

The effects of trolling, cancel-culture on modern society

Introduction

"Cancel culture is not activism; it is a way to avoid accountability."- Sherrilyn Ifill. *

In today's technological world of social media and online personas, we are constantly surrounded with new terms and phrases such as 'trolls', 'cancelling', and the like. Trolling (saying or doing things online to provoke or upset others, often for amusement or attention ^[1]) and cancel culture ("taking a public stance against an individual or institution for actions considered objectionable or offensive" ^[2]) have emerged as significant influences on modern society, with many people afraid of expressing their personal thoughts or opinions in fear of being ostracized and publicly shamed. In this paper, I will examine the effects of trolling and cancel culture on various facets of modern society to gain a better understanding of the problems they cause.

Thesis

The prevalent influence of trolling and cancel culture in modern society has strong effects on freedom of expression and poses significant challenges to the mental health of those involved.

Case Study

To assess the impact of trolling and cancel-culture on modern society, I investigated the case of the cancelling of Ellen DeGeneres—the host of one of the most well-known talk shows in television history, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

Popular for her wit, humour, and charity, DeGeneres was considered highly successful with her career in TV-show hosting as well as writing, acting, and producing. Ratings for *The Ellen Show* were only increasing as years passed by, people from all over the world tuning in to see their favourite celebrities in interviews, getting pranked, and playing games.

Until it all went downhill in March 2020, when comedian Kevin T. Porter posted a tweet thread—that would soon become viral on social media—inviting people to post stories about DeGeneres' unpleasantness in the past. Replies from numerous ex-employees and individuals who had interacted with her flooded in, with one claim being that "[DeGeneres] has a 'sensitive nose' so everyone must chew gum from a bowl outside her office before talking to her and if she thinks you smell that day you have to go home and shower." ^[3]

The accusations of rudeness and a toxic work environment were particularly damaging for a celebrity like DeGeneres, whose whole brand was the phrase "be kind to one another". The comedian ended up losing a total of 545,000 followers on Instagram and over 612,000 on Twitter that year ^[4], and *The Ellen Show* lost more than a million viewers since September of 2020 (a 43% decline since the same period in 2019, a drop steeper than any of its competitors.) ^[5]

In May 2021, DeGeneres made the announcement that *The Ellen Show* would not be returning to television. The host claimed that the allegations about her behaviour and the show's environment behind the scenes had "destroyed" her, and that in cancel culture, there was barely any chance of redemption. ^[6] One of the problems with this culture is how it taps into feelings

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of shame, which rarely helps an individual grow and make positive changes, as stated in an interview by DeGeneres herself. [7]

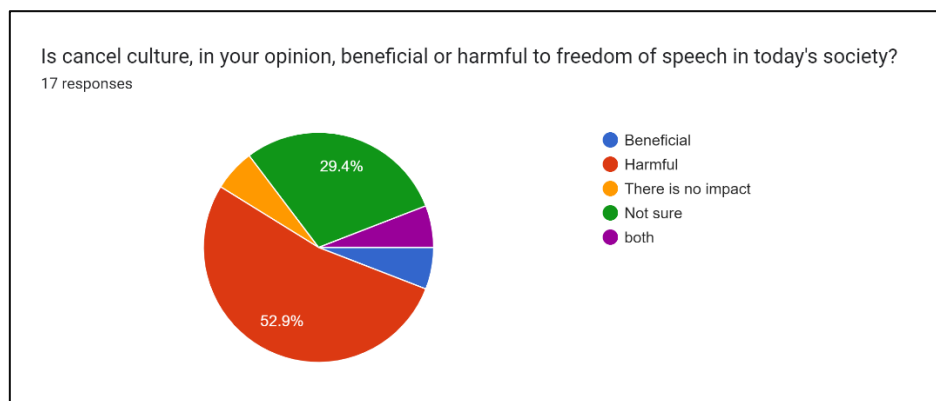
To conclude: the cancelling of Ellen DeGeneres provides insight into the impact of cancel culture and trolling on modern society by highlighting its potential barrier against personal growth and redemption.

Survey

On conducting a survey requesting participants (anonymous, ages ranging from 14 to 22) to answer questions about their experiences and knowledge of cancel-culture and trolling, the following results were recorded:

Out of 17 participants, only two claimed that they were not affected by the possibility of backlash from internet trolls when expressing personal opinions or ideas, whereas the majority of participants chose to stay neutral by choosing the option 'Maybe'.

Most participants (76.5%) believed that cancel culture may be used to silence contrasting opinions and suppress different perspectives. This theory is one that has been discussed many times before by multiple researchers. According to Professor of Media, Culture and Social Change Shakuntala Banaji (Ph.D.), cancel culture, trolling, and flaming are among the forms of social media hate that silence women and ethnic or religious minorities and push them out of the public sphere. [8]



For the last question of the survey (above), respondents had multiple opinions to offer.

Over half of the participants viewed cancel culture as an impediment to freedom of speech, while one participant each believed that it has no impact, is beneficial, or has *both* helpful and harmful aspects.

The subjectivity of the cases that cancel culture is based on is not to be forgotten. It can either be beneficial or detrimental to freedom of expression depending on the specific context and degree to which it is used. Niall Coghlan of European University Institute suggests that cancel culture is paradoxical in nature, “both a form of and threat to free speech”. [9]

Cancel culture can be perceived as a way to defend the weak from higher authorities. Whether justifiable or not, it can also act as a voice for those who are excluded and aid them in challenging destructive narratives propagated by a larger system. [7]

Conclusion

This research paper highlights the significant impact of trolling and cancel-culture on modern society through a compelling case study as well as an insightful survey. In the case study, we observed the case of a famous entertainer and how being cancelled affected her mentally. The survey helped us understand how younger people perceive this culture and how it might provide a platform for accountability and amplification of marginalized voices, but also pose challenges to freedom of speech and open dialogue.

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