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# THE BLAME GAME

## DISSECTING ONLINE CANCEL CULTURE

**AS INSIPID TIKTOK** loops lull me to sleep, the painted face of Mikayla Nogueira, social media’s trendiest beauty guru, slides into view. Flaunting lush, full eyelashes, Nogueira divulges that L’Oreal’s Telescopic Lift Mascara is the culprit. I scan my eyes to the bottom of the screen where the caption “paid partnership” sits in plain sight—and then, out of curiosity, I open the comments section. “This bitch is a liar,” “Anything for a check I guess,” and “Even fake eyelashes can’t hide the ugly,” are three of the 78.5 thousand comments “canceling” Nogueira for ostensibly using false lashes in this advertisement. A scroll or two deeper, and an anonymous user deems her existence “a waste.”

I shut my phone off and let the comments reverberate through my sleepless thoughts. *All of this over a fucking mascara?* That night, I dream that I am Nogueira, navigating

the weight of an entire city’s hatred on my shoulders.

If you’re a TikTok regular—or just the average social media user—chances are you’ve brushed paths with cancel culture. Birthed in 2014 as a social movement to dismantle the authority of corrupt public figures, cancel culture originated as a means of holding those in power accountable, boycotting and “outing” transgressions.

And at first, it did just that. High-profile stars and politicians began dropping like flies, publicly shunned for a slew of offenses come to light: sexual assault allegations, racist commentary, corrupt practices, and other stabs at the disenfranchised. The 2017 movement #MeToo empowered innumerable women to call out and cancel their abusers, deploying social media as a platform to make their voices heard in a justice system that looked the other

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way. Marginalized populations latched onto the accessibility of the movement, underscoring the ease of signing up for a Twitter account to catapult discrimination into the limelight instead of being brushed to the edges of public discourse. It was a testament to the power of the Internet—and shared outrage—in cultivating tangible change.

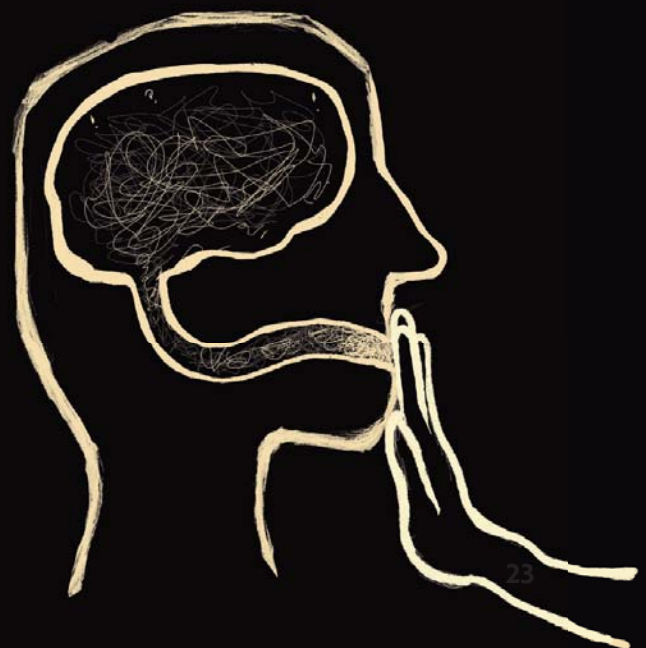
By 2020, the days of power operating as immunity were over; no celebrity was untouchable.

But as cancel campaigns became more ubiquitous, the offenses they targeted became diluted—and the number of targets themselves greater. With platforms like TikTok, pretty much anyone can become “someone,” spontaneously amassing millions of views and followers when the stars align. The result is a sizable uptick in “micro” influencers: people who capitalize on their new following by publicizing brand deals and sponsorships. And like anyone under the public eye, the scrutiny is real, even if they may not have the celebrity resources to bounce back from mass shaming.

I’ve seen budding influencers get canceled for infractions as trivial as their clothing style, the makeup they wear, “toxic” relationship behavior, and not being “authentic” enough. These comment sections are flooded with thousands of copy-and-paste grievances decimating the reputation of the accused TikToker, many of which are personal and hateful. Death threats and doxxing—the intentional reveal of a target’s private or identifying information—are commonplace. The vitriol is so potent that I’ve forced myself to delete the app more than once.

So where do we draw the line between accountability and bullying? Between justice and mob mentality? It shouldn’t be shocking that 78.5 thousand people don’t actually care enough about a deceitful mascara advertisement to compel another human being to re-contemplate their existence. They want to belong. That’s the thing about cancel culture; when taken to an extreme, it feeds on our basic human desire to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, even if the result is ruthless bullying. The consequences for championing hate behind a screen are slim.

Perhaps its implications are felt most in the political sphere, where cancel culture breeds fear of expression instead



of tolerance. A 2022 Pew Research survey found that Democrats and Republicans are further apart ideologically today than at any time in the past 50 years. Cancel culture exacerbates this political gulf, leaving little room for meaningful dialogue and creating an environment conducive to intolerance and dogmatic philosophies.

And it's not just online. Over half of the UCSB students surveyed on College Pulse, an online survey and analytics company dedicated to understanding the attitudes of today's college students, reported self-censoring on campus. Only 28% of students said they are "not worried about damaging their reputation because someone misunderstands something they have said or done."

"It is important to consider multiple sides of an argument, no matter how controversial or uncomfortable other sides are. Even if you don't change your mind, you gain insight as to how people who disagree with you might think, which goes a long way in recognizing how even people who disagree with you are still human and worthy of human respect and empathy," said a graduating UCSB student surveyed on the site.

Even former President Barack Obama weighed in on cancel culture's dangerous

lack of nuance. "The world is messy; there are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids, and share certain things with you," he said. "If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far." Online, the threshold is low to become an "activist." And playing the blame game is easy, cathartic, and thrilling. We get to release our anger in bursts instead of doing the painstaking political work—petitions, campaign building, networking, etc.—to make a difference.

But a world where we hold others to a moral precedent that not even we can achieve is a dangerous one. Reducing others to one moment, one mistake, or one lapse in judgment reduces the complexity of the human experience. Like the injustice the movement aims to combat, canceling an everyday person perpetuates it, disposing of individuals who deviate from majority rules instead of engaging with them through a lens of nuance and empathy.

None of this is to say that cancel culture is all bad; that perspective is just as intolerant. Disengaging with those who spew hate and condone abuse is how we give voice to the voiceless. But it is up to us to deploy it this way—as a tool and not a weapon. **w**

