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Title: "Consumers-Brands Battle: Investigating The Impact of Cancel Culture On Switching Behaviour and Brand Cancellation-The Moderating Role of Negative eWOM"

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Abstract

Cancel culture has become one of the most controversial topics in the last few years. Online cancel culture movement can be defined as the practice of any form of withdrawing customers' support for a particular brand, company, or even a person. Customers can withdraw their support by engaging in boycotting acts and unfollowing the brands on various networking websites to express their outrage and disapproval of the company's wrongdoings. In today's current world, the cancel culture debate is considered a crucial phenomenon due to its power to engender public pressure to boycott a particular brand by inducing others to switch to another competitor and thus, promoting brand cancellation. This paper sheds the light on the dangers of the online cancel culture movement on a brand's image. It also aims to provide guidance to businesses to mitigate the effects of brand cancellation and avoid falling prey to cancel culture movements. To achieve the research objectives, a mixed-methods approach will be conducted using qualitative content analysis and an online survey.

Keywords: Cancel culture, eWOM, Customer Disloyalty, Brand cancellation, Content analysis

Literature Review

Cancel culture

The whole world is now witnessing a new movement of unique social media activism, which is known as to cancel culture (Lentini, 2022). In the past few years, the term cancel culture has gained much attention from researchers due to its importance in changing the transactional dynamics between customers and brands (Bakhtiari, 2020). Cancel culture has become a controversial topic in marketing because of its ability to increase the brand cancellations rate. Brand cancellation can be detrimental to any brand because it can destroy the brand equity and ruin its reputation in seconds. The term cancel culture was originally coined in the 1980s. However, in 2014, the sparkle of this term has renewed again after the #MeTooMovement, and

the Black Lives Matter movement, which was against sexual harassment, racism, and inequality (Mendes et al., 2018).

Cancel culture refers to the consumers' practices of boycotting a certain brand, a person or a celebrity because of their wrongdoings or false claims, which can induce consumers to spread negative eWOM, bad comments, and posts (Bakhtiari, 2020). Hence, it is considered a form of consumer activism (Lentini, 2022). Consumers employ cancel culture to express their rage and disapproval online as a way to protest against the brand's actions or views on social media (Norris, 2021). This movement exerts a greater social pressure on other consumers because they spread boycotting behaviour, bad comments, and negative eWOM, which induce others to follow their leads and imitate their behaviour to express their hostility (Kimmel, 2004), revenge (Richins, 1983) and their dissatisfaction of what happened (Jansen et al., 2009). The main aim of cancelling a particular brand, a company or even a person is to combat corruption and hold the other party accountable for their actions to live in a better world. However, some researchers viewed the cancellation practices as an online form of mob rule because they believed that cancel culture prevents the creation of open debate between the conflicting parties, which is considered the fundamental for realizing democracy (Norris, 2021). The opponents refer to cancel culture as a form of public shaming (Norris, 2021). Cancel culture was also accused of inducing various media platforms (e.g., HBO) the implementation a form of cultural censorship over its content (Romano, 2021). In contrast, supporters believe cancel culture is crucial in today's world to empower people and give voice to vulnerable people, so they can speak up and share their stories with the whole world (Norris, 2021). Thus, cancel culture is considered an important tool for realizing social justice, and eliminating racism and ethical malpractice.

Brand cancellation

Brand cancellation can be caused by the diffusion of the online cancel culture movement (Novelli, 2021). It can be defined as any action or practice in which consumers decide to withdraw their support for a particular brand, company, or even service as a form to protest against the company's behavioural discrepancies, or malpractice acts (Bakhtiari, 2020). Withdrawing the support activities (i.e., unliking, or unfollowing the brand) on various networking websites as a way to express their disapproval of the company's wrongdoings. In

other words, when a brand is cancelled, consumers decided to cease supporting a certain brand, and instead search for a better substitute that will satisfy their needs (KrisRuby, 2020).

Thus, brand cancellation can be considered a form of boycotting acts in which consumers decided to express their disengagement, dissatisfaction, and disloyalty with the brands by engaging in negative dysfunctional behaviours (e.g., participating in anti-brand actions and trash-talking) (Japutra et al., 2018; Japutra et al., 2014). Moreover, Bacile et al., (2014) pointed out consumers may start acting like "Badvocates" by spreading negative word of mouth about the brand to prevent others from consuming or buying it.

Based on brand-hate literature, prior studies (e.g., Jain and Sharma, 2019; Grégoire and Fisher, 2006; Lee et al., 2013) postulated that highly emotionally attached consumers to a certain brand can turn into dissatisfied angry customers when they confront service failure compared to low emotionally attached consumers. As consumers tend to feel betrayed when brands fail to meet their expectations. Hence, their love and attachment towards this brand can become hatred when they face service failure (Mattila, 2004), or as a result of the company's transgression or violations of its promises (Jain and Sharma, 2019). Thus, the stronger the customer-brand relationship, the more hostile the anti-branding actions and behaviours once this relationship ceased to exist (Johnson et al., 2011; Japutra et al., 2014). Additionally, Grégoire and Fisher, (2006) came up with the "love-becomes-hate" concept to express the degree of customers' retaliation and their tendencies to engage in betrayal acts when they feel betrayed by their favourite brands.

The role of social media and changes in consumer-brand power dynamics

Cancel culture movement is driven primarily by two factors; firstly, the proliferation of social media has contributed to increased consumers activism behaviour in recent years, as these platforms have made consumers more socially aware (Ng, 2020). Social media has assisted the consumers in shedding the light on any irresponsible brand as it empowers consumers and to stand up for their demands and express their anger when companies do not keep their promises to them (da Silva, 2021; Ng, 2020). Furthermore, social media provide a rich platform for the consumers to share their opinions without any barrier, which may encourage them to engage in negative eWOM to express their anger and revenge against any brand (Azemi et al., 2020).

eWOM can be defined as expressions of negative opinions about products, brands, companies, or even a celebrity on various networking websites (Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017).

The second driver is the changes in the customer-brand power dynamics as consumers have gained more control in managing their relationships with their favourite brands (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017; Labrecque et al., 2013). In other words, consumers are no longer the recipients of brand offerings but have now gained the upper hand in their relationships with brands. This shift in the consumer-brand power dynamics can induce consumers to rebel against their favourite brands when they confront any service failure.

The consequences of cancelling culture

Brands should exert greater efforts to eliminate and reduce customer dissatisfaction (KrisRuby, 2020). Dissatisfied customers can destroy the company's reputation and demolish the brand equity in a flash. The outrage and bad publicity that exists on various networking websites can trigger other social media users to form negative perceptions of this brand because other consumers can participate in sharing these complaints and inducing others to stop consuming this brand (Rosenmayer et al., 2018; Obeidat et al., 2017). Moreover, de Campos et al., (2018), and Jalilvand and Heidari (2017) posit that as a result of the negative eWOM, other users will have a lower tendency to purchase or repurchase anything from this company, since the trust and loyalty are breached. Hence, brand cancellation, customer disloyalty, customer brand disengagement, and switching behaviour can be considered the right actions for the consumers to protest against the company's unethical actions, behavioural discrepancies. Consequently, consumers will use brand cancellation as a tool for exerting greater pressure on brands to keep their promises to the consumer and be transparent in how they operate. For instance; millions of subscribers are now considering cancelling their Netflix accounts and switching to other platforms due to the increase in the subscription fees, as well as the greater restrictions imposed on sharing their account with family and friends (Nambiar, 2022).

Hypotheses development and research framework

From the above-mentioned, it is reasonable to expect that cancel culture movement that happened on various networking websites can encourage others to feel dissatisfied, disengaged and disloyal towards the brand as a mechanism to advocate for victims who has been harmed

by a brand (Norris, 2021). As cancel culture is about telling others what exactly has happened to raise their awareness, and the most important is to force the evil brands to reveal themselves, which helps in protecting others and achieving social justice. Moreover, numerous studies stressed the dangers of the negative word of mouth (e.g., Duana et al., 2008; Rosenmayer, McQuiken, Robertson, & Ogden, 2018; de Campos Ribeiro, Butori, & Nagrad, 2018; Umashankar, Ward, & Dahl, 2017) as they highlighted that negative electronic WOM can encourage others to participate in sharing the bad news and inducing others to stop buying this brand. This can be attributed to the power of negative eWOM, as it can reach a much wider audience across the whole world in just a few seconds, which can be dangerous for any business firm and constitute a threat to a brand image and reputation (Zúñiga et al., 2014).

In a similar vein, Park & Lee (2009) argued that negative eWOM can have a greater effect compared to positive eWOM, as they found that each 1,000 negative eWOM on the internet can cause an accumulated loss of up to \$8.1 billion over 20 months. Hence, people always intervene and support the angry dissatisfied customers by decreasing their purchase intentions towards this brand and sharing their negative posts/comments across various networking websites.

Therefore, based on the previous literature, it is reasonable to expect that the movement of cancel culture and public backlash that happened online, can easily make other customers disloyal, and dissatisfied towards this brand. These feelings can be considered drivers for many consumers to increase their tendencies towards participating in anti-brand behaviours (e.g., trash-talking, and schadenfreude) (Jain & Sharma, 2019; Japutra et al., 2018; Japutra et al., 2014). Hence, the purpose of this study is to extend the previous literature by assuming that consumers may also participate in the online cancel culture movement and consequently, promote brand cancellation to protect others from falling prey to the brand's malpractices.

Research hypotheses

H1	Online cancel culture movement positively affects customers' disengagement
H2	Online cancel culture movement positively affects customers' disloyalty
H3	Online cancel culture movement positively affects customers' dissatisfaction
H4	The relationship between the online cancel culture movement and customers disengagement, customers disloyalty, and customers dissatisfaction are moderated by the spread of negative eWOM on various networking websites
H5	Customers' disengagement is positively associated with increased switching behaviour
H6	Customers' disloyalty is positively associated with increased switching behaviour
H7	Customers' dissatisfaction is positively associated with increased switching behaviour
H8	Switching behaviour is positively associated with brand cancellation

The research model shows the impact of the online cancel culture movement on other consumers' intentions and behaviours towards the brand. This model portrays the dangers of cancel culture towards any brand.
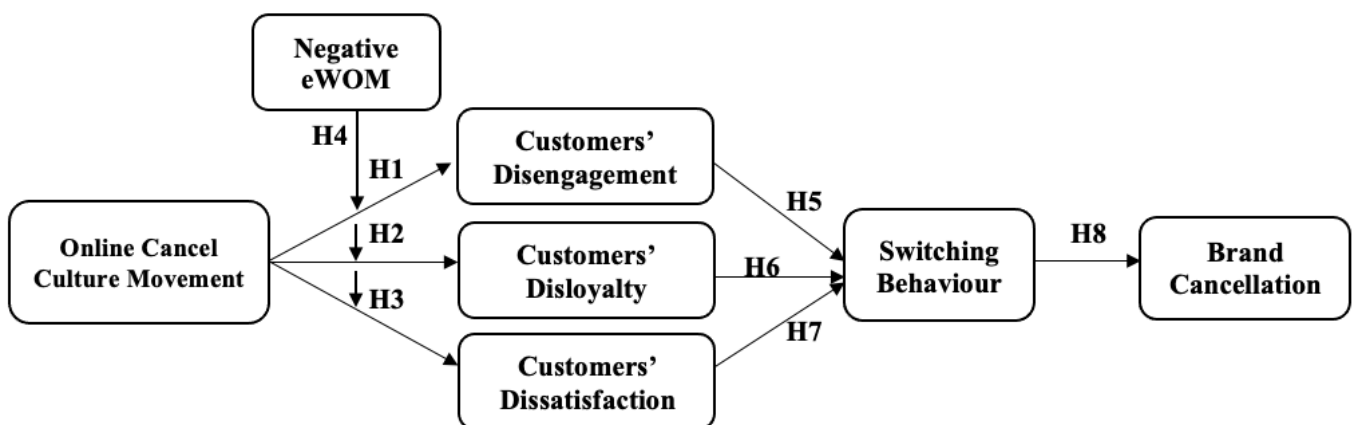

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Stage one: a qualitative content analysis

The first stage involves conducting a qualitative content analysis across various digital channels (e.g., Facebook, and Twitter) to explore to what extent calling out others to cancel/boycott a certain brand can affect their actions and behaviours towards this brand. In other words, to see whether the negative eWOM will impact people's intentions to acquire this brand or not. By employing the content analysis, the researcher will be able to track all negative comments, posts, and shares on Twitter and Facebook against some particular brands (e.g., Heineken, Oatly, Netflix, etc). Then, the collected data will be analysed using NVivo. It is considered a crucial tool, which helps the researchers focus on particular words such as boycotting, cancelled, backlash, etc. NVivo is also considered an excellent tool for organizing and categorizing the dataset and determining the relevant theme for each group of words (Zakrzewski, 2008). NVivo assists the researchers in addressing particular research questions (Aureli, 2017). Thus, it helps in enhancing the reliability and the accuracy of the obtained data, which assists in achieving accurate results (Bae and Chi, 2022).

Stage two: Online Survey

The second phase includes conducting a quantitative online survey. This study will depend on Qualtrics to produce a self-administrated online survey. The questionnaire will be designed based on the existed and validated scales. Participants will be recruited through various social networking websites to enable the researcher to statistically test the developed hypotheses as well as the proposed conceptual framework.

The practical significance of the research

Over the last few years, brand cancellation has increased rapidly, largely due to the changes in customer-brand power dynamics, as consumers have gained more control in managing their relationships with their favourite brands (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017; Schultz and Bailey, 2000). Therefore, companies need to change and respond faster to avoid falling victim towards brand cancellation movements. Thanks to social media, consumers nowadays have the power and the necessary information, which enable them to become picky and to set higher expectations from their brands. Bakhtiari, (2020) reported that a study conducted by the

Edelman company revealed that 64% of the consumers are willing to buy or cancel a particular brand based on their views and opinions regarding a social or political issue.

Since no brand has immunity towards brand cancellation, understanding the new demands of the customers and their updated expectations is a must for any company to achieve sustainable growth and maintain its reputation in the market (Novelli, 2021; Lentini, 2022). Hence, this study aims to emphasise the importance of customer satisfaction and provide guidance for the businesses to mitigate any controversial issues that may arise online to prevent brand cancellation, which in turn, helps companies grow profitably by keeping their customers satisfied.

Current stage

At the current stage, an analysis of the literature review has been conducted. Furthermore, a preliminary analysis of publicly available content analysis on Twitter and Facebook has been carried out and analysed.

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