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Let Justice Be Done: Cancel Culture and Demanding Social Changes in Vietnam

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Abstract

Cancel culture - a term once mainly used by social media users, is now frequently mentioned and wielded across traditional news institutions and politicians alike. Popularized during the #MeToo movement around 2017, it was originally embraced as an empowering tool for those marginalized in society. However, cancel culture is now increasingly denounced as emblematic of digital ills and sometimes used as a tool to actually suppress minority voices. Thus, drawing from case studies of online call-outs and cancellation, scholarship on cancel culture, and debates in mainstream and alternative journalism or activist groups, this research project is meant to examine the reasons and context leading to this transformation and discuss more broadly about the escalating use of social media to enact democratic change and demand the disruption of the status quo. Nevertheless, cancel culture is currently mostly studied from an Anglo-American context. In order to theorize it more comprehensively and centrally in digital media studies, I also situate this research at an international and intercultural level by examining how cancel culture is performed in Vietnamese platforms with specific attention to the conditions and the nature of online discourse.

Introduction

On July 7, 2020, a letter was published on the *Harper's Magazine* website and named *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate*. "The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes them less capable of democratic participation," the letter wrote. "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away." Commonly known as Harper Letter, it attracted a total of 153 signatories across scholars, writers and other public figures to defend free speech, but most important of all, to denounce and fight against "cancel culture".

While there are multiple definition on 'cancel culture', it is generally agreed that the term refers to withdrawal of any kind of support - viewership, social media follows, fanbase, purchases of products endorsed by the person - for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable, often from a social justice perspective, especially alerting to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism or bullying (Mahan, 2019; Ng, 2020). Oftentimes, these problematic remarks and behavior resurface from the accused's distant past - screenshots of old tweets or old videos - and then would attract new attention and be canceled publicly as a signal that others should withdraw their support as well (Brito, 2021; Mahan, 2019).

In the past few years in the United States, the rise of online activism and more particularly cancel culture has led to somewhat optimistic outcomes - such as the surge of #MeToo movement effectively reckoning Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein and bringing a sex abuser to justice, or the social movement in Arab Spring (Castells, 2012). However, I first realized the paradox of cancel culture during July 2018. James Gunn - the famous director of blockbuster *Guardians of the Galaxy* - was fired by Disney for joke tweets about pedophilia and

rape. It did not matter to the public, or the company, that these tweets were made a decade ago and the filmmaker had previously apologized. For them, consequences are necessary, and the target must either get fired, deplatformed, or to sum up, get "canceled".

The paradox lies in how those consequences are often short-term. By March 2019, James Gunn was reinstated by Walt Disney Studios as the director of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*. Thus, it is questionable whether the act of "canceling" - leaving no room for constructive conversation, growth and forgiveness - could make any real and lasting impact on individuals and society. Moreover, as shown by the political campaign and use of social media by former U.S. President Donald Trump, digital practices could be misused and give more power to influential figures to silence the minority (Tufekci, 2018). Therefore, the role of cancel culture in calling for social justice is also questionable, especially regarding if it has become a tool to suppress the voices of marginalized groups.

While there are many other similar cases in the U.S, it is equally important to examine online spaces beyond Anglo-American viewpoints. Thus, for this project, I want to look into Vietnam's canceling cases to understand more about how cancel culture is transmitted globally and how it is tied to social activism in Vietnam. By comparing the effects of cancel culture, political and cultural contexts between Vietnam and the U.S., I could also explore more about Vietnam's opportunities (or threats) for utilizing digital platforms as a tool to enact social changes. These comparisons and analysis could even illustrate how digital technologies (like social media) are changing political communication and participation, as well as influencing democratization and authoritarian resilience. Such multi-pronged agendas, realized unevenly in the fields of intercultural communication and media studies will then help us answer if digital

technologies have shifted from promising instruments for promoting social changes to tools for derailing them across different countries around the world.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Public Shaming and Digital Transformation

Cancel culture has had a long contested lineage. The term might be new, but the human impulses propelling it are aged-old and the core idea is far from novel (Henderson, 2019). For example, in The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne depicted how a young beautiful woman living in 1640 Puritan Boston, Hester Bryne, had to wear a letter "A" as a reminder of her adultery and a symbol of shame. The act of cancelling then could be said to be a variant of public shaming - a process in which "citizens publicly and self-consciously draw attention to the bad dispositions or actions of an offender" as a form of punishment or retribution for engaging in those actions (Kahan & Posner, 1999, as cited by Hou et al., 2017, p. 1; Mishans, 2020). The motives behind public shaming often come from the desire to (1) ensure conformity to social norms through self-regulation and (2) exercise social control for group solidarity and deterring deviance (Hou et al., 2017).

With the help of Internet and digital networks, public shaming has escalated significantly with real and serious life consequences in the past decades. The Internet has transitioned from a platform for people to share information, voice viewpoint and participate in civic discourse to a battlefield to call for punishment for those who have violated social norms, for those who are deemed as "moral transgressors". A lot of the time, the target's personal web pages are met with numerous angry and abusive comments. And with Internet rapid information transmission, the effects of online shaming can be far-reaching and take place with great immediacy as it comes

with the exposure of personal identifiable information of the offenders, escalation into a form of mob trials, and offline harassment (Hou et al., 2017).

Yet, as our era is undergoing major and rapid changes regarding moral standards and cultural sensitivities around the construction of social identities, it is argued that powerful and public figures should be held accountable for their words, actions or even inactions. From this perspective, public shaming plays a legitimate role for those traditionally powerless to criticize the use of derogatory language (for example racial or homophobic slurs) or engagement in cultural appropriation, as well as to highlight the abuse of power like sexual harassment (Norris, 2021). Therefore, the act of public shaming is now often thought as a form of activism, and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter has been embraced as promising instruments to mobilize collective efforts for social activism and promote democratic participation (Castells, 2012; Mercea, 2013; Ng, 2020; Norris, 2021).

Cancel Culture and Activism on Social Media

While cancellation might have happened for a long time, what is unique about the contemporary cancel culture, is the potential reach facilitated by social media. Call-outs now can go viral globally, and be instantly provoked by a massive audience with the use of hashtag, retweet, sharing or comments. Furthermore, what starts on online platforms does not necessarily stay on online platforms only. Viral posts and hashtags with accusations against famous high-profile figures are often accompanied with extensive coverage in traditional media, like cable TV, talk radio or op-ed commentary (Norris, 2021).

Indeed, over the past decades, networked digital media have played an increasingly prominent role in social and political protest across the world (Castells, 2012; Mercea, 2013; Ng, 2020; Penny et al., 2014). Studies have pointed out a number of key functions of the social web

that are well-served for democratic movements. First of all, social media allows activists to bypass mainstream TV coverage and thus be used as citizen journalism via mobile devices. Secondly, the affordances of internet technology has effectively enabled direct online action very quickly and with little effort (Bünte, 2021; Ng, 2020; Penny et al., 2014). A prominent example would be the use of Twitter hashtag to plan marches and protests, share stories collaboratively, connect communities and render into public for social change (Mbabazi & Mbabazi, 2018; Ott, 2017; Papacharissi, 2016).

In a way then, social media has given the voice to the previously marginalized, disenfranchised and voiceless and massively expanded opportunities for activism and new ways to strengthen civic society (Bouvier et al., 2021; Clark, 2020; Hou et al., 2017; Ng, 2020; Sinpeng et al., 2021). This is especially important considering that up until now, public discourse has been controlled by the elites, social media opens decentralized networks for average, like-minded citizens to gather and speak back from below (Clark, 2020). Past targets of this movement were often powerful public figures who have appeared for many as above the reach of the law. Yet progressive movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter succeeded in holding them accountable and in some cases leading to legal prosecutions. Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby are convicted as sex offenders and now in prison (Italie, 2020). Within days of his first sexual harrassment allegations, several women felt encouraged to come forwards and Harvey Weinstein was eventually sacked from the board of his company with immediate effect, banned from The Producers Guild of America, expelled from The Television Academy, and even faced a bankruptcy. Countless accusations also pressured Bill Cosby to resign as honorary co-chair of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst's capital campaign, Temple University's board of trustees, and got his honorary degrees and honorary doctorate revoked.

#BlackLivesMatter digital activists, on the other hand, have shed light on multiple fatal cases of police brutality in communities of color (George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, to name a few), racial stereotypes employed to sell consumer products, or university departments lacking in diversity.

From this view, cancel culture could be viewed as an useful tool, a collective strategy to ostracize targets (someone or something) for offensive deeds or violating social norms (Norris, 2021; Sailofsky, 2021). The goal is to use social pressure to sanction powerful individuals directly and hold them accountable, such as by damaging reputations and careers, to shut them down from public platforms and establish ground for legal prosecution. The broader and more indirect goal is to "share collective expressions of moral outrage, mobilize public opinion, and demand actions from decision makers" (Norris, 2021, p. 4).

Cancel Culture and Criticism in the U.S.

Even with all the promising outcomes, as canceling cases proliferate and sometimes go out of hand, heated debate and deep division has appeared on the effects of this culture and the constant online calls-out. Most notable of all might be the Harper's Letter which denounces cancel culture as "restriction of debate" and "hurt[s] those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation". The letter was widely endorsed across scholars, writers and other public figures like J.K. Rowling, Margaret Atwood, Malcolm Gladwell and Noam Chomsky. In another case, during an interview about youth activism at the Obama Foundation summit in 2019, former President Barack Obama also objected to the prevalence of "call-out culture" and "wokeness" during his interview, and expressed doubt about its ability to bring about change. He mentioned, "If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far. That's easy to do" (Rueb & Taylor, 2019).

Some scholars do agree with these criticisms, citing that social media often does not lead to a nuanced discussion, but leads to binary polarities of good and evil (Bouvier, 2019; Brooks, 2019; Norris, 2021; Papacharissi, 2016, and of the homophily and confirmation bias effects (Papacharissi, 2016). Some also cite that online activism is based largely on symbolism and buzzwords rather than careful consideration of the issues (Bouvier & Cheng, 2019). The optimism of online activism is also tempered by the fact that these digital networks like Twitter or Facebook are administered and policed by external commercial entities which might not always operate with the interests of the movement and restrict protesters' ability to freely compose and circulate texts (Penny et al., 2014). These include the possibilities of politically motivated censorship, or unwanted surveillance from authorities who have legal right to access digital records.

Thus, different opinions on the effects and origins of cancel culture have also popped up in the last few years. Some argue that it is driven by the immediate pleasure brought by social and status cohesion (Henderson, 2019); others contend that it is motivated by the belief they are working together to fight for justice and help the vulnerable (Bérubé, 2018), or that they are morally good (Spratt, 2022). There are also people, however, depict it as another form of political correctness, or the zealotry when taking others down (Brooks, 2019; Toebe, 2020), or identity politics going too far and dangerous for civilization (Furedi, 2020).

Additionally, some argue that cancel culture does not necessarily lead to the much needed systematic change. Instead, it leads to woke capitalism - where corporates and brands "purport to take a stand against social injustice by removing a person from a job or releasing a statement, without making any substantial changes to the systems that allow those behaviors or beliefs to perpetuate" (Sailofsky, 2021, p. 4). Similarly, it is also highlighted that the internet creates

clicktivism and slacktivism, or feel good social activism without any social impact (Gladwell, 2010 as cited in Bünte, 2021; Spratt, 2022).

What's more important, cancel culture often disproportionately affects people with less power and privileges than prominent figures (Bovy, 2020; Brito 2021; Mahan, 2019; Ng, 2020; Sailofsky, 2021). With the passage of time, it is not uncommon to see celebrities and people of power re-emerge in the public scene, not to mention use it to their advantage by creating publicity around themselves. A few example includes Donald Trump, J.K Rowling, or Louis C.K. and Kanye West - who will still enjoy patronage from fans willing to extend room for "growth" just like all the other celebrities who have incurred backlash (Butler, 2018; Mahan, 2019; Ng, 2020).

On the other hand, for average everyday people or those traditionally vulnerable, a mistake caught on social media can follow them for years as the mob mentality of cancel culture can be extremely damaging (Bovy, 2020; Mahan, 2019). Particularly, a data analyst tweeted out the findings of a research paper about the ineffectiveness of violent race protests to Democratic vote share and was fired and removed from his progressive data listserv despite his immediate apology on Twitter (Chait, 2020). Emily, a member of the hard-core punk music band in Richmond and previously lost her job whilst defending a woman, suddenly became the object of nationwide group hate and called out on social media because of a mean emoji she left at one nude photo roughly a decade ago (Brooks, 2019; Ng, 2020)

These examples also point out the fact that cancellation often lacks due process, nuance and complexity, not to mention the brutality of the campaign is not proportional to the original transgression (Bouvier et al, 2021; Brooks, 2019; Ng, 2020; Sailofsky, 2021). Cancel culture leaves no room for constructive discourse as social media often delivers a quick verdict and thus

allowing no opportunity for the "cancelled" person to explain themselves and make their case against their own "cancellation", or the evaluation on how they should be judged (Brooks, 2019). Thus, cancel culture has gradually evolved from an empowering tool to a digital ills that stifles free speech and inches our society toward self-censorship when the population acts as "thought police" (Polumbo, 2020; Sailofsky, 2021). It creates an atmosphere of fear and prevents those who desire change from speaking out, while those in favor of the status quo could keep remaining silent (Henderson, 2019; Polumbo, 2020).

Yet, it has been argued that those demonizing cancel culture only wish to protect historically privileged people (Clark, 2020; Italie, 2020; Sailofsky, 2021). By cancelling cancel culture, these privileged, un-cancellables voices thus frame the accountability and consequences they are facing as exaggerated and far-fetching to minimize the severity of their behavior and discredit marginalized voices. And while call-outs may have their problematic characteristics, their presence indicates that existing institutions are failing to address the very real and pressing public concerns over social justice. If hashtags and online activism risk simplification, ideological extremes and moral incivility, what are the justifications for cases where campaigns seek to cancel individuals are warranted like #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter movements. Discussion around cancel culture is thus so timely and important as it raises questions about inequality, accountability, social justice and democracy.

Cancel Culture and Emergence in Vietnam

While the political work of cancel culture has currently spread across the globe and on multiple media ecosystems, there is rarely a study examining the way cancel campaigns can provide minority groups the chance to play a role in democratizing and negotiating the elite control over mainstream media outside of Anglo-American context (Ng, 2020). In Vietnam

specifically, with the rise of social media uses and changes in culture and norms over the past decades, cancel culture might have taken place, yet barely documented. Still, there exist a few studies upon the role of social media on online behaviors and activism in the region.

It is worth pointing out that the majority of Vietnamese people use Facebook instead of Twitter. As of recent statistics, Facebook had 70.4 million users in Vietnam in early 2022, which accounts for 71.4 percent of the total population and 97.6 percent of those having access to the Internet (Kemp, 2022). In situations where access to other media was restricted, controlled or otherwise not trusted, Facebook quickly emerged as a platform for news sharing and information dissemination. Particularly, Facebook is used in news breaking, in anticipation of events that are about to happen or already happening.

In some cases, Facebook was used as an instrument for democratic participation and led to real life social impact. In 2015, when the Hanoi city administration announced a plan to cut approximately 6,700 trees from the city's boulevards, a Facebook page named "6,700 people for 6,700 trees" appeared and gained massive attention. Its collective networks and mobilization subsequently led to protests in the capital city, and successfully pressed the government to halt its original plan.

It is worth remembering that Vietnam is politically, socially and culturally different from the United States (and most Western countries) and its media landscape, online participation and mobilization is hence fundamentally different. Studies have pointed out that Vietnam has not dared to shut down social media directly (for fear of backlash and increased criticism), yet it does engage in several forms of content control or content manipulation beyond the legal sphere or outright repression (Bünte, 2021). The country has a military cyber department of 10,000

troops called "Forced 47" whose task is to defend the party and the government from online dissidents (Reporters without Borders, 2022).

What's more, social media networks in Vietnam have changed from a tool for promoting democracy and collective efforts to something derailing them. First of all, there is a drive for instantaneity in news reporting, for filling news stories with high intensity but little substance or fact-checking on the Vietnam media landscape (Sinpeng et al., 2021). Secondly, over the past decades, multiple reports of mob mentality, or the massive personal attacks of a person on the Internet as a form of punishment for straying from social norm have dominated scholarly discussion. As Dr. Dang Hoang Giang pointed out in his best seller book *Bức xúc không làm ta vô can* "Frustration Doesn't Make You Irrelevant" and *Thiện, Ác và Smartphone* "The Good, The Bad and Smartphone", the crowd effect gives individuals the anonymity, excitement, and a sense of power that could push them into committing acts they would not normally do. All these arguments point out that while the term cancel culture rarely appears on public media or academic research, the act of public shaming, boycotting and calling out people on social media has existed for a long time in Vietnam.

As a result, this project aims to look more closely at digital practices and how they are tied to social movements and sense of justice in Vietnam. More specifically, I want to examine how cancel culture in Vietnam is different from previous research on Anglo-American counterparts, especially considering its media landscape and political regime. Based on the findings, I hope to further the discussion around using digital networks like Facebook for grassroots activism.

Methodology

Data Collection Process

This research employed both thematic analysis and discourse analysis on two case studies across different media platforms in Vietnam. The first case happened around March - October 2020 and is about a Vietnamese socialite, Nhung Nguyen, who contracted COVID-19 after attending high-end fashion shows in Europe and thus prolonged the government lockdown restrictions. Deemed as irresponsible, she was publicly shamed not only because of her behaviors, but also of her upper-class background and privileges. The second case involved Hoai Linh - a reputational Vietnamese comedian and actor, and his embezzlement over public donation - from its emergence around May 2021 originally as online call-outs until early January 2022 when it actually led to investigation.

The data for this research were pulled from Facebook - with around 20 posts (10 for case study one and 10 for case study two), over 1000 comments and replies - as well as online news surrounding these two cases within its corresponding timeframe. The data for this research came from diverse sources as such, the data set was often multimodal and multi-perspective. Data were also in different modes (audio, visual, textual) and from different points of view or subjectivities.

The Two Case Studies and Contexts

Case Number 1: Nhung Nguyen - COVID-19 patient number 17 in Vietnam

After the joyful celebration of Lunar New Year in early February 2020, the possibility of a new pandemic breakout known as COVID-19 started to dawn on the people living in Vietnam. As news of the virus' high transmission and death rate from other countries emerged, Hanoi began taking small steps to prevent virus spread while balancing with other interests like closing down certain parts of the city, or not having students return to schools.

As the situation continued for almost a month (February - early March 2020), confusion, anxiety and sometimes anger appeared as people were stocking their food, or arguing about how

long this virus could last, and detailing how government policies upset the economy and their financial interests so far. But most people held hope, and expectation for Hanoi to be fully open soon, and that everything would return to "normal", especially at the time Vietnam only recorded 16 cases and most involved people returning from abroad, not local transmission.

Thus, during the first week of March 2020, news about the government discussing the possibilities of opening up Hanoi buzzed all over social media and news coverage after several days not recording any new cases. All were met with excitement, eagerness, and optimism. Yet, right after a few hours, on the night of Friday, March 6th, the information of a new patient case 17 rose up and sent the whole mainstream media into an opposite direction. People were confused, and most important of all, angered because of the reasons why this patient, named Nhung Nguyen, was contacted with the virus. Prior to coming back to Vietnam, she was traveling from London to Milan, Italy on February 18th for the Gucci fashion show, and then to Paris for the Saint Laurent one. What angered the public more was the strong conviction that she was allowed to enter the country without any notice or isolation because she did not report any of her symptoms at the immigration checkpoint. As such, her wealthy and privileged background soon made headlines, along with her personal address, social media accounts and pictures in fashion regalia or at party scenes. With that information at hand, the internet went into full rage and left countless articles, posts, and comments not only 'canceling' her behavior, but her as a person.

Case Number 2: Hoai Linh - Scandal involving embezzlement over public donation

Around May 2021, Nguyen Phuong Hang - the CEO of the billion-revenue and multi-industry Dai Nam Joint Stock Company, published several livestream on her personal Youtube and Facebook channel to call out Saigon-based comedian Hoai Linh for embezzling the

VND13.4 billion ($581,742) he raised to support flood victims in the central region. Once

nationally praised for his philanthropic activities and generosity, Hoai Linh then suffered from a

tremendous amount of comments demanding him to show proof of his donation activities and

personal bank statements, or for TV producers to reconsider putting him on the show, or purely

personal attacks and disappointments. In a few months afterwards, Nguyen Phuong Hang

continued releasing several videos calling out Hoai Linh, the amount of canceling took place on

him increased tremendously, leaving little room for conversation and explanation. As the

situation unfolded, this cancellation not only cost Hoai Linh job prospects and damaged his

reputation, but also led to police investigation from the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism.

Examining this case could help answer how cancellation is often used as a form of online

activism, and whether it is effective or not in bringing out real justice.

Data Analysis Processes

The analysis involves two stages. The first is thematic analysis where I tried to find

patterns in a large set of data to describe, organize and interpret aspects of the topic. I actively

searched for the keywords related to the two cases on Facebook (with a limited timeframe), and

familiarized myself with posts, comments and articles shared about them. Each data was

inductively coded for its content and meaning. Based on the method of Saliofsky (2021), coding

is initially left open to let the data speak for itself and allow meaning and content categories to

emerge. Multiple code categories are often identified after the first round of analyzing and

coding the data. Then, a second round of coding will be conducted to correct inconsistencies

with the developed code categories and to group code under specific themes. Some comments or

post will be recorded more than one code and could fall into multiple categories and themes

The second stage involves discourse analysis. The discourse analysis in this project is

inspired by the works of mediated discourse analysis (MDA) proposed by Jones and Norris (2005). MDA has an increased focus on language "not as an abstract code but as a set of tools through which people realize particular social functions, and of discourse not as matter words, sentences or texts but as a matter of social action" (Jones & Norris, 2005, p. 6).

By combining two methods of thematic analysis and then discourse analysis, I could then study canceling cases in Vietnam holistically. The thematic analysis would lead to a detailed, closed-up look about how the Vietnamese public viewed both situations as they were happening, and help us identify 'core consistencies and meanings' within the responses (Patton, 2002, as cited in Sailofsky, 2021). MDA, on the other hand, granted us the full picture of how these responses interacted with each other and induced certain social and collective behaviors. What's more, MDA then revealed how these responses and actions created multiple layers of meaning and implication to cancel culture in Vietnam, as well as situate the analysis in a broader cultural context.

The analysis is also informed by the broad understanding of social practices. Online life is essentially social, and the role of people both online and offline is crucial. Therefore, social practices provide an additional understanding of how the social order is constrained, reproduced and modified (Snyder, 2015). Viewing the act of canceling as a social practice will then further investigation on the networks and other groupings people participate in, and the fluidity and flows in such online participation (Barton, 2015). This is especially important in light of the fact that canceling is a digital, social practice that is always changing to meet demands of new circumstances or to respond to the affordances and constraints of new cultural tools. While cancellation is different in its association with new digital technologies (and thus often referred to as digital practices), its use is still for attaining particular goals, enacting particular social

identities and reproducing particular sets of social relationships (Jones et al, 2015).

All being said, I hope to examine the role of cancel culture with particular focus on Vietnam. Still, I will also rely upon previous studies about the phenomenon in the U.S and see how the differences (or similarities) in culture and media environment could influence how Vietnamese audiences approach cancellation, how a target is located and ostracized. And whether its consequences are meaningful. By answering these questions, the project aims to broaden the understanding of a global experience but inadequately explored, and determine whether cancel culture is here to stay or be canceled for good.

Results and Findings

After analyzing the Facebook posts and responses from both case studies, I identified eight themes of how cancel culture is performed. These include Essentialism, Collective Anger or/and Disappointment, Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism, Punishment and No Forgiveness, Speculation and (Dis)Information, Rationalization, Pushback and Irrelevant. The summary of them could be found from the table below with more elaboration on each theme afterwards.

Table 1

Eight Themes of Cancel Culture in the Two Case Studies in Vietnam

Themes	Themes descriptions	Example
Essentialism	go from criticizing a person's actions to criticizing a person themselves (Wynn, 2020), and is often accompanied with cruel humor or meme	"Her wealth surely can't compensate for her stupidity at all" "I have always known he is not trustworthy at all. Look at that face!"

Collective Anger or/and Disappointment	express pure anger or disappointment for the person, the issue, or the whole system altogether	"It's all because of her that our country fell into this chaos" "I watched every comedy show of Hoai Linh and so admired his generosity. Now I just feel betrayed".
Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism	provide a forged pretext about why this person/ case needs extensive investigation or just deserves cancelation	"She's spreading the virus to the whole country! Can't let this slide easily"
Punishment and No Forgiveness	call for punishment for the offenders as their actions are utmost horrendous or their apologies/ explanation as insincere, and thus they deserve no forgiveness	"She should be shot to death" "Capital punishment is the way to go" "The government should give them the most severe punishment to deter similar acts!"
Speculation and (Dis)Information	speculate or update about the situation on a minute-by-minute basis, often accompanied by the offender's personal information, current location or situation	"I heard that she visited this shopping mall the other day! Be careful everyone because we can't know who might have gotten the virus" "I work at the bank and can verify that his bank statement is a fraud!"
Rationalization	voice their opinions and arguments for the matter without engaging in the shaming	"I hope that this scandal gets resolved soon because it is making everyone else scared of calling for public donation for people going through natural disasters"
Pushback	express disapproval for the leak of personal information or reactions of online community	"Regardless of her actions, her personal information should be protected", "I do not deny his wrongdoings, but I do not think online community should shame him further without knowing the whole truth"

Irrelevant	make irrelevant comments about the matter or the offender in point , or trolling comments	"Because of this girl that I want to change me name 😥" "If Hoai Linh can not spend all that money, I could help him!"

Note. Depending on the text unit's semantic complexity, each text unit (whether comment or reply) could fall under more than one theme. In general, the order for most common themes to least ones are Essentialism, Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism, Punishment and No Forgiveness, Irrelevant, Collective Anger or/and Disappointment, Pushback, Speculation and (Dis)Information and Rationalization.

Essentialism

Among all the themes, Essentialism could be said to occur the most. Instead of accusing the offender of doing something bad, Essentialism comments often conclude that the offender is inherently evil. For example, what was originally "Hoai Linh might embezzle public donations for the central region" became "Hoai Linh is a greedy and unscrupulous robber". So here netizens still target Hoai Linh himself, but not for this potential wrongdoing but for the type of person he is - a greedy and unscrupulous robber. Not to mention, these comments often go with foul languages, sarcasm and cruel humor, along with memes and parody.

This phenomenon might be explained through online anonymity which keeps people safe from identification and penalty for their offensive behavior. It also brings about dehumanization and deindividuation, thus reducing people's ability to regulate their online behaviors, freeing people from the pressures of social norms, conscience, morality and ethics to act with current emotional states with little awareness of others' thoughts and feelings. Additionally, these personal attacks often require little investment in terms of time and efforts researching the whole situation.

Collective Anger or/and Disappointment

Second most observed theme is Collective Anger and/or Disappointment which includes comments ranging from expressing how sad and disappointed they (the public) are after seeing everything unfold to pointing out what the target could have done to simply curse words. This type is often seen in the case of Hoai Linh - a household name comedian and much known for his philanthropic works. They mostly came from his past fans (" It's sad that I have always trusted these lies") or those showing sympathy for people in the central region ("It's heartbroken to know the people in the central region was trying to survive the flood and COVID-19 but they received none of the support that he promised"). Additionally, netizens sometimes express discontent about the whole system that allows privileged individuals (like Nhung and Hoai Linh) to abuse power and effortlessly hide their frauds without any consequences ("I have never trusted the whole celebrities donation thing! It's crazy how they got so much money and connections with the authorities that they could keep getting richer by deceiving the ordinary people!").

Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism

Originally, Nhung was publicly shamed for just not reporting her health properly at the immigration checkpoint, whilst Hoai Linh was called out because of the public donation embezzlement. Shocking as they might be, these accusations were thrown at the targets without any investigation, context, or explanations. Yet, as the discourse evolved, mortal and intellectual pretexts of why they both deserved all the shaming and calls-out were forged out, particularly for the public to self-validate their mob attacks, cynicism and insulting condemnation. This type of comments is what I call Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism comments, and they are consistent with what Natalie (2020) noted, "[y]ou can pretend you just want an apology; you can pretend you're just a 'concerned citizen' who wants the person to improve. You can pretend

you're simply offering up criticism, when what you're really doing is attacking a person's career and reputation out of spite, envy, revenge".

Yet, for those posting and commenting, there is a powerful sense that they are fighting for social justice through emotional intensity of moral rage, the shouting in all caps or frequent use of exclamation points as well as the unflinching modality of staring the perpetrator down. And this is also experienced as collective mobilization, as seen in the constant use of "we" and simulated conversation about what the offenders have done wrong to the public and the whole nation.

Notably, this theme was highly present in the case of Nhung where citizens expressed sympathy or regrets about how all the hard works preventing COVID-19 of the government were wasted because of her. These comments were accompanied with the pictures of Vu Duc Dam (Deputy Prime Minister of Vietnam and who was in charge of COVID-19 prevention at the time) or of frontline doctors to reinforce a sense of unity in the battle of "Us vs Nhung" and show how responsible and attentive citizens they are.

Punishment and No Forgiveness

The Punishment and No Forgiveness theme ran far and wide across both cases. Whether the targets offered an explanation and apology or not, the cancelers troop would still dismiss it and throw accusations frivolously at them. Interestingly, Punishment and No Forgiveness comments are often paired with Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism or Essentialism ones, as if the audience was imagining themselves to be a judge pronouncing a final verdict.

Yet, Punishment and No Forgiveness responses often involved the arguments based on their emotion and moral rage instead of legal and rational consideration. Thus, the penalties are significantly disproportionate to what the target caused. People were urging Nhung to be

sentenced to capital punishment, shot to death, expelled from the country, and that she did not deserve the COVID-19 treatment. Hoai Linh, on the other hand, should be fired from all his current comedy shows and put into prison.

It is questionable if cancel culture is, and should be used for social justice. Regardless of the motives, these Punishment and No Forgiveness responses were already somehow one-sided and do not leave room for conversation or due process. Essentially, it does not promote understanding but conflicts, and is weaponized to destroy individuals but leaving space for them to reflect and grow.

Speculation and (Dis)Information

Along with official news published about both situations, the audience also participates in the investigating and reporting process. Comments within this theme often began by affirming their legitimacy. Then, they would update about the target's current whereabouts, and connect what they experience first hand with what's being posted on Facebook or official news. For example, in the case of Nhung, many claimed to be a doctor/ officer/ nurse working in the hospital where she received treatment from and constantly posted pictures of her getting treatment, or whether her health got better or worse, or other little detail about her whereabouts that did not get published on official news. In a way, this theme reflects how cancellation culture on digital networks allows every user to throw more or less related, or even tangential issues and details to the affective flow (Bouvier, 2019, as cited in Bouvier et al., 2021).

Yet, a faster flow of information without the traditional in-depth research and verification also means that a lot of disinformation about the target, or the situations regarding the target was spread and even made headlines sometimes. For example, as soon as Nhung was confirmed to have contracted the virus, rumors about her attending the opening ceremony of a new shopping

mall were circulated with pictures and speculation (not to mention anger towards Nhung for being irresponsible). Thus, there was a public call to avoid the place, and influencers going there were urged to test for COVID-19 or stay at home. Nonetheless, these individuals (as well as the mall) later on had to correct those news, and even officials confirmed that Nhung was only staying at her home (or visiting her friends at private house) after coming back from Europe.

Rationalization

Among all the themes, Rationalization comments are usually difficult to come by, considering how social media interactions are often driven by simplicity, impulsivity and incivility (Ott, 2017). Rationalization comment could usually explain about what the target could have done, or what the public has misunderstood about the situation ("If Hoai Linh wants to prove his innocence, he should speak up and show the bank statement immediately!"). Sometimes,Rationalization responses point to the consequences of the target's careless actions, but with a calmer tone and reasons to back up ("She could have taken more notice about COVID-19 policies in Vietnam and acted according to it earlier"). In some other cases, these comments do not necessarily condone the targets, but how we should move on from the situation ("Cursing her would not solve anything, instead we should try to locate infected yet not reported to avoid similar situations from happening"). As Rationalization comment is usually long in content, it does have some form of engagement back (in the comments' likes or replies), yet its frequency is considerably smaller than other themes.

Pushback

Pushback is a group of unpopular and minority opinions which criticized all the actions of online communities, particularly the mob trials, personal attacks, or jumping to conclusions without any of the accusations proven ("While she might be at fault for not properly reporting

her infection, her personal information should still be protected, especially as a patient!", "When Hoai Linh did not speak up you all demanded an explanation, now when he does you still don't want to believe him. Now what do you all want him to do?"). And while Facebook users do not necessarily protect those allegedly canceled, they still emphasized the lack of due process and the disproportionate mistreatments to them.

Nevertheless, since social interactions among networks of like-minded digital activists are likely to reinforce group values, any pushback risked being immediately invalidated and shunned away by others. As a result, while comments within this theme might start off with civility and reasonings, they soon deranged to a spiral of hatred comments and mob attacks that associated those who strayed from the majority discourse as being "brainwashed" or bribed by the target. To a certain extent, this effect indicates a certain level of silencing and self-censorship, especially as the more time passes, the fewer these Pushback comments appear on the main Facebook feeds.

Irrelevant

Surprisingly, along with all the comments targeting the accused with intense emotions, Irrelevant comments turn up quite a lot (approximately 30-40% of the time). They do not address the person or the situation directly, but are for the purpose of trolling and light humor. Moreover, these jokes are often reused across different Facebook posts, and met with great delight and interactions back.

This theme is consistent with the works of Bérubé (2018, as cited in Bouvier et al., 2021) - which suggests cancel culture can be driven by the pleasures of those commenting or posting on Facebook as they have a sense of working together, fighting for justice, or contributing something meaningful to the society. In other words, they feel content knowing that they are still

within the information flow and be a part of a movement, or a trend. Also, as pointed out by Bouvier et al. (2021), the use of humor or trolling in the debate of civic issues can also soften the style of discourse, hence signaling accessibility for those normally feeling excluded. Not to mention, since these emotional and humorous comments surprisingly drive engagement, like and sharing, it can work as a form of self-promotion and attention grabbing for the commentators.

Discussion

Cancel is often thought of and mentioned as a whole and straightforward process. However, as revealed from the aforementioned eight themes, from the moment that a target is called out, publicly shamed and declared guilty (or innocent), the types of responses often vary. Hence, based on the findings, I also identified and generalized three different stages that a target often goes through in the cancellation process. This is also in light of the fact that cancellation in the two case studies are not only about the types of comments or their frequency of occurrence, but also the performance of cancel culture progressed across three stages, with different themes featured in them.

Stage 1: Presumption of Guilt

In the tradition of justice, before anyone is condemned or punished, they are often allowed to provide explanation and defend their case. Thus, citizens legally have the presumption of innocence and no judgments shall be made before investigating all evidence and a neutral party reaching a final conclusion.

But in both cases examined, an accusation is enough to deem a person as guilty and disposed to cancellation. In the first case of Nhung, when it was first published that she got COVID-19 after traveling back from Europe, a wave of backlash against her started to happen with a mixture of anger, anxiety and, notably, sarcasm. Her personal information, including

social media accounts, images, home address, phone number and family background was immediately dug up and spread over Facebook and news articles. What followed was a form of vigilante mob trials but without chances for her to explain since Nhung was under treatment for COVID-19 during those days. People did not care, or came up with other possibilities that she might simply not have known about the policies of Vietnam at the time, or instantly linked her coughing to COVID-19 possibilities. (It is worth remembering that this was March 2020, the early phase of pandemics when pretty much everyone was confused about the virus). Prominent during this phase hence were comments of Essentialism, and Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism. Yet, it is also worth noting that a small percentage of responses (approximately 10%) also expressed confusion about information, or refused to engage or criticize the mob justice against Nhung, which fell under the themes of Rationalization, Speculation and (Dis)Information and Pushback.

The second case follows a similar trajectory as Hang was the CEO of a reputable corporation and had previously called out other high-profiles figures apart from Hoai Linh. Thus, her words carried weight and Hoai Linh immediately attracted attention and doubts about his actions everywhere on Facebook. Yet unlike the case of Nhung, most people expressed shock, disappointments or skepticism about the whole situation altogether instead of purely anger or frustration. Hence, most comments were coming out of Speculation and (Dis)Information, Pushback, or Rationalization. But either way, both Nhung and Hoai Linh were deemed as responsible, or at least partially responsible for their actions and publicly shamed or called out.

Stage 2: Confirmed Wrongdoings

This stage was when the situation escalated when evidence, sometimes really ambiguous and insignificant, about the misdeeds of those accused emerged. The evidence could either come

from the original accusers, or from the mob investigation, or sometimes from the authorities themselves. This stage observed an increase of misinformation and higher volume of attention and emotional intensity. People were in need of new constant updates and details about what happened, so a lot of Facebook pages and individuals, and even government agencies, exploited this thirst for attraction for their personal gains by publishing misleading information and interpretation.

For Nhung, as soon as it was revealed that she had dual passports and thus immigration officers did not know that she had traveled to Italy, the discourse immediately became one-sided. People who did not agree to the online cancellation were put down, or deemed to be Nhung's friends, families or just someone getting paid to support her. Interestingly, the government agencies were the one publishing this information, with the language subtly shifting the blame to Nhung for not properly reporting herself.

It is worth noting though that Nhung was never said to not report her past travels. She was confirmed to not have reported her fatigue when she was coming back to Vietnam. Regardless, she was self-quarantining at home and checked up on her health when she did not feel well. Yet, this information was rarely brought up or discussed by official news. Instead, the media, to some extent, provided the reasons why she passed the immigration process (by having dual passports), and her current health update. A lot of times, the news even mentioned her personal identification (full name, home address and current hospital for treatment), especially when discussing how areas surrounding her got closed down. This often worsened people's perception of her and hence the themes of Essentialism, Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism, and Punishment and No Forgiveness would appear the most ("Such an ungrateful little b*tch" ,"Go to hell and make our country a better place please", "She deserves

being exposed like this," or "As long as people like her got to live, our country will continue suffering from the pandemics!"). Notably, in contrast with Hoai Linh, Nhung encountered a high volume of comments sexualizing and body-shaming her, sometimes with attached images and personal profiles. Reasons for this have not been extensively researched on, but could be attributed to the fact that Vietnam is a patriarchal society. Therefore, women are often under greater scrutiny from the public and more prone to be criticized for their appearances. Finally, at this stage, rarely did comments occur in Rationalization or Pushback, for anyone attempting in doing so immediately got mocked or satirized by a mob.

On the other hand, after the day Hoai Linh was called out by Hang, there was a lot of Speculation and (Dis)Information news or Facebook posts surrounding the case as well as the demands for the truth - often paired with Collective Anger and/or Disappointment or Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism. These reactions came from not only citizens themselves but also well-known people like procurator Truong Quoc Anh from The Supreme People's Procuracy of Vietnam.

However, at this stage, unlike Nhung, there are still numerous reactions from Rational and Pushback for Hoai Linh. They often showed skepticism towards Hang and her accusations, or about how the internet community jumped to conclusion too soon without enough proof or evidence, or that Hoai Linh was already well-off and did not need that money. Many also chose to believe in Hoai Linh fully, and that they would continue supporting him regardless of the scandals. Such a difference might be explained by the fact that Hoai Linh is a celebrity and has been popular for several decades and across generations. Also, Hoai Linh's reputation had always stayed clean until this scandal, so his fanbase is massive and willing to push back

accusations coming towards him. Another reason could also be that people's daily routines and lives were not directly disrupted or affected by Hoai Linh's embezzlement scandals.

As the cancellation progressed towards the next stage, the Rationalization and Pushback comments started to emerge less and less. This might arise from many social pressures like the unorthodox to confirm with the majority views, the wish to avoid engaging in conflict or risks of disapproval, isolation and loss of respect (Norris, 2021). This also confirms the "spiral of silence" proposed by Norris (2021) - where "the trajectory of existing shifts in public opinion and cultural values in any society are reinforced and even accelerated by the processes of online communications and interpersonal discussion" (p. 8). Besides, Facebook tends not to carry coherent, rational discussion, but are usually fed on simple and highly emotional narratives and buzzwords.

Stage 3: Transmissive Cancellations and Consequences

This stage is marked by the widespread public humiliation that a target is going through and how that affects their lives (losing careers or experiencing mental anguish) as well as the people surrounding them. Cancellation is infectious. Once a person gets canceled, then any one associated with them would be deemed as problematic and dragged down as well. This ripple effect is especially prevalent in a collectivistic society like Vietnam, where people look out for each other but also might be blamed if someone in your "group" made a mistake that triggers public shaming. It goes without saying then anyone or anything associated with the offenders in cancellation would too suffer from being condemned and dismissed.

For the case of Nhung, as she was traveling in Europe with her sister Nga Nguyen and both also contracted the virus later on, Nga was also under the hostility and heavy scrutiny of the public. Her personal profile (social media account, family background) was also uncovered and

made vulnerable to countless mob attacks and hateful remarks - even though to a lesser extent to Nhung. Furthermore, family members and friends of Nhung also found their information exposed and encountered trolling comments or offenses regarding them or their relationships with Nhung.

This transmissive nature and hateful comments particularly escalated when the two later on made headlines on *The New Yorker* and shared their side of story and public shaming experience. What followed was a wave of frustration and anger, for people felt that these two were painting a negative picture of Vietnamese authorities and public. Nhung and Nga were deemed as unpatriotic, and ungrateful for the fact that the domestic doctors were taking care of them. What's even more, several articles and Facebook posts/ comments insisted the two owed the whole country an apology, and should be stripped of their Vietnamese citizens, expelled or even sentenced to death. As such, prominent themes were Essentialism, Punishment and No Forgiveness and Pseudo-Moralism or Pseudo-Intellectualism.

On the other hand, there was only a small percentage of responses where Hoai Linh was compared with other celebrities doing philanthropic works and how transparent they were. However, within approximately a few weeks after the accusations, several brands started removing Hoai Linh from their advertisements or withdrawing their sponsorships, and shows were retracting their roles for the comedian. Not only that, people kept calling for the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to remove Hoai Linh from the highest title for Vietnamese artists - The Merited Artist of Vietnam (the request was eventually denied).

Notably, because of the public outrage, Hoai Linh was actually under police investigation for several months. The investigation indicated that a digital phenomenon like canceling could pressure authorities to take action, and give even public profiles like Hoai Linh legal troubles

when it is due. On the other hand, Hoai Linh was eventually pronounced as "clean" and faced none of the consequences. Considering that the investigation was done during the height of the scandal and the process of investigation and collecting evidence was not present to the public, the investigation might just be an example of "woke" signaling and how transmissive cancellation could get.

Aftermath

While the consequences are real for both Nhung and Hoai Linh, its long-term effects and benefits are still debatable. After two years since her cancellation, Nhung has kept a low profile and her social media account private. Yet, her Instagram food account indicates that she is still able to enjoy her socialite lifestyle: traveling around the world and trying out fancy restaurants, modeling part-time and attending exclusive fashion shows. She indeed did not get into any real legal prosecution, and as soon as COVID-19 became "normalized" and "a thing in the past," her name barely got mentioned or remembered again. Similarly, Hoai Linh's investigation eventually concluded that there was no evidence for his embezzlement. For more than one year, Hoai Linh has not appeared on any big national show or on mass media for his career and philanthropic works. Still, he was recently invited to a regional comedy show and anticipated a huge comeback soon. All in all, while we can not know for sure consequences on their private life (mental health for instance), the material losses for both cases were not as heavy as the media coverage they received at the time.

Comparing Nhung and Hoai Linh's cancellation together, it seems that individuals who are less well-known often got backlashes more regardless of their misdeeds and backgrounds. The fact that Nhung was born into an elite and privileged family only made her be canceled even more (which could be out of the moral outrage about how irresponsible the rich are, out of envy

about her lifestyles amidst all the struggles people face during COVID-19). Besides, even though what Nhung did was not traditionally illegal or considered unethical (like misappropriating public donation), she did not have the strong fanbase like Hoai Linh did to rationalize back with the mob, or to protect her. Thus, the amount of cyber attacks she received were outright more significant and tremendous than Hoai Linh.

Notably, even though both cases involved some mishandling of the authority to certain extent, rarely did anyone mention it. And even when looking through past examples, most of what is considered cancellation in Vietnam usually targets entertainment celebrities, or singular individuals. It might be attributed to the fact that censorship of the online public sphere is strategic in countries where the government partly or fully controls the media. One does not question authority publicly on social media platforms, and individuals like Nhung and Hoai Linh sometimes became the scapegoat for the public to voice their anger and frustration when troubles happened. It is also worth highlighting that dependence on external platforms (like Facebook) restricted the ability to communicate of the online public (protesters), primarily due to the possibilities of politically motivated censorship and unwanted surveillance from authorities who have legal access to their digital records. Therefore, it is once again worth asking whether cancellation could lead to any meaningful contribution and improvement to our society, especially since all will be soon forgotten and the system and authorities did not get called out for letting similar behaviors happen continuously.

Conclusion

Cancel culture demonstrates how digital platforms could facilitate quick, large-scale responses to acts considered problematic and empower traditionally marginalized groups. However, its effects only last for a short moment with little material consequences relative to the

targets' power, wealth, background and privileges. As a result, over the past few years, cancel culture has seemingly stopped being a promising tool with which to fight power abuse and social injustices, but become an online mob attack (especially for unpopular opinions) and a social media morality performance. This legacy deters people from posting online for fear of being shamed and being "wrong", thus closing off the possibility of being challenged and acknowledging what we as society must change and how to progress forwards. Moreover, cancel culture does not allow mistakes to happen and the opportunity to resolve them, whether through conversation or education - which would not bring up any change or space to discuss conflicting ideas and learn from each other. As such, even the quest for justice can turn into a vicious trial if it is not infused with generosity, awareness of human frailty, and a path to redemption.

As the research is focused on Vietnam - a country with different social norms, cultures and media ecosystem, evidence also pointed out that cancel culture does not seem to lead to any meaningful and real justice. Indeed, from both of the two case studies, the behaviors shown are often ruthless, filled with personal attacks, and feel like "a vengeful game of moral one-upmanship in which social annihilation can come any second" (Brooks, 2019).

On the other hand, the phenomenon also highlights people's desire for changes and for consequences for those with privileges. Yet, the speed and virality of information and news stories wraps everyone up in the expectation that political, legislative and systematic change should take place immediately right after. When that does not occur, the audience then chooses to take matters into their own hands and relies on external tools like social media to burst out their frustration and demand instant accountability. However, most of the time we fail to realize the fallacy of our reasonings, the reductiveness of digital discourses and the losses of nuance and

complexity when doing so. So, if we want real and lasting social development, cancel culture should not be the final answer and might need to be "canceled" in the long run.

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