SN Soc Sci (2021) 1:237
https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00241-3

ORIGINAL PAPER

Whose agenda is it anyway: an exploration of cancel culture and political affiliation in the United States

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Received: 2 January 2021 / Accepted: 17 August 2021 / Published online: 22 September 2021

Abstract

Cancel culture is a new catalyst for digital hate seen in various media platforms, in which large groups of people publicly criticize the victim's actions and withdraw their support from that victim, leading to serious consequences for their livelihood and wellbeing. This study examines how political leaning and cultural values affect a person's participation in cancel culture. To test this, a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ online experiment was created, with each participant asked to watch a series of Tiktok-style videos about current partisan social justice issues in the United States and read comments from either Democrat or Republican supporters that "canceled" the creator of the video, indicating how they would react to such a video themselves. Results indicated that more liberal individuals were less likely to "cancel" than conservative or non-partisan individuals, but that there are no significant influences from the participants' political affiliation or self-construal that would affect their engagement in cancel culture. However, the stronger one's sense of honor, the more likely they are to engage in cancel culture behavior. Implications for our understanding of social media engagement and digital hate are discussed.

Keywords Cancel culture · Online experiment · Social media · Political affiliation · Honor · Self-construal

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Introduction

As more and more people use social media, there has been a continued growth in digital hate culture (Garnish 2018). Social media users across multiple platforms can post personal attacks in the forms of taunts or threats of violence toward other users on the site with differing opinions; these can catalyze a "frenzy of hateful speech" and loss of support for the target (Leetaru 2018). An example of this is when J.K. Rowling, the author of the famed Harry Potter series, expressed her beliefs on Twitter that "biological sex is the only factor that determines someone's gender" (Romano 2020). Many of her fans subsequently replied to these anti-trans comments with hate and disappointment, leading to these same fans withdrawing their support for her as an author (Romano 2020), or even sending her death and rape threats (Lampen 2020). Other instances of such online hate and backlash have been documented against noted feminists (Cooper 2015), politicians (Garnish 2018), and celebrities (Dodgson 2020). In addition to threats, this hate can take the form of racism, sexism, heterosexism, bullying, or homophobia (Cooper 2015; Semler 2020). When this anger is directed toward removing collective support of someone or trying to make a group effort to diminish an individual, as in the case of Rowling, much if it falls under the umbrella term "cancel culture", some of which—like the death and rape threats—falls under the even larger category of "digital hate".

The phrase "cancel culture" emerged in the collective consciousness in 2017, but has only recently become a popular term to describe a particular type of negative social media interaction (Greenspan 2020). It is defined as

> The withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues (Ng 2020, p. 623).

Cancel culture, also known as call-out culture, primarily takes place "among progressives, radicals, activists, and community organizers to publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others" (Ahmad 2015, p. 1). That said, aside from its alleged left-leaning nature (see Washington Examiner 2020), there are few hard and fast rules when it comes to what is and is not canceling. There are even some who assert that "cancel culture isn't real" and refuse to acknowledge the new terminology; according to Hagi (2019), it is simply a cultural shift to normalizing "people in power [facing] consequences for their actions". Despite the media's regular coverage of cancel culture, however, and the growing ubiquity of the term in popular culture, there are comparatively few academic pieces that talk about this emerging online phenomenon.

Generally, academic literature focusing on cancel culture takes the form of essays and critical scholarship, with few exceptions (e.g., Nguyen 2020; Rogers 2020). When examining people who were threatened with deplatformization,

which is the removal of one's ability to post or express views freely on a media platform, Rogers (2020) found that cancel culture is used to "express victimhood or victimization" (p. 14). People who supported canceling in the form of deplatformization believed they were cleansing their platforms of choice. Although this could reduce platform toxicity, it has the potential to increase toxicity in darker corners of the Internet, which ends up making the person who got canceled someone else's problem instead of truly deplatforming them (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017). Tucker (2018) had similar findings, comparing the rapid dissemination of information to the rapid conclusions people come to online when exacting judgment on others' posts or comments.

Outside of these initial results, however, there are still many lines of inquiry that need exploring. For instance, several cultural variables have been shown to have effects on online toxicity and aggression (e.g., Cohen and Nisbett 1997; Ma and Bellmore 2016; Severance et al. 2013), but they have yet to be tested for their relationship to this specific kind of negative online interaction. In addition, published studies on cancel culture focus almost exclusively on text-based canceling, but cancel culture can exist on image or video-based platforms as well (Dodgson 2020). Finally, although the media and some academics have asserted that cancel culture is a left-wing political phenomenon (e.g., Ahmad 2015; Washington Examiner 2020), no one has actually tested this postulate, and so it remains an unconfirmed assumption. In short, though there are many opinions and ideas about this new type of negative online interaction, there is only limited empirical research.

In this study, we explore the perspectives of U.S. social media users on cancel culture and analyze several potential motivations for users either engaging in or supporting cancel culture. The primary focus of our study is to determine if a user's willingness to engage in or support cancel culture is linked to their political affiliation, and if their cultural values (individualism vs collectivism and a sense of honor) are related to cancel culture engagement and support. In this way, we can begin to explore the possible mechanisms behind the digital hate fueling this phenomenon instead of focusing exclusively on its effects. We explore these possibilities by conducting an experiment in which we present various short videos and comments that are "canceling" said videos to naïve users. This allows us to determine users' reactions and attitudes toward cancel culture, while simultaneously capturing their own self-reported social media behavior. This should provide us with a clearer picture of the motivations behind cancel culture endorsement and engagement, which can later be used by academia and industry alike to develop less toxic ways to deal with perceived problematic posts; it will also extend our understanding of the psychological and cultural underpinnings of engagement in digital hate.

Theoretical background

The psychological definition of hate is considered an "emotional state", consisting or combining the emotions of anger, fear, or disgust and can be directed, "towards a specific individual or entity", or generalized, "towards a general group or individuals who share a common protected characteristic, e.g., ethnicity or sexual orientation"

(Pelzer et al. 2018, p. 206). Digital hate is directed hate or generalized hate that can be found anywhere on the Internet (Pelzer et al. 2018). In most cases, digital hate is found through direct messages that attack and belittle those that fit in specific groups, mainly minorities; however, there are few exceptions of overall public opinion being negative toward the specific action of an individual or group (Dozier 2018; Lee-Won et al. 2020). Some of this hate can fall under the umbrella of 'digital vigilantism', where ordinary netizens take to social media in order to "name and shame" (Dunsby and Howes 2019, p. 41) real or perceived offenders (Trottier 2020). This vigilantism can be performed by organized groups or individuals (Favarel-Garrigues et al. 2020) and has the goal of establishing justice when people feel that the authorities have failed to do so (Huang 2021; Loveluck 2020; Tanner and Campana 2019). Although the content of their message is hateful, expressing anger or fear toward a person or persons, digital vigilantes believe they have the moral high ground (Chiou 2020; Favarel-Garrigues et al. 2020). When these vigilantes attract a mob to join in their actions (e.g., Udupa et al. 2020), this form of digital hate can become cancel culture.

The origin of the term "cancel culture" has been credited to Black Twitter—a Twitter grassroots movement aimed toward giving mostly African American users a collective voice on the black experience—in 2015 when the hashtag "#Cancelled" began circulating to call out the behavior of celebrities deemed "problematic" ('Getting Canceled' and 'Cancel Culture'; Semíramis 2019; White 2019), which is something that is deeply hurtful to others and used to describe something that is oppressive, racist, sexist, or homophobic ("Urban Dictionary: Problematic" 2019). After the hashtag was used, support in the form of viewership, social media followings, and endorsements was withdrawn (Ng 2020). Cancel culture is also called call-out culture (Matei 2019) or 'being dragged' (Tucker 2018). All of these terms can be connected back to digital vigilantism: grassroots movements aimed at perceived justice (Dunsby and Howes 2019; Favarel-Garrigues et al. 2020; Loveluck 2020). Unlike digital vigilantism, however, which can involve a single vigilante or a mob (Udupa et al. 2020), one cannot cancel alone; evidence would suggest it takes a mob to cancel or deplatform a public figure (Beer 2020; Bluestone 2017; Dodgson 2020; Frazer-Carroll 2020). In addition, while digital vigilantism is associated with bypassing censorship by making private information public (Huang 2021; Trottier 2020), cancel culture is actually seen as a form of contemporary censorship (Tufekci 2018) coming from social networks (Herzog 2018). Digital vigilantism adds to a person's public digital profile, while cancel culture harnesses what already exists in the digital public space and uses it to remove the person entirely (see Waisbord 2020 for a full discussion of digital publicity). Although both are often prompted by a disagreement or criticism, digital vigilantism and cancel culture escalate the situation in different ways in order to actively punish their target.

In addition, while in digital vigilantism people seem to consistently believe that what they are doing is in the name of justice and the greater good (Chiou 2020; Favarel-Garrigues et al. 2020), this is less clear when it comes to cancel culture. In some cases, instances of cancel culture are preceded by potentially criminal actions like homophobia (Marquina 2017) and sexual harassment (Finley and Johnson 2019; Lerer and Goldmacher 2019). This canceling much more closely resembles the idea

of digital vigilantism. However, this is not always the case, as demonstrated by Katie Herzog, an alt-weekly critic, who was targeted on Twitter over her opinions by a reader who disagreed with her and wanted her fired (2018). In this case, although one person seemed to believe that they had the moral high ground, as they thought Ms. Herzog's opinion was incorrect, the motivations of everyone else who engaged were unclear. It could have been a case of journalism trolling, as described by Waisbord (2020), or it could have been a genuine shared belief in her wrongness on this single issue. Either way, the messages she received constituted digital hate, and there were enough people involved to constitute at least an attempted canceling.

In short, although not all cancel culture is digital hate, and cancel culture can sometimes be legally justified, there are cases that go beyond reprimand and into personal attacks, and this is the kind of cancel culture that the present paper aims to explore. Cancel culture can create a fearful and toxic environment in which people feel the need to conform to the bandwagon thought, creating a false consensus (Parker Beard 2020). With social media apps there exist digital echo chambers in which cancel culture is further bred as users are primarily shown content that reinforces their beliefs and senses an environment in which people believe that their group's outrage is universal (Antin 2020). The fact that this all happens instantaneously and globally on the internet also means that the disproportionate reactions we see in cancel culture—death threats, rape threats (Lampen 2020), and doxing (Trottier 2020)—can happen without the deliberation and reflection required when meting out punishment in court (Hall-Coates 2015). Although cancel culture's intentions started out prosocial (Semíramis 2019; White 2019), what seems to happen online is a knee-jerk form of mob justice that can happen immediately with worldwide consequences.

Political affiliation and moral decision-making

The combination of the media (Washington Examiner 2020) and Ahmad's (2015) assertion that cancel culture takes place in "progressive" spaces, alongside the intrinsically polarized two-party United States political system (see Hetherington and Weiler 2009), suggests that it is a specific group of the United States population that engages in and endorses cancel culture: Democrats. It is the Democratic party of America that represents the social justice and liberal values that represent digital vigilantes' moral high ground (Favarel-Garrigues et al. 2020; Laren 2019), as chronicled on websites like Twitter (Leetaru 2018). It is this claim that the political left of the United States is responsible for cancel culture that forms the crux of this paper. Although this has never been explicitly tested before now, there is some basis for this idea in the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Day et al. 2014; Graham et al. 2009; Kugler et al. 2014). According to MFT, there are five basic conflicting values that form humans' moral perspectives on issues of justice: care and harm, fairness and cheating, loyalty and betrayal, authority and subversion, and sanctity and degradation (Graham et al. 2013). Depending on which value in each pair is more important to a person, their moral decisions will change, albeit sometimes only slightly (see Banerjee et al. 2010). Each person has their own value set, but research would

suggest that there are statistical differences in terms of which values are preferred by people who lean left or right politically (e.g., Kugler et al. 2014).

Extant literature suggests that while liberals focus more on issues of harm and fairness, politically conservative people put issues of loyalty, authority, and sanctity (also called "purity") on equal ground with harm and fairness (Kugler et al. 2014; Rempala et al. 2016; Yilmaz et al. 2016). On a practical level, this means that issues of justice will be interpreted differently by conservatives and liberals depending on if they also touch on issues of sanctity or authority. Stem cell therapy, for example, could be perceived to violate purity/sanctity norms regarding the human body and the sanctity of life, and so it is typically opposed by those on the right (conservative) end of the political spectrum (Wolinsky 2010). Since social justice is the core of most cancel culture (Nguyen 2020; Rogers 2020), and social justice focuses on issues of fairness above the sanctity of existing systems, from the MFT standpoint, it stands to reason that left-leaning United States citizens would indeed be the primary perpetrators and supporters of cancel culture.

However, this could potentially be affected by exactly who is being canceled and who is doing the canceling. More specifically, if a Democrat sees a Republican canceling, or vice versa, they may be more inclined to be against the action than if they see a fellow party supporter doing the same thing. This phenomenon is called the black sheep effect (DeMarco and Newheiser 2018; Pinto et al. 2010), and means that if a person agrees with an ingroup member—someone who is part of the same social group as them—they will wholeheartedly agree, but if they disagree, they are likely to reprimand and try to correct that deviant person so that their ideas match the broader groups' ideas (Rullo et al. 2015). We can see this in action in cancel culture, with purportedly liberal celebrities like J.K. Rowling and Ellen Degeneres being particularly harshly criticized for their views contrasting with popular liberal beliefs (Frazer-Carroll 2020; Graham 2020). Outgroup members are assumed to be deviant, and are thus easier to criticize (Pinto et al. 2010; Rullo et al. 2015). What is rarely explored in black sheep literature though, is when an outgroup member shares an opinion with an ingroup member. What happens, for example, when a Republican endorses LGBTQ values, or a Democrat takes a pro-life stance? How do members of the party that traditionally shares these views treat the outgroup member who agrees with them? This remains under-researched, and will be examined further in the present study.

Cultural identity and online aggression

Political affiliation is not the only measure of one's personal values when it comes to controversial issues, though; cultural background can also be an important influence when it comes to questions of morality (e.g., Leung and Cohen 2011; Markus and Kitayama 1991). In gang culture, for example, violence can be fully endorsed by the group (Ang et al. 2018), while at the country level, it is, in certain countries, acceptable to kill even a family member if the situation calls for punishment (Heydari et al. 2021). Much of Cohen's work argues that this is due to these cultures' conception of honor, a core portion of

some cultures' ideology when it comes to how one should live one's life (see Cohen and Nisbett 1994, 1997; Cohen et al. 1996). If someone is insulting this way of life, or is contravening it with their own, retaliation is fully justified in order to preserve said honor (Glick et al. 2016). The opposite tends to be true in countries like Japan, where a core cultural value is harmony, alongside rejection avoidance (Hashimoto and Yamagishi 2013, 2016). When confronted with a morally reprehensible act, instead of the direct retaliation one might see among certain honor-valuing groups in Pakistan (e.g., Anjum et al. 2019; Cook et al. 2020) or Argentina (e.g., Huddleston 2021), it is more likely to find witnesses offering support to the victim, or reporting the offense to an authority figure (Li 2008; Ma and Bellmore 2016). This can be further contrasted with dignity-valuing cultures, like the United Kingdom, which are typically very individualistic in nature (Leung and Cohen 2011). Unlike honor, dignity is not easily lost, and is totally determined by the self, while honor is usually a shared reputation among family or another social group. While honor requires defending, dignity does not, and so there is no need to react in the same insulting or aggressive situation (Leung and Cohen 2011). In other words, in the face of perceived aggression—of which the most extreme cancel culture is, we argue, a form—extant literature would suggest that culture has an important role to play when it comes to how people respond to said aggression or offense.

Self-construal and the role of the self in reactions to violence

Although culture is vast and complex, there are two key variables that emerge repeatedly in connection to aggression: self-construal (Markus and Kitayama 1991) and cultural logic (Leung and Cohen 2011), honor in particular. Self-construal is often used interchangeably with Hofstede's (2011) individualism and collectivism dimension, with the former being measured at the individual level and the latter typically used at the national or cultural group level (see Kim et al. 2015; Polyorat et al. 2012; and Yamaguchi et al. 2016 for examples). According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), self-construal refers to how a person's conceives of their "self": as a complete, individual, and unique entity separated from all other "selves" that may exist, or as a collection of relationships and social identities that build up a person's unique "self". Practically, a deeply interdependent (collectivistic) person may worry about how retaliating in the face of aggression may reflect on their family or workplace's reputation, while a more independent (individualistic) person may be more concerned with how *not* retaliating in the face of perceived aggression or injustice may go against their own personal integrity (see Jiang Bresnahan et al. 2002 and Peng and Tjosvold 2011, for more examples). When applied to cancel culture, one's interdependence or independence could theoretically change how they perceive and engage with cancel culture, as cancel culture is an interaction that is both negative and frequently associated with identity (e.g., LGBTQ community members and JK Rowling).

Honor and aggression

However, even more prominent than self-construal when it comes to the question of aggression and culture, is the concept of honor. There are two main schools of thought when it comes to honor: it is used either as a part of Leung and Cohen's (2011) cultural logics framework (e.g., Harinck et al. 2013), in which it is compared to dignity and face, or as a standalone construct which is more or less important in different cultural settings and to different people (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2008). While both face and honor largely depend on one's family or social standing, dignity is an internal construct more closely connected to personal integrity. All three are conceptualizations of reputation—both its loss and gain (Leung and Cohen 2011; Martins Guerra et al. 2012; Nawata, 2020). Honor is something that is not easily gained—usually associated with a family or social group's reputation, which has been gathered over time by adherence to that society's code of conduct (honor code)—and must therefore be protected, contrary to face, which cannot be regained once lost, and dignity, which does not require protection. From a practical standpoint, this often results in reciprocal aggression from those who value honor highly, particularly if the person in question perceives an insult to themselves or their family/social circle (Glick et al. 2016; Howell et al. 2015; van Osch et al. 2013). This is because reciprocal aggression is justified if it is in the pursuit of defending one's honor or regaining it after its loss. It is also important to note that, because honor is often associated with a group, sanctions can come from several different places (Severance et al. 2013). If an outsider is insulting the honor-valuing person or their social group; this merits retaliation, as the group's honor is at stake. However, if someone sees another member of that social group violating their code of conduct, this too merits a harsh sanction, as they are cheapening the honor of the entire group (Anjum et al. 2019; Leung and Cohen 2011; Severance et al. 2013). In short, when faced with either an insult from an outsider, or a perceived violation of code from an insider, people who highly value honor are, according to extant literature, susceptible to engaging in retaliation (Cohen, 1998; Harinck et al. 2013; Howell et al. 2015; Nowak et al. 2016; Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2008). Translated to the world of cancel culture, honor-valuing people should be extremely likely to at least reprimand the perceived offender, but they could potentially escalate into behaviors involving digital hate.

Variations in culture in the United States

At this point, it is clear that the majority of studies we have cited deal with international studies in which multiple nationalities are compared (e.g., Anjum et al. 2019; Ma and Bellmore 2016; Li 2008; Peng and Tjosvold 2011); however, the present study is focused on the United States alone. It is critical to understand that, although the differences in culture may be more salient internationally, there are still significant cultural variations to capture within a single country (Cohen and Nisbett 1994, 1997; Cohen et al. 1996; Uskul and Cross 2018; Uskul and Over 2014). Multiple works have shown us repeatedly the significant cultural variations in honor across Turkey (van Osch et al. 2013; Uskul and Cross 2018), while other studies

have found differing conceptions of honor in the northern and southern states of the United States (Uskul et al. 2012; Vandello et al. 2008). For example, although the United States is normally considered a dignity-valuing culture when used in cross-cultural settings (see Leung and Cohen 2011), there are numerous studies focusing on particular pockets of culture that exist in the country that more closely resemble traditional honor-valuing cultures (Cohen and Nisbett 1994; Uskul et al. 2012; Vandello et al. 2008). It is also worth noting that, even within sections of the United States, multitudes of cultural groups exist; despite its melting-pot approach (Hanson 2016), the various immigrant groups that make up the population do retain at least parts of their original values and bring those into their interactions (Ijzerman and Cohen 2011; Kim and Cohen 2010). Honor-based aggression is also perpetrated by different groups against many other groups that also exist within the country, such as the LGBTQ community (Lowe et al. 2019), or, even more broadly, women (Payton 2014). Thus, despite focusing only on one country, we still aim for diversity in our participants, and anticipate significant variations in self-construal and honor-valuing.

Study design and hypotheses

To explore the connections between political affiliation, culture, and cancel culture, we conducted a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ (participant political leaning $\times$ partisanship of an issue $\times$ political affiliation of the canceler) study. For the participants' political affiliation, this could be liberal, conservative, or non-partisan; for the partisanship of the issue and political affiliation of the canceler (Republican or Democrat) online experiment. Participants' political leanings, self-construal, and honor are all measured prior to them being exposed to eight canceling situations devised by the authors. To explore beyond the more textual basis of most cancel culture literature, the stimuli being 'canceled' were in the form of TikTok-like videos created by the authors—short-form (approximately 10–15 s long) videos accompanied with text. The issues emphasized by each video were either a predominantly Republican or Democrat value, but all had to do with some kind of social justice issue (e.g., racism, immigration and refugees). Each video was then 'canceled' by a series of commenters, either a Republican or Democrat, as evidenced by their usernames (comments and usernames were devised by the authors).

Based on the literature reviewed, we developed several hypotheses, visualized in Fig. 1.

H1: The more left-leaning or liberal a person is, the more likely they are to engage in cancel culture.

H2: The relationship between a participant's own political leanings (left/right) and their endorsement of cancel culture will be altered by:

(a) The partisan nature of the issue in the video (ingroup or outgroup issue).

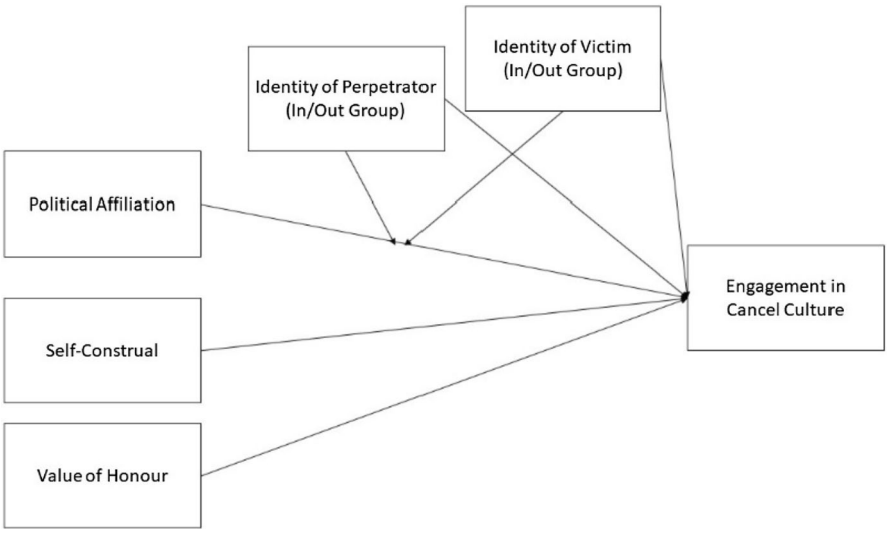

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of hypotheses

(b) The political affiliation of the users 'canceling' the video poster (ingroup or outgroup member).

H3: The more interdependent (collectivistic) a person's self-construal, the *less* they will engage in cancel culture behaviors.

H4: The stronger a person values honor, the *more* they will engage in cancel culture behaviors.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through Qualtrics' panel service. We specified that we wanted a minimum of 100 liberal and 100 conservative participants, and all had to be social media users. Ultimately 240 participants aged 18–76 ($M = 37.23$, $SD = 12.69$) completed the study. The majority of these participants identified as cis-gendered women (47.9%) or cis-gendered men (35.0%); the rest were either trans men (5.0%) or trans women (1.2%), non-binary (3.8%), twin spirited (0.4%), or another, undisclosed gender identity (6.7%). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of our participants were white (73.8%), followed by black or African American (10.0%), Hispanic and/or Latinx (6.7%), mixed race (5.8%), Asian (2.9%), American Indian or Alaska native (0.4%), and finally native Hawaiian or Pacific islander (0.4%). All participants were living in the United States, and all professed to use some form of social media. In our sample, 180 (75.0%) participants used Facebook or Facebook Groups,

163 (67.9%) used Instagram, 159 (66.2%) used YouTube, 117 (48.8%) used Twitter, 86 (35.8%) used Snapchat, 75 (31.3%) used Pinterest, 69 (28.8%) used WhatsApp, 63 (26.3%) used TikTok, 58 (24.2%) used LinkedIn, 53 (22.1%) used Reddit, 38 (15.8%) used Twitch.tv, 29 (12.1%) used Tumblr, 16 (6.7%) used WeChat, 7 (2.9%) used Line, and 4 (1.7%) used other, undisclosed social media platforms. Compensation for participation was provided by Qualtrics and varied based on their individual agreements with the users.

Procedure

After Qualtrics distributed the experiment link to their panel, participants indicated their consent to participate and which social media platforms they used. They then marked whether they are either left-leaning or right-leaning politically, and filled scales designed to measure their self-construal (independent/individualistic or interdependent/collectivistic) and the importance of honor in their lives. Once these scales had been filled out, participants were shown all eight of the TikTok-style videos prepared for the present study in a random order. Of the eight videos, four videos are of left-leaning social justice issues, while the other four videos are of right-leaning social justice issues. Alongside each of the videos were four comments in which fake TikTok users were actively engaged in canceling the poster of the mock TikTok video. After the video and the comments are viewed by the participants, they are asked if they agree with the opinion of the person who posted the video, the commenters who canceled the poster, or neither. They then complete a measure of cancel culture behaviors designed for the present study, in which they indicate what kind of behaviors they would have engaged in had they seen this video and comment section in their own daily social media consumption. Once the participant had responded to all eight videos, they were debriefed and redirected to Qualtrics to receive their compensation.

Materials

Please note that all materials as participants saw them are available in Online Resource 2.

Stimuli: TikTok videos

In the initial stages of establishing the survey design, the team created a list of social justice issues that they had viewed TikTok creators getting canceled for posting about. Some of these topics included Black Lives Matter, Defund the Police, No Mask, Mask Up, Speak English in America, All Lives Matter, and the Border Wall/Immigration. For these seven topics, team members would try to find an existing, public TikTok posted on the social media app by other creators. However, to standardize the content being used in our survey, the team decided that instead of using existing content, we would create original TikTok videos for each of the topics. In the end, we had eight original TikTok-inspired videos prepared for our participants,

two for each of the following social justice issues: Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter, Abolish U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.), and Build a Border Wall. Black Lives Matter and Abolish ICE represented left-leaning agendas, while All Lives Matter and Build a Border Wall represented right-leaning agendas.

Because team members were creating content from scratch, we established the following guidelines to have each TikTok video to adhere to: (1) make the content clear and obvious, (2) ensure the styles of the videos are the same across the topics, (3) each of the videos should be approximately 10–15 s, (4) an equal number of text should appear on each opposing video (e.g., 6 text boxes appear on a Border Wall video and 6 text boxes appear on a Abolish I.C.E. video), (5) avoid using music on the videos and only use the audio of the clip being used in the video, if there is any, and (6) make the videos such that audio is not necessary in viewing and understanding them. Additionally, each of the videos follow TikTok video formatting in that they are short in length (15 s maximum) and filmed vertically. Complete descriptions of each video can be found in Online Appendix.

Stimuli: 'canceling' comments

Along with each video, participants were shown a set of four comments in which the poster of the video was being canceled. These comments were designed by the authorial team with existing canceling comments from TikTok and Twitter used as the inspiration. In these comments, the fake users posting the canceling comments were given obvious fake usernames that showcase their political affiliation as either Democrat (left-leaning) or Republican (right-leaning), either by including a direct reference to a member of the political party, or by referencing a common social group in their voter base. There are instances of Democratic users canceling a Republican poster, Democratic users canceling a Democratic poster, Republican users canceling a Democratic poster, and Republican users canceling a Republican poster. For example, on the first Abolish I.C.E. video, a Republican user is canceling the Democratic poster of the video by writing, "You're probably a little illegal shit yourself. Only reason you'd support this liberal propaganda. #fakeamerican". The rest of the comments can be found in Online Appendix A.

Honor

Participants' adherence to traditional honor codes was evaluated using the 5-item scale (e.g., "Defend my family from criticism.") developed by Rodriguez Mosquera et al. (2008). Participants indicated how important each item was to them personally using a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). The scale performed reliably, $a = 0.80$.

Self-construal

Participants' self-construal—either independent or interdependent, as defined by Markus and Kitayama (1991)—was evaluated using Vignoles et al.s' (2016) self-construal scale, a measure developed through testing across 16 countries. The

measure contains 38 items (e.g., "You try to maintain harmony among the people around you.") designed to evaluate whether one is more focused on the self as an individual, or as a member of various social groups. Participants indicate how much they agree or disagree with each item using a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 is "completely disagree" and 5 is "completely agree". These items are divided into 7 subscales: difference vs. similarity ($a=0.17$), self-containment vs. commitment to others ($a=0.19$), self-direction vs. receptiveness to influence ($a=0.15$), self-reliance vs. dependence on others ($a=0.17$), consistency vs. variability ($a=0.58$), self-expression vs. harmony ($a=0.21$), and self-interest vs. commitment to others ($a=0.20$). As demonstrated by the alphas, the subscales were largely unreliable on their own, a common problem with scales measuring cultural variables (see Taras et al. 2009). However, when taken as a whole, the scale did perform acceptably ($a=0.73$). Thus, we only used the full scale as a variable for our analyses.

Political affiliation

Participants' political leanings, either left or right, are evaluated with a single item: "How do you place yourself on the following scale in terms of both social and economic issues?" They answered the question using a Likert-type scale from 1 (very conservative) to 7 (very liberal). On average, our participants were more conservative ($M=3.84$, $SD=2.26$), but we had participants who fell on both ends of the political spectrum, as well as non-partisan participants (primarily left-leaning = 99, primarily right-leaning = 100, non-partisan = 41).

Cancel culture

To evaluate participants' attitude toward cancel culture, as well as their tendencies to engage in cancel culture behavior, we first asked all participants with whom they agree more: the commenters (those doing the canceling), the poster (the person being canceled), or neither. This was done for each scenario. In addition to this, we developed a measure of cancel culture behavior that participants answered for each scenario as well. Initially, we built a list of 20 possible items that could have something to do with cancel culture (e.g., "Report the poster", "Ask others to shame the poster in the comments", "Make fun of the commenters in a comment"). We then paired this with the following question—"Below you will find a list of possible reactions a person could have to an upsetting or morally disagreeable social media post. Please indicate using the scale provided how likely you would be to react in these ways if you came across such a post in your daily life."—and asked 103 MTurkers to evaluate each item on a scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). We then ran an exploratory factor analysis and primary components analysis which determined that 2 was the appropriate number of factors to retain. Items that loaded at less than 0.50 were removed from the scale, leaving us with 16 items divided into two factors: one representing public canceling (e.g., "Making fun of the poster in a comment."), and one representing private canceling (e.g., "Report the commenters."). Since participants completed this measure after each of the 8 videos presented, 8 alphas were calculated for the public canceling subscale, the private canceling subscale, and

Table 1 Cronbach's alphas for each cancel culture subscale and full scale for each condition

Video topic	Canceling party	Public canceling	Private canceling	Full scale
Black lives matter	Democrats	0.97	0.91	0.98
	Republicans	0.95	0.90	0.97
All lives matter	Democrats	0.95	0.88	0.96
	Republicans	0.97	0.92	0.98
Abolish ICE	Democrats	0.97	0.90	0.97
	Republicans	0.95	0.90	0.96
Build the wall	Democrats	0.96	0.91	0.97
	Republicans	0.97	0.89	0.97

the scale as a whole. However, we found that two items that should theoretically be reverse-coded, as they are antithetic to cancel culture ("Share the post" and "Support the poster in a comment"), were positively related to the overall construct. These items were thus removed and alphas were recomputed. These final alphas, calculated using the 14 items retained, are presented in Table 1.

Results

Alphas and descriptive statistics, as well as preliminary analyses, were calculated in RStudio (RStudio Team 2020). All other analyses were carried out using SPSS v. 25 (IBM Corp 2017).

Preliminary analyses

To ensure that there were no significant differences between the different political leanings (liberal, conservative, or non-partisan) in terms of self-construal and honor that may explain differences in our later analyses, we conducted two one-way ANOVAs. The first revealed that there are indeed significant differences between the three groups in terms of how much they value honor, $F(2,237) = 5.36$, $p = 0.01$. A Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (THSD) test revealed that this difference lies between the conservative and liberal participants ($p = 0.01$), with the conservative participants valuing honor more than their liberal counterparts. Thus, analyses pertaining to a high honor score are likely to also reflect our more conservative participants. The second ANOVA, however, revealed that there are no significant differences between the groups in terms of self-construal ($F(2,237) = 2.47$, $p = 0.09$), with participants across the political leanings falling in the middle, with a slight tendency toward independence (individualism). All means and standard deviations for these variables are presented in Table 2.

We also wanted to see who agreed with whom in our conditions (e.g., do the liberal participants regularly agree with the Democrats, be they commenters or video posters?). To do this, we first created a 3×3 table: the participants' political leanings

Table 2 Important participant descriptors, divided by political affiliation

	Honor	Self-construal*	CCE—DvD	CCE—DvR	CCE—RvR	CCE—RvR
Liberal participants						
M	4.04	4.08	3.13	3.18	3.14	3.12
SD	0.47	0.76	1.40	1.32	1.42	1.37
Conservative participants						
M	4.17	3.73	2.34	2.48	2.39	2.53
SD	0.61	0.84	1.18	1.19	1.16	1.18
Non-partisan participants						
M	4.24	3.74	2.10	2.20	2.13	2.20
SD	0.41	0.85	1.01	0.99	0.95	0.98

CCE cancel culture engagement; *DvD* Democrat video, Democrat commenters; *DvR* Democrat video, Republican commenters; *RvR* Republican video, Republican commenters; *RvD* Republican video, Republican commenters

*A higher score indicates a more independent (individualistic) self-construal, while a lower score indicates a more interdependent (collectivistic) self-construal

(liberal, conservative, non-partisan) on one axis, and the political affiliation of the party they agreed with (Democrat, Republican, Neither) in all TikToks on the other, the middle being filled with the number of times participants of each leaning agreed with a member of the corresponding political party. Table 3 presents the count data for each political leaning, describing who agreed with whom (the poster, commenters, or neither) in each experimental condition.

We then ran a Chi-square test to see if the two variables were related, which was indeed the case, $\chi^2(4) = 122.86$, $p < 0.001$. Surprisingly, however, those who considered themselves to be more liberal in their views tended to agree more often with Republicans, while those who were more conservative tended to agree more often with Democrats. However, a second Chi-square test on a new table—this time relating participants' political leanings with who they agreed with (the video poster, the commenters, or neither)—revealed that these variables were also related, $\chi^2(4) = 103.59$, $p < 0.001$. Both liberal and conservative participants agreed most often with the poster, while non-partisan participants most often agreed with neither.

Hypothesis testing via multilevel modeling

In order to test our hypotheses, due to the repeated measures design we employed, we decided to conduct a multilevel model analysis in which participants' political affiliation—coded as either liberal, conservative, or non-partisan (H1)—the political affiliation of the TikTok poster (H2a), the political affiliation of the TikTok

Table 3 Number of participants who agreed with the position of each party in each condition

	Democratic issue—democratic commenters			Democratic issue—republican commenters			Republican issue—republican commenters			Republican issue—democratic commenters		
	Agreed with poster	Agreed with commenters	Agreed with neither	Agreed with poster	Agreed with commenters	Agreed with neither	Agreed with poster	Agreed with commenters	Agreed with neither	Agreed with poster	Agreed with commenters	Agreed with neither
Liberals	88	56	54	91	52	55	106	50	42	122	31	45
Republicans	131	31	38	118	30	52	58	94	48	57	76	67
Non-partisans	32	13	37	24	19	39	17	18	47	14	21	47

Each participant saw two videos per condition, which gives a total N of 198 for liberal participants, 200 for conservative participants, and 82 for non-partisan participants

Table 4 Results of full multilevel model predicting cancel culture behavior scale score

	Estimate	Std error	*df*	*t*	Sig.	Conf. intervals	
						Lower	Upper
Participant political affiliation							
Democrat	−0.63	0.20	240.66	−3.18	0.002	−1.02	−0.24
Republican	−0.21	0.20	240.14	−1.09	0.28	−0.60	0.17
Poster affiliation*	0.01	0.07	240.00	0.17	0.86	−0.12	0.14
Commenter affiliation*	0.03	0.06	240	0.52	0.61	−0.08	0.14
Self-construal	−0.14	0.13	240.00	−1.10	0.28	−0.40	0.11
Honor	0.56	0.08	240.00	6.81	< 0.001	0.40	0.72
TikTok topic**							
BLM	0.06	0.03	240.00	1.90	0.06	−0.002	0.12
ALM	0.02	0.04	240.00	0.55	0.58	−0.05	0.09
Age	−0.02	0.01	240.00	−2.90	0.004	−0.03	−0.01
Gender							
Male	0.04	0.20	240.00	0.23	0.82	−0.35	0.454
Female	0.65	0.19	240.00	3.44	0.001	0.28	1.03
Ethnic majority	−0.27	0.17	240.00	−1.64	0.10	−0.60	0.05
TikTok user	−0.19	0.16	240.00	−1.18	0.24	−0.50	0.13

Interaction terms are not included in the present table for parsimony, as none were significant. Confidence intervals are calculated at 95%

*For coding purposes, 1 = Democrat and 0 = Republican

**The topics "ICE" and "Build the Wall" were considered redundant in the analysis, and are not included here

commenters (H2b), the participants' self-construal (H3) and their value of honor (H4) are included as predictors of participants' score on the cancel culture scale, where a higher score indicates a higher likelihood of engaging in cancel culture behavior. Age, gender (coded as "cis-female", "cis-male", or "other"[1]), ethnicity (coded as "majority" or "minority"), and the topic of each video (Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter, Build the Wall, Remove I.C.E) were included as covariates, as was previous experience with TikTok. Data was nested within participants, and an unstructured covariance matrix was employed. Compared to the intercept-only base model, the full model explained more of the variance ($x2(37–54 = -17) = 3295.92–3195.31 = 100.61$), as expected.

In the full model, only four significant predictors emerged: how much a participant values honor ($F(1,230) = 44.43$, $p < 0.001$), if the participant is liberal in their political stance ($F(1,230.12) = 10.31$, $p = 0.002$), the participant's age ($F(1,230) = 8.06$, $p = 0.01$), and if they were a cis-gendered woman ($F(1,230) = 2.58$,

[1] All non-cis gender identities were coded together to reflect the LGBTQ's shared experiences with cancel culture.

$p = 0.001$), all other $ps \geq 0.11$. The fixed effect estimates of the full model are presented in Table 4.

This means that if someone identifies as liberal in their political stance, they are *less* likely to engage in cancel culture behaviors than those who identify as conservative or politically neutral, contrary to what we predicted in H1. No interactions were significant, so we can also reject hypotheses H2a and H2b. The effect of self-construal was also not significant, meaning we must also reject H3. However, these results do support H4: the more someone values honor, the more likely they are to engage in cancel culture behavior themselves.

Although these findings were not specific to our hypotheses, it is also interesting to note that gender and age were important predictors of cancel culture behavior. Our results would suggest that cis-gendered women were significantly more likely to engage in cancel culture than cis-gendered men or those of a different gender identity. It would also seem that the older the social media user, the less likely they are to engage in cancel culture behavior. Thus, both culture and life experiences appear to have a role in cancel culture behavior.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to take an empirical approach to cancel culture behavior by exploring its roots in politics and culture through an online experiment mimicking social media instances of cancel culture as described in the media. We had four key hypotheses, the first (H1) being that participants who identified as being more politically liberal would be more likely to engage in cancel culture behavior. This hypothesis was rejected, as the effect was actually the opposite: those who were more liberal were actually *less* likely to engage in cancel culture than those who identified as conservative or non-partisan. There are several possible reasons for this, the simplest being a social desirability bias (see Poltavski et al. 2018 for a full discussion of this effect). As we have already established, the media has popularized the use of the term cancel culture and have been clear that it is a liberal phenomenon (e.g., Washington Examiner 2020). Participants who identified as liberal may have wanted to dispel that conception through their participation in the study.

Another possible explanation lies in the moral foundations theory (MFT). The understanding presented in literature is that people who lean liberal tend to value fairness and protection from harm above all else (Kugler et al. 2014; Rempala et al. 2016; Yilmaz et al. 2016). Our hypothesis was that this would, as described in the media, apply to the social justice core inherent to most cancel culture. However, it is entirely possible that the cancel culture behavior was perceived as more or equally unfair and harmful when compared to the social justice issues presented in the TikTok videos. Our results showed that topic was not a factor in whether participants would "cancel" the video poster or not, and also that the video poster was usually the person the participants agreed with most, which would suggest that cancel culture is denounced as unfair and harmful, even by those purported to support it the most. Both options can be studied in greater depth in future work by explicitly

administering a morality scale designed to evaluate participants' priorities when it comes to the MFT's more specific components.

Our second hypothesis was divided into two parts: there would be an interaction between the participants' own political leanings and (H2a) the political affiliation of the video poster, as well as (H2b) the political affiliation of the commenters. Neither of these interactions appeared in our results, suggesting that the political affiliation of those involved in cancel culture does not affect the likelihood of bystanders to engage in cancel culture behavior themselves. This would suggest that the black sheep effect, if it exists at all in cyberspace, does not work the same way online as it does offline (e.g., DeMarco and Newheiser 2018; Pinto et al. 2010). Although this is not the first time the black sheep effect did not occur as expected in a case of online aggression (see Cook et al. 2020), it is still something that merits further investigation, as there is no existing framework that fully explains why this may be the case. In fact, prominent theoretical ideas like the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) would suggest that group identity would be *especially* salient online (Postmes et al. 1998), leading to increased tensions between the already polarized political parties of the United States (e.g., Hetherington and Weiler 2009). However, it should be noted here that we specifically asked participants about their political leanings to gather their opinions on issues of social justice, and not their actual political affiliation. It is possible that, despite their political stances, the political parties of Democrat and Republican do not adequately represent all the possible levels of liberal and conservative beliefs, and this is why the poster and commenters' political affiliations were inconsequential. This was further supported by our finding that liberal-leaning participants agreed with Democrats less than they did with Republicans in our scenarios. This possibility could be tested more explicitly in future work by measuring both actual political affiliation *and* political leanings/beliefs to see if this is indeed the case.

Our final two hypotheses dealt with two key cultural variables: self-construal (H3) and the value of honor (H4). According to H3, those who were more independent (individualistic) would be more likely to engage in cancel culture than those who were more interdependent (collectivistic); however, no significant effect emerged in our results, meaning that self-construal does not appear to influence one's engagement in cancel culture. However, H4 was confirmed: the more a person values honor, the more likely they are to engage in cancel culture. Taken together, this would suggest that there are only certain aspects of culture that influence the decision to engage in cancel culture. Honor, with its direct connection to reputation and aggression (e.g., Cohen and Nisbett 1994; Cook et al. 2020; Thrasher and Handfield 2018), appears to be one of those components. Self-construal, however, is a highly complex variable that is measured using multiple subscales (Vignoles et al. 2016). It is possible that certain parts of self-construal—for example, the self-expression versus harmony component (see Hashimoto and Yamagishi 2013, 2016 for a full discussion of harmony and self-expression) from Vignoles et al.s' (2016) scale—could still have an effect. The horizontal/vertical dimension of self-construal is also not taken into account in the present scale, which could potentially have had an effect on people's willingness to engage in cancel culture behaviors (e.g., Singelis et al. 1995). Due to the scale's performance in the present study, we were unable to

look at the different components to see if this was indeed the case, but another future study may be able to separate these aspects of self-construal out more to see if there are pieces that are relevant for online aggression.

Theoretical and practical implications

The first and most important finding in the present study is that being a politically liberal person does not make someone endorse cancel culture, contrary to the picture painted by popular media (see Washington Examiner 2020); in fact, our results would suggest that the opposite is true. This finding could have major ramifications for future work in both political psychology and communication, as well as our understanding of social media's role in these processes. For one, though many studies have derided social media as a source of echo chamber effects and a catalyst for the political polarization in the United States today (Berman and Katona 2020; Bessi et al. 2016; Bright 2018), it would seem that, as postulated by Dubois and Blank (2018), this effect is overstated. Overall, the vast majority of our participants were not supporters of cancel culture behaviors, irrespective of their political leanings (see Tables 2 and 3 for mean scores on cancel culture engagement and agreement with video posters vs. commenters). The digital hate we were anticipating with emotionally- and politically-charged TikTok videos only seldom occurred, even when we intentionally broke the echo chambers our participants may have curated for themselves by presenting political opinions directly opposed to their own. What this may mean is that, like the case with online trolling and toxicity (Kumar et al. 2018), there is a vocal minority that is inflating our general perception of cancel culture on social media, although this would require more large-scale content analysis to uncover. As of now, it would seem that cancel culture is not something intrinsic to liberal values and echo chamber effects, but rather a by-product of the interplay of larger cultural values (e.g., honor) and life experiences (e.g., age and gender). It is also likely a feature of the internet's culture more broadly. Since its inception, the internet has been used both for trolling (Graham 2019; Waisbord 2020) and for bringing trolls to justice (Dibbell 1993). Some authors even go so far as to argue that nefarious activity is endemic to the internet due to its very structure and affordances (e.g., Kerr and Lee 2019). The two phenomena, trolls and vigilantes, seem to work in tandem: as a dissenting voice grows, the public needs to act to preserve the established social norms (see Tanner and Campana 2019), thereby also preserving the moral 'good' in cyberspace (Favarel-Garrigues et al. 2020). This can be seen in digital vigilantism escalating into the mob-like cancel culture: seeking the removal of human beings or ideas from cyberspace (e.g., Rogers 2020) instead of the proportionate punishment of a person or warning others of the dangers of a perceived criminal (e.g., Dunsby and Howes 2019). Because of the anonymity of the internet and the lack of real-world consequences for online actions, people seem to feel equally empowered to express both normative and dissenting viewpoints (Dunsby and Howes 2019; Huang 2021; Loveluck 2020). Despite the small number of voices—both trolls and vigilantes (Kumar et al. 2018)—they represent the symbiotic extremes of internet

culture, and media would suggest that they are impacting people offline (Dodgson 2020; Dozier 2018).

The other critical finding, related to political leaning as well, is that cancel culture seems to exist independent of topic when it comes to politics; irrespective of who is presenting the topic (a Democrat or a Republican), who is trying to cancel discussion around the topic, or what the topic actually is, our participants reacted the same way. This lends further credence to the idea that cancel culture may, in fact, be a vocal few (e.g., Kumar et al. 2018), as we found that people are consistent in their online behavior. In other words, if they are going to 'cancel' someone, it seems that they will do so regardless of who that person is or what they are talking about at the time, while those who do not generally engage in cancel culture are unlikely to start, even if they do not necessarily agree with the information being presented in a social media post. This result would, however, consequently suggest that it is not group identity that leads to cancel culture at all, as the SIDE model may posit (Postmes et al. 1998), but rather the individual's own specific values, which may or may not correspond to any particular culture or established group. Just as liberal values do not necessarily lead to a Democratic political stance, nor is honor equally revered by all United States citizens, so the terms "American" and "Democrat" or "Republican" may not be quite so useful in describing this particular form of online aggression. In short, it would appear that to fully understand cancel culture and grasp all its nuances, we have to move beyond labels and look at individual components and variables, as this is where we can find the differences that could lead to explanatory mechanisms behind the phenomenon later on.

Limitations and future directions

As this study is among the first of its kind—an empirical investigation of cancel culture in social media—it is not without its limitations. For one, our sample size, although adequately powered, is still relatively small. Our findings show trends that should be examined with a representative sample in future studies to see if they can be replicated at the national level. Also, our study design did not take into account independents: politicians who are unaffiliated with one of the two parties. This is beyond the scope of the present work, but studies performing global analyses on cancel culture in politics should take these alternative politicians into account as well. This study also specifically targeted the United States because of its particularly polarized two-party political system (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), but cancel culture exists all around the world (e.g., Huang 2021; Italie 2020; Mortimer 2020; Sonder 2019; Udupa et al. 2020), including in countries without two-party political systems. Future work should examine cancel culture in these other cultural contexts to see which variables hold up as predictors and which do not function outside of the United States context. Finally, although this study focused on cancel culture in relation to politics specifically, canceling happens outside of the political sphere too (e.g., Dozier 2018; Lampen 2020; Romano 2020). Further work on cancel culture should also look at instances of

the phenomenon in non-political circumstances to see if the important predictors change or function the same way as they appear to in political canceling situations.

Conclusion

In this study, we conducted a 3×2×2 online experiment with 240 participants to explore the connection between cancel culture and participants' political leanings, self-construal perceptions, and honor beliefs. Our results indicate that someone who identifies as liberal is less likely to engage in cancel culture online in comparison to those who identify as conservative or politically neutral. Additionally, participants who value honor are more likely to engage in cancel culture behaviors online. There are no significant interactions between participants' own political leanings and the political affiliation of the video poster and commenters. There is also no significant connection between cancel culture and participants' self-construal perceptions. Overall, participants' own political leanings and specific values contribute to their willingness to engage in cancel culture suggesting that individual components and variables affect this form of online aggression more than the group's identity and beliefs.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00241-3.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to thank Tabatha Thibault for her assistance during the analysis phase of the study, as well as the Social Interaction Lab for assisting in the pre-testing of research materials.

Author contributions CLC and DYW conceptualized the study, and CLC designed the experiment. AP and MG built all stimuli and, with CLC, built the experiment in Qualtrics. All analyses were conducted by CLC. CLC, AP, and MG wrote the article, and DYW engaged in extensive editing work.

Funding The study was also supported by National Science Foundation Grants #1928627 and #1841354.

Data availability Materials used in the study are included in appendices. Data will be made available upon request.

Code availability All SPSS and R syntax used to conduct analyses will be made available upon request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There were no conflicts of interest in the present study.

Ethical approval Ethical approval was obtained from the first author's university institutional review board, approval code FWA00003246 (Online Resource 1).

Informed consent All participants were given a consent form to accept digitally before participation (see Online Resource 2). No at-risk or vulnerable populations or minors participated in the present study. All authors have read the article and consent to its publication.

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