Trotter uses the term 'digital vigilantism' to describe this phenomenon of a networked public shaming and punishing a target outside of institutional constraints (27,28). Social Learning Theory, which posits behaviour is learnt through observation and reinforcement, also explains participation (2). In online spaces, outrage is often rewarded with 'likes', 'shares' and comments which in turn increase visibility and create a bandwagon effect; individuals are then encouraged to mimic this behaviour.

Moreover, and perhaps crucially, public denouncement may function as a vehicle to declare one's own values and position within a community. (Ng 17). Consequently, participation may be motivated less by a concern with accountability, and more by the drive for approval, validation and social belonging. Ultimately, online shame and cancel culture are the outcome of the interaction between norm enforcement, social identity, moral emotions, online disinhibition, deindividuation, social learning, and platform design and are responsible for the swift diffusion of condemnation online and the aggregation of individual contributions into major episodes of public shaming. Figure 1 illustrates an overview of the mechanisms underlying online shame and cancel culture.

Figure 1
Psychological Mechanisms underlying Online Shame and Cancel Culture



Note. Developed by the author based on Billingham and Parr (2020), Bandura (1977), Haidt and Graham (2007), Tajfel and Turner (1979), Suler (2004), Zimbardo (1969), Muir et al. (2023), and Trottier (2017, 2019).

4. Psychological and Mental Health Consequences of Online Shame and Cancel Culture

4.1 When public accountability is Public Shaming

If the online world does not offer as much nuance as we should be receiving from public criticism and if people get over-enthusiastic in wanting public shame and a quick, swift cancellation it will end with the victims and the aggressor. After one post is made and goes viral it can go on to obtain thousands of posts with thousands of likes. This can result in millions of shares and media report, as well as dozens if not hundreds of personal messages to victims, and once shared online it does not go away even once public attention fades (8, 13, 29).

Therefore, this public and the difficult-to-escape outrage differs greatly to that of traditional and targeted criticism, and as it leads to psychological stress that can significantly affect mental and emotional well-being, identity, social connections and career paths.

4.2 Public Rejection to Psychological Distress

The Core Idea of Public Shaming on the internet can be the form of public social rejection. It is a part of our psychological being that we as human beings need a sense of belonging to those who surround us. And being rejected by large groups can potentially harm not only one's social connections but also self-esteem and identity (4, 9, 13). It is often reported that instead of feeling attacked for one mistake or an action, the victims feel like they are attacked for who they are in terms of their personality or being.

The internet makes it worse because of its ability to create a simplified public image from the more complex human identity that can prove so difficult to avoid and manage.

The result of this condemnation will be typically shamed. According to research shame differs greatly to guilt, and whilst the former focuses on behaviour, the latter deals with an internal state which can make an individual feel inadequate, Worthless, and withdraw from their society (26). With public shaming often taking the form of judgment towards an individual's character rather than one behaviour or specific mistake, many victims believe they are inherently deficient and have an entire life permanently stigmatized by that one mistake, an attitude that is reinforced by the permanence of online information (13, 26).

It's not unlike how Goffman (9) described the stigma in that it is a procedure that singles out a personality trait or event as the ultimate factor determining the identity of an individual, however online, a single post can create lasting negative associations through search engines, archiving and repeated discussions of an event (8, 13). Mental health outcomes There are more substantial psychological ramifications of public shaming when condemnation becomes more prolonged; this leads to clinical mental health issue that is beyond ordinary disappointment or stress. Cyberbullying, cyber harassment and the similar forms of victimization online have historically been correlated to psychological distress, depression, anxiety, lowers self-esteem, loneliness and socially withdrawn behaviour (1, 11, 15, 22).

Although cancel culture or public shaming may differ in comparison to typical cyber-bullying due to their unique motivations behind them, the shared factors like prolonged public display and targeting of reputational damage create very similar Psychological Processes.

Steven et al. (22) suggest that cyberstalking and cyber harassment are

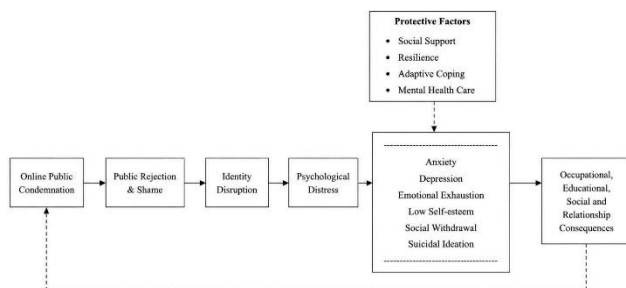
positively associated with levels of depression, anxiety, depression, emotional distress and even suicidal intent, while Marciano et al. (15) and Kowalski et al. (11) demonstrate linkage between successive incidents of online victimisation and decreased well-being. Arif et al. (1) identified a relation between anxieties, depressions and reduced self-esteem among students exposed to cyberbullying and academic struggle. The lasting nature of online information may worsen these effects. This because online victimisation lacks a specific ending point for the ordeal, often leave the victim with a feeling of insecurity or hypersensitivity of becoming a victim again through future searching, posts or re-public attention of previous mistakes (8, 13, 22). Such uncertainties lead to feelings of constant fear, a sense of helplessness and avoidance behaviour from the external environment (8, 13).

4.3 Identity, Reputation and Society

The social and occupational consequences of online condemnation go beyond the mind of the victim, for it can lead to them being alienated from school, employment and other spheres of society (8, 13, 29). The growing tendency for education institutions, employers and professional bodies to analyse online behaviour means that victims may continue to struggle with job search and application long after the incident. Re-shaping of their image or reputation might become very challenging.

Some publicly known individuals who are victims of these types of online actions include Monica Lewinsky, who has talked about how much the public shaming had affected her mentally, saying that she was one of the first victims of mass internet public shame(14). Similarly Ronson (20) discusses how some career paths have been completely devastated by online shaming as well as relationships and family life as he discusses how these events can have major and lasting effects on ones live. It is crucial to mention that although these cases were mostly illustrative in their nature they highlight the devastating impact of public shaming.

Figure 2
Psychological Consequences of Online Shame and Cancel Culture



Note. Developed by the author based on Goffman (1963), Tangney and Dearing (2002), Stevens et al. (2021), Kowalski et al. (2014), Marciano et al. (2020), Arif et al. (2024), and Lewinsky (2015).

Not all individuals, however, endure the same long term effects; resilience and support networks can make a huge difference to recovering and overcoming such an ordeal (15, 22). Ultimately, it should be remembered that public shaming is more than just embarrassment and it is important that while public outrage should be channelled constructively and productively, it must never be allowed to escalate to the level of destructive and long lasting humiliation that can devastate an individual's identity, relationships, career and place within society.

5. Ethical and Societal Perspectives

Online shame and cancel culture have elevated public accountability to the level of a controversial debate of the digital era. Although digital space makes it easy for people to reveal abuse, scrutinize authoritative institutions and claim account, it is at the same time an arena for collective condemnation, reputational damages, privacy violations, and emotional suffering. Hence, we cannot treat digital cancel culture and online shame as exclusively negative or positive but in a scope of justice, retribution, expression liberty, human dignity, privacy and security (4,8,13,29).

5.1 Accountability or Digital Vigilantism?

Many believe that accountability occurs as a result of calling out online behaviour on social platforms when traditional institutions have failed to address injustice. Social media empowers public to expose acts of abuse, discrimination and misconduct from the powerful in the form of what is called 'participatory justice' (7,25). For Clark (7) the origin of call out culture can be rooted back in Black digital vernacular practices in which it began as the practice

of voicing out oppression and marginalisation.

Accountability however becomes ethically relevant when it's fair, proportionate and legitimate. Billingham and Parr (4) indicate that online public shaming replaces evidence, context and due process by crowd outrage which can turn into retribution and punishment. As Trottier described it as “digital vigilantism whereby networked publics take upon themselves the responsibility for sanctioning (both through naming and through punishment) individuals” outside of formal judicial system with absence of guarantees and procedural protection (27,28). So punishments are dictated by emotions rather than impartial and balanced judgement.

5.2 Justice, Freedom of expression, privacy and human rights

Unlike the legal frameworks, online shaming or cancel culture rarely involves the procedures for explanation, apologetic or reformative elements (8,13,29). Even worse, content published online becomes easily searchable, shared, and reusable, hence the punishment for one's perceived offence never ceases to linger in public even if they have amended and apologised for it (8,13,29). Laidlaw (13) argues that the processes involved raise also significant concerns with regard to people's privacy as an online mob could easily and quickly spread one's private information, leaving no opportunity for them to recover.

The liberty of speech is at stake as well. This means that fear of public ridicule might curb expression of dissenting views leading to a chilling effect (18). Conversely, some believe the public calling out should not be understood as censorship but as an inevitable consequence of expressing an opinion which people disagree with (7,25). The fundamental question of the debate lies in whether we hold the view that the consequences are proportionately justified based on individual behaviour or that they should remain moderate and just.

5.3 Equity and Responsible Digital participation

We are all aware of how it impacts us all differently. According to Saint-Louis (21), public shaming on the net tends to replicate social inequality, because women, racial and ethnic minorities as well as other marginalised populations tend to receive much harsher reactions. Public perceptions of cancel culture seem to be polarised, and it varies depending on whether it is conceived of as a legitimate accountability or a form of online bullying or even a kind of censorship (21,25). As for Ng (17), participate in such practice could possibly reflect a general mode of communication within digital public spaces in which a person identifies as a supporter of a specific moral stance or a group with the similar values by making condemnatory remarks towards wrongdoer.

Participation may thus derive from a genuine ethical concern and a social one as well.

In the end, what we ought to challenge isn't whether digital accountability should exist or not, but how to promote an ethically just, proportionate and humane process that embraces fair procedural guarantee, privacy protection, chances for correction, rehabilitation and psychological well-being (4,8,13,29) with the cooperation from researcher, policy-makers, educators, jurists, mental health specialists and online platform designers.

6. Future Directions and Interventions

Given how digital technologies have transformed the nature of human communication, our responses to online shame and cancel culture must not be limited to individual behaviours. As a result of the intersection of psychological processes, platform design, legal frameworks, and social norms, meaningful solutions will necessitate a multi-pronged approach that transcends different levels of society (8,19,29).

One key level where change is warranted is the design of digital platforms. Algorithms used by social media companies tend to promote highly emotional content, as these tend to receive more clicks, thereby inadvertently fueling outrage and encouraging a faster pace of public censure (8,29). Emerging technologies like generative artificial intelligence could make things even more complicated, by allowing easy generation and dissemination of misleading and false content (19). Platforms should take responsibility by ensuring transparent moderation policies, better handling of coordinated online attacks, and design that discourages impulsive and premature judgement, without hampering honest and open public discussion (13,19,29).

The other important piece of the puzzle are legal and policy changes. It has been challenging for existing laws and regulations to catch up with emerging forms of online harassment, doxing, and privacy violation. Legal safeguards that protect individual freedoms, as well as freedom of expression, will continue to be needed as digital communication evolves (13,27,28).

Despite these advances in the law and technology, no purely legal or technical solution will address the ethical and psychological quandaries we explored earlier in this chapter. Increasingly, scholarly opinion suggests that punitive measures are not enough and that restorative models emphasizing communication, accountability, apologies, and opportunities for repair are needed to build more effective systems (4,7). A restorative framework acknowledges the ways in which true accountability is built when the process

involves opportunities for learning and change, instead of perpetual organization.

Prevention has a vital role in digital communities as well, and this takes the form of education. Beyond technical competence, education for the digital age includes empathy, ethical reasoning, and skills in critical media consumption and assessing information, along with knowledge about the psychological implications of digital participation (17,25). These capacities have the potential to guide users towards a more thoughtful mode of interaction and mitigate their participation in online mob action.

Furthermore, mental health support for those who experience online victimisation needs to expand. Psychologists, clinicians, and other mental health professionals ought to assess how the effects of online shame and attacks may be contributing to emotional problems and use interventions aimed at increasing emotional regulation, coping skills, and positive relationships and social support to promote psychological resilience (1,11,15,22,26).

Ultimately, there are major gaps in the existing literature. Most of the research on the topic thus far has focused on cyber bullying and other forms of online harassment, rather than on cancel culture per se (11,22). Research on its longer-term impacts on mental health and pathways to recovery, the impact of cross-cultural and emerging technologies, and the efficacy of legal, educational, technological, and restorative solutions needs to be conducted, involving close collaboration among psychologists, scholars of communication, legal professionals, educators, policy makers, and technologists to develop more responsive and humane digital environments (19,29).

7. Concluding Remarks

How does one moment of failure become someone's defining characteristic? When does responsibility curdle into punishment? Is it possible to dispense justice without accounting for context, growth, and the capacity for change? These are the questions at the core of online shame and cancel culture and they may be among the trickiest conundrums of our digital era.

As this chapter illustrated, the dynamics of online shaming and cancel culture are not simply the product of digital technology but also taps into deeply embedded human psychology. They involve fundamental psychological processes of moral judgement, social identification, emotional reactions, and collective behaviours, which are greatly amplified by the immediacy, immutability, and ubiquity of the digital space (2,4,5,10,16,23,30). In turn, this affects identity, mental health, interpersonal relationships, professional lives,

and public engagement (1,9,11,15,22). At the same time, online shaming and cancel culture are not easily neatly sorted into either "good" or "bad."

On the one hand, these practices can be a powerful mechanism for social justice; they can identify and amplify wrongdoing where institutional structures failed, challenge norms, and provide a voice for those who had been marginalized (7,21,25).

On the other hand, however, these practices may result in stigmatization, severe and long-term psychological distress, loss of privacy, and career and social devastation due to excessive public condemnation, which has been disassociated from notions of fairness or proportionality (4,8,13,27,29). Therefore, the question is not so much whether to hold others accountable online, but how to do it in a responsible manner. In this respect, a more salient question may be not whether individuals should be held accountable in online environments but what online accountability should look like.

Should the priority be retribution and punishment or rehabilitation? Public denunciation or thoughtful conversation? Ostracization for life or the possibility of growth and change?

It is unlikely there will ever be a single correct answer, but we will need to focus more on the human beings who populate online spaces and the conditions necessary to support them and, at a minimum, to avoid destroying them.

A truly healthy online community will not arise out of improved technology or stricter legislation, but will also need compassion, self-reflection, ethical design of platforms, legal reforms, and the efforts of researchers, educators, policy-makers, therapists, designers, and tech innovators (4,19,29). In the end, every tweet, share, post, and "like" represents a choice. In concert, our collective choices form the culture of our digital society. Because so much of our daily lives occurs within that digital space, perhaps the question is not whether we are capable of holding others accountable online, but whether we can hold ourselves and others accountable without sacrificing our humanity to do so.

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