

Course: SKOM12
Term: Spring 2022
Supervisor: Howard Nothhaft
Examiner: Charlotte Simonsson

**When Reality Outweighs Ethics in Cancel Culture:
A Theorisation, Modelling, and Empirical Exploration
of Brand Cancellation**

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Master's Thesis



Abstract

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The phenomenon of cancel culture is one we all witness and sometimes partake in, and it has recently become a hot topic in research. However, the literature on this phenomenon is still in its infancy. Scholars have attempted to understand cancel culture by looking at cases where public figures and celebrities are targeted, but not enough attention has been paid to the ins and outs of cancel culture when it targets brands. This thesis provides a theory on cancel culture when it targets brands that captures the diverse and complex sub-phenomena underpinning it. The most relevant of the findings made in this theory is that two antagonistic dynamics are at play in cancel culture. First, there is an initial driving force that pushes consumers to cancel brands, manifested in three different cancellation dynamics originating from: (1) brand transgression; (2) community pressure; and/or (3) one's inclination to be morally virtuous. Second, another antagonistic force in the form of a *Reality Check* that prevents individuals from cancelling brands despite the fact that all of the necessary conditions are met for this to happen. This theory has been developed on the basis of theoretical concepts obtained from previous literature and the subjectivities obtained in focus groups.

Keywords: Cancel Culture, Brands, Consumer-brand Relationship, Social Media, Ethics, Reality Check.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our supervisor, Howard Nothhan, for his guidance, invaluable dedication, support, and valuable contributions to this thesis. We are grateful to have had the good fortune to work with him as his enthusiasm has undoubtedly been a driving force behind the success of this project. His belief in us pushed us to achieve our full potential.

As thesis partners, we thank each other for offering our shoulders to lean on, for every hour of work, which has always been a pleasure, and for being part of the best team we could have aspired to be part of.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In 2020, the famous oat drink company Oatly dealt with backlash from its consumer base when the public found out that the company sold 10% of their stake – 200 millions of dollars worth – to Blackstone, a private-equity firm involved in Amazon deforestation and Trump’s 2020 presidential campaign (Haggblom, 2021). As a result, Oatly’s followers expressed their disappointment on social media, prompting a boycott of the company.

Another brand that faced strong online criticism and was boycotted is the lingerie giant Victoria’s Secret. The company has been accused over the years of cultural appropriation and lack of inclusivity and diversity following transphobic and fatphobic comments made by Ed Razek, the company’s former chief marketing officer, during an interview with *Vogue*. Due to this, more consumers started boycotting the brand, which caused the company’s revenue and sales to drop. This prompted Victoria’s Secret to cancel the annual fashion show and abandon its iconic angels (Singh, 2019). These are just a few examples of brands experiencing consumers’ negative response to what is publicly seen as transgression on the part of the brand, a phenomenon known as cancel culture.

Saldanha et al. (2022) – in citing Goldsbrough (2020) – define cancel culture as the act of rejecting, ignoring, and publicly opposing their views or actions of the cancelled target to them “of time and attention and, sometimes, their ability to make a living” (p. 2). Cancel culture is deeply rooted in the #MeToo movement, started by American activist Tarana Burke, who told she felt the urge to say “me too” after a 13-year-old girl told her that she had been sexually abused. Burke began using this now emblematic phrase in 2006 (Williams, 2021) with the aim of encouraging other women to tell their stories of sexual abuse and find empowerment through empathy. A few years later, in 2017, the #MeToo movement blew up on social media after actress Alyssa Milano shared her testimony on Twitter. This paved the way for cancel culture to become a means to hold public figures accountable (Saldanha et al., 2022).

Cancel culture is now a tool for consumers to resist the power exercised by organisations, politicians, and other power structures (Saldanha et al., 2022). Brands and corporations today operate in an environment where consumers are increasingly independent, socially conscious, and aware of the fact that they are the subject of aggressive marketing and persuasive strategies. This implies that cancel culture can have detrimental effects on brands and tarnish their reputation (Barraza, 2020), as well as damage their relationships with their followers.

Due to the fact that social media has become more accessible in the past few years (Barraza, 2020), it has become evident that cancel culture represents an ideal counterspeech tool for those who previously had no voice. Publicly singling out influential figures and holding them accountable for their misconduct has served to expose social injustices and spread awareness in an unprecedented manner (Williams, 2021). At the same time, the visibility provided by social media makes it the ideal breeding ground for cancel culture to become a global phenomenon where users are encouraged and allowed to act as judges and juries of others' actions (Mueller, 2021).

Given the fact that cancel culture is made possible by the interconnectivity of a global community where everyone is subject to online scrutiny (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021), any individual and organisation worldwide can potentially either participate on it or become a target. Cancel culture is a phenomenon we all witness on a regular basis, and, in recent years, it has become a hot topic in research. However, scholars have focused on cases where celebrities, influencers, and public figures are the targets. The aim of these studies has been to find out what the process of cancelling a celebrity consists of (Haskell, 2021) or to what extent is this public rejection a civic behaviour (Burmah, 2021). On the contrary, insufficient attention has been paid to how this phenomenon takes place when a brand is the target, what are the moral implications of cancelling (Loveluck, 2020), and the reasons that prompt the audience to cancel brands. Based on the limited research that has been conducted, it is evident that there is a tendency to isolate one of the interconnected elements of cancel culture – such as social media or the role of the consumer – and look at it in isolation from the other sub-phenomena involved. This causes a very tentative and deficient interpretation of the phenomenon that does not take into consideration the important interconnections displayed by all its components.

For instance, a significant part of the research on consumer behaviour has focused on consumer-brand relationships (Tuškej et al., 2011), how brand transgressions affect brand

evaluations, and consumers' identity construal work (Swaminathan, et al., 2007). However, the linkage between these areas of research and cancel culture has not been fully explored yet. Some other areas of research explored cancel culture as a form of counterspeech with the aim of regulating hate speech and public discourse online (English, 2021; Mueller, 2021), as well as its utility as a tool at the hands of the public to maintain a collective value system (Legocki et al., 2020; Romani et al., 2015; and Palmer et al., 2020 among others). Digital vigilantism and virtue signalling have also been explored as methods for the public to speak out and stand up against transgressions by individuals and entities (Loveluck, 2020; Chiou, 2020; Grubbs et al., 2019; among others). Finally, recent research focuses on the dimension of power relationships within cancel culture (Saldanha et al., 2022).

In spite of scholars' recognition of the serious consequences and ramifications of cancel culture, as well as its communicative, consumeristic, moral, and legal dimensions, no comprehensive theory of the phenomenon has yet been developed, nor have models been created to explain its elements and structure. With acknowledgement of this flaw, this thesis provides a theory of cancel culture and a multi-dimensional model where all the sub-phenomena that contribute to it and the forces that drive it are enlisted and structured. This paves the way to reach a deep understanding of how the interaction among the different sub-phenomena give rise to different outcomes in cancel culture.

To shed light on this, this study relied on the literature on consumer-brand relationships, social and individual identity construal, neurocognitive foundations of social norms, and consumers' moral behaviours. The concepts identified as instrumental to cancel culture were collected from these areas of research in order to construct a theory of the phenomenon. They were incorporated, along with our own observations as researchers, into the multi-layered model mentioned. In it, they are categorised into background, peripheral, catalysts, and central factors. The dynamics of cancellation are triggered by the interconnections of these factors. As consumers are indispensable agents and vehicles to cancel culture, this research used focus groups to enrich this multi-layered theoretical model. Using this approach, we were able, first, to inspire a more comprehensive and far-reaching model that incorporates concepts that had not previously been explored in the literature, and, second, to run a pilot plausibility test to validate the proposed model.

Focus groups revealed that there are a number of factors not reported in the literature that deter people from cancelling brands. In other words, empirical data indicate that there are

obstacles in the process of cancelling brands that prevent people from doing so, even if the conditions are present on a theoretical level. These factors have been enlisted and incorporated into the model as what we have called the 'Reality Check', which represents a gap between consumers' morals and their actions as consumers.

Chapter 2. Literature review

The literature on cancel culture is still in its infancy. Most scholars who have attempted to understand the phenomenon have done so by focusing on cases where anonymous individuals and celebrities are the cancelled targets (Palmer, 2020; Mueller, 2021; English, 2021), but they have not paid enough attention to the ins and outs of cancel culture when it targets brands.

Only recently has academia begun to explore brand-targeted cancel culture, but these are only preliminary attempts to understand it as these authors examine it from only one angle, for instance, cancel culture as a tool for dissociating from brands (Smajlovic & Åhl, 2021), or as a means to reversing traditional power dynamics between consumers and brands (Saldanha et al., 2022). Our starting point as researchers is that these are only some of the dimensions of cancel culture and that it is in fact a much more complex phenomenon that lacks a satisfactory explanation that could assist companies in navigating it. In order to provide a theory on cancel culture, this research draws on literature on this phenomena. From this, we derive key concepts that are arranged in a model that depicts the complexities of the phenomenon.

This literature review is broadly divided into three sections: the relationship between consumers and brands, the relationship between society and brands, and the relationship between the self and the communities to which they belong. The first section, on consumer-brand relationships, covers aspects related to individuals' identification with brands, as well as the type of behaviour by organisations that can provoke feelings of rejection in consumers. The second section, on the relationship between community and brands, explores trends that characterise mass behaviour, such as activism, prosocial behaviours, or inclinations to protect one's peers. Finally, the third section, on self and community, summarises the notions of multi-ethical pluralism and moral superiority in relation to cancel culture and its effectiveness.

2.1. Brand-consumer relations within cancel culture

2.1.1. Brands as symbolic entities

Research on sociology suggests that individuals need to establish and sustain an identity that will stay stable in the face of a fast-evolving environment (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1991). In today's consumer-capitalist society, consumers construct their identity through consumption and to do so they “engage in consumption activities to represent or project particular dimensions of their identity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 3). With brands having such a primal role in identity construction, individuals in postmodern society are undermined by what Giddens (1991) defines as ‘dilemmas of the self’ which refers to a sense of fragmentation, powerlessness, uncertainty, and a fight against commodification of the self. The author explains that what propels these dilemmas is the “looming threat of personal meaninglessness” (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1991, p. 131). Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) state that consumers’ consumption choices are influenced not only by the tangible aspects of the product, but also by the symbolic significance that the brand conveys. In this sense, the authors argue that “cultural meanings are transferred to brands, and it is brands that are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity” (p. 132). The symbolic meanings of products serve two purposes: outwardly in the shaping of the social world (*social symbolism*), and inwardly in the formation of our self-identity, (*self-symbolism*) (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Indeed, in previous literature, it is amply confirmed that a brand is not merely the logo or name of a product or service, but a symbolic entity that carries with it a multitude of aspects intricately linked to the consumer that are of fundamental importance.

Sutikno (2011) explains how a brand can be compared to a person with its own image and its peculiar and steady personality. On the other hand, Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) argue that brands, as holders of symbolic implications, might support consumers at achieving their core identity goals and undertakings. Swaminathan et al. (2007) specify that it is known that consumers are likely to establish solid and deep bonds with those brands which values and personality align with their self-concept. This means that brand relationships can be interpreted as a representation of consumers’ identities. More generally, many authors refer to Belk’s (1988) notion that consumers become what they own, in the sense that brands can be viewed as extensions of individual consumers, since the purchase and use of a brand defines us both to others and to ourselves. As a matter of fact, Vajkai and Zsóka (2020) argue that a

purchased brand “strengthens the self-image of the consumer or the image that a person presents to others” (p. 40). Thus, the symbolic meanings of brands allow consumers to show the core of their individuality as well as to mirror their desired connections with others, while also enabling their categorisation within society (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

2.1.2. Consumer-brand identification

It follows that this kind of interaction between consumers and brands leads consumers to identify with said brands. Previous literature has analysed the concept of ‘consumer-brand identification’ extensively through different theories. For this research, we chose to adopt a conceptualisation of consumer-brand identification based on Social Identity Theory within social psychology. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals label their social identities in line with their self-categorisation as members of various social groups (Coelho et al., 2018). Within this process of social identification, brands play a crucial role as they provide consumers with appealing and significant social identities, which allow them to meet their self-defined needs (Coelho et al., 2018).

Consumer-brand identification can be defined as the “degree to which the brand expresses and enhances consumers’ identity” (Kim et al., 2001, as cited in Tuškej et al., 2013, p. 54). Through it, people can symbolically construct some of their main cultural categories such as gender, age, or social status, as well as cultural values such as authenticity, family, and tradition (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). According to Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012), consumer-brand identification is presumably connected to “the extent to which a person perceives the brand (1) to have a personality that is similar to his or her own (i.e., brand-self similarity); (2) to be unique or distinctive; and (3) and to be prestigious” (p. 408).

An important aspect to point out is that according to Social Identity Theory, the self can be considered as a conjunction between a personal identity and a group identity, where both of them might be communicated through material possessions (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Kleine et al. (1995, as cited in Swaminathan et al., 2007), applied Social Identity Theory to the study of consumer behaviour and concluded that attachment to material possession can be interpreted as “having two distinct facets: one facet reflects consumers’ desire for a unique personal identity (i.e., autonomy seeking), and a second facet reflects a desire for group identity (i.e., affiliation seeking)” (p. 249).

Because the self is composed of both a personal and group identity, consumer-brand identification happens on the corresponding personal and social levels. Indeed, Coelho et al. (2018) assert that, on a personal level, brands can be a useful tool to enhance individuals' personalities and convey their belief and values, whereas on a social level, brands can serve to communicate their self-status and ambitions. Tuškej et al. (2013) further support this notion arguing that the identification that occurs on the personal level allows consumers to develop "feelings of affinity towards the brands" (p. 54), while the one occurring on the social level manifests the desire of individuals to associate with or disassociate themselves from their closest groups of individuals. Similarly, Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) explain that when it comes to the consumers' personal identity, identification is pushed by self-definition needs which refer to self-verification, self-enhancement, and self-distinctiveness. However, regarding consumers' group identity, the authors claim that the identification aims, first, at gaining or consolidating the consumers' membership in those social groups they wish to fit in, and second, at connecting with other significant groups or communities.

2.1.3. The importance of values

The literature suggests that the main factor driving consumers to identify with a brand is the alignment of their values with the brand's. Hawkins (2019) explains how "brands provide consumers with cultural resources and symbolic meanings to incorporate into their identity, allowing them to project desired identity dimensions and express their personal values" (p. 4). Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) suggest that through the purchase of brands, consumers tend to incorporate the brands' values into their own self-definition and self-identity, while communicating such self-definition to others. Likewise, Tuškej et al. (2013) developed the Self-congruity Theory, which refers to the "mental comparison that consumers make in respect to the similarity or dissimilarity of entity's values and their own set of values", which pushes them to acquire brands that get them "closer to realising their values and ideal selves" (p. 54). In this sense, values serve as crucial and fundamental links between consumers and brands, impacting the consumers' behaviours.

2.1.4 Brand loyalty, brand trust, and brand satisfaction

According to Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012), brand loyalty is the main direct outcome of consumer-brand identification and is characterised by preference for a particular brand rather than another due to attachment to that brand (Ishak & Abd Ghani, 2013). Underlying the notion of brand loyalty is the concept of brand trust (Lau & Lee, 1999; Sung & Kim, 2010; Kabadayi & Alan, 2012) and brand satisfaction (Lau & Lee, 1999; Suyono et al., 2020). In referring to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), Kabadayi and Alan (2012) define brand trust as the consumer's desire to trust a brand's capabilities to accomplish its claimed tangible and intangible function, based on beliefs of reliability, safety, and honesty. The authors perceive it as a cognitive element that elicits an emotional response from the consumer. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) specify that "trust in a brand evolves from the delivery of consistent benefits over time, that is, from lived experience that carries behavioural signification" (p. 139). Scholars consider it as an influence of consumer-brand identification, thus representing its main precursor. When consumers trust a brand, they become emotionally and psychologically attached to it, which stimulates their desire to display their belonging to that brand (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013).

On the other hand, authors also believe brand satisfaction – defined as the result of the subjective assessment of a brand meeting or exceeding expectations (Lau & Lee, 1999) – to exert great influence on consumer-brand identification. For instance, Sutikno (2011) reports that various studies within Social Identity Theory suggest brand satisfaction to be the main antecedent of the identification process. Said findings indicate that because satisfaction is defined by fulfilment, content consumers are those who have satisfied one of their definitional needs, meaning that the feeling of identification is strengthened as satisfaction is reinforced (Sutikno, 2011, p. 320).

2.1.5 Positive outcomes of consumer-brand identification

As a whole, consumer-brand identification is the result of both brand trust and brand satisfaction, and it may result in brand loyalty. However, this is not the only possible outcome. Prior literature points out how identification positively affects consumer behaviour in different ways. For instance, Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) report that previous

research within Social Identity Theory states that through identification, consumers are more likely to genuinely care about brands' accomplishments and to engage in supportive and advantageous practices for the brand. This is because when consumers feel that a brand reflects genuine aspects of their personality, they “develop a cognitive connection and perceived oneness with a brand” that drives them to instinctively act on behalf of the brand (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013, p. 372). Tuškej et al. (2013) indicate that consumer-brand identification mostly influences a positive word of mouth (WOM), which consists of spreading positive information about the brand by promoting its qualities, recommending its products, and making positive recommendations regarding the brand to others. The most obvious and powerful forms of WOM are brand advocacy and brand evangelism (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Brand advocacy is defined by Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) as the promotion of the brand with which a consumer identifies. This can occur both at the social level – suggesting the brand to others or defending it when it is attacked –, and at the physical level – buying and displaying the brand name or logo (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). On the other hand, brand evangelism is the type of deep and lasting attachment that stimulates consumers to “make it their mission to demonstrate their oneness with the brand, share their opinions regarding the brand, and attempt to convince others to switch to their brand” (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013, p. 373). Brand evangelism derives from a deep emotional and psychological attachment to a brand (Scappi, 2020, as mentioned by Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013).

2.1.6. Brand transgression and cognitive dissonance

As stated by Sayin and Gürhan-Canli (2015), consumer-brand relationships are akin to interpersonal relationships, in which one partner may violate the principles of the relationship by taking actions detrimental to it. When attached consumers confront a transgression by a brand, they encounter an ethical dilemma, which could result in a dissociation between them and the brand (Kim & Krishna, 2021). A brand transgression is defined as “any violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding the consumer-brand relationship”, which have the potential to “negatively affect the consumer-brand relationship and are easily shared with the public via media outlets” (Sayin & Gürhan-Canli, 2015, p. 238). The attitudes and sentiments of consumers toward that brand are important indicators of how they will react if the transgression occurs (Sayin & Gürhan-Canli, 2015) and what they will do to address the

problem (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012). Sayin and Gürhan-Canli (2015) outline how “once exposed to a brand transgression, consumers need to make a decision: either adapt and continue their relationship with the brand or abandon the brand” (p. 239). That is, consumers will either take a stand with the brand and compromise their own values or they will take a stand with their values and suspend their relationship with the brand.

The reason why consumers might decide to stick with the brand and jeopardise their own values can be explained through Cognitive Dissonance Theory. As reported by Nobi et al. (2021), “[i]n the event of a brand misdeed, consumers may feel a mental discomfort because the unfavorable action of the brand acts as a threat to the self (Lisjak et al., 2012). This feeling of discomfort is regarded as cognitive dissonance” (p. 3). Generally, humans have an intrinsic desire for psychological consistency and when a brand transgression threatens that consistency, the caused discomfort pushes them to decrease the dissonance (Nobi et al., 2021). The primary implication of cognitive dissonance theory in consumer behaviour is that “consumers rationalize a choice by enhancing its positive aspects and suppressing its negative aspects” (Sayin & Gürhan-Canli, 2015, p. 239).

To deal with dissonance, some consumers may prioritise their relationship with the brand over the egregiousness of the brand’s actions based on the effectiveness of the brand or the benefits they receive from it (Kim & Krishna, 2021). Some other consumers may develop several moral argumentation strategies. Sayin and Gürhan-Canli (2015) point out the *selective exposure to information* effect, which refers to the “phenomenon during information seeking whereby people tend to select information that is in line with their own opinion because they prefer the information that is consistent with their beliefs and attitudes” (p. 239). On the other hand, other consumers might consider a threat to the brand as a threat to their own self and identity, and would therefore preserve the brand from punitive action as a way of protecting their own self and identity (Lisjak et al., 2012; Kim & Krishna, 2021). To understand why consumers choose to ignore the brand's wrongdoing by remaining loyal to it, Kim and Krishna (2015) suggested that more committed consumers may re-construct the transgression as less unethical. According to the authors, consumers may use processes of *moral rationalisation*, where they dismiss negative information about the transgression made by a brand, or processes of *moral decoupling*, where they attempt to distance “the immoral act of the transgression from the performance of the company's products and services” (p. 2).

2.1.7 The role of negative emotions

Within this context, past literature believes that consumers that identify with a brand are more likely to justify the brand transgression, which translates into the fact that brands tend to be immune to negative information. Indeed, Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2017) affirm that “[b]eyond generating responses such as affective commitment, emotional attachment, passion, and intimacy, consumer-brand identification is able to immunize brands from negatively-charged emotions elicited by unfavorable brand comparisons and protect the consumer’s self from discomforting psychological stages” (p. 225). Likewise, Ahluwalia et al. (2000) argue that, when presented with negative information, consumers are more likely to resist and refuse that information, while also decreasing the possibility of attitude degradation. However, several other scholars state that as a consequence of a brand transgression, consumers disidentify from it.

Sayin and Gürhan-Canli (2015) affirm that due to an incoherent behaviour by the brand, the norms of the relationship between said brand and the consumers are violated (i.e., brand transgression) since the brand’s potential to influence the consumer’s self-concept is compromised. As a matter of fact, the authors assert that “[t]he self-relevance of this relationship amplifies the inconsistency between the brand behavior and the brand meaning and results in greater negative reaction toward the brand” (p. 251). The findings presented by Lin and Sung (2014) indicate that, following a brand transgression, consumers’ willingness to maintain relationships and repurchase decreases, while their proclivity to spread negative word of mouth (WOM) increases. The authors refer to the *love becomes hate* phenomenon which suggest that brand identification entails a controversial impact on consumers’ response to brand transgression.

This phenomenon is also mentioned by Grégoire and Fisher (2007), who state that consumers who have a stronger relationship with a brand feel more deeply betrayed by a brand that breaches principles of fairness. This can result in a real disidentification from the brand on the part of the consumer. Ruppel and Einwiller (2020) claim that highly reported assertions regarding the falsehood of key brand propositions – also termed ‘brand crises’ – spur consumers’ disidentification from brands. By citing Wolter et al. (2016), the authors define consumer-brand disidentification as a “cognitive rejection of a brand wherein a consumer consciously views a brand as misrepresenting his or her self and impeding self-motives” (p.

187). This disidentification implies emotions of aversion and disgust as well as rage, anger, contempt, and annoyance (Ruppel & Einwiller, 2020).

Moreover, consumers' strong attachment to a brand does not always imply that they will compromise their standards of morality to endorse the brand they identify with. This relates to the aforementioned consumers' decision to stick to their values and abandon the brand. It is this choice that drives the phenomenon of cancel culture. When consumers recognize that the brand they trusted and identified with does not remain true on a practical level to the values and promises made on a theoretical level, consumers feel a sense of betrayal that goes so far as to undermine the relationship with the brand, resulting in actions aimed at punishing the brand. In fact, Grégoire and Fisher (2007) point out how betrayal is the key to the psychological mechanism of *retaliation* defined as "customer's actions that are designed to punish and cause inconvenience to a firm for the damages the customer felt it caused" (p. 247).

The authors' findings also highlight how consumers' decision to retaliate is not simply steered by their impulses or emotions, but also by their 'cold' judgement that a brand has violated cardinal norms of their relationship. For the purpose of this paper, cancel culture can be considered indeed as a form of retaliation, as it entails strong complaints, negative publicity, insults to the employees, and negative WOM among others (Grégoire & Fisher, 2007). Cancel culture can also be perceived as an extreme result of consumer-brand disidentification, as disidentification implicate negative WOM and a strong rejection, particularly evident on social media, where users discharge their negative opinions to cause drastic damage to a brand (Ruppel & Einwiller, 2020).

2.1.8 Brand hate

According to Abbasi et al. (2022) when consumers have negative feelings about a brand, they tend to enthusiastically express them online through negative reviews and WOM, as well as through general negative consumer behaviour such as brand avoidance, dislike, and hate. The authors link cancel culture to the concept of *brand hate*, which is defined as a "customer negative emotional stage that has the potential to damage the brand image" (p. 2) and consider it to be the main trigger of cancel culture. By referring to previous literature, Abbasi et al. (2022) indicate that brand hate is tied with various layers of negative emotions (e.g.,

anger, disgust, sadness, fear) and contemplates two different categorisations: attitudinal brand hate and behavioural brand hate. The former manifests as passive responses from consumers who disassociate themselves from the brand, whereas the latter manifests as aggressive and active displays of anger towards the brand. Moreover, Abbasi et al. (2022) identify four main ground factors of brand hate.

The first one refers to an ideological incompatibility due to ideological indifferences owing to a brand's misbehaviour in social, legal, or moral dimension. This incompatibility may induce negative relationships between consumers and the brand, as well as negative emotions that can spur brand rejection. In particular, by referring to Lee et al. (2009), the authors suggest that "the base root of this problem is the subject of brands' unethical practices such as misconduct, deceptive communication, or inconsistencies of values by the brands" (p. 5). The second factor is related to a negative past experience that happened when a brand failed to meet the expectations. The third factor is connected to symbolic incongruity, described as an incompatibility and inconsistency between the self-image of the consumer and the brand image (Hegner et al., 2017), which prompts brand irritation (Garg et al., 2019). Abbasi et al. (2022) specify that the impact of symbolic incongruity has been supported by the Disidentification Theory. This theory asserts that individuals will not identify with brands that are inconsistent with their self-image. Finally, the fourth factor triggering brand hate relates to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Abbasi et al. (2002) suggest that if the brand fails to "fulfill customers' expectations and is not capable of being socially responsible, the customer could perceive that the brand is not emphasizing the welfare of the society and the brand behavior could be deemed as socially irresponsible" (p. 6). According to Saldanha et al. (2022), cancel culture specifically takes place when consumers recognise a lack of support for social causes. The brand's irresponsible social behaviour undergoes a moral or social degradation which produces anti-branding emotions (Abbasi et al. 2022).

2.2 Community-brand relations within cancel culture

Some anti-brand feelings might result in anti-brand activism, a kind of active resistance motivated by the consumers' deep disappointment and disapproval over brands resulting from injustices, unfairness, dishonesty, and moral violations (Romani et al., 2015). Romani et al. (2015) point out that brands' violations usually emerge from news stories and WOM

among consumers, which trigger emotions of hate. The same authors state that “the moral transgressions perpetrated by brands and companies are characterized by consumers as stories of hate”, hence “the stronger the transgression, and perhaps the more humiliating and damaging they are perceived to be, the stronger the appeal of such stories as topics of conversation” (p. 660). This prompts consumers to carry out anti-brand activism actions, which include cultural jamming, boycotting, brand avoidance, and online activism, and are all different forms of cancellation.

2.2.1 Anti-brand activism as a result of empathy and hatred

The tradition of assigning political and moral meanings to our consumption habits has a long history (Glickman, 2009). Consumers acknowledged long ago that their purchasing decisions matter and their consumption habits have an impact on production, labour, the environment, equality, and policies. Romani et al (2015) point out that feelings of disgust and even hatred towards brands provoked by misconduct and intensified by empathy with other consumers instigate anti-brand actions. These authors describe anti-brand activism as a set of actions, including “boycotting, culture jamming, online activism and several other forms of active resistance [that] develop around individuals’ disapproval of brands” and which “have the potential to symbolise negative perceptions associated with corporations” (Romani et al., 2015, p. 659).

Following Chen’s (2020) interpretation, consumer activism is halfway between a social movement and general activism. Dykstra and Law (1994) define a social movement as “the coming together of relatively large numbers of people around a commonly held set of values or notion of rights (human and/or social) in order to bring about social change” (p. 94). On the flip side, general activism refers to a movement of people coming together to take action around a wicked situation caused by an organisation (Kim & Sriramesh, 2009). The conceptualisation of the two notions together is akin to Nguyen et al.’s (2020) definition of cancel culture, which he describes as the “increasing phenomenon of social media activism [that] has prompted many to promote the boycotting of different people, companies, and systems for misalignment with social values” (p. 7). According to the literature, cancel culture can be seen to be inextricably linked to two phenomena: safeguarding a community's values and social media platforms, as such platforms facilitate one of its main effects, withdrawal of support.

In a similar vein, Legocki et al. (2020) explain that consumer activism is the empowering reaction of consumers to a company's failure. Saldanha et al. (2022) assert that cancel culture allows consumers to gain power over brands by allowing them to react publicly and massively to what is considered misconduct or transgression. Although cancel culture can be considered a form of consumer activism, it differs from other forms because of the speed at which content circulates and spreads. This results in unprecedented empowerment for traditionally marginalised groups, in this case, consumers (Saldanha et al., 2022). This readjustment of power asymmetry may be beneficial for consumers, but Rucker et al. (2012) point out that as consumers gain more power, they lose perspective and become less empathetic towards the brand being cancelled.

2.2.2 Mass discourse: The revenge of the consumer

Research in social psychology shows that when the discourse of the crowd becomes dominant, it tends to lose control and become irrational (Zimbardo, 1970, as cited in Drury, 2002). Social psychologist John Drury (2002) revealed that the discourse around crowds has historically been problematic and negative, and their participants tend to display their political and ideological preferences with pride. Luu (2019) explains that because the ideological tension resulting from the confrontation of opposing views generates negative feelings, crowds tend to break out of social norms by engaging in behaviours that fall outside of what is defined as correct.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) suggested that collective behaviour is volatile in the sense that it is driven by mass hysteria and collective delirium, which causes emotions to take the place of rational thought and judgement. Already two decades ago, John Drury (2002) stressed the need to examine the pathological component of crowds and their discourse and highlighted that it is essential to look at crowds from a critical perspective. The starting point to this endeavour, he argues, is to take note of how the discourse of the crowd becomes dominant even when its practices are to be criticised (Drury, 2002). This implies that alternative discourses are suppressed by the dominant ones, which makes it necessary to find a way of talking critically about crowds and their behaviour that does not have the ideological implication that undermines the crowds we do support (Drury, 2002).

The implications for individuals of participation in a cancellation are not yet known, just as the implications for brands have not yet been specified beyond the realisation that they lead to revenue losses and affect brand reputation (Saldanha et al., 2022; Barraza, 2020). It is known, however, that the act of publicly shaming others for their problematic behaviour is not a new phenomenon (Barraza, 2020). Luu (2019) explains that singling out those who deviate from the norm in order to preserve community values has always been part of community life, from the witch hunts between 1450 and 1750 (Levack, 2015), to the shaving of the heads of French women suspected of associating with German soldiers during World War II. However, there is still very little research on the moral process the public – in this case, consumers – go through when they first learn about a brand’s misbehaviour, as well as what triggers their decision to cancel it (Kim & Krishna, 2021). A fundamental part of understanding how such a complex system of signalling, judgement, punishment, and ostracism has been established in modern society is to understand the moral framework within which it operates.

2.2.3 Digital vigilantism and cancel culture: The quest for moral rectitude

Today, the Internet facilitates and fosters participation by accommodating all types of opinion and discourse and enables a more decentralised public realm that upholds the democratic values of freedom of thought, opinion, and speech (Loveluck, 2020). Some forms of participation take the form of moral regulation, as they are intended to control criminal or transgressive activities by punishing those who engage in them (English, 2020). Loveluck (2020) names this phenomenon “digital vigilantism” and defines it as “direct online actions of targeted surveillance, deterrence or punishment that tend to rely on public denunciation or unsolicited excessive attention, and are carried out in the name of justice, order or security” (p. 216). On his part, Trottier (2020) defines it as “a set of practices to scrutinise, denounce, and even leverage harm against those deemed to transgress legal and/or moral boundaries, with the intention of achieving some form of justice” (p. 197).

Research on the practices of judgmentalism and doxing in social media has explored the similarities and internal links between cancel culture and digital vigilantism, highlighting that their boundaries are blurred. Chiou (2020) recognised that cancel culture could turn into digital vigilantism when perpetrators perceive they possess a more valuable moral code entitling them to publicly reject, judge, and humiliate those without the same views or values.

It follows that both cancel culture and digital vigilantism are driven by a sense of moral righteousness, defined by Chiou (2020) as peoples' belief that it is "morally justifiable to denounce someone who is morally inferior and deserves the criticism" (p. 297).

2.2.4 Self-segregation and prosocial behaviours

Grubbs et al. (2019) point to self-segregation as one of the mechanisms at play behind the need to express our values and opinions and to judge as inferior those who do not share them. Homo sapiens are social animals that tend to seek and establish community bonds in order to find a group identity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and are the only ones with the ability to cooperate and engage in prosocial behaviour (Buckholtz & Marois, 2012). These prosocial behaviours include the prohibition of criminal activities such as physical harm or appropriation of property, but also the establishment of moral behavioural norms that are widely supported by the community (Buckholtz & Marois, 2016). According to social neuroscience studies, this is made possible by cognitive processes that enable the learning of values and the adoption of others' perspectives (Buckholtz & Marois, 2016).

According to Buckholtz and Marois (2016), this human tendency to establish social norms also requires the standardisation of punishments and sanctions to enforce the aforementioned norms, which is the foundation of modern judicial systems. The ability to enforce rules within a community, together with the capacity to differentiate between our thoughts and feelings and those of others – which develops in early childhood (Yoder & Decety, 2019) – is what enables individuals to find affiliation and a sense of belonging to a community (Grubbs et al., 2019). All of this, in turn, enables societies to function successfully as it allows us to predict other people' behaviours and communicate that information to third parties (Yoder & Decety, 2019). This is particularly relevant because neuroscience has provided evidence that the establishment of new social norms in human societies leads to the evolution of third-party sanctioning systems (Buckholtz & Marois, 2013).

Kim and Krishna (2021) looked at supporters of a particular brand as a community and applied these findings to the behaviour of consumers in the marketplace. The authors found that those who are merged into a group identity are more likely to make decisions that benefit the group, including protecting against those who transgress its moral standards. Consumer identity researchers Luedicke et al. (2009) refer to this as 'morality plays', understood as

actions taken to demonstrate that one's own belief system is valid. According to these authors, this helps individuals to deal with uncertainty in environments where moral ambiguities or inconsistencies occur (Luedicke et al., 2019). In today's postmodern society, where moral conflicts are perceived as having clear contrasts and where it is assumed that there is only one truth, morality plays enable us to live in our own idealised moral universe. Through the use of these mechanisms, we tend to surround ourselves with people with whom we share moral codes and beliefs in order to be part of a larger group (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). These circumstances occur in a digital age where social platforms foster outrage and polarisation, which increases the generation of biases by members of one group when judging members of other groups (Grubbs et al., 2019).

2.2.5 Brands as elites: Consumer activism regulating power dynamics

In his work on the sociology of elites, Khan (2012) defines them as “those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource” as they occupy “a position that provides them with access and control or as possessing resources that advantage them” (p. 362). This author views the study of elites as the study of difference and inequality of power in terms of the distribution of social, economic, cultural, political, and knowledge resources (Khan, 2012). According to his definition and to Haskell's (2021) rationalisation, brands are part of the elite, while consumers are part of the masses or periphery, which Avin et al. (2018), define the “larger, less organized, and less dominant complement of society” (p. 2).

According to Keltner et al. (2003), the relationship between the elites and the masses is symbiotic: while the elites obtain labour-power, support, followership, and attention from the masses, the masses benefit from the elites by the purchase of goods and services, entertainment, and the attainment of certain status. This exchange implies that elites keep the masses dependent on them through their rhetoric of power (Haskell, 2021). In a similar vein, research on anti-brand activism confirms that consumer discourse establishes and reaffirms that the role of consumers and society as a whole is that of victims, while companies are typically the perpetrators of wrongdoing (Romani et al., 2015). Certainly, the behaviour of companies' will often challenge the morals of their consumers, which they perceive as an injustice in the marketplace and prompt them to take actions that reflect their revulsion (Romani et al., 2015). In fact, consumers are increasingly both sensitive to social causes and are more aware of the power imbalance, a situation they tend to fight in order to rebalance or

even reverse the asymmetry. According to Creech (2020), access to technology has facilitated the redistribution of power by giving the masses the tools to take over space and separate themselves from the elites. In turn, this virtual space serves for elites to defend their position of power (Creech, 2020). Under these circumstances, social media has become the perfect platform to perform these dialectical tensions and further fuel disagreements (Grubbs et al., 2019).

Brauer and Bourhis (2006) explain that this imbalance of power has a decisive influence on how the masses behave and how they judge others. On a similar note, mental states, such as goals, beliefs, and intentions, play a crucial role in making moral judgments about others, according to Yoder and Decety (2019). In other words, they serve as a yardstick for determining culpability and punishment by serving as our standards for judging or justifying behaviour. Likewise, consumer identity research reveals that followers of one brand tend to describe followers of a competing brand as less knowledgeable and morally reprobate just because they do not align with the set of values they believe to be correct (Luedicke et al., 2010).

As mentioned above, research on consumer behaviour has pointed out that in today's consumer-capitalist society it is inevitable that individuals develop their moralistic identity inherently linked to their consumption habits. According to Luedicke et al. (2010), this implies that their ideological beliefs become a dramatic narrative of their identity as consumers. Arnould and Thompson (2005) argue that the act of endorsing our beliefs and morals through our consumerist habits confer the individual a particular form of identity. In the same regard, Luedicke et al. (2010) point out that it is crucial to identify the moral implications of our current consumption habits, how they affect others and what impact they have on the system, something that has long evaded the understanding of scholars. Hilton (2004) specifies that certain forms of consumption associated with certain sets of morals can have a negative impact on the integrity of society and the safety of the community. Cancel culture, anti-brand actions, and boycotts, as phenomena resulting from the collision between consumerism and morality, fall into this category.

Luedicke et al. (2009) refer to the process of dramatisation of our ideals through consumption as *consumer identity work*. Consequently, the consumer becomes the moral protagonist and attributes moral meanings to the conflicts established with other consumer groups or against brands that are ideologically deviant in her or his eyes (Luedicke et al., 2009). It has been

observed that this model of consumer moral identity leaves room for ideological tensions that consumers can use to claim their morals and principles, making them ideological heroes who stand up for the greater good, values, and ideals. (Luedicke et al., 2009). For these reasons, the research points out that tools for cooperation and dialogue between politicised consumer activists and brands must be established and explored (Chen, 2020).

Chen (2019) explains that these new consumers who attach political and moral meanings to their consumption habits put pressure on companies to act in the way they expect, always based on their own beliefs and principles. Numerous definitions of consumer activism have been provided in the literature, but we choose to quote Glickman's (2004), who refers to modern consumer activists as "agents of moral and economic change" (p. 893) who seek the greater good. Faced with this type of consumer activism that brings to light moral conflicts between brands and consumers – which is becoming more and more frequent –, the academia points out that dialogue and empathy are the essential tools for the resolution (Johannesen et al., 2008).

2.3 Self-community relations within cancel culture

Advocates of cancel culture acknowledge in the literature that it has given to those who previously had no voice the opportunity to be heard and start their own movement to bring injustices to light (Mueller, 2021). However, there are also those who question its ethicality and compatibility with democratic values. Research on cancel culture has found that because it arises on social media, where anonymity is guaranteed, it can also be used by individuals to spread toxic ideas with severe ramifications (Mueller, 2021). As such, one of the most critical stances of this modern call-out culture (Richard, 2013, as cited in Mueller, 2021) is that it has become the weapon of those who wish to impose their values and opinions on others at any cost (Nakamura, 2015), which can be detrimental to social justice or democracy (Bouvier, 2020). This has led academia to question the effectiveness of the cancellation culture, as it has not been proven to prevent misconduct or transgressions, and it has not even been determined what the tangible effects of cancellation on the target subject are (Nakamura, 2015). In this regard, numerous scholars (Barraza, 2020; Chen, 2020; Williams, 2021; Ahuja & Keretta, 2021) raise questions on how to navigate cancel culture and come out unscathed. The disagreement among scholars regarding its compatibility with democracy and the lack of

precise understanding of the phenomenon highlights the lack of empirical knowledge. This, coupled with the fact that some theoretical views argue that cancel culture has become a tool of censorship in the digital space, justifies academic concern and makes it clear that more research is necessary (Mueller, 2021).

2.3.1 Moral superiority towards social status

According to the research on social psychology and personality science, underlying the aforementioned concept of ‘moral righteousness’ is the conviction that our own beliefs are superior to those of others. Tappin and McKay (2016) assert that most people believe that their morals and values are virtuous and just, while they consider that the other person’s are much less so. Dong et al. (2019) refer to this as *moral superiority*, and explain that it not only consists of the belief that one is morally superior to others, but also involves the hypocrisy of presenting oneself as more virtuous than one really is. In their study, the authors conclude that this tendency to self-enhancement causes individuals to engage in activities in the public and private spheres that represent discrepant moral performances (Dong et al., 2019).

Tappin and McKay (2016) point out that this condition affects in most cases moral characteristics such as honesty, fidelity, or responsibility and not so much personal characteristics such as ambition or independence. In particular, the authors explain that moral superiority entails the fallacy that we give validity to the judgements we make about ourselves and the people around us, while we do not consider the judgements of others to be just or right (Tappin & McKay, 2016). Going one step further, they draw attention in their study to the paradox of thinking that, while others do not possess valuable moral traits, ours are innate, which implies that they are not developable through learning and adaptation (Tappin & McKay, 2016). The assumption that one’s own beliefs and stances are the only valid and acceptable ones invites irrational judgements and sometimes even harmful and violent behaviour, a tendency that is even more pronounced in the virtual world (Tappin & McKay, 2016).

Heeding Foucault (1977) quoting Nietzsche, it can be argued that our moral arguments often serve to rationalise and justify the imposition of power and domination. However, scholars still consistently point to the need to unravel the evaluative processes that make violent behaviour more tolerable when exercised by oneself (Chiou, 2020). Meanwhile, it is clear

from the literature that these online actions are motivated by the need to express and defend our values and morals as the most valuable ones.

This appears to be motivated by the urge to gain social status by the validation of others, which Henderson (2020) identifies as one of the drivers for cancel culture. The author explains that respect and admiration from others contribute to one's own well-being and that pointing out the moral violations of others is one of the most effective strategies to this end as it does not require the effort needed to make something good ourselves. Furthermore, Henderson (2020) points out the usefulness of cancel culture to gain social status as it allows individuals to demonstrate their credentials in a very comfortable and effortless way. Grubbs et al. (2019) refer to this as *moral grandstanding*, understood as moral discourse aimed at improving our social status. The Internet is, in fact, their best ally, as debates on controversial issues are increasingly volatile in this environment. The authors relate this behaviour very closely to the term *virtue signalling*, which refers to the act of highlighting one's values and virtues with the intention of attracting attention and gaining the approval of others (Grubbs et al., 2019).

2.3.2 Multi-ethical pluralism and social justice

From their analysis of the phenomenon, Ahuja and Kerketta (2021) conclude that cancel culture exists on the assumption that “there is no room to learn, make mistakes, or educate oneself by engaging in constructive discourse” (p. 35). Besides this, it has been noted that the consequences of cancellation are so far unpredictable, seem to be unique in each case, and last as long as Internet users allow (Nakamura, 2015; Loveluck, 2020; Saldanha et al., 2022). Although research on cancel culture is not extensive because it is a relatively new phenomenon, some academic work has suggested that cancelling brands may not be the ideal solution to prevent social problems and brand misbehaviour (Barraza, 2020; Wychunas, 2021). Instead, scholars have suggested education and information sharing as alternatives to cancellation and encourage individuals who engage in it to ask themselves why other individuals and brands think and act differently than they would. These perspectives within academia are based, first, on the idea that the cancelled targets may not have had access to certain information before expressing their opinions or engaging in certain behaviours (Barraza, 2020), and second, the notion that empathic dialogue and understanding are more effective tools for conflict resolution (Johannesen, 2008; Henderson, 2020).

In the same vein, Wychunas (2021) highlights that cancel culture should target and cancel behaviours and not individuals or organisations, and describes cancel culture as a never-ending problem. More specifically, the author explains that cancel culture is a ‘wicked problem’ and bases his reasoning on the definition that design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber coined of the term in the 1970s. According to the authors, for a problem to be wicked, it must have certain characteristics, including no definitive formulation, no stopping rule that indicates when it is solved, and no way to check whether a solution is good or bad, among others (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wychunas (2021) concludes that, as long as social media exists, cancel culture will, so the solution comes down to understanding the perspectives of those cancelling and of those being cancelled.

Williams (2020) clarifies that individuals or organisations are rarely cancelled for minor inconveniences, but users and consumers only resort to this strategy when the disagreement or misconduct has reached a certain level of severity. As Grubbs et al. (2019) explain, this certain level of severity is reached when the public discourse, which is often confrontational as it has been discussed above, occurs on social networks and when moral issues are being discussed. This raises one of the most obvious problems with the culture of nullification according to scholars, which is that for its existence to be justifiable and its enforcement effective, we should all accept the same set of moral norms and agree on what it is to transgress the norm. According to Williams (2020), failing to reach this consensus leads us to reconsider the ethicality of cancel culture as a whole. In a world where this consensus does not yet exist, the question is: can a conciliatory approach be adopted in which a debate between different opinions is possible? Or is one side expected to change its position and adopt the opposite perspective, leaving no room for a plurality of ideas?

In *Disagreements: An Introduction*, the theoretical philosophers Mölder and Simm (2020) explain that disagreements that arise over one’s value system are profound in the sense that they cannot be solved by talking over each other. The author introduces the notion of *meta-ethical pluralism*, which he defines as the idea that moral discourse in society is more heterogeneous than is generally assumed. Mölder and Simm (2020) argue that as there is no such thing as a set of inviolable foundational principles governing what is true or right, it is difficult to conclude whether any party to the disagreement is making a mistake and thus to find a straightforward solution. The widespread illusion that we all think or should think in the same way, and share the same values, is what causes real disagreements (Mölder &

Simm, 2020), and therefore, it is crucial to analyse cancel culture in its relation to the belief that our set of morals is the correct one.

Sutrop (2020) refers to this type of disagreement as ‘deep conceptual moral disagreements’ and explains that they can be caused for four reasons: (1) because people’s values are not commensurable on the same scale of values, (2) because the conceptions of morality of those involved are different, (3) because the parties involved have different notions about the exemplarity of the values to aspire to, (4) and because the parties are adherents of different moral theories and value differently the motivation and rationale for acting. In his contribution on theorising disagreement, Manuel Knoll (2020) argues for the formulation of a theory of disagreement that could potentially enable parties to a disagreement to accept the opposing views as intellectually worthy rather than as irrational or uninformed. This would imply seeing the parties to the disagreement not just as opposing sides of a dichotomy but as complementary, or at least, valid perspectives (Knoll, 2020). However, the author does not advocate the possibility or necessity of reaching a consensus with every disagreement but argues that negotiation and tolerance are tools that serve prosperity (Knoll, 2020).

Decety and Cowell (2015) define empathy as a multi-faceted construct that competes with fairness in the decision-making process. In the realm of cancel culture, empathy would be key to respond to the needs of others and support their quests (Yoder & Decety, 2019), but also to leave room for dialogue with brands, as explained by Rucker et al. (2014). The same applies to justice. Yoder and Decety (2019) distinguish between self-oriented and other-oriented justice. Self-oriented justice refers to the selfish dimension of the individual that encourages her or him to pursue her or his self-interest, has an anti-social component, and prevents the individual from carrying out actions or behaviours that require courage or exposure of her or his morality (Yoder & Decety, 2019). Other-oriented justice refers to the individual’s willingness to carry out prosocial attitudes and actions and stimulates the individual’s desire to carry out or participate in punishing third parties (Yoder & Decety, 2019). In this regard, Henderson (2020) affirms that a brand misbehaviour stands as a litmus test, since it raises the dilemma to the individual as to whether they should join in the cancellation or first question whether the transgression is severe enough to trigger such a reaction. The latter reaction could be seen as unfair or unfaithful, which reinforces group division and confrontation (Henderson, 2020). According to Henderson (2020), another inherent problem of cancel culture is that peer pressure for users or consumers to speak out or support a cancellation around a sensitive issue works to the detriment of justice.

2.3.3 Social media and freedom of speech: The debated legitimacy of cancel culture

Several authors (Williams, 2021; Trottier, 2020; and Mueller, 2021 among others) draw attention in their works to how the Internet gives individuals the possibility to act as judges, juries, and executioners of their causes, and thus serves as a perfect breeding ground for cancel culture to spread like wildfire (Mueller 2021). The digital age and its attendant connectivity in times of extreme social change have created an environment in which society is increasingly polarised and where only one truth or reality is considered defensible and reasonable. Some argue that unjust transgressions should be punished, while others call for a more open debate and advocate education as an alternative to cancellation (Mueller, 2021). However, what is clear from the literature is that the lack of knowledge and agreement regarding the effectiveness of cancel culture shakes its foundations even though an understanding of how its mechanisms work has yet to be reached.

As discussed above, Drury (2002) noted that once the crowd is pathologised and criminalised, its discourse becomes meaningless. It is fair to assume that cancel culture has been criminalised and pathologized because the part of academia most critical of cancel culture has condemned this phenomenon because it is said to instigate unjust and anti-democratic behaviour. On a similar note, Ahuja and Kerketta (2021) explain that not all individuals who engage in a cancellation have sufficient knowledge of the subject under discussion or the circumstances of the target subject. This effect becomes even more apparent in social media as consumers are cloaked in anonymity (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). Indulging in peer pressure and mass emotions is often detrimental to justice, as mentioned before, but also to others' right to freedom of thought and expression (Mueller, 2021). Regarding this, Brumah (2021) points out that the more conservative stances note that cancel culture leaves no room for freedom of expression, while the more progressive views claim that despite it, disagreement and pluralistic debate are still possible and take place. It follows that cancel culture is seen both as an exemplary form of democracy for those who can raise their voice against power structures and as a tool to publicly shame and censor alternative opinions to the discourse that dominates social media (Mueller, 2021).

Henderson (2020) explains that one of the forces fuelling cancel culture is *concept creep*. This notion was first defined by Haslam (2016) and refers to the fact that our understanding of what is dangerous or threatening expands as society becomes safer. Haslam (2016) outlines

that concepts related to harm expand in meaning both horizontally, so that they encompass more and more phenomena, and vertically, so that they refer to less and less extreme phenomena. This means that when the individual looks for red flags, they often expand their definition of what is alarming to fit the pattern they are seeking (Henderson, 2020).

Just as it seems unfeasible to reach unanimity on what is right and what is wrong, it also seems beyond the scope of social media platforms to develop means to regulate cancel culture, mainly because they benefit from the high levels of activity brought about by cancellation campaigns (Trottier, 2020). But before investigating how to make cancel culture a communication strategy that works fairly for all, it is essential to understand its internal patterns, dynamics and drivers.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical model presented below, designed on the basis of the above-mentioned literature, was developed to be enriched with insights from the focus groups. Using this strategy, we were able to carry out a first plausibility test in order to assess the consistency and coherence of the concepts presented in this first depiction of the phenomenon. Second, the focus groups gave us new perspectives and subjectivities that could not otherwise be included in the model. As a result, we got a more realistic and rigorous version.

For the development of a theory in cancel culture we have followed the guidelines provided by Swedberg (2014) in *Theorizing in Social Sciences: The Context of Discovery*. In this section, we explain in detail the procedure we have followed and provide the consequent model. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the operational logic of the model according to which we can explain to cancel culture.

3.1 The process of theorising

According to American sociologist Robert K. Merton, theories in social science are “logically interconnected sets of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived” and which patterns must be empirically testable (Swedberg, 2014, p. 4). As Swedberg (2014) remarks, Merton argued that good theories are grounded in inspiration and creativity, to which data work must be added. For his part, Émile Durkheim, one of the fathers of sociology, explained that a good researcher builds her or his theories by proceeding from facts to ideas, meaning the hypotheses must be formulated after data have been explored.

According to Swedberg (2014), the first part of a theorising study, which he names *prestudy*, consists of observing the empirical facts tested so far in previous research with the aim of arriving at a modest discovery. As he follows, in the second stage of research, “for successful theorizing to take place in social science, the researcher needs to be thoroughly grounded in its core ideas and know many of its concepts” (Swedberg, 2014, p. 9). It is for this reason that

literature research is such an important part of this study and on which much of the weight of the preliminary model to be presented below rests.

3.2 Theorising on cancel culture

According to Swedberg (2014), the observation of the environment provides the basis for theorising, since it allows researchers to become aware of interesting phenomena that must be studied. The author argues that this is the first step in theorising and it includes, first, the formulation of central concepts and, second, the development of a tentative theory that provides a preliminary explanation (Swedberg, 2014). It has been acknowledged by academia that cancel culture is a phenomenon that deserves further scholarly attention as it is a topical issue, it is relevant within the field of Strategic Communication – its implications for brands are not fully understood yet –, and it lacks a holistic and satisfactory theoretical explanation. Following the procedures suggested by Swedberg (2014) as most suitable for theorising in social sciences, observation led to the formulation of core concepts, which was carried out through literature research. These concepts helped to reach a preliminary understanding of the factors at play within the phenomenon.

The second phase of the research is the main phase according to Swedberg (2014), as it includes the design of the research, the research execution, and the transcription of results. For this research and as briefly mentioned above, focus groups were used as a scientific method to test and enrich the model due to the belief that cancel culture is mainly driven by subjectivities. The focus groups were conducted, as it is explained below, after the formulation of the core concepts, which allowed us to arrive at a more complete and realistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The third step of theorising consists of building and enlarging the theory by outlining the patterns and structure of the phenomenon (Swedberg, 2014). At this point in the research, abductive reasoning was applied to understand the dynamics between the given concepts. Despite explaining in more detail below why abductive reasoning was selected for this study, we would like to talk about this method in broad terms at this point. Charles Sanders Peirce presented abduction as a process of reasoning that includes continuous adjustments between hypotheses, theories, and data, as well as the testing of anomalous findings in order to adjust and define a new theory (Swedberg, 2014). Using this reasoning process, we were able to

understand the structure of the phenomenon, as well as the interconnectedness among its internal sub-phenomena (Swedberg, 2014). The insights extracted from the focus groups were included in the preliminary model to complete the tentative theory that explains cancel culture. This is, according to Swedberg (2016), the fourth step of theorising in social sciences.

3.3 Three questions to develop a theory

For the design of a model on cancel culture and the subsequent formulation of the theory that explains it, we have followed the procedure that Daniel B. Klein and Pedro Romero suggest as the most appropriate for theorisation (Swedberg, 2014). According to these authors, a model can be considered a theory when it answers three questions: (1) Theory of what?; (2) Why should we care?; and (3) What merit in our explanation? (Swedberg, 2014).

The first question, *Theory of what?*, refers to what the authors call *explanandum*, which is a real-life phenomenon that requires an explanation (Swedberg, 2014). This must be facilitated by the suggested model (Swedberg, 2014). As for the second question, *Why should we care?*, the aim of researchers must be, first, to prove that the phenomenon to be investigated lacks sufficient explanation and, second, to persuade the community that it requires the academia's attention (Swedberg, 2014). Finally, as for *What merit in your explanation?*, the aim of the proponents is to justify why the suggested model, i.e., the suggested *explanation*, deserves further attention and resources (Swedberg, 2014).

3.3.1 Theory of what?

In this research, cancel culture is the *explanandum*, i.e., the real-life phenomenon to be explained. In order to come to the conclusion that this phenomenon required further explanation, it was necessary to review the literature around the topic (Swedberg, 2014).

3.3.2 Why should we care?

As discussed earlier in the literature review, cancel culture is a growing phenomenon affecting more and more individuals and organisations, which is why it generates growing

interest among researchers in the field of communication. Although the initial interest has provided a first glance to the numerous dimensions of the phenomenon – namely, consumer-brand relationships (Tuškej et al., 2011), brand identity work (Swaminathan, et al., 2007), public discourse (English, 2021; Mueller, 2021), consumer activism (Legocki et al., 2020; Romani et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2020), or digital vigilantism (Loveluck, 2020; Trottier, 2020) among others –, it has not yet translated into a detailed understanding of cancel culture as a whole. This missing model might help brands and organisations understand how to navigate cancel culture by designing communication strategies to avoid the cancellation or by measuring the impact of a possible transgression on their part.

3.3.3 What merit in our explanation?

The merit of our explanation lies in the fact that our model is the first one to our knowledge developed on cancel culture to describe and understand its functioning, as well as the first to account for the interconnectedness of the internal sub-phenomena that take place in and around the phenomenon.

3.4 Abductive reasoning

Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) explain that the formalised process of abductive reasoning follows four steps: (1) observation of a phenomenon, (2) acknowledgement that it breaks with our understanding, (3) suggestion of a conjecture that makes the phenomenon understandable, and (4) acceptance of that explanation until a better interpretation is reached. The authors clarify that when there is no complete explanation of the phenomenon and therefore the results are unpredictable, the abductive approach is the most appropriate in the reasoning process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Echoing Peirce (1955), Shank (1998) explains that in abductive reasoning observation leads to the hypothesis that explains why circumstances are the way they are, meaning “the end result is an intuitive ‘guess’ as to the reason that a certain pattern of experience is found, and that ‘guess’ can then serve as the basis for empirical test” (p. 846). Following abductive reasoning, strategy involves the realisation that the information at hand is incomplete, and from this insufficient set of observations, a diagnosis is made that can explain most of them.

The abductive approach was the reasoning strategy chosen for this research, as we recognise that the available material, which has been presented in the literature, is sufficient to provide a complete and understandable tentative theory. We assume, therefore, first, that cancelling culture is a phenomenon driven by subjectivities, and second, that the theory we provide in this study will need to be tested in future research.

3.5 A preliminary model on cancel culture

Three axes are represented in the model below, which all relate to the sections that were discussed earlier in the literature review: the brand, the community, and the self. They operate in an environment characterised by three key background factors: (1) meta-ethical pluralism, (2) freedom of expression, and (3) the standardisation of social media. They refer to the specific circumstances that today allow cancel culture to exist and that are impossible for businesses or individuals to ignore or control.

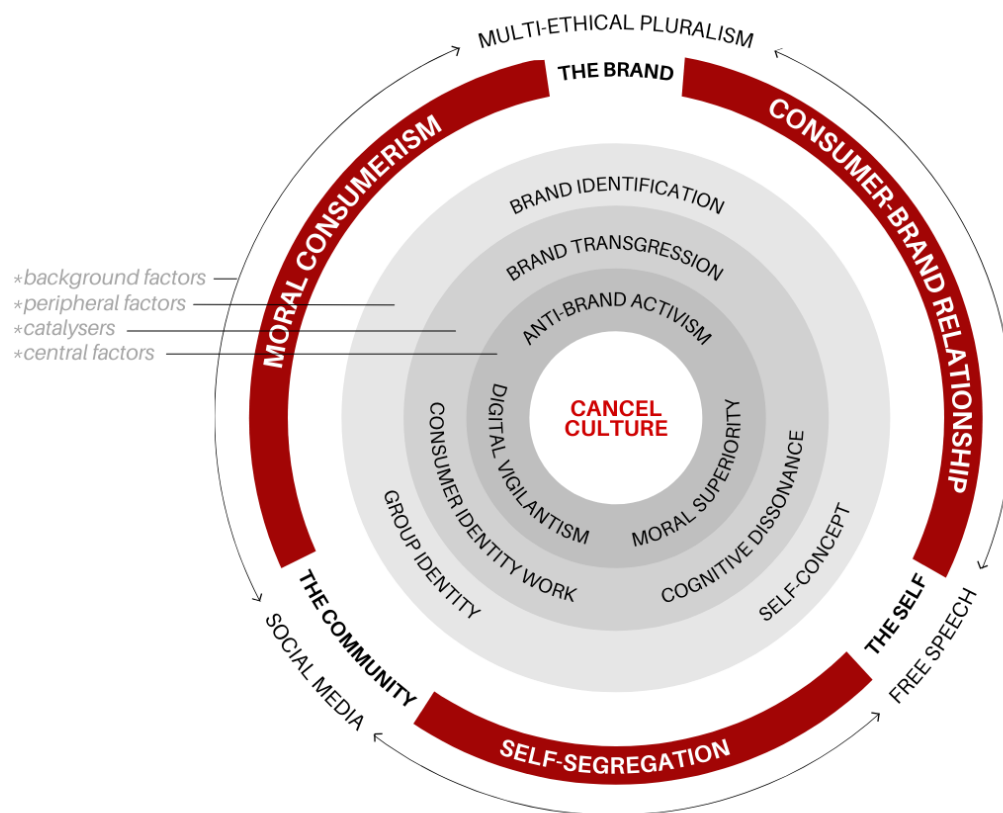


Image 1. Conceptual model based solely on literature.

In the scenario created by these factors, the interaction between brands and the community gives rise to moral consumerism, defined as the tendency to assign moral and political meaning to our consumption habits (Glickman, 2009). Secondly, the interaction between the brand and the self gives room for the development of a consumer-brand relationship (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Finally, the interaction between the self and the community gives rise to the tendency to believe that our morality is more valid than that of others, which causes individuals to judge their peers (Tappin & McKay, 2016). The forces of the sub-phenomena that take place on each of the axes The Brand, The Community, and The Self trigger different cancellation dynamics. These sub-phenomena occur in parallel, but the confluence of all of them is not necessary for cancellation to take place.

From the outside in, on the first ring we find the peripheral factors, which refer to the processes individuals take on to develop individual and groups identities and that are carried out unconsciously: (1) self-concept, defined as the image we have of ourselves in terms of our values and ideals (Swaminathan et al., 2007); (2) brand identification or feeling of belonging to a brand that one trusts and is loyal to (Tuškej et al., 2011); and (3) group identity or feeling of belonging to a community (Grubbs et al., 2019).

One level down are catalysers, understood as the factors that trigger the process of cancellation. They are: (1) brand transgression on the part of the brand (Sayin & Gürhan-Canli, 2015); cognitive dissonance, caused by a lack of alignment of our values with those of the brand (Nobi et al., 2021); and consumer identity work, defined as the process of assigning moral meaning to our purchases through which we associate ourselves with different groups and brands (Luedicke et al., 2009).

In the last ring we find the central factors, so called because they are the actions taken with the aim of cancelling the brands. They are: (1) anti-brand activism or the actions taken to reverse the individual-brand power relationship and protect community values (Romani et al., 2015); (2), digital vigilantism aimed at signalling brand misconduct (Loveluck, 2020); and (3) moral superiority, understood as the perception that our moral set is superior to the rest (Tappin and McKay, 2016).

3.6 Research paradigm

This study provides a model influenced by epistemological exploration and analysis of reality. The epistemological approach is the branch of the philosophy of knowledge that involves debates about what knowledge is, how it is obtained, and through what sources (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). This perspective within research focuses on how humans can know the world rather than how the world ultimately is (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), this approach also includes the opinions and assumptions of the researcher as well as how it is best to inquire about the reality being studied, which sets out the researchers' views and standpoints of what is relevant to the study.

Within the epistemological approach, this study has been carried out based on the Social Constructionism paradigm, embracing the philosophical doctrine of epistemological relativism, which holds the idea that our perception and beliefs about reality are constructed on the basis of historical, cultural, and individual circumstances (Gillett, 1998). Hoffman (1991) defines Social Constructionism as the postmodern movement that seeks to replace objectivism with a broader tradition of critical thinking in which all productions of the human mind are accommodated and accepted. The author argues that knowledge evolves as space and people do, as well as what they understand by the 'common world'. It is the ongoing conversations with individuals who experience this evolution that allow them to develop a voice and opinion about it (Hoffman, 1991). For this reason, Galbin (2014) defines Social Constructionism as the philosophical perspective that states that there are no universal true or false, right or wrong, but rather there are stories and points of view about what is true or false, right or wrong.

In summary, this research uses the epistemological paradigm of Social Constructionism because our starting point as researchers is that cancel culture is a phenomenon fundamentally driven by subjectivities, which we believe is the reason why there is a lack of explanation on the topic. It is also believed that it is a phenomenon that has arisen through the interaction of various factors and the confluence of certain historical, social, and cultural circumstances. Therefore, it is considered essential to discuss with individuals, and observe the way they participate and interact with the phenomenon so that their experiences and perspectives can provide a better and deeper understanding of cancel culture.

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1 Methods

This study uses qualitative methods. Van Maanen (1979) defines qualitative research as “an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (p. 520). The goal is to develop an understanding of how people construct meaning, that is, how they decode the world around them and give meaning to the experiences they live (Merriam, 2009). Our qualitative research method of choice was focus groups, which allowed us to explore cancel culture and its internal sub-phenomena by looking at the perspectives and experiences of a sample of consumers.

4.2 Sampling and participants

The selection of participants was carried out through *purposeful sampling*, also referred to as *purposive sampling* (Chein, 1981, as reported by Merriam, 2009). This type of sampling represents the most common type of sampling within the non-probabilistic sampling strategy, which is the primary strategy used within qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). It is based on the assumption that the “investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Furthermore, different kinds of purposeful sampling can be identified. For the purpose of this research, the *typical sample* was used as it “reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2009 p. 78).

In this research study, data were collected from students at Lund University, whose ages ranged from approximately 18 to 30 years old. The sample was grouped into three different focus groups of 5 to 6 individuals. An invitation to participate in our research was posted on the Facebook group "International Students in Lund" with a post that clearly stated the topic and purpose of the study. The reasons why we decided to focus on this social group are

numerous. First of all, as students ourselves at Lund University, it was easy to get in touch with other students. Second, and more importantly, the age group of the selected students is the right starting point for gaining a deeper understanding of cancel culture, as they are the most active generation on social media. Consequently, their perspective would be more comprehensive. Third, through their buying power, they represent the generation shaping consumer behaviour, and therefore their perspective is important to enable a better knowledge of the practical implications of cancel culture.

4.3 Data collection method and procedure

Our decision to implement focus groups came from the fact that they allow participants to have a natural conversation. Focus groups are effective because they tap into human tendencies, so interactions with others contribute to shaping impressions and attitudes about concepts, goods, or services (Krueger, 1994). By exchanging ideas among themselves, participants in focus groups can develop their opinions to a greater extent. As argued by Brinkmann and Kvale (2014), focus groups are predominant in consumer research as they enable the investigations of consumers' preferences and motives. Similarly, Krueger (1994) explains that "when questions are asked in a group environment [...], the results are candid portraits of consumer perception. The permissive group environment gives individuals licence to divulge emotions that often do not emerge in other forms of questioning" (p. 11). It can also be said that focus groups interviews are particularly suitable for explanatory studies within a new domain – such as cancel culture – as the "lively collective interaction may bring forth more spontaneous expressive and emotional views" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014, p. 176). However, participants might feel swayed by their peers' opinions and, as a result, be induced to provide similar responses (Krueger, 1994). The interviewers' role was thus essential in making everyone feel comfortable exchanging their personal views and in supervising the dialogue. Because the discussion can be challenging to manage in terms of time, the interviewers attempted to steer the conversation and keep it focused on the topic of research. Focus groups were also used in this study to fill a reality gap. Considering it may be too difficult to transfer the phenomena simulated in a theoretical model to the real world, a natural and open discussion with normal individuals allowed us to narrow the gap between reality and perfectly controlled experiences.

4.4 Implementation

Two focus groups were held in person on the 26th and 29th of March, while the third one was held online on the 28th of March. The reason why was related to the fact that one of the participants presented COVID-19 symptoms. In order not to put anyone at risk, we decided to conduct the focus group on Zoom. The discussions lasted roughly ninety minutes, and they were recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission. Prior to starting, the researchers held a casual conversation with the participants so as to create an easy environment where the participants could feel comfortable in sharing their personal opinions and thoughts. The study's objectives were explained to each participant to guarantee that they were well aware about the research topic. In addition, prior to the commencing of the interview recording, it was ensured that the consent form (see appendix 1) had been read and signed.

4.5 Data collection instrument

The necessary data were gathered through a questionnaire (see appendix 2). In structuring the questionnaire, three main sections were outlined: consumer-brand relationship within cancel culture, ethics and morality in the process of cancelling, and participation in cancel culture. For each of these sections, a set of questions was developed in order to investigate in depth what drives people to cancel a brand, which factors are at play, and which are not relevant. When designing the questionnaire, possible follow-up questions were also taken into account for the sake of clarification. This type of questions are essential to “get more depth and understanding about an idea, a concept, a theme, an event or an issue suggested by the interviewees”, while at the same time to “obtain nuanced answers when the initial response is too general, simplistic, or dogmatic” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 173).

4.6 Data analysis plan

Once the data were collected, their analysis started off by the examination of the interview transcripts. Data analysis is a fundamental part of research as it allows researchers to make sense of the data collected around the studied phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). In order to do so, the data were analysed by the model presented above. That is, the interpretation of the

discussions carried out in the focus groups was driven by the theoretical assumptions drawn from the model. As the provided model presents theoretical concepts – based on past literature – that are difficult to understand, the notions and ideas presented in the focus groups were rather self-explanatory concepts that could be understood without a background on cancel culture and its related phenomena.

4.7 Validity and reliability

For this research to be effective both on a theoretical and practical level, it was necessary to ensure its accurate conduction. Therefore, the principles of validity and reliability were adopted. By paying close attention to how a study is conceptualised and how the data are collected, analysed, interpreted, and the way in which results are presented, validity and reliability can be enhanced (Merriam, 2009). Validity refers to the credibility and congruence between research results and reality, i.e., how well they coincide in capturing the reality of things (Merriam, 2009).

In order to increase the credibility of the findings, several strategies can be employed. To reinforce validity, the present research applied *triangulation* strategy. According to Denzin (1978), four types of triangulation can be used: multiple investigators, multiple methods, multiple sources of data, and multiple theories to legitimise the findings. Investigators triangulation was adopted in this study, as multiple researchers collected and analysed the data. In addition, triangulation of different data sources was also used, as data were collected through various focus groups where different perspectives emerged (Merriam, 2009).

On the other hand, Merriam (2009) defines reliability as the “extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p. 220), holding to the assumption that if the study were to be repeated, the same results would appear since there is just one single reality to refer to. However, within the realm of Social Sciences reliability may be problematic as human behaviour is never constant and unchanging, nor is reality (Merriam, 2009). Given that in qualitative research the aim of researchers is to give interpretations of how individuals experience the world, these interpretations can be multiple and subjective, thus causing a lack of clear guidelines for establishing the reliability principle in the traditional sense (Merriam, 2009). What is essential to understand within qualitative research is if the results and the data collected are consistent with one another, as explained by Merriam (2009). The author

specifies that “rather than demanding that outsiders get the same results, a researcher wishes outsiders to concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense — they are consistent and dependable” (p. 221). To do so, *the triangulation* strategy discussed above was applied, which is a valuable method to ensure not only validity, but also reliability (Merriam, 2009).

4.8 Reflexivity and ethical considerations

Validity and reliability can also be secured through *reflexivity* (Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (2000) describe reflexivity as the “process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’” (p. 183), where the researchers’ intentions, biases, and inclinations are considered. As researchers, we should emphasise that our choice to focus on cancel culture was informed by our deep interest in the phenomenon, as well as the fact that we are exposed to it regularly on social media. This strong interest in cancel culture translates into solid views regarding how we believe cancel culture works, which may have influenced our approach. In addition, as a result of our desire to gain a deeper understanding of the communicative dimension and implications of Strategic Communication, both of us are critical of the phenomenon. To the extent possible, these views were kept at bay in order to collect and analyse data in a neutral manner. As such, we want to clarify our biases, perspectives, and beliefs to the reader not to reduce the “*variance* between researchers in values and expectations they bring to the study, but with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108).

Validity and reliability are also undergone to the ethics of the researchers (Merriam, 2009). As explained by Merriam (2009), “in qualitative studies, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings” (p. 230). As to reduce any discomfort, we guaranteed anonymity to all the participants, and we provided them with a consent form (see appendix 1). Being aware that cancel culture can be a controversial topic where the boundaries between right and wrong, legitimacy and invalidity can be subtle and subjective for each participant, we did not influence their opinions in any way. We ensured this by creating a non-judgmental environment where all participants felt comfortable and could freely express their honest beliefs and ideas. Furthermore, it was noted

that the data collected was strictly for academic purposes, and as such, no information was disclosed to third parties.

Chapter 5. Results

Using the above model, based on previous literature, three focus groups were conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of cancel culture, which is the purpose of this study. Before proceeding, it is important to note that the individual personalities of the participants play a significant role in this study, since they greatly influence the individuals. Our objectives were: (1) to expose the model to the subjectivities of consumers in order to check its congruence; and (2) to enrich it from a realistic and pragmatic perspective. As explained in the previous chapter, this section is organised in the same three sections as the preliminary theoretical model, which comprises (1) the brand, (2) the community, and (3) the self. The choice of this division also corresponds to the different sections in which the literature review is organised.

Participants are assigned a number and a letter, as it can be seen below. Numbers correspond to subject order within a focus group and were assigned based on when the subject entered the interview in relation to the other participants. Letters correspond to the focus group a subject participated in, so that focus group 1 is A, focus group 2 is B, and focus group 3 is C.

5.1 The brand

5.1.1 Consumer's priorities

Participants highlighted different aspects when discussing what they value most in a brand. Participants 3A, 3C, and 4C discussed the aesthetic of a brand as an important aspect, while participant 4A and participant 5B stressed the importance of its affordability. The majority of participants put emphasis on the main values that a brand embodies. For example, transparency was identified as a fundamental value. Participant 3B explained that it is essential for a brand to be transparent regarding its business processes, its supply chain, and the governance within that company. For participant 1B, transparency goes hand in hand with honesty, as a brand needs to demonstrate that its claims are not dictated only by profit-seeking motives. This participant explained that

There are lots of brands, who pretend to be something else. And you know, people say like ‘I really care about sustainability and inclusion and equality’ and then brands kind of jump on that train. So, I think for me, it’s really important that a brand is actually able to prove their values.

Another value that was often mentioned was inclusivity. Different participants stated that one of the aspects they appreciate the most in a brand (specifically fashion brands) is when the brand is inclusive in terms of body positivity (i.e., sizes) – as stated by participant 4B –, and in terms of age and gender – as asserted by participant 2C. Integrity in a brand's conduct was also considered crucial for consumers to value a brand.

Nearly all of the participants (14 out of 15) mentioned that an important aspect they prioritise is the ethical and moral dispositions of the brand in sustainability, social, equality and labour law matters. For instance, participant 4C affirmed that he appreciates brands that try to make an impact by being outspoken and by taking a stance about “hot and important” aspects for society, such as “sustainability and environmental-friendly practices [...], but also LGBTQ+ rights or racial equality”. Likewise, participant 2A highlighted how crucial it is that a brand shows that it cares through the actions it takes. In the same focus group, participant 3A pointed out how valuable it is for a brand to be vocal about their actions, as for her “it says much about a brand if you can easily tell what they stand for, or what their stance on certain issues is or not. So, if they’re vocal about it, that’s something I want”.

The only participant who did not mention social or environmental aspects was participant 1A. Instead, he focused on brand reputation as a key aspect to appreciate a brand. He explained that he perceives reputation in three ways: “reputation through word of mouth, reputation through how others perceive the brand, and that’s influenced by the brand’s external actions, and reputation through personal experience with the brand”. Participant 2A agreed with this, highlighting that she values how a brand is perceived by others. This was also mentioned by participant 4C.

5.1.2. Consumer-brand identification

The focus groups provided interesting results when discussing whether participants identify with the brands they purchase. More than half of the participants asserted that they do identify with the brands they purchase. The results suggest that consumer-brand identification

takes place thanks to the alignment of the brand's values with the consumer's as explained by participant 3A, who stated that "it is about a brand I can relate to, [...] a brand I get an idea of what it stands for. Those values are the things that I would say I feel connected to and feel like I identify with". Participant 4A agreed to this adding that she needs to "imagine myself buying the products, like feeling that they are approaching me in a way. So, like I see that they represent my values, trusting them to do so". In the same way, participant 2B explained that she identifies with those brands who share and promote the same values as her because that makes them relatable and trustworthy.

When talking about the factors that lead to consumer identification with the brand, participant 4C mentioned an aspect that had not been mentioned before. Firstly, in referring to fashion brands, he remarked that a brand's country of origin represents an important aspect, as wearing a brand from a specific country is a "piece statement" that reinforces his social and national identity – something participant 5C agreed to. Secondly, participant 4C argued that he identifies with brands that provide him valuable experience and status: "I would rather buy products from Apple than from Android because I associate with my own good experience with it but also just the status. [...] Then in a way I identify with this brand". When talking about the status, this participant interestingly pointed out that he identifies with brands he considers high-quality since they allow him to present himself with a certain image and associate himself with a specific social group. That is, he claimed to identify with brands not because of the values he and a brand may share, but because of what the brand offers in terms of social status. Participant 4C further explained that he wants to "buy Apple because then it's like I present myself in a certain way through it and associate with the same kind of people who have Apple as well". The fact that by purchasing a specific brand one can display a certain self-image to others was also emphasised as an important factor when choosing a brand by participant 1C. However, for this participant consumer-brand identification is still linked to brand values as well as the lifestyle portrayed by that brand. She stated that

It's about how you see that brand and its values and lifestyle lining up with your own image right? Like, I'm super into yoga and I'm environmentally conscious and I love this yoga brand that believes in the same thing as I do. So, to wear this brand it's like I say 'hey look at me' I wear this because that's the lifestyle I wanna show the others I have.

Thus, this participant identifies with a brand that shares the same values as her while at the same time allows her to show a particular lifestyle and image.

A good portion of the participants suggested that they do not necessarily identify with brands, but rather look at a brand for what it has to offer. It appeared that they focus on the tangible assets of the brand, such as quality. For instance, participant 1A assured that he chooses brands not because he identifies with their values or actions, but instead because of “the quality that you kind of get ascribed to it”. Likewise, participant 3C stated that what is important when choosing a brand is not the feeling of identification with the brand, but the confidence in the quality of its products or services. The participant considered this to be closely related to her need to buy and her disposable income. She argued:

I don't identify with brands especially at this stage of my life. I feel like I don't have that much money to spend, I'm a very functional person so I look at the best value for money and if I really need it, because I'm trying not to buy that much like I don't I just don't think I'm like that attached to brands. [...] I do think that has to do with quality and like trust, but trust in a brand that it's like a good quality product.

Economic capabilities were also highlighted by participant 4B, who stated that she does not particularly care about brand values when she has to buy a product. Thus, when she is in need of something, she prioritises the tangible elements of the brand. She explained this by stating

It's something I don't think about or don't even care honestly. If I need something good, great I'm gonna go for that brand because it's cheap and nice enough. Unfortunately, by being a student, I can't afford to be picky or to consider aspects that maybe if I'd have more money I would, I don't know.

Participant 5B brought up another interesting aspect of why consumers do not identify with brands. This participant talked about the fact that in the ultra-capitalist society we live in, the goal of brands is to create profits by selling as much as they can. To do this, they rely on emotional marketing with messages that are purposely marketed to attract consumers, but which the participant does not believe to be authentic. He pointed out that “everybody is literally posting about LGBTQ+ rights or sustainability because that's what is hot right now. So, at that point, you don't even know how to differentiate that, especially because you can't verify what they're actually talking about”. In this context, the participant assured he mistrusts the brand, which hinders his identification: “you identify with a brand because of its

ethics or values, but how can you trust the authenticity of that? I can't identify with that, I can't trust them".

5.1.3 Brand betrayal

Participants expressed different emotions and reasons why they would feel betrayed by a brand they value. The most common reason why participants feel betrayed is that they perceive a lack of honesty on the part of the brand, which undermines their trust in it. Participants indicated that they could not bypass the lies told by a brand especially concerning social and environmental practices. For instance, participant 3A affirmed "I can't stand when a brand proclaims itself to be environmentally friendly, and then turns out they are actually doing greenwashing. It's so disappointing". Similarly, participant 2B further explained that "a company doesn't have to be sustainable necessarily, but they need to be transparent about not being sustainable. Because if they're lying about it, somehow in my eyes, that's worse". Other participants mentioned greenwashing as well as pinkwashing, as participant 5A suggesting that that is where he "draws the line".

Another common reason that breaks participants' trust in brands is the use of child labour, as said by participant 5A, 2B, and 3B. In particular, participant 2B clarified that it is not only about the practice itself, which is already "horrendous and unacceptable", but it is the fact that "these brands are very much for like gender equality and inclusivity, while they're still producing a lot of their clothes in cheap production countries that are exploiting women and children". In addition, participants commented on feeling betrayed when a brand they valued has attacked a social group to which they feel they belong. In this regard, participant 2C cited brands that "shame women" and are "fatphobic".

Participant 1A brought up a reason for non-identification not mentioned in other focus groups. This participant explained that, being aware of the highly capitalist society we live in, he recognises the impossibility of a brand being completely sustainable or ethical. Thus, according to him, brands break their trust when they adopt political stances that go against their beliefs. He stated that "the tolerance of the average consumer is rather high considering there's allegations of child labour across all major brands, so I don't know where people draw the line. But for me it is about geopolitical issues".

All of the above actions lead participants to feel strong negative emotions towards a brand that breaks their trust. Participants reported feeling disappointment, disgust, aversion, anger and indignation that "brands have been playing with them, insulting their values and making them feel stupid" just to make more profit, as participant 4A shared. For some participants, these strong negative feelings translate into action that fall within the realm of cancel culture, such as brand avoidance, boycotting, and negative WOM. Moreover, it was suggested that these feelings and actions intensify when participants have invested a lot of time and money in the brand that betrayed them. Participant 5C pointed out that "if I consciously decide on spending more money because I feel like it has a better environmental or social impact, and then I found out the contrary, I feel worse. I feel betrayed and I would easily cancel because of that".

The majority of the participants reported that the desire to cancel a brand is much stronger when they have an attachment with it. Participant 2A indicated how she would cancel any brand, but she would go further in the cancellation for brands she values the most: "I'll cancel everything... I think it doesn't matter if I like the brand. But if it's a brand I care about, then I guess I have a stronger reaction and I am more active". This perspective was also shared by participants 1A and 5A. As part of a similar sentiment, participant 4C stated that it is easier to not engage in the cancellation of a brand with which they have no habit. Participant 1C also stated that during her experience in customer service, people with a stronger attachment to a brand were the ones who showed more negative emotions and took harsher actions. On the contrary, participant 3A believes it is "easier" to cancel a brand one is not related to.

5.2 The community

5.2.1 Self-segregation and peer pressure

Most of the participants, except for two – participants 1A and 5B – highlighted that peer pressure is a factor that significantly influences their decisions when it comes to following, choosing, rejecting, and/or cancelling brands. When talking about following certain brands, participant 4C explained that "what he sees around him" in terms of the brands that the people he interacts with regularly use largely determines his consumer behaviours to a high extent. When talking about cancelling brands, this participant further highlighted that he would cancel the brands that his social circle cancels: "I'm actually sheep in this. I know that

if everyone around me would cancel a certain brand, I would do it as well because then I would find valid the reason that they give”. On a similar note, participant 5A explained that he “has made decisions based on the decisions his friends have made” regarding brands they have neglected.

It was observed that participants justified this social pressure with the fact that their values align with those of the people they accept the influence from. This refers to the feeling of belonging to the group. In this context, participant 4C said that “peer pressure beats values. It’s an interplay between the two because let’s say the opinion of my peers goes against my values. Then I guess I wouldn’t do it. But in general, it aligns”. This refers to self-segregation and the human tendency to choose the people we relate to, both online and offline, based on our values. In this regard, participant 2C, takes peer pressure for granted, saying: “If I am doing something, then I would look at my peers and expect them to do the same”. These results suggest that peer pressure works both ways: consumers both exert and receive it both when cancelling brands and when deciding not to cancel them.

With regard to peer pressure, participant 3A explained that she is only interested in cancellations when they become a big issue either on social media or in the news. She explains that this is due to a fear of being left behind and not being aware of what she refers to as the “big discussion”. Participant 2B said that she receives this influence from both social media and her offline social circle, which is also confirmed by participant 3B in the same focus group:

To me, it matters when people tell me they are cancelling. I don’t do all the research myself. I basically do it when someone in my network both online or offline does it. Something can be fake news, but something can also really be reaching me or not. So, for sure, other people are influencing me and influencing others, especially if they have a huge reach on social media platforms.

This is also confirmed by participant 4C:

You don’t want to be the odd one out when it comes to cancelling. You want to be part of the people that cancel basically because if you don’t cancel as well, and if you don’t stand up for it, you’ll be part of them [the cancelled target] basically.

Negative feelings concerning group belonging were observed among some of the participants. One of them is participant 3C, who said that she does not feel that she belongs to

any group. However, she changed her mind when another participant, 2C in the same focus group, suggested feminist women as a social group to which she could potentially feel attached. Participant 1C shared that a strong feeling of belonging to the group would provoke the rejection of a certain brand to be stronger if that brand undermines the values of the group she belongs to. When talking about the cancellation of Victoria's Secret, she said bluntly that she "would never buy from that company again [...] because of the things that this guy [the now former chief marketing officer, Ed Razek] says".

5.2.2 Motivations behind social media activism and cancel culture

Participants expressed that they tend to share and justify their opinions on certain issues within their circle of influence, both online and offline. Participant 5B confirmed this by saying: "I try to influence some people for them to say: 'I made the wrong decision'". To this respect, participant 4B underlined the importance of sharing one's position and opinions with one's circle on social media: "you can reach more people, even the ones that are not your friends. [...] So, you don't have the occasional opportunity to get in touch with them and express your opinion".

Regarding participation in social media activism, some participants stated they do take part in it, while others assured they do not because they find it useless. Participants discussed users' intentions when taking part in social media activism, which is understood among them as the acts of publishing or sharing online content about social or political matters. One of the most widely shared stances among the three focus groups was that the intention of social media activists is primarily to inform one's network. Participant 2A suggested that she feels that "it is worth sharing information because it can be useful to someone else".

In general, participants expressed positive feelings towards social media activism and reported associating it with motivations that pursue a greater good. Participant 2B explained that social media activism "can change people's opinions and values", but noted that she perceives that much of today's activism is more about creating an identity – online and offline – rather than trying to make a real change. This participant explained that she believes that

It's more about your personal brand. [...] It's just for you to kind of make sure people see you as a good person, [and that defeats] the purpose of the whole thing because

then it is just for people to show that they support [a] movement and they're good people.

This has to do with individual identity, one's self-concept, and moral superiority.

When discussing possible motivations for consumer and user participation in the cancellation culture, the general perception among participants was that it seeks to raise awareness among peers, to put the spotlight on social and political injustices, and to reduce companies' benefit in order to cease their unethical activities. It was also underlined that cancel culture is a way to send a warning signal to brands in order to gain their attention. Participant 4C defined cancellation "as a punishment from the victims [consumers]" towards the brand for having misbehaved.

Participant 4A explained that cancel culture, in this sense, is a tool for levelling "the uneven playing field" between corporations and consumers. "Social media has played a role in terms of levelling the playing field between the monopoly that corporations have in crafting their image and selling the image they want to the public", he argued. Likewise, participant 3B expressed a similar opinion by saying that cancel culture "can make changes in the world". Participant 4C shared a similar opinion and suggested that cancel culture is useful in terms of

Establishing change [...] because otherwise, if you don't do it [participate in cancel culture], then these companies can just continue to practise this. So yeah, maybe it has high costs, and people will lose their jobs. But if you don't do it, they will just continue.

This same participant added:

If we have certain norms within a society, I think the company should adhere to those, but because the law doesn't cover it, companies can still show such behaviour. But through cancel culture that can be punished. And that's how you guide [them] in certain directions. And it sets limits and indeed changes norms.

Participant 2C in the same focus group commented that this is why it is so important to listen to minorities because, as she explained, "otherwise, they will always be minorities". The participant explained that it is understandable that targeted groups are upset about transgressions of their values, adding that "You have to be an ally for any change".

5.2.3 Consumer identity work and digital vigilantism

When discussing brand attachment, it was said that belonging to the group of consumers of a certain brand was equivalent to belonging to a social group. Some participants showed a tendency to judge other consumer groups that are part of the competition of the brand they follow. All three focus groups discussed the tech market and the ‘rivalry’ between buyers of a certain brand and the competitors. More specifically, in all three focus groups it was mentioned that the choice of one brand or another defines you as a consumer and even as a person. For example, participant 4C indicated that he associates Apple with quality and that this serves as a yardstick by which he judges other consumers:

When I interact with a new person, and I see that that person has Android again, I don’t want to judge but it’s just something that you see. [...] Of course, you’re generalising here. But certain people buy Android because they care less about technology, they want to save more money. But when you see people that buy [brand name], you associate that with growth, professionalism.

As a result of their consumption habits, consumers construct an identity according to which they judge other consumers.

When delving deeper into the issue of judgmentalism, participants expressed a generalised fear of being judged by others for not cancelling a brand that is being massively cancelled. Participant 4C explained that the cognitive dissonance produced by the lack of alignment between his values and those of a brand he follows leads to personal dissatisfaction. However, he stated that the cancellation would only be caused by the fear of being judged for not taking sides. He argued it is a “weight that you don’t want to carry. [...] The price you pay then [for not cancelling] is high, being scrutinised is a high embarrassment”.

Focus groups B and C discussed the act of shaming others for their behaviour, something intrinsically linked to digital vigilantism and doxing. Participant 1B said that she tries to “inform people” in a “softer way”. For example, ‘Oh, maybe you should not shop there three times a week’. [...] Trying a different angle. Because I think [...] trying to influence people or shame people doesn’t really work”. Although negative views were expressed regarding the act of shaming others, participants suggested that it is permissible to try to influence others’ opinions regarding brands. On this same topic, participant 2C asserted that in her opinion cancel culture becomes toxic when shame and blame are directed at other consumers:

“[T]here’s a spectrum of where’s the shame being directed to? Is it directed to the company or to each other?”.

Participants noted a generalised behaviour of signalling others when discussing the confrontational environment on social media. Participant 2C compared cancel culture to a test that social media users undergo to determine whether they are allies of certain causes. Digital vigilantism and virtue signalling are examples of this. A general rejection of this attitude on social media among participants was observed.

High levels of empathy towards other consumers were observed among participants. Several of them reported, firstly, a desire to provide others with information that could be useful to them through social media activism. Second, they reported feeling that other consumers are in an unfair and unequal situation, similar to their own and towards brands. Thirdly, they said they did not intend to shame other consumers for their behaviour, but to direct that discomfort towards brands and organisations.

5.3 The self

5.3.1 Moral superiority behind cancel culture

When discussing questions regarding the ethicality of the act of cancelling brands, participants debated issues that would cause them to reject a certain brand individually. Participants generally expressed that the same issues they see as compelling reasons to cancel a particular brand should be issues that everyone should care about. Feelings of astonishment and bewilderment were expressed among the participants when they talked about other consumers not paying attention to matters that are extremely important to them individually. Speaking about the lack of representation and diversity in brands, participant 4A explained:

I find it very shocking that other people don’t notice it. And I get really [upset] and I try to tell people ‘hey, have you noticed this?’. Because I think it’s something that everyone should be concerned about, [...] at least think about it and position yourself in some way?

When discussing fast fashion and its impact on the environment, participant 2A in the same focus group said:

When it comes to fast fashion, I lose my [...] mind. People who just buy stuff just to buy it... They're not even in need of a pair of jeans or something and they buy it from somewhere that's considered unethical. That really makes me upset. And I'm just like, you should really care more about what you're doing and what you're spending your money on.

In general, negative feelings, such as anger and indignation, were observed when participants were asked how they felt when people around them did not care about the social, environmental or political issues that were important to them. Participants reported becoming defensive when their values, opinions, or ethical stances are questioned or criticised. The results from focus group B suggest that individuals tend to react negatively and even aggressively when they risk being perceived as a "bad person". Participant 1B justified this as a reason not to participate in the cancellation culture by attacking other consumers:

There's a very fine line between asking nicely, trying to inform others about problems with brands, and being preachy about it. People can get quite defensive about these things, especially if they feel like they're being attacked for not being a good person or not making ethical choices, then it [talking about sensitive topics] can really work against you.

In this regard, in focus group A participants discussed why individuals continue in this tendency to express their opinions and defend them as unique and true, even when this means branding others as immoral and transgressive. Participant 4B affirmed bluntly: "It never happened to me that I tried to convince someone else about cancelling and brand. But if I was maybe convinced of something, then maybe I would definitely do it". Participant 1B in this same focus group identified this behaviour as a mean to reaffirm one's values:

I guess you gotta stay true to yourself and what you value as an individual. So, if you feel so much so empowered, or so inclined to express your displeasure with a company, then that's well within your right, because it's what you stand for as a consumer.

Participant 3B added that it is also paramount to spread the word in one's circle, which refers to the concept of peer pressure discussed above:

I think it would be important to participate, to talk to friends about it, especially if they are very supportive of that brand. [...] Then I think it's just fashion to have with

people you engage with, but I don't think it necessarily has to be public on social media.

In a similar discussion in focus group C, participant 4 argued that cancel culture consists basically of reaffirming your values by rejecting a brand or corporation that has undermined them: the people that cancel “don't attack the company or the people [...], they are mostly attacking the idea of what the company stands for”. These reflections show a clear tendency to express one's opinion to others on the assumption that it is the right one.

5.3.2 Hypocrisy

During the focus groups, some of the participants noted that they tried to convince the people around them to do what they thought was right. This led some of them to realise that their behaviour as consumers is sometimes hypocritical. When talking about the ethical transgressions of the company Apple, participant 3C acknowledged not being true to their values:

Apple has done a lot of bad things that I'm aware of. And I've read about it, and yet I don't cancel them because I like the product. So, I would say I'm very angry in the sense, but I'm being a hypocrite. Like, I know all these things, but then I forget about them. [...] Next time I might try to buy another phone. But you know, probably not.

When discussing this same example in focus group A, participant 5 noted that consumers are generally hypocritical:

Exploitation and cheap labour is part of the course in a lot of cases. Because a lot of people know, iPhone users know that Chinese workers try to commit suicide in these factories. But at the same time, people still buy it because they don't throw themselves off a six-floor building and make a profit out of it. As long as they were on the good side of things, it was fine.

To this, participant 2A: “I care about all the people committing suicide, but then you have the iPhone 13 Pro Max”.

On a similar note, but talking about sustainability and the environment, participant 3B claimed that she rejects certain brands that transgress her values but acknowledges not

making all the possible efforts so as to be the most sustainable she could be: “I wouldn’t shop at H&M again but, at the same time, I sometimes buy clothes from Patagonia which at the moment is quite a sustainable brand but of course not as sustainable as it could be”. In this regard, participant 5B in the same focus group noted: “There is always a kind of boundary between doing something that is valuable and doing something that gives you something in return”, referring to the fact that consumers ultimately seek to obtain an individual benefit from the transaction. This suggests that there is a gap between one’s individual values, which define our identity, and the actions one takes in public life.

5.3.3 Ethicality and effectiveness of cancel culture

Some of the participants showed a sense of distrust towards brands, as well as very low expectations of what to expect from them. Participant 2C expressed this by saying that she “would find it hard to believe any kind of apology” from a brand after witnessing its transgression. In a similar note, participant 2B noted that if one were to be very strict with one’s values, one would have to cancel all brands, thus referring to the fact that they all engage in unethical behaviour: “I think then you can cancel every company... So, it’s also about what I need as a customer”.

This has to do with the way consumers are informed about brand misconduct and cancellations, a theme that was discussed in all three focus groups. Participant 3C said she thinks people cancel brands “because they see other people cancel [them], and they want to be with those who cancel. And maybe it’s less about the consequences of what they want for the brand and more about being on the right side of history”. This view is shared by participant 3A, who associated this lack of information with the speed with which debates heat up and pervert on social media:

I think that’s part of social media, because it’s so fast. [...] There’s so much inflammation. Maybe you read it and you’re like, oh, yeah, I agree. And then you might like it or forward it or whatever without doing much more research. But there’s usually not a lot of information. Just a few sentences on the topic. And you say ‘I agree’, and then you say ‘repost’ without doing much more research.

Participant 4A shared this opinion and added that “it is very easy for negative information to spread without people stopping to think about it too much, and I include myself”.

When participants were asked directly what their first reaction is when there is a cancellation on social media, a representative part of them stated that they tend to fact-check the information to check whether it is true or not. Even so, most of them affirmed that their first reaction is to believe it is true. This is due, first, to peer pressure, and second, to a general feeling of distrust towards brands. Participant 4A explained: “I would like to say that I am impartial and I say okay, well, we will have to see what happens. But no, [...] I believe it most of the time”. Participant 5A stated that “Most of the time, there’s a reason behind it” and that, when a brand is cancelled, “they definitely did something to deserve [it]”.

5.4 Barriers to cancel culture

During the discussion on the factors that trigger the cancellation of brands, participants also pointed to factors that could prevent cancellation. The results suggest that these factors are interrelated.

5.4.1 Necessity

The first one is *necessity*. When discussing the most important factors for purchasing certain brands, a representative part of the participants mentioned *the need* as one of the most important factors. As the results suggest, consumers because they have a need, which motivates purchasing decisions that are not necessarily linked to their values. This necessity serves as justification and relief when the consumer buys from a brand that has betrayed its values or ethical standards. On this matter, participant 3C affirmed “I know this brand produces its clothes in horrible conditions and uses slave labour. And I bought a new pair of their jeans because I was like, I need this, this is a quality product and will last me a lifetime”. Although the participant is aware of the brand misconduct, the need for that product along with the functionality, aesthetic, and trust in the quality of the brand, pushes the participant to put her ethical stances aside. Participant 3B confirmed this by saying: “I think then you can override every company... but it’s also about what I need as a customer”.

5.4.2 Alternatives

Necessity is closely linked to the second factor, *alternatives*, which was acknowledged to be an obstacle to cancelling a brand. From the discussions, it appeared how consumers are more prone to cancel brands when there are more alternatives available. Participant 1C stated “I think the availability of alternatives is really important, like to some companies, I don’t want to buy from them, but there’s nothing else there. So, then you don’t really have a choice, but to actively repurchase it”. Participant 3B shared a similar opinion and stated: “Sometimes, as a customer, I go back to buy because I need a product and I can’t find it anywhere else. [The] alternatives play a very important role in whether or not to cancel”.

Participants suggested that the availability of alternatives depends on the sector of the market. For instance, some participants indicated that when it comes to fashion brands, it is somehow easier to cancel as there are more options available, such as second hand shopping. When it comes to food retail instead, participants considered it “harder” to switch brands, as they find it difficult or too tedious to look for satisfactory alternatives with more ethical production practices than the brand they used to buy.

When discussing the brand Oatly, which has been massively cancelled during the last two years, participant 1B, who is a regular consumer, said:

I love it. I think it’s the best brand in terms of vegan dairy products. And now you realise it’s not that good. But then I don’t know if the other brand is really better. And then I don’t do my own research. So I keep buying the same product. [...] I think, as consumers, we’re like, overwhelmed with the products and the brands that are out there. And I think it’s, you know, like, brands that are sustainable. Are they really sustainable?.

5.4.3 Habits

The choice to use an alternative brand is closely related to consumers’ *habits*, which is also a reason why they would prevent the cancellation of a brand. Participant 4B suggested that sticking to the same brand you are used to is “easier”, something that was confirmed by participant 2B, who stated:

I think it's easier to stop using a product that you haven't been using for such a long time. Whereas with many of these brands that are doing really awful things like you've been using it for such a long time, that it's kind of a habit, and it's very hard to break that cycle, even though you know, it's not good to use that brand anymore.

When discussing Oatly in focus group B, participant 2 said:

It was the first one of those vegan alternatives. And well, now it's not getting such good publicity anymore. And I'm not entirely sure how good they are, and if I should still be using their products, but it was the first one I started with. So there's this habit of buying their products, even though other products are good. But it's much easier for me to like when I go shopping to keep buying because I know it's gonna be a good alternative, instead of buying something new.

The results suggest that the fact of being used to buying a particular brand is often a matter of convenience and not necessarily due to a strong attachment to the brand. For instance, in focus group B, the participants emphasised that the reason why they continue to buy a certain brand despite its misconduct is because it is more practical. Participant 1B said:

There's like a war and a pandemic, and there's just so much negative stuff going on. For me at least at one point. I'm like, I don't have the time and the capacity to think about it now, so I know it's a good product, so I just stick with it because I know it's easier.

5.4.4 Brand stickiness

Habits, as well as alternatives, go hand in hand with a factor that can be defined as *brand stickiness*. A brand is considered sticky when it succeeds in monopolising the market, a goal it achieves when it makes consumers resonate with it and perceive it as the best and highest quality in the industry. By being memorable in these terms, the brand in question gets the attention of a large part of the market. This brand influence causes consumers to not even conceive that other brands can be of equal or even better quality, because they understand that the quality standards are covered by this sticky brand. This makes it difficult or unappetising for consumers to switch to another brand.

In particular, the participants believe this is the case with the so-called tech giants, as participant 1C indicated: "it's so hard to switch to something else, because they've

completely monopolised the system. You're locked in, you cannot do the same if you always had that brand as a phone, like, it's super hard to switch to something else". The stickiness as a barrier to cancelling a brand was also discussed in focus group A, where participant 2 explained that certain tech brands have created a whole lifestyle and prototype for consumers, impacting the entire society. Sticky brands can alienate themselves from criticism due to their influence. They become dominant despite their known negative practices. Individuals still choose them because they know that by buying them, they acquire a certain image. This was asserted by participant 4C. Further, participant 5A explained that "It's about how sticky products are [...]. They have like a moat in the sense that once you start entering into that brand, it's very hard to leave because you have all these other features and gadgets connected to that".

5.4.5 Economic capabilities

In considering the different barriers to cancel culture, the most important factor appears to be the one of *economic capabilities*, as highlighted in all the different focus groups. That is, being all students, the participants have limited purchasing power, which influences the choice of cancelling or not a brand. Participant 4B explained that

It's more convenient in terms of money. And maybe you don't have that much economic availability. So, there is also no choice. At the end, [...] it's like putting on a balance and having to see what is best for you in terms of your resources and in terms of your values. But it cannot be just values because sometimes it's not affordable for you.

On a similar note, participant 5B pointed out a similar view by stating "the only thing is that I do really think here money is what plays the biggest part [...]. If I have to cancel or not a brand, it is all about money and the availability of it that I can access". Furthermore, he suggested that ethical values and practices are indeed important, but at the same time they have led to a significant price increase which cuts out part of the potential market base due to budget reasons. Thus, according to this participant the possibility for consumers to cancel a brand highly depends on how affordable the alternative product is that satisfies their needs and preferences. He believes that the less affordable the alternative is, the less likely a customer will cancel a brand.

Chapter 6. Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to delve into a theoretical formulation of cancel culture targeting brands. With this intention, a theoretical model was developed that encapsulates the variety and complexity of the sub-phenomena taking part in it. The most relevant finding made in this theorisation is that two antagonistic dynamics are at play in cancel culture. First, there is an initial driving force that pushes consumers to cancel brands, which manifests as three different cancellation dynamics: (1) the transgression of the brand; (2) community pressure; and/or (3) one's own inclination to be morally virtuous. Each of these cancellation dynamics can potentially happen parallel to one or both of the other two dynamics. It is important to note that it is not strictly necessary for this to occur for cancellation to take place. Likewise, in each of these cancellation dynamics, various sub-phenomena take place. On the one hand, it is found that there is another antagonistic force preventing individuals from cancelling a brand despite the fact that theoretically, the necessary conditions for this to occur are met. This fourth dynamic encompasses the reasons why individuals avoid the decision to cancel the brand.

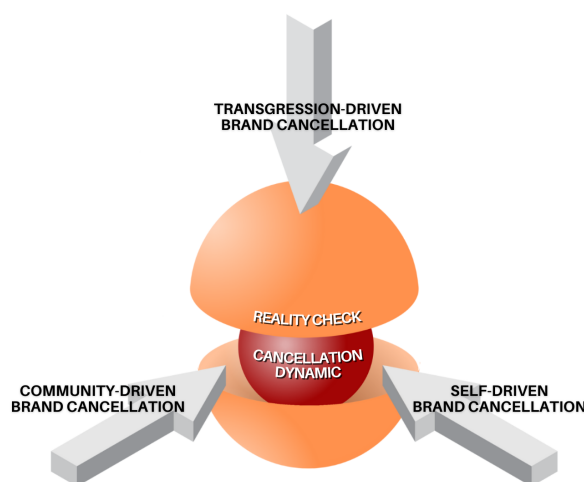


Image 2. Simplified model on cancel culture.

The sub-phenomena that push individuals to cancel and thus form part of the various cancellation dynamics have been placed in the outer rings of the model shown below. These have been organised as background factors, peripheral factors, catalysers, central factors. At the centre of the model are the sub-phenomena that prevent the consumer from cancelling despite the existence of a cancellation dynamic. This is what we have called Reality Check, which functions as an obstruction to the cancellation of a brand.

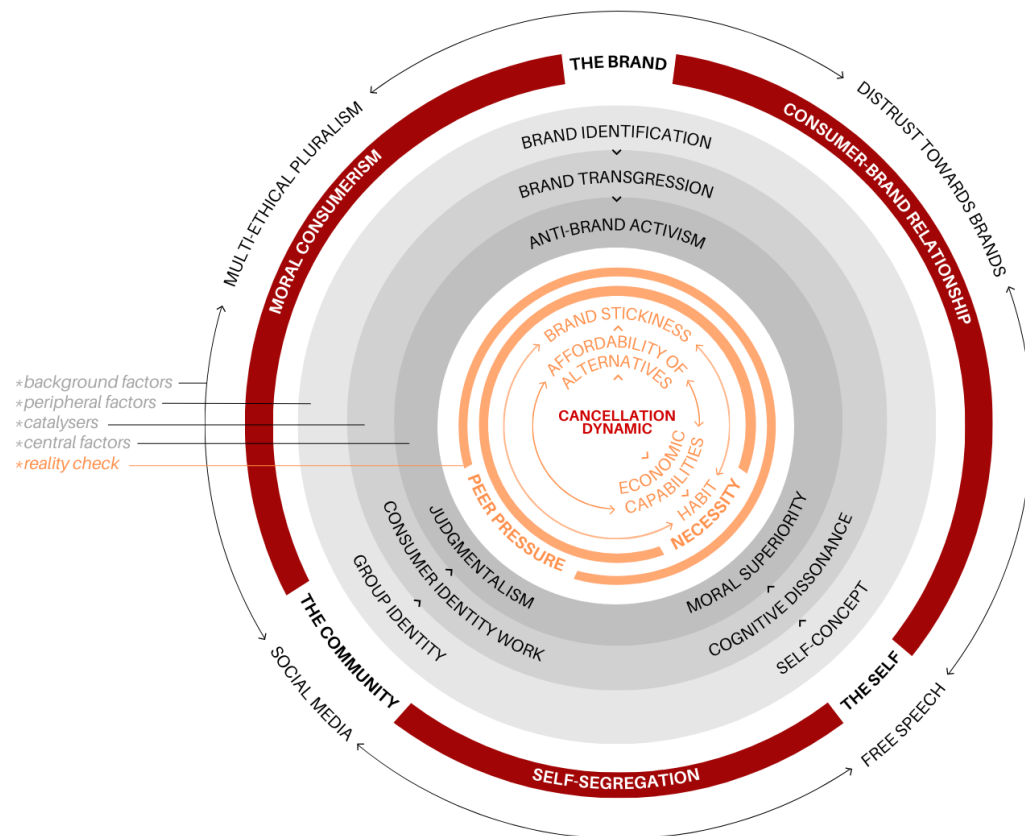


Image 3. Model on cancel culture after empirical data integration.

This discussion serves as an interpretive guide to the model provided. First, we explore the mutual connections between the three fundamental axes – the brand, the community and the self – and how sub-phenomena occurring in separate rings in connection with parallel sub-phenomena occurring on separate axes converge in different dynamics of cancellation. We then elaborate on how the Reality Check, constituted and integrated into the model

through the focus groups, exerts the opposite dynamic by serving as an obstacle to the cancellation.

6.1 Transgression-driven brand cancellation

The results of this study shows that what influences consumers' preference for one brand over another relates both to tangible aspects and mainly to intangible aspects. These intangible aspects of the brand refer to its values as well as its ethical practices. The obtained findings are in line with what was stated by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), who argue that the tangible aspects of the brand, such as appearance or slogan, are not the only ones that influence consumer preferences, but that its symbolic stances are also clearly determining factors. Through this type of more meaningful consumption, individuals tend to purchase from brands whose moral stances align with their own, which is a way for the individual to fulfil their core identity goals (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). This helps consumers not only convey aspects of their individuality but also shows their desire to connect with a group and ultimately helps them classify themselves as part of a community (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). What the results of this study suggest is that consumers tend to prioritise those brands with moral and ethical values similar to their own, as this allows consumers to construct and affirm their multiple identities (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), while meeting their self-defined needs (Coelho et al., 2018). This is because the brands' values and personality affiliations match with the consumers' self-concept (Swaminathan et al., 2007).

Past literature emphasised that the alignment of consumers' values with brands' values is the main driver of consumer-brand identification. Indeed, the results of this study suggest that through values such as transparency, honesty, inclusivity, integrity, and moral and ethical dispositions, consumers find brands relatable and trustworthy and thus identify with it. As consumers, they have the capability to construct their identities through the purchase of brands and the incorporation of brand values into both their own self-definition and the identity they convey to others, confirming the findings of Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013). Because the identification happens on a personal level, a brand can be an important mean of enhancing consumers' personality and communicating their beliefs and values (Tuškej et al., 2013), whereas on a social level, the identification enables consumers to associate themselves with their closest circle of individuals (Coelho et al., 2017).

Furthermore, *brand identification* helps individuals not only to create a *self-concept*, but also a *group identity* shared with other consumers to whom they are linked by common values and preferences that they aspire to uphold. For this reason, these three elements are placed in the same ring of the model as peripheral factors.

However, according to Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012), consumer-brand identification is also influenced by several other factors, which refer not only to the brand-self similarities, but also to whether a brand is unique and considered prestigious. Throughout the various focus groups held for this study, participants in all of them touched upon each of these factors. The results indicate that for consumers to identify with a brand, it must not only possess characteristics, values and interests similar to those of the consumers, but also meet their expectations to help them portray the individual and social image they wish to project. In other words, consumer-brand identification is driven by the fact that the use of a certain brand provides the consumer with a specific image – and corresponding status and lifestyle – which usually occurs when the brand is considered as distinct and prestigious. Thus, the brand acts as a ‘piece statement’ for oneself and for others.

Yet, the findings also show that consumers do not necessarily identify with brands, but still decide to purchase them. This means that consumers do not focus neither on the values of a brand, nor on the individual and social image that the purchase of that brand may offer. Simply, the purchase or interest in a brand is given by brand assets such as the quality, the price or the necessity it fulfils – aspects that will be discussed later in this chapter. What appears is that in this context, consumers do not think in terms of whether or not they identify with the brand, since in certain cases more ponderable elements such as the just mentioned carry more weight in consumer choice.

Another element preventing consumer-brand identification and pushing consumers to cancel organisations is the *distrust towards brands*. Previous literature poses trust as a paramount ingredient for consumers-brand identification (Kabadayi & Alan, 2012; Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013) and, if missing, the identification does not occur. The findings show that, because of a lack of authenticity in brands and an increasing awareness of the fact that brands utilise marketing techniques to appeal to consumers’ emotions, consumers do not trust them. Yet, consumers may still choose to buy these brands, a decision that is due to their prioritisation of the tangible elements mentioned above. For this reason, *distrust towards brands* has been integrated in the model as a background factor.

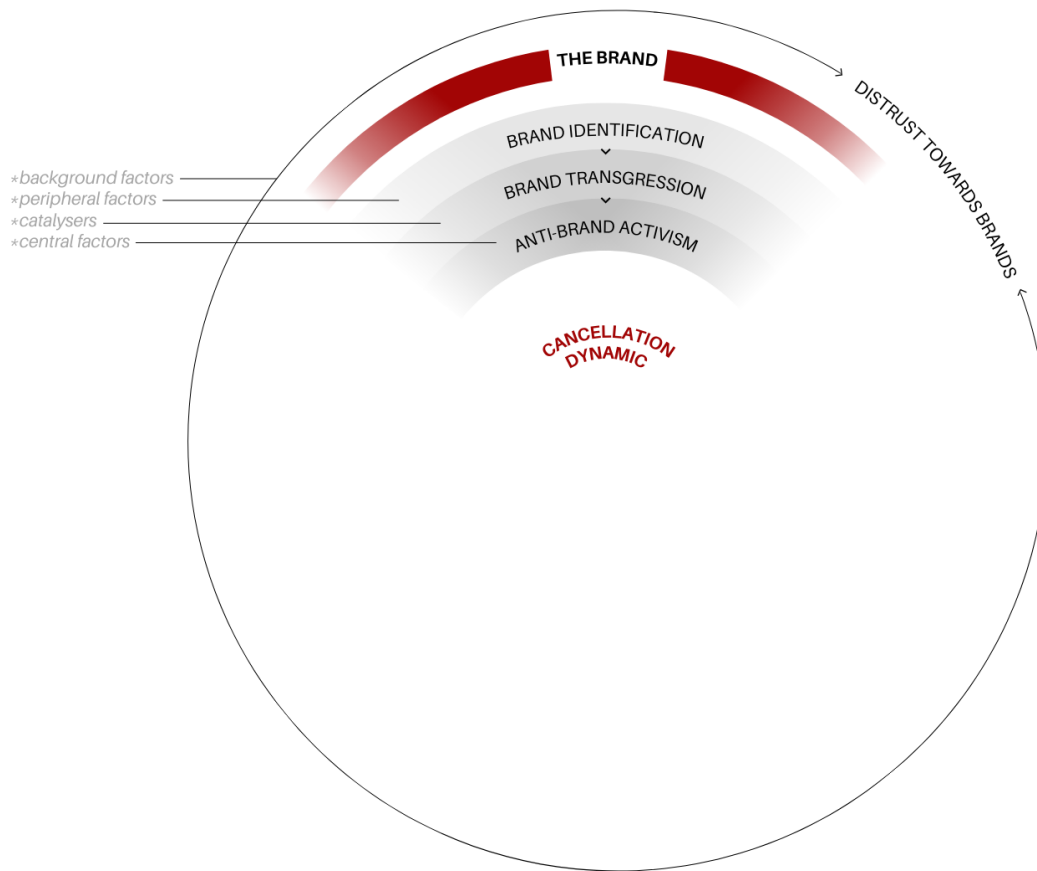


Image 4. Transgression-driven brand cancellation

Through consumer-brand identification, consumers feel attached to brands, and this can result in positive WOM (Tuškej et al., 2013), brand advocacy, and brand evangelism (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). However, positive relationships between consumers and brands might change due to brands committing a transgression, causing a breakdown in consumers' trust and raising a sense of betrayal. As previously reported, Sayin and Gürhan-Canli (2015) define *brand transgression* as any violation of the implicit or explicit regulations surrounding the consumer-brand relationship that has the potential to harm said relationship. From the results of this study, it appears that these violations refer to when brands display lack of honesty mainly linked to social and environmental practices, use of child labour as workforce, attacks to the social groups consumers belong to, and controversial political stances. Because of these transgressions, apart from the feeling of betrayal, consumers also develop feelings of disappointment, dislike, disgust, anger, and outrage, which intensify

according to the amount of capital invested in those brands. These negative emotions are what Abbasi et al. (2022) consider to be the different layers of brand hate. Moreover, two out of the four ground factors causing brand hate introduced by Abbasi et al. (2022) and previously presented in the literature review, emerged during the focus groups: ideological incompatibility resulting from a brand's misbehaviour along social, legal, or moral dimension, and the irresponsible and lacking behaviour within CSR. As it can be seen, these factors triggering negative emotions are in line with the violations causing brand transgression.

6.1.1 Brand transgression as an indispensable but not result-determining factor

According to past literature, consumers that are strongly attached to a brand and identify with it are more likely to justify and forgive the brand's wrongdoing, providing the brand with a sort of immunity to negative information and feelings (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Davvetas & Diamantopoulos, 2017). However, the findings of this study imply the opposite: that consumers who identify strongly with a transgressive brand reject it more strongly after the transgression. Because of the inconsistency between the brand meaning and the brand actions, consumers develop greater negative emotions and reactions against the brand (Gürhan-Canli, 2015). Their negative emotions translate into actions such as negative WOM, brand avoidance, and boycotting. These are all measures that fall within the realm of *anti-brand activism*, and because it is considered a central sub-phenomena of cancel culture, it has been placed as in the inner ring together with the other main triggers.

The results indicate that the more the consumers are attached to a brand, the harsher their reaction is. This can be referred to as the 'love becomes hate' phenomenon, whereby the brand's violation of the principles of fairness causes consumers who have a strong connection to the brand to experience great disidentification (Grégoire & Fisher, 2007; Lin & Sung, 2014). Furthermore, the results point out that betrayal is the key factor in what the literature identifies as the psychological mechanism of retaliation, defined as consumers' actions aimed at punishing a brand for the harm it has caused them (Grégoire & Fisher, 2007). These acts fall within the realm of cancel culture.

Therefore, it can be understood that a strong consumer-brand identification tends to provoke a harsher reaction on the individual – both on the emotional and behavioural level –

following a brand transgression. In other words, when customers realise that the brand they trusted and identified with is not living up to the principles and promises stated, they feel betrayed and take steps to punish the brand, with actions typical of *anti-brand activism*.

6.2 Community-driven brand cancellation

The focus groups suggest that the same elite-mass dynamics between brands and consumers that Khan (2012) identified a decade ago still exist. Consumers appear to be fully aware both of the unequal distribution of power that corporations enjoy, and that their decisions as consumers and members of a community have an impact on the marketplace. These circumstances put them in a position to potentially change this structure and redistribute power (Saldanha et al., 2022), and they do so through the tools available to them, such as *social media*. The results of this study indicate that this is one of the main reasons why consumers justify and perpetuate the existence of cancel culture, although it is not the most important factor in pushing users and consumers to take action against brand transgressions.

The findings also imply that there is a widespread feeling of *distrust towards brands* – mentioned above – among consumers, which causes them to have relatively low expectations regarding the brands' ethical behaviours. This negative emotional stage of consumers is, according to Abbasi et al. (2022), the most important trigger for brand cancellation. As suggested in the focus groups, this feeling of *distrust towards brands* is not as a key driver of cancellation but rather as an initial factor in the cancellation dynamic that lays the foundation for the phenomena that follow. It has therefore been introduced as a fourth background factor.

Indeed, it is this sentiment that leads many consumers to passively support the cancellation of brands as it causes many of them to believe information that is massively shared on *social media* when a cancellation occurs. This prevents many from fact-checking the information that spreads like wildfire (Mueller, 2021), which is what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) point out as one of the traditional features of mass discourse: emotions take the place of rational thought. In this regard, Ahuja and Kerketta (2021) add that many of the individuals who participate in cancel culture do not have all the information they need to make a fair judgement of the situation, with which the results of this study concur. Here we see the interconnectedness of the background factors of *social media* and *distrust towards brands*: social networks instigate this feeling of apprehension towards brands by facilitating the

dissemination of information that is not necessarily true, while users who experience these feelings use them to express it and vent their anger for different purposes.

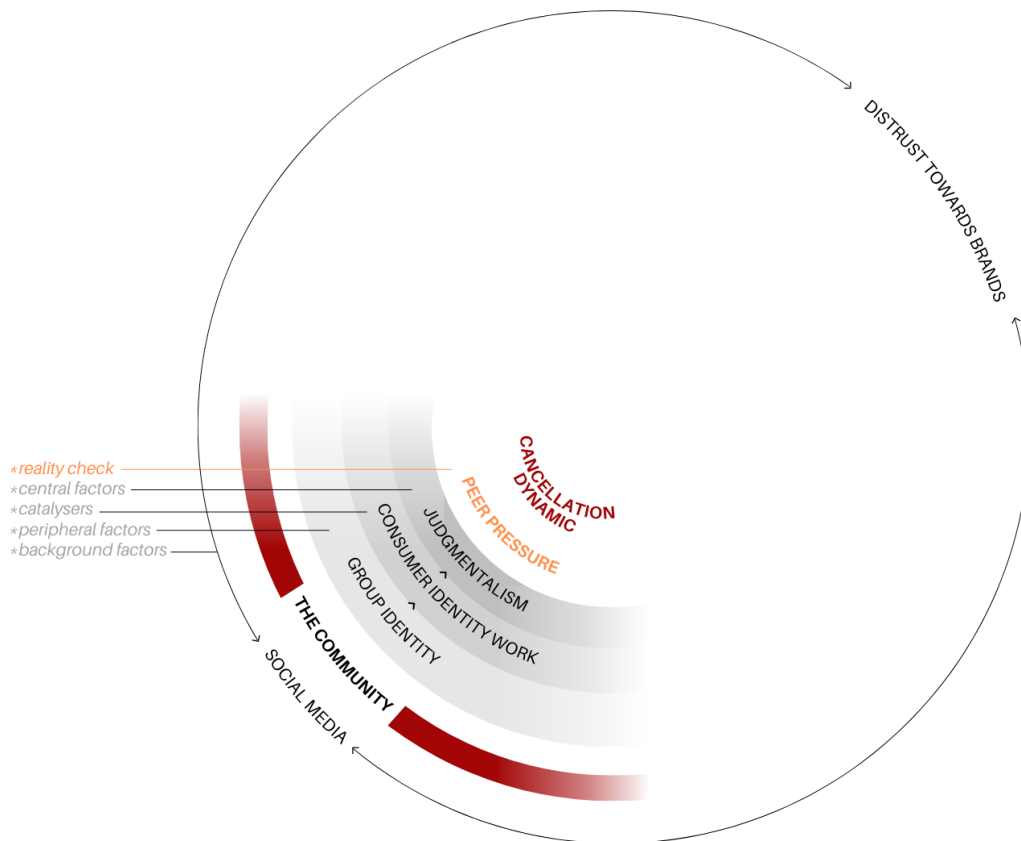


Image 5. Community-driven brand cancellation dynamic

According to Romani et al (2015), the negative feelings toward a certain brand together with the feeling of empathy towards other consumers is the mixture that triggers anti-brand activism, discussed above. The results of this study indicate precisely that there are high levels of empathy among consumers, as they see their peers as victims at the expense of brands and organisations, while these are the ones to be punished. This signifies that this sentiment of affinity with their peers often leads to the instinct of protecting other consumers from misbehaving corporations.

6.2.1 Group identity and peer pressure as main drivers of the cancellation dynamic

What appears to be the main reason why consumers punish brands is misalignment with the social values of the community in question. The results suggest that consumers are very aware of the values of the community in which they live and adapt to them. This means that they align their way of thinking and acting with these commonly-shared values and would consider punishing brands that do not conform to them, but only as long as the cancellation of that specific brand does not pose a major inconvenience in their lives. This exception will be further discussed later when the Reality Check is discussed.

Although individuals aspire to act in accordance with their own and the community's values, the results of this study show that the feeling of belonging to the community or to certain groups is present but very diffuse for some individuals, i.e., they are not aware of their identification with groups. The feeling of belonging to the group is seen as an identity factor that influences the individual's decision-making and behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this regard, authors such as Kim and Krishna (2021) assert that this condition also applies to groups of consumers, who, encouraged by this *group identity*, make decisions to protect their members from the transgressions of other groups of consumers or brands. This resembles what Luedicke et al. (2010) describe as *consumer identity work*: the individual gives a redemptive meaning to their consumption habits in order to justify them, which sometimes brings them into conflict with other consumers of other brands who disagree with these choices. As explained by these authors, this leaves room for ideological tensions between groups of consumers – which give rise to cancellation – providing them the opportunity to become moral protagonists and thus stand out from the crowd (Luedicke et al., 2010).

The literature on cancel culture and related digital phenomena, such as digital vigilantism, points to the existence of a current environment of digital prosecution and surveillance that seems to be justified by the pursuit of greater good and the preservation of common interests (Luu, 2019). This standardised system of doxing, first, enables the existence of cancel culture and, second, feeds on it as it gives individuals space to act as judges, jurors, and executors of their own causes (Loveluck, 2020; Trottier, 2020). The results of this study suggest that this tendency to judge others and try to shame them for their decisions exists and, in fact, causes a widespread fear of being accused and singled out.

It follows from the focus groups that the determining factor that leads consumers to take the decision to cancel a brand is *peer pressure*, which takes place because there is a prior group identity and habit of watching and judging other peers. Earlier in the literature review, this concept was not presented as one of the determining factors in the cancellation dynamic, but as a simple inherent component of the feeling of belonging to a group that almost went unnoticed. However, the findings highlight that it is one of the pivotal drivers of brand cancellation as, in many cases, witnessing your circle cancel a certain brand is the only condition that pushes consumers to do so.

The American Psychology Association defines *peer pressure* as “the influence exerted by a peer group on its individual members to fit in with or conform to the group’s norms and expectations” and concludes that it can have “positive socialization value” (n.d.). The results denote that peer pressure and the opinions of close circles – both online and offline – strongly influence individuals’ decisions when it comes to following, choosing, rejecting, and/or cancelling a brand. This seems to occur both in cases where a consumer-brand relationship already exists and in those where it does not. This suggests that peer pressure is a more important factor than (1) the alignment between the brand’s values and those of the individual (on the The Brand axis) and (2) the desire to gain social status through the display of personal values and opinions (on the The Self axis). However, it should be noted that the results indicate that the values of the individual and those of the group tend to coincide, since, otherwise, the individual would not profess this feeling of identification with her or his peers (Luu, 2019).

It has been noted that *peer pressure*, which is part of the Reality Check that will be explored below, functions as a hinge, triggering both the cancellation dynamic and hindering it. When it comes to cancelling a brand, *peer pressure* pushes individuals to join the movement. However, at the same time, when it comes to resisting the cancellation of a brand of which the individual is a regular consumer, the *peer pressure* exerted by that consumer’s group to remain part of that community, together with the strong consumer-brand relationship, exerts an equivalent influence. For this reason, it has been placed in the outer ring of the Reality Check in close relation to the theoretical components outside of it.

6.3 Self-driven brand cancellation

As discussed earlier in the literature review, Henderson (2020) compares cancel culture to a litmus test in the sense that cancellations present a dilemma to the individual in which she or he must decide whether the transgression committed by the target brand is, in her or his opinion, serious enough to take part and join the movement. In this sense, cancel culture functions as a system to judge the values of others in which the rest of the consumers and users are the juries. This, according to Henderson (2020), reinforces group division, confrontation, and disagreement, which can only exist where there is given freedom of thought and expression. For this reason, *free speech* is located in the model as a background factor.

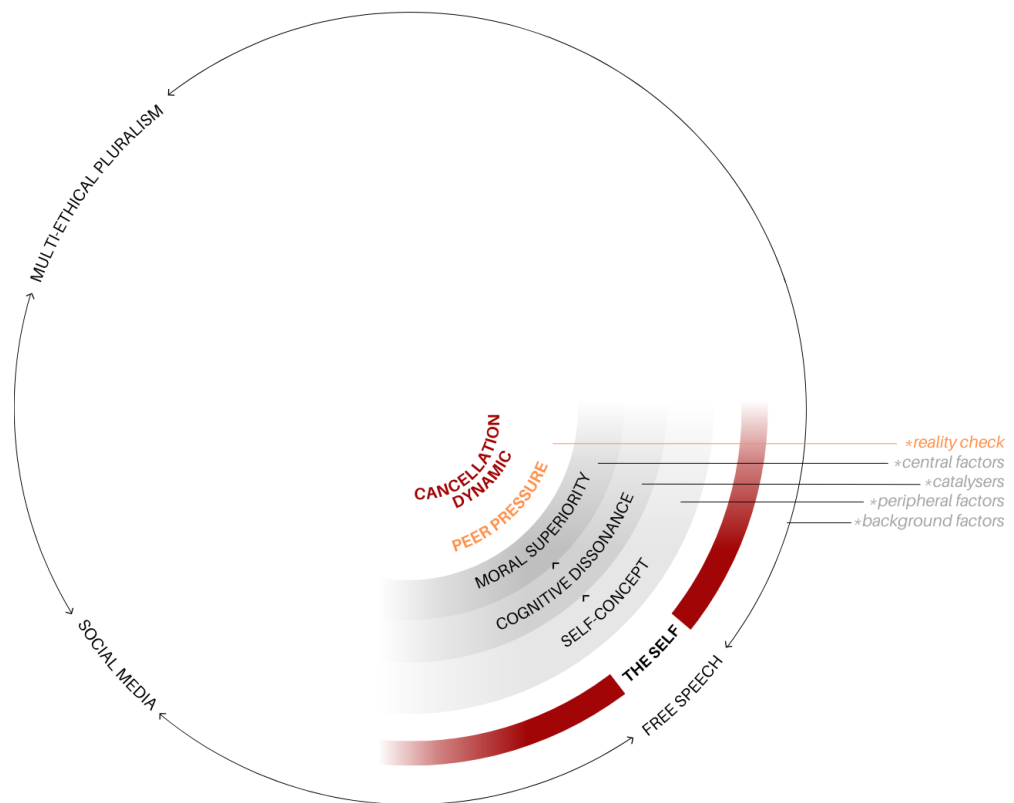


Image 6. Self-driven brand cancellation

In the previous section, we discussed the value of cancel culture as a tool to reverse the uneven field between consumers and brands. In contrast to this, another use of cancel culture

also widely explored in the literature is its use as a censorship tool. Authors such as Mueller (2021) explain that on many occasions cancel culture serves to publicly shame and censor those whose opinions are contrary to the dominant discourse that prevails in social media. The findings imply that this is indeed one of the main uses of cancel culture.

This confirms that, as Mölder and Simm (2020) point out when discussing *multi-ethical pluralism*, individuals are not aware of how heterogeneous public discourse and morality are. On the contrary, as the author emphasises, people tend to believe that opinions are much less varied than they are. This leads the average individual to believe that opinions and ideological stances different from one's own are wrong and therefore need to be changed, which is one of the factors that push individuals to persuade those with whom they disagree to change their minds. This is undoubtedly one of the conditions that give rise to cancel culture, as disagreements are an inherent feature of human societies. Therefore, *multi-ethical pluralism* is considered to be crucial in this theoretical model as a background factor.

The results of this study suggest that cancel culture functions as a mass-dividing agent that accommodates those consumers who wish to impose their values on the rest. This is consistent with Luedicke et al.'s (2010) explanation in the literature that individuals tend to believe that their decisions and principles are the correct ones, meaning that those of others are less valuable or wrong. It is observed that this tendency is an attempt to protect the image that individuals or consumers have of themselves (*self-concept*) and that they want to defend through the free expression of their values and opinions. Within the phenomenon of cancel culture, it is the *cognitive dissonance* caused by the misalignment of one's values with those of a company that triggers this desire or need to share with others that one is against this misbehaviour. This means that the factors *cognitive dissonance*, in the axis of The Self, and *brand transgression*, in the axis of The Brand, are parallel, and for this reason, they have been placed on the same ring of the model as Catalysers.

6.3.1 Moral superiority as a central factor in cancel culture

In the act of cancelling, in order to cope with this *cognitive dissonance*, individuals detach themselves from the brand and publicly express their opposition and rejection, and in an attempt to emphasise their displeasure and underline the value of their opinion, they try to encourage their peers to join in the cancellation. In other words, they exert *peer pressure*, something that

would confer on the individual a certain social status. This refers to the concept of *moral superiority*, discussed in the literature by Nakamura (2015) and Dong et al. (2019), who define it as the perception that individual values and morals are superior to those of others and are therefore to be defended and imposed on your peers.

As the findings underline, the cancellation of a brand is a very specific form of virtue signalling and moral grandstanding, two concepts defined by Grubbs et al. (2019) and which refer to the act of showing and highlighting one's values in order to gain the approval of others. It appears that individuals are hardly aware that this motivation is behind a large part of the actions they take part in when it comes to the cancellation of a brand. These include the act of trying to convince one's circle or sharing novel information on social media about sensitive topics that one hardly identifies with. In other words, it is implied that many users and consumers participate in cancellation without being aware of it.

Dong et al., (2019) also point out in their definition of *moral superiority* that it is accompanied by the hypocrisy of presenting oneself as more morally virtuous than one actually is. The focus groups shed light on this issue, as they indicate that some social activism – motivated by the need to share the righteousness of one's values and opinions – is more about building an admirable identity in the eyes of others than the pursuit of the greater good. This is why *moral superiority*, *judgmentalism*, and *anti-brand activism* are situated on the same layer of the model, that of central factors.

6.4 The Reality Check

The factors explored up to this point in the discussion were identified and integrated into the model on the basis of previous research. They are all sub-phenomena which confluence gives rise to the dynamics of brand cancellation. It can therefore be said that in theoretical terms, the more blatant these sub-phenomena are, the greater the cancellation of the brand in question. Subjecting this fundamentally theoretical model to the subjectivities of the focus groups served as a first plausibility test that allowed us to verify that these sub-phenomena occur in practice as well. This experiment did, however, contribute to making the model more realistic and complete from a practical perspective.

The findings have revealed that at the same time as these dynamics exert an inward dynamic that pushes individuals to cancel, there is also an antagonistic dynamic that, in an outward direction, prevents individuals from engaging in brand cancellation. These are the various reasons why consumers make an informed decision not to cancel a brand even though there have been sub-phenomena in the axis of The Brand, The Community, and/or The Selfh have exerted an influence on them. This is what we have defined as the Reality Check.

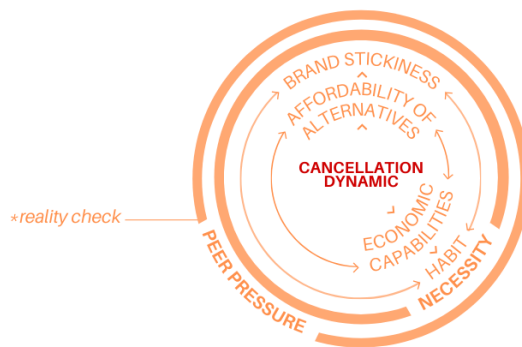


Image 7. 'Reality Check', the core of the model on Cancel Culture

The Reality Check shows how, although, speculatively, cancel culture should occur because of the concurrence of several sub-phenomena, this does not actually occur. The justification an individual arrives at for not cancelling a brand is their way of dealing with the cognitive dissonance caused by the transgression and betrayal of the brand. In reference to our earlier discussion of cognitive dissonance, we must recall that individuals try to escape this mental discomfort either by sticking to their values – which leads to the cancellation – or by sticking to the brand, which we have not discussed yet. We now proceed to analyse what happens, and how, in the Reality Check.

6.4.1 Peer pressure as a juncture between cancellation and the avoidance

Peer pressure, briefly discussed above in its relation to *group identity* and *moral superiority*, belongs in the first outer ring within the Reality Check. As mentioned above, it functions as a

hinge to cancel culture since it either triggers cancellation or prevents it. *Peer pressure* may be seen as part of The Community axis, but it plays a role in all three of them: facilitating a brand community where loyalty is shared (The Brand axis); creating a community where we share values and can be influenced by others (The Community axis); and being a tendency that individuals themselves exert in their attempt to influence others with their opinions, conceived as correct and irrevocable (The Self axis).

One ring down is *necessity*, which seems to be, according to the focus groups, a vitally important factor for not cancelling a brand. This refers to the individual's need to buy a certain product or hire a certain service. The individual continues to experience the same need even when the brand they buy to satisfy this specific need betrays them. This creates a cognitive dissonance that must be resolved either by being loyal to the brand or by being loyal to one's own values. As the results of this study illustrate, in many cases brand cancellation is an unrealistic and non-pragmatic solution for the consumer due to the factors detailed below, which are located one ring down from *necessity*. These factors are at the same time the justifications the individual resorts to in order to cope with the need and escape the cognitive dissonance while alleviating the mental discomfort of contradicting their values.

6.4.2 Habit and economic capabilities: the reasons for not cancelling

Habit is one of the aforementioned factors. The results of this study suggest that a long-standing relationship with the brand is one of the main barriers to the cancellation of a brand. The convenience and habit of buying from that particular brand often outweigh those values considered ideologically important. This is a reason why many consumers decide to stick to a brand that transgresses their values: they trust it and are satisfied with what they are getting from it. For instance, consumers are satisfied with the quality, recognition, reputation, and good service of a brand, so they continue to stick with the brand instead of making the intellectual or economic effort to find a new brand that satisfies them. This is closely related to *brand stickiness*, placed in the same ring as habit.

As explained in the previous section of this study, sticky brands build a community of consumers who are deeply loyal to them, making it very difficult for them to leave for a competing brand. This shows that by employing marketing strategies that make a brand sticky can be a smart brand management strategy to avoid the negative repercussions on

profits that come with cancel culture. Apple is a very potent example of *brand stickiness*. It is fair to say that a representative part of their consumers are aware of the unethical practices the company carries out and which they do not approve. Yet, they still refuse to abandon the brand. Depending on the case and the brand, this refusal to cancel can happen either for convenience (*habit*), due to a strong sense of identification (*brand stickiness*), or because their economic capabilities do not allow them access to another alternative, which belongs to the core ring of the model and will be analysed below.

6.4.3 *Economic capabilities as a central articulator of brand cancellation*

The results of this study denote that both the inconvenience of seeking an alternative (and thus breaking the habit) and the feeling of identification with the brand (brand stickiness) can be overcome if the individual decides to commit to their values and principles. However, *economic capabilities* are a major barrier to overcome when it comes to cancellation. This is why this factor has been placed at the core of the model as the final obstacle to cancellation. Linked to this concept is the fact whether or not there are other alternatives that satisfy the individual's need, serve to replace their habit, and are affordable according to his or her economic capabilities, which is seen as an insurmountable obstacle to cancellation. Linked to this concept is whether or not there are other alternatives that satisfy the individual's need and serve to replace his or her habit. Therefore, in the same ring but on The Brand axis is the *affordability of alternatives* factor.

6.4.4 *Final remarks*

Cognitive dissonance and how consumers deal with it so as not to jeopardise their values and personal identity are key concepts in the study of cancel culture targeting brands. Research in consumer behaviour identifies various strategies to do so, such as selective selection of information (Sayin & Gürhan-Canli, 2015), the process of moral rationalisation, and the process of moral dissonance (Kim & Krishna, 2015). The Reality Check can be seen as a kind of justification or rationalisation that is part of a new strategy to overcome cognitive dissonance. However, it differs from the aforementioned strategies, as these are moral arguments employed to defend the brand to which they are emotionally attached (Sayin & Gürhan-Canli, 2015; Kim & Krishna, 2015). In contrast, the Reality Check does the opposite:

they defend their values and acknowledge the brand’s misconduct while justifying their attachment to the brand on the grounds of convenience.

It is clear from the results of this study that consumers’ strong attachment to a brand does not always imply that they will compromise their standards of morality to support the brand with which they identify. This relates to the aforementioned decision of consumers to stick to their values and abandon the brand. It is this decision that drives the phenomenon of cancel culture. When consumers recognise that the brand they trusted and identified with does not remain true on a practical level to the values and promises made on a theoretical level, consumers feel a sense of betrayal that goes so far as to undermine the relationship with the brand, resulting in actions aimed at punishing the brand. Nonetheless, consumers might decide to maintain the relationship with the brand because of the benefits the relationship brings (Kim & Krishna, 2021), making it problematic and inconvenient for the consumers to leave.

The theory formulated in this study suggests that up to four forces are at work in the cancellation of a brand. Three of these are cancellation dynamics that do not necessarily occur in all cases and are triggered by (1) the transgression of the brand, (2) the influence of the community involved, and (3) one’s eagerness to serve as a moral role model. These forces pushing consumers to cancel are faced with a barrier before culminating in cancellation: the Reality Check that functions as a ‘convenience filter’.

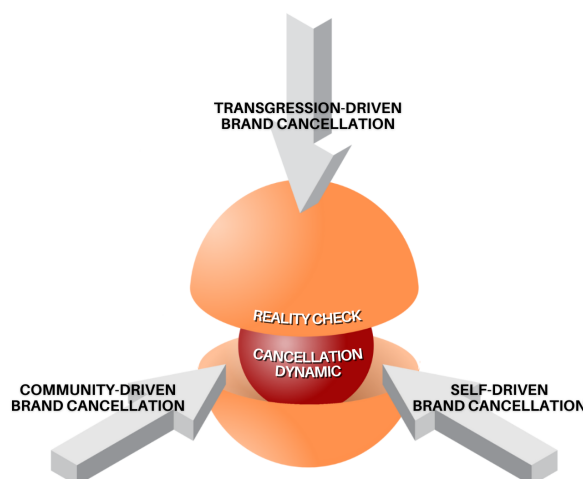


Image 8. A Theory on Cancel Culture

Hence, the Reality Check serves as a barrier to cancel culture, where its factors (i.e., *habit*, *necessity*, *economic capabilities*, *brand stickiness*, lack of *affordable alternatives*) sometimes prevail over moral, ethical, and ideological instances or identity expression needs. They are the key elements – dictated not by consumers’ emotional attachment or identification with the brand, but rather by matters of convenience – justifying consumers’ bypassing of the brand's misbehaviour and impeding cancellation.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

With the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of cancel culture by theorising on the inner dynamics of the phenomenon, the research done was an honest attempt to capture the whole complexity of it and its interconnected, integrative dimensions and sub-phenomena, that have been encapsulated in the model provided. In testing the model with the focus groups, it emerged that these theoretically-based sub-phenomena that seem to push individuals to cancel a brand, do not fully and realistically capture the immense complexity of cancel culture towards brands. Rather, it seems that, in addition, an antagonistic dynamic comes into play that shows that, in practice, individuals often do not cancel brands for various reasons. These are what shape the Reality Check we have provided.

The Reality Check, which is the main contribution of this research, is presented as a breach between the morality of individuals and their actions as consumers. This means that while certain consumers appear to be committed to current social and political issues – such as unsustainable practices, social inequalities or workers’ rights – these stances do not always translate into practical actions to fight brands that behave immorally and unethically according to their moral standards.

These values-actions discrepancies can be explained by a number of structural elements influencing consumers’ decision-making, including economic capabilities, availability of alternatives, purchasing habits and peer pressure, among others. As a result, despite their ethical intentions, individuals do not always have full autonomy over their behaviour and consumption choices. Therefore, while individuals may wish to cancel certain brands, the structural conditions of the economy and society we live in constrain their behaviour.

7.1 Practical implications

Within academia and specifically around brand communication and consumer behaviour, this thesis is, to our knowledge, the first theoretical model capturing the complexity of cancel

culture that takes into account its complex dimensions, as well as the interrelationships and dynamics between its components. Inspired and built on the foundations laid by previous literature, this study integrates the consumer perspective to deliver a comprehensive and unified model of cancel culture, which represents an important step in addressing such a topical phenomenon. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, this model can be useful for professionals in the field of communication and brand management as it represents a valuable tool to study the behavioural patterns of their brands' followership and thus make predictions about their decision making in the event of a brand transgression. This would make it possible to design efficient communication strategies to avoid cancellation or reduce the harmfulness of its effects. In this sense, the efforts to increase a brand's stickiness is one of the most obvious takeaways.

On the other hand, it follows that, given that consumers are subjected to and constrained by the factors displayed in the Reality Check, it is not possible to solely rely on individuals to drive change in society through cancel culture. Cancel culture can be seen as a powerful tool to bring awareness to social and ethical injustices and to resist power wielded by brands and corporations. However, it cannot be considered as effective and punitive to misbehaving brands since there is a Reality Check that comes into play, preventing the cancellation dynamic from culminating in the cancellation of the brand. This calls for the development of substantive policies that specifically aim to hold brands accountable for their actions.

7.2 Limitations

This study presents a few limitations. Firstly, the sample used for the focus groups features students of similar ages, roughly between 18 and 30 years old. This means that they all have a certain level of education and have easy access to information. The generalisation made in this study may not be entirely accurate for this reason. Secondly, it should be noted that all randomly selected participants were found to be citizens of Western countries, which may have established a certain bias in their opinions. This is due to the cultural differences between Western, Eastern and African countries, which differ in aspects such as power, hierarchies, conceptions of individualism and collectivism, and individual freedoms, all of them very relevant aspects discussed for and during the course of this study.

7.3 Future research

Given the limitations in the design of this study that inevitably affect the results, it is suggested that future research should focus on testing the model on a broader and more heterogeneous group of individuals, including participants from different cultural, social, and academic backgrounds; from wider age ranges; and with diverse economic capabilities in order to obtain more applicable results. Another interesting line of research to pursue is to apply this model to specific market segments (e.g. fashion, technology, food and beverage, automotive, etc.) to determine whether the elements that make up the Reality Check vary by product type and market. This would also be relevant to see which factors play a more pressing role in triggering or slowing down the dynamics of brand cancellation. These can function as case studies to further investigate the complexity of the phenomenon in more detail.

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Chapter 9. Appendix

Appendix 1

Informed Consent Form

When Reality Outweighs Ethics in Cancel Culture: A Theorisation, Modelling, and Empirical Exploration of Brand Cancellation

This consent form is part of the process required for ethical treatment of participants in research. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about the research process or procedures, please ask.

Invitation to Participate

We are researching cancel culture against brands from a consumer behaviour perspective. This research is conducted by Martina Ferretti and María Viéitez Gómez for a Master Thesis at Lund University.

Research Purpose

The aim of this thesis is to elaborate a theoretical formulation of cancel culture against brands with the intention of encapsulating in a theoretical model the variety and complexity of the components taking part in it, contributing so to a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Research Method

If you decide to participate, we will invite you to participate in a focus group. For example, you will be asked: Tell me three things you care about for you to like/follow a brand. Which one would you prioritise? Why? Tell me about a brand you follow/purchase. Would you say you identify with it? How? Your answers will be reported together with data from other research participants.

Confidentiality - Anonymity - Security

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and any other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the data analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the study is completed, all data containing personal information will be destroyed. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Voluntary participation

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications.

If you would like to consult with someone not associated with this study that will be all right, too. If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researchers or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time as a result of your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

What Your Signature Means

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Signature of Participant

Date

Print Name

Signature of Investigator

Date

Contact Information
(please insert contact information here)

Appendix 2

Questionnaire guide for focus groups

Set 1. Consumer-brand relationship within cancel culture

1. What is cancel culture for you? What kind of actions are part of a cancellation from your perspective?
2. Tell me three things you care about for you to like/follow a brand. Which one would you prioritise? Why?
3. Tell me about a brand you follow/purchase. Would you say you identify with it? How?
4. What would make you feel betrayed by a brand and push you to stop following or purchasing it? How would you deal with the situation (actions)?
 - a. Do you feel you'd be harsher/easier in your cancellation with brands that you know/like?
 - b. Let's say you find out a brand you follow is not sustainable. Would your reaction be worse if the brand voiced their commitment to the environment?
 - c. Think of your favourite brand. How would you feel/react if you discovered that their actions transgressed your values?
5. What do you think is the message consumers want to convey by cancelling brands and which effects it has on them? What do you think is the purpose?

Set 2. Ethics and morals in the process of cancelling

6. What do you consider a brand misconduct?
7. Think again of the reasons why you could potentially cancel a brand. What do you think could be the reasons for others not to care about it?
8. Imagine one of your closest friends tells you they are cancelling a brand. How would you react? Would you believe them immediately, double check the information?
 - a. Do you feel your peers influence your feelings about a brand misbehaving?
9. Imagine you felt betrayed by a brand you follow and stop purchasing it. Under which circumstances would you reconsider your decision and buy it again?
10. How do you feel about the call-out culture on social media? How do you find it useful or harmful?
11. Do you think people have the right to express their own opinions and views on cancelling a brand?
 - a. So people have the right to express opinions but cancelling culture can get toxic. What's the breakout moment? Where's the limit?
12. Does the size of the corporation matter?

Set 3. Participation on cancel culture

13. Do you participate in social media activism? In which cases?
 - a. In case you don't, what could possibly change that?

14. How do you first feel when you learn a brand has been cancelled on social media?
Why?
15. Tell me about a brand you have cancelled and for how long. In case you 'forgave' it, when was it and for what reason? What if you don't have an affordable alternative to that brand?