

Cancel Culture and Its Impact on Social Anxiety in Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

Cancel culture has increasingly emerged in the social media era as a form of digital social control in which individuals or groups collectively withdraw support from someone who is perceived to have violated social norms. This phenomenon not only affects individuals who become direct targets of public criticism but also influences other social media users who observe these interactions, creating continuous social pressure. This study aims to analyze the psychological impact of cancel culture on social anxiety among emerging adults. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach based on a literature review, analyzing national and international scholarly articles related to cancel culture, social anxiety, and digital social pressure. The findings indicate that cancel culture produces multidimensional impacts encompassing emotional, behavioral, and social aspects. Emotionally, the phenomenon triggers feelings of shame, fear of interaction, and psychological stress due to the pressure of public opinion. Behaviorally, individuals tend to engage in self-censorship, avoid digital interactions, and adjust their behavior to prevent criticism. Socially, cancel culture can lead to digital isolation, reduced social participation, and heightened concern over public judgment. These three dimensions interact and reinforce one another, creating sustained psychological risks for emerging adults. Therefore, intervention strategies such as digital literacy education, resilience-building programs, and adaptive mental health support are necessary to help individuals cope with social pressure in digital environments.

Keywords: cancel culture, social anxiety, emerging adults, social media, psychological impact

INTRODUCTION

Cancel culture is a digital social phenomenon that is increasingly widespread in the era of social media, where individuals or groups collectively withdraw support from someone due to actions or statements considered to violate social norms or to be controversial (Adeyemi, 2025). This phenomenon emerges as a form of digital social control, positioning society as a norm watchdog, where individual behaviors and statements are publicly monitored through online platforms. Cancel culture can influence individual behavior and attitudes both directly and indirectly, as social pressure arises from the collective reactions of social media users. The psychological impact of cancel



culture is not limited to the targets who directly experience criticism or exclusion but is also felt by observers or audiences, who often experience anxiety and self-censorship due to the continuous public pressure that encourages them to exercise caution in speaking and acting in digital spaces (Ramsey Soroghaye, Onalu, & Anyaegbu, 2023).

This phenomenon demonstrates that cancel culture is not merely a temporary social mechanism but has become an agent shaping social norms and psychological behavior in the digital era. Continuous monitoring of individuals' statements and actions on social media creates an environment in which personal identity and reputation are always exposed to public judgment. Such pressure can induce fear, shame, and social anxiety, particularly among emerging adults who intensively use social media and are highly sensitive to public opinion. Therefore, understanding cancel culture is important not only from a communication and sociological perspective but also from a social psychology perspective, as its impact on individual mental well-being can be significant and long-lasting.

A study by Latief (2023) indicates that on platforms like Instagram, cancel culture can provoke feelings of shame, fear of interaction, and pressure to maintain a favorable self-image to avoid public criticism. These findings suggest that digital interactions are no longer merely social communication channels but also significantly shape individuals' emotional and psychological experiences. In this context, social media functions as a public arena where individuals' behaviors, statements, and self-presentation are constantly evaluated and judged by a broad audience. The pressure to always be "correct" or comply with digital social norms creates conditions in which individuals consciously or unconsciously adjust their behavior, potentially increasing social anxiety, insecurity, and self-censorship.

Furthermore, public perception of cancel culture is highly varied. Some view it as a form of social responsibility to uphold norms and justice, whereby individuals who are considered to have violated norms are held accountable collectively (Salisah, Auwaly, Umu, & Kusuma Putri, 2025; Rianto, Sulkhan, & Marantika, 2025). Others perceive cancel culture as a form of digital persecution or excessive social pressure, which can generate negative psychological effects, including stress, social isolation, and prolonged anxiety (Hasna & Hendratomo, 2025; Rijal, 2025). These differences in perception highlight the complexity of cancel culture, where moral, social, and psychological dimensions are interrelated and mutually influential.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant for emerging adults, aged 18–29, who are active on social media and tend to be highly sensitive to public opinion. At this developmental stage, individuals are still forming their self-identity, self-esteem, and social image, making digital interactions highly influential on psychological well-being. Aslamiyah, Santi, and Ananta (2022) emphasize that social media addiction and self-dissatisfaction can exacerbate social anxiety, which is further intensified when individuals encounter negative experiences such as cancel culture.

In this context, social media serves as a public arena in which individual identity, reputation, and behavior are continuously tested. Criticism, rejection, or digital ostracism occurring through cancel culture can trigger strong emotional responses, including shame, fear of interaction, and pressure to conform to social expectations (Latief, 2023; Ulva, Dimala, & Maulidia, 2025). This pressure is not merely temporary but can have long-term effects on mental health, increasing the risk of social isolation, stress, and self-censorship behaviors.

Negative digital interactions can reinforce defensive thinking patterns and feelings of insecurity, leading individuals to limit self-expression to avoid potential public criticism. This underscores that cancel culture is not merely a social phenomenon but also a factor that reinforces social anxiety dynamics among emerging adults, particularly for those who heavily rely on social media to build identity and social connections.

Although several studies have discussed cancel culture in general, most remain descriptive or focus on specific media platforms without examining the psychological impact on emerging adults, the age group most active on social media (Adeyemi, 2025; Latief, 2023; Salisah, Auwaly, Umu, & Kusuma Putri, 2025). This limitation indicates a research gap, particularly regarding the relationship between public perception of cancel culture, negative digital experiences such as cyber-ostracism, and manifestations of social anxiety in emerging adults. Previous research has tended to emphasize social phenomena at a macro level, leaving the psychological mechanisms underlying emotional responses, self-censorship, and digital social pressure insufficiently explored (Ramsey Soroghaye, Onalu, & Anyaegbu, 2023; Aguiar, Lopes, Brooks, & Shoukat, 2025; Cleoputri et al., 2023). This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on emerging adults active on social media, a group highly sensitive to public opinion and likely to experience more intense psychological pressure from negative digital interactions. By considering this psychological context, the study not only describes the cancel culture phenomenon but also analyzes its emotional, social, and behavioral impacts, including shame, social anxiety, and pressure to conform to digital public norms (Latief, 2023; Ulva, Dimala, & Maulidia, 2025).

Therefore, cancel culture is not merely a temporary social phenomenon but a digital-social mechanism that can significantly impact the mental well-being of emerging adults. This phenomenon demands serious academic attention, as a deeper understanding of the mechanisms, perceptions, and individual experiences of cancel culture will enable the formulation of more effective prevention strategies and psychological interventions. Such research is essential to support young adults in managing digital social pressures, enhancing mental health, and reducing the risk of social anxiety exacerbated by social media interactions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach based on secondary data, aiming to provide an in-depth depiction of the relationship between cancel culture and social anxiety in emerging adults. The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for capturing the complexity of digital social phenomena, including the dynamics of social media interactions, public perceptions, and individual psychological experiences, without the need for primary data collection. This method enables a more contextual, thorough, and reflective analysis of the existing literature, allowing for the identification of patterns, themes, and psychological implications emerging from the phenomenon of cancel culture.

The study's data sources consisted of scholarly journal articles addressing cancel culture and its psychological impacts, including studies that examined cyber-ostracism, digital social pressure, and experiences of anxiety on social media. All articles used were selected from valid DOIs and had been previously verified, ensuring the quality, credibility, and traceability of the secondary data analyzed. The literature selection was conducted systematically, with a focus on studies relevant to emerging adults and highlighting the psychological and social dimensions of cancel culture.

The data analysis procedure was conducted thematically through several systematic stages. First, all literature was read thoroughly to understand the context, objectives, and key

findings of each study. Second, sections relevant to the psychological impacts of cancel culture—such as social anxiety, social isolation, self-censorship, avoidance of interaction, and pressure to conform—were identified and coded. Third, a comparative analysis was performed, organizing codes based on recurring themes to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships among variables. Finally, these findings were synthesized into a cohesive descriptive narrative that comprehensively illustrates how cancel culture interacts with social anxiety and the psychological experiences of emerging adults.

This approach offers several methodological advantages. First, it allows the study to provide a deep and contextual understanding of complex digital-social phenomena without requiring time-consuming and costly primary data collection. Second, thematic analysis enables the exploration of psychological nuances that may not be captured in quantitative studies or large-scale surveys, such as emotional reactions, coping patterns, and long-term impacts on mental well-being. Third, this method provides a strong conceptual foundation for subsequent research or psychological interventions targeting emerging adults, particularly in managing public and collective digital social pressures.

Thus, the descriptive qualitative approach based on literature not only allows for the exploration of new and complex phenomena such as cancel culture but also offers empirical and theoretical insights that can be used to understand and mitigate its psychological impact on highly active social media users within the emerging adult population. This study emphasizes that cancel culture is not merely a temporary social phenomenon but a mechanism that influences social interactions, self-image, and individual mental health in the digital era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literature analysis indicates that cancel culture exerts broad and significant psychological impacts on emerging adults, particularly those who are highly active on social media as a means of social interaction, self-identity, and social validation. This phenomenon not only targets individuals directly perceived as violating social norms but also affects observers or audiences through collective and ongoing social pressure (Adeyemi, 2025; Ramsey Soroghaye, Onalu, & Anyaegbu, 2023). This pressure arises because every action or statement made by an individual in digital spaces has the potential to be evaluated and criticized by a large audience, generating fear of speaking out, concerns about public judgment, and heightened social anxiety.

These psychological effects often manifest in self-censorship, where individuals consciously limit their self-expression, refrain from sharing opinions, or adjust their behavior to avoid controversy. Self-censorship is not limited to the direct targets of cancel culture; it also affects observers who aim to remain safe within digital social interactions. In other words, cancel culture creates an intimidating social environment in which individuals feel constantly under collective scrutiny and compelled to conform to sometimes ambiguous social norms.

Social media has become a public arena that continuously monitors and evaluates individuals' identities, behaviors, and self-image. Within this context, every digital interaction—whether comments, posts, stories, or even likes—is not merely a simple action but can be publicly interpreted and serve as a subject of broad social judgment. This evaluative process is multidimensional, involving not only the immediate assessment of friends or followers but also potential discussion, commentary, or reactions from a wider audience, including strangers, generating ongoing social pressure.

This pressure is repetitive and cumulative, as negative experiences or exposure to cancel culture heighten individuals' awareness of potential public criticism. The psychological impact progresses over time: social anxiety intensifies with repeated exposure to digital exclusion, and feelings of insecurity in online interactions increase as

individuals begin to perceive every post or comment as a potential source of conflict or threat to their self-image. Consequently, individuals develop defensive behaviors in subsequent digital interactions. These behaviors may include self-censorship—limiting the expression of opinions, deleting previously shared content, or avoiding interactions with certain friends or followers. Repeated public pressure can also induce fear of socialization, reduce participation in online discussions, and lead to feelings of social isolation, further reinforcing the cycle of social anxiety.

Latief (2023) highlights that on platforms like Instagram, cancel culture can trigger feelings of shame, fear of interaction, and pressure to maintain self-image, prompting individuals to exercise caution in every action or expression they share digitally. These findings indicate that social media interactions are not only communication channels but also emotional and psychological arenas, where each comment, post, or public reaction can shape deep emotional experiences. For emerging adults, aged 18–29, who are in the process of developing their identities and social connections, dependence on social media makes them particularly vulnerable to these negative effects. As a result, social anxiety increases, insecurity becomes more pronounced, and individuals tend to adopt defensive behaviors, such as self-censorship or avoidance of digital interactions, to mitigate the risk of public criticism.

Beyond the direct impact on targets of cancel culture, public perceptions of the phenomenon vary and influence psychological experiences differently. Some individuals view cancel culture as a form of social responsibility to uphold norms and justice, holding those who violate social standards collectively accountable (Salisah, Auwaly, Umu, & Kusuma Putri, 2025; Rianto, Sulkhan, & Marantika, 2025). In this context, cancel culture functions as a digital social regulation mechanism that emphasizes compliance with norms and public expectations.

Conversely, others perceive cancel culture as excessive digital persecution, which can produce negative psychological effects such as chronic stress, social isolation, prolonged shame, and heightened social anxiety (Hasna & Hendratomo, 2025; Rijal, 2025). These divergent perceptions indicate that cancel culture is not a homogeneous social phenomenon but a complex one that intertwines moral, social, and psychological dimensions. For emerging adults, these experiences can create internal tension between the desire to participate in digital interactions and the need to protect their self-image, significantly impacting their mental well-being. Literature suggests that the combination of digital social pressure and social media dependence can create a repetitive psychological impact cycle. Fear and social anxiety lead individuals to become more cautious in digital interactions, which in turn increases social isolation, reduces self-confidence, and reinforces defensive behaviors.

Psychological factors such as social media addiction, self-dissatisfaction, and fear of missing out (FOMO) can amplify the impact of cancel culture on social anxiety among emerging adults (Aslamiyah, Santi, & Ananta, 2022; Ulva, Dimala, & Maulidia, 2025). Individuals prone to frequent social comparison are more vulnerable to psychological pressure, experiencing feelings of shame, failure, or inadequacy when confronted with negative feedback, public criticism, or digital exclusion stemming from cancel culture. This process can intensify social anxiety, as individuals feel constantly monitored and judged, making social interactions tense and cautious.

Additionally, experiences of cyber-ostracism, or digital exclusion, arising from cancel culture, can provoke social isolation, lower self-esteem, and self-censorship behaviors (Cleoputri et al., 2023; Aguiar, Lopes, Brooks, & Shoukat, 2025). When

individuals perceive that any digital interaction might elicit negative responses from the public or online communities, they tend to limit self-expression, reduce participation in digital conversations, or even withdraw from certain social media platforms. This self-censorship not only affects direct social interactions but can also produce long-term psychological effects, such as increased stress, insecurity, and vulnerability to repeated digital social pressure.

The combination of social media addiction, self-dissatisfaction, and exposure to cancel culture creates a negative feedback loop that reinforces social anxiety. The more frequently individuals are exposed to exclusionary or collective criticism, the greater the psychological pressure they experience. This emphasizes that cancel culture is not merely a temporary social phenomenon but a digital mechanism capable of influencing psychological well-being, shaping defensive interaction patterns, and triggering recurring emotional tension among emerging adults. Cancel culture functions as a complex socio-digital mechanism that reflects social norms and expectations while amplifying social anxiety dynamics in emerging adults. The phenomenon creates a digital environment where every action, statement, or post can become an object of public evaluation. Consequently, emerging adults, who are still developing their identities and social images, face constant pressure to conform to collective and sometimes ambiguous digital norms.

The pressure to conform elicits intense emotional reactions, including fear, shame, and recurrent anxiety. When individuals perceive that even minor mistakes or controversial comments could trigger judgment or digital exclusion, psychological stress increases progressively. Moreover, this pressure reinforces defensive behaviors, such as self-censorship, limiting self-expression or avoiding social interaction to reduce the risk of public criticism. Over time, these defensive strategies may result in social isolation, where individuals feel disconnected from social networks or fear participating in healthy digital conversations. The psychological impact of cancel culture is not merely temporary but can have long-term consequences for the mental well-being of emerging adults. Continuous pressure to maintain self-image can reduce self-confidence, heighten social anxiety, and reinforce insecurity in social interactions, both online and offline. Additionally, the combination of digital social pressure and social media dependence can create a cumulative stress loop, where individuals increasingly avoid interactions, feel isolated, and constantly worry about public evaluation.

Based on the literature analysis, cancel culture has multidimensional impacts that are interconnected emotional, behavioral, and social cumulatively reinforcing psychological risks for emerging adults:

1. Emotional impact

Cancel culture triggers intense and multifaceted emotional responses. Individuals who are targets or observers of digital exclusion often experience profound shame, particularly when their behaviors, opinions, or online expressions are publicly criticized or scrutinized (Latief, 2023). This shame is compounded by a pervasive fear of interaction, as every comment, post, story, or reaction can potentially provoke conflict, criticism, or social judgment from a broad audience. The resulting psychological pressure is cumulative and persistent because digital interactions create an environment in which behavior and self-image are continuously monitored, evaluated, and potentially penalized by peers, followers, or even unknown observers.

These emotional impacts extend beyond momentary discomfort, influencing long-term mental health outcomes such as heightened social anxiety, diminished self-

confidence, and chronic stress. Moreover, the experience of observing cancel culture indirectly witnessing others being criticized or excluded can elicit vicarious emotional responses, including anticipatory anxiety, hypervigilance, and self-consciousness, further reinforcing defensive or avoidant behaviors in digital spaces. Collectively, these emotional consequences illustrate that cancel culture is not merely a social phenomenon but a potent psychological stressor, capable of shaping the way emerging adults perceive themselves, regulate their social interactions, and navigate the expectations of online communities.

2. Behavioral impact

Emotional responses from cancel culture often extend into observable behavioral changes in how individuals engage with digital environments. One of the most consistent behavioral patterns identified in the literature is self-censorship, wherein individuals consciously limit their self-expression to avoid potential backlash or public criticism. In practice, this may involve refraining from sharing opinions on sensitive topics, deleting posts that could be perceived as controversial, or moderating language to fit perceived social standards. This self-suppression is not limited to those who have been directly targeted by cancel culture but also affects observers who internalize the risk of criticism and adjust their online conduct accordingly, a phenomenon highlighted in psychological analyses of cancel culture's effects on speech and interaction (Adeyemi, 2025).

Interaction avoidance is another behavioral consequence; individuals may reduce their participation in online discussions or deliberately disengage from communities perceived as judgmental or hostile. This avoidance can manifest as lower posting frequency, reluctance to comment on contentious issues, or even withdrawal from certain platforms altogether. These patterns reflect more than momentary discomfort: they signify a defensive coping strategy aimed at minimizing exposure to public evaluation and potential reputational harm. Research in digital communication studies has shown that perceptions of surveillance, potential backlash, and regulatory ambiguity contribute to increased self-censorship and reduced willingness to speak openly in online spaces, especially around controversial subjects.

Additionally, individuals may adjust their behavior to conform to dominant norms or align with perceived majority views to avoid criticism. This can take the form of mimicking widely accepted viewpoints, altering communication styles to reduce disagreement, or prioritizing “safe” topics over substantive engagement. Such adaptations are consistent with broader theories in communication research—such as the spiral of silence, which suggest that fear of social isolation and negative feedback encourages conformity and suppresses diversity of opinion, thereby chilling open dialogue.

3. Social impact

Social impacts arise when individuals experience digital isolation, either due to being directly shunned by online communities or voluntarily withdrawing to avoid criticism. Public opinion pressure also plays a crucial role, as the perception that actions or statements may be evaluated by a broad audience creates a restrictive social environment. Emerging adults, who are highly sensitive to public opinion, are more affected, resulting in limited social interactions, increased social estrangement, diminished support networks, and heightened feelings of loneliness (Aslamiyah, Santi, & Ananta, 2022; Ulva, Dimala, & Maulidia, 2025).

These three dimensions interact and reinforce one another. For example, social

pressure from public opinion can increase shame and anxiety, triggering self-censorship and interaction avoidance, which in turn exacerbates social isolation. The dynamic interplay among emotional, behavioral, and social aspects creates a sustained psychological risk pattern, making emerging adults particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of cancel culture, especially those who are highly active on social media and sensitive to public judgment.

Consequently, these findings highlight the urgency of research and psychological interventions specifically targeting emerging adults. Cancel culture not only generates temporary digital social pressure but also has long-term psychological effects, including heightened social anxiety, isolation, and self-censorship. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms, experiences, and perceptions of individuals regarding cancel culture is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate psychological risks.

Potential intervention strategies include digital literacy education, aimed at improving social-digital skills and enabling individuals to evaluate, understand, and respond adaptively to online criticism or pressure. Strengthening psychological resilience is also essential, allowing emerging adults to manage stress, reduce fear or shame, and maintain mental well-being despite collective social pressure. Adaptive mental health interventions, including mindfulness-based coping techniques, digital counseling, and peer-to-peer social support, can facilitate safer and healthier social media experiences. Understanding the diversity of public perceptions toward cancel culture—as social responsibility or digital persecution can further help design interventions sensitive to the social, cultural, and psychological contexts of emerging adults. For instance, interventions that emphasize critical understanding of social norms can help individuals assess when criticism is constructive or potentially harmful to mental health.

By integrating digital education, resilience-building, and psychological interventions, this research demonstrates that mitigating the impacts of cancel culture can be conducted proactively. This approach is not only crucial for reducing social anxiety and psychological stress but also for supporting emerging adults in developing healthy self-identity, maintaining social image, and interacting adaptively in complex digital environments. Thus, comprehensive understanding of cancel culture provides a scientific and practical foundation for developing policies, educational programs, and psychological interventions targeted at young adults in the social media era.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that cancel culture functions as a complex socio-digital phenomenon with multidimensional psychological impacts on emerging adults, particularly those aged 18–29 who are highly active on social media. The analysis of existing literature indicates that cancel culture not only affects the direct targets of public criticism but also exerts pressure on observers, creating a pervasive environment of social evaluation and judgment.

The psychological consequences are multidimensional: emotionally, it triggers shame, fear of interaction, and cumulative stress; behaviorally, it promotes self-censorship, avoidance of digital interactions, and adjustment of behavior to conform to social norms; socially, it leads to digital isolation and intensifies pressure from public opinion. These dimensions are interconnected and reinforce one another, producing sustained risks for social anxiety and reduced well-being among emerging adults. Individual factors such as social media addiction, self-dissatisfaction, and fear of missing out (FOMO) further amplify the effects of cancel culture, creating a cycle of heightened

psychological stress, defensive behavior, and social withdrawal. This underscores that cancel culture is not merely a temporary social trend but a digital mechanism with significant and potentially long-lasting effects on mental health.

Given these findings, it is crucial to implement **intervention strategies** targeting emerging adults, including digital literacy education, resilience-building programs, and adaptive mental health support such as mindfulness-based coping, digital counseling, and peer-to-peer support. A nuanced understanding of public perceptions of cancel culture, whether as social responsibility or digital persecution, can inform interventions that are socially, culturally, and psychologically sensitive.

Ultimately, addressing the psychological impact of cancel culture is essential not only for reducing social anxiety, stress, and isolation but also for supporting emerging adults in developing healthy self-identity, maintaining social image, and interacting adaptively in complex digital environments.

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