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The Duality of 'Cancel Culture': Youth Perspectives of West Bengal

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	ABSTRACT
Keywords: <i>Cancel culture, digital age, youth, cancelled, West Bengal</i> 	The present century has witnessed the ushering in of the digital age, with the rapid progression and infiltration of information technology. Social media platforms have transformed the way in which social interaction and communication occur, endorsing a vibrant digital culture. The active engagement between people via these platforms stimulates an environment that nurtures the development of new trends and cultural elements. 'Cancel culture' is one such phenomenon that has been incorporated into the lexicon of social media-oriented trends or movements. This present study is an attempt to understand whether this evolving trend of cancel culture depicts the exercise of freedom of expression or can be considered as a form of castigation. The objectives of the study were – (i) to assess how the youth comprehend cancel culture; (ii) to analyse the role of social media platforms in shaping the practices and narratives of cancel culture; (iii) to examine the perception of their participation in cancel culture by the youth of West Bengal. This study assesses the ways meaning is assigned to cancel culture and the nature and forms of participation by the category of population, designated as the 'youth'. The findings of the study reveal that the definition of cancel culture is highly subjective, but influenced by direct or indirect factors. Although the phenomenon supports accountability, yet at the same time, negative implications of the said culture remain. The need of the hour is for effective and stronger regulations revolving around such a dynamic digital space.

Introduction

The present century has witnessed a rapid progression and integration of information technology, ushering the development of a period known as the digital age. The rise of this epoch, has brought about massive transformations in the way in which social interaction and communication transpire. This has augmented the ubiquitous use of social media platforms, that have permitted the creation of personalised profiles where users can exchange multimedia content in various forms, thereby endorsing a vibrant digital culture. As these social media platforms flourish on continuous and active engagement between people, these new media have engendered an environment that nurtures the development of new trends and cultural elements. This rapid advancement has led to users becoming not just consumers, but also active producers of content. The ease of accessibility, large scale percolation, adaptability and its immediacy has transmuted these social media platforms into a space for discourse and activism, encompassing diverse issues of the overall society, ranging from economics, to politics, culture etc. However, such newer forms of trends and cultural elements, also have their downside and can be equally detrimental. 'Cancel culture' is one such phenomenon that has been initiated into the lexicon of such social media-oriented trends/movements.

The state of West Bengal has a long history and ethos of intellectual debate, protest and discord, actively undertaken by all sections of the society, especially the youth, unveiled in numerous dimensions. However, the traditional methods of such discourse have now been exceedingly influenced by digital media, especially by social media platforms. In this context, cancel culture merges with the tradition of social, cultural and political discourse rather than remaining just a fad of popular culture.

In this context, the present study seeks to explore the following research question - does the evolving trend of cancel culture depict the exercise of freedom of expression or is it considered as a form of castigation? The objectives of the study are – (i) to assess the ways in which youth comprehend cancel culture; (ii) to analyse the role of social media platforms in shaping and practices and narratives of cancel culture; (iii) to understand the nature of participation in cancel culture by the youth of West Bengal. This study attempts to understand the phenomenon of cancel culture as a rising trend and the ways of meaning assigned and the nature and forms of participation by the category of population, designated as the 'youth'.

This study is significant for understanding the ways in the youth perceives cancel culture. In contemporary digital age, cancel culture has developed as an exceedingly visible and contentious social phenomenon, particularly on social media platforms. The youth are often at the core of cancel culture, both as participants and as targets. This study is essential to understand how the youth interpret and justify both their involvement and also narrate their experiences of cancel culture, in order to comprehensively assess the social impact. The issues encompassed within cancel culture is multidimensional, varying from micro to macro level.

While there exists a widespread debate on the global scenario of cancel culture, there remains limited scholarly attention directed to how Indian youth perceive, experience and rationalise

cancel culture. Thus, the significance of this study rests in the unique socio-demographic context of India that is the youth. India has one of the largest youth populations in the world. This socio-demographic category also referred to as the Gen Z in this study, is characterised to be technologically oriented, where digital media plays a significant role in their everyday interaction and also identity formation. This demography also plays a significant role in the democratic country like India, on their ideas on accountability, morality, values, freedom of speech and expression and rights. The focus on the youth of West Bengal would add another dimension to the phenomenon, that assess the intersection with the established tradition of youth discourse. This study therefore, would be beneficial in exploring the attitudes and experiences of the youth of West Bengal in the way in which cancel culture is interpreted, practiced, and justified in this digital public sphere. This study attempts to understand the complex nature of responsibility, agency exerted and also the vulnerability in the digital public sphere and how they impact public discourse. This youth-related trend requires to be critically understood as it rests on the notions of newer forms of identity that are digitally oriented, and also of democratic participation.

Review of literature

A brief review of literature reveals polarities in the kind of influence that cancel culture has on the society, with multiple outcomes. A study undertaken by the Pew Research Centre on Americans in 2020, observed that there were differences in age, gender and educational differences in terms of what was understood as 'cancel culture' (Vogels et al.). Foelster and Leon notes that the reasons behind the occurrence of 'cancellation' is due to meting out 'punishment' against offenders, while simultaneously safeguarding those considered as 'vulnerable' (441). This can then take the form of an activism, a movement of sorts and viewed as a weapon of empowerment. Traversa et al in their experimental study observed that an instance of cancel culture had an "indirect positive effect on collective action intentions arbitrated by feelings of 'collective validation and collective empowerment"; while it also observed indirect effect of cancel culture on collective action intentions mediated by feelings of collective anger and contempt (Traversa et al. 01).

Wairagade and Dhawankar note that despite the variations in the usage of social media across demographics, it served as a common platform for information, 'public discourse, content sharing and connection' (165). The post-Covid times have witnessed a surge in the trend of 'doomscrolling', which is believed to trigger negative engagement amongst the users, often capitalised upon by influencers (166). Cancel culture is often triggered by the creation of 'echo chambers' that obstruct a balanced information distribution to the users, and augments passivity of the users (166). Thus, the social media platforms can also transform into a space for shaping online social pressure, even to the point of culminating as online ostracism. The motivations of cancel culture can also be cursory influences like "trends, social influence, resentment towards public figures and the inherent human desire for affiliation with specific social groups" (Foelster and Leon 441).

Infante et al assessed the experiences of cancel culture victims on social media and how it impacted their psychological health, taking young adults aged 18 to 25, as their respondents (4). The study revealed that cancel culture was associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and self-confidence and ultimately social isolation (Infante et al. 4).

The consequences of cancel culture are not just limited to those acting on it, but also on those that get 'cancelled'. Those designated as the targets of cancel culture are often influencers, celebrities, organisations, who heavily feel the brunt of such 'cancellation', resulting in loss of followers or members, brand partnerships or having even their pages removed from the designated platforms (Foelster and Leon 442). The impact then can be not just in the form of economic forfeitures but also emotional, psychological and social, infiltrating from online to everyday life (Foelster and Leon 442). This can aggravate to the level of toxic behaviour like cyberbullying, trolling, insulting, shaming, etc. (Foelster and Leon 442). There has been a dearth of studies specific to the Indian context reflecting on the phenomenon of cancel culture.

Methodology

This study was undertaken to fulfil the following objectives: i) to assess how the youth comprehend cancel culture; (ii) to analyse the role of social media platforms in shaping the practices and narratives of cancel culture; (iii) to examine the perception of their participation in cancel culture by the youth of West Bengal. This study adopts a quantitative methodology, with a descriptive research design. The study involved the utilisation of both primary and secondary sources of data. The sample size of the study was 60, selected through the non-probability sampling method of purposive sampling. The sample was selected based on the following inclusive criteria – individuals between the age group of 15-29, irrespective of gender; those who are regular users of any form of social media platforms; and were fairly knowledgeable in the social media trends. This age bracket was specifically chosen since this group is considered to be as one of the most regular users of social media, amongst other categories of population ("Youth Statistics"). There is no unanimous agreement on the age-group of the category of population defined as the youth. According to the United Nations, as required for statistical purposes, defines 'youth', as those individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years, recognised in 1981 and reiterated in later policy documents. The Government of India in its National Youth Policy of India of 2024, considers individuals between the age group of 15 and 29 years as youth (9). For the purpose of this research, the age group of the respondents considered as youth is taken between 15-29. In recent parlance, this category of population is also commonly referred to as 'Generation Z' or 'Gen Z' – particularly those born between the years 1995-2012. Marked by a huge exposure to varied form of digital media, this generation depends on information technology, which almost becomes their identity (Lopez et al. 770).

The method and technique of data collection was through the circulation of semi-structured google survey forms. Few telephonic interviews were also conducted, taking the help of a semi-structured interview schedule. The respondents were made well aware about the purpose of the research and prior informed consent were taken from them. The names of the respondents have been kept anonymous in order to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Secondary sources of data included reviewing of peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, web-articles, reports and periodicals. The data has been analysed using simple quantitative percentage analysis, along with figure representations. The open-ended responses have been coded, identifying themes, analysing, and interpreting the patterns of meaning within the data acquired. Narratives of the respondents have also been utilised, wherever relevant, to add richer nuances to the findings.

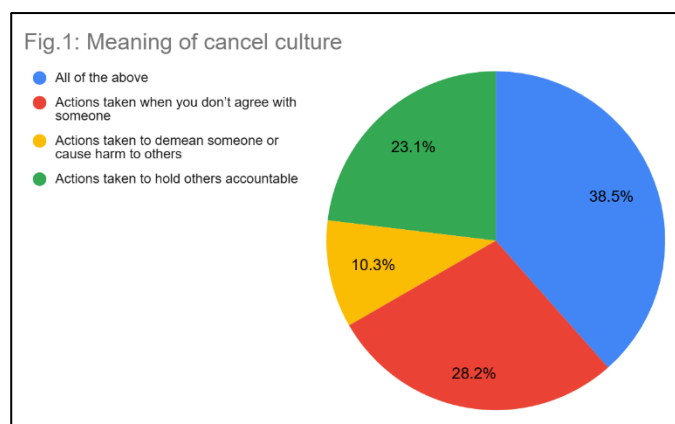
Socio-demographic Profile

A description of the socio-demographic dimension of the respondents in this study is necessary here. The total number of respondents undertaken for the purpose of this study were 60, who ranged between the age-group of 20-29, where 46% identified themselves as male and 54% as female. There were no respondents identifying as the 'other' gender. All the respondents had completed their graduation, where a majority of them were even post-graduate degree holders (82.5%) and 7.5% were pursuing their Ph.D. About 32.5% of the respondents were employed and the rest 67.5% were currently not working anywhere. Among the employed respondents, their annual income level, ranged from more than 5 lakhs (35.3%), between 1-2 lakhs (47%) and less than 1 lakh (17.7%). All the respondents were residents of various districts and sub-divisions of West Bengal.

Conceptualising Cancel Culture

The expression 'cancel culture' is believed to have been inspired by a slang term - 'cancel', used in a 1980's English song, meaning 'to breaking up with someone'. (Vogels et al, par.2). Clark opines that the socially facilitated phenomenon of 'cancelling' has its origins in the queer communities of colour, especially through the medium of social media collectives like 'Black Twitter' (89). A term gaining popularity in various mediums of popular culture and later on social media. The complex phenomenon of cancel culture upholds diverse meanings resulting from its varied mechanizations. Cancel culture, denotes a phenomenon where individuals or groups overtly condemn against a particular person, organization, or idea, mainly through the medium of social media platforms (Ebsco). Initially originated to confront racism, this phenomenon has now enlarged to encompass varied dimensions that are considered belligerent or problematic (Kato). A brief overview of the literature reveals that this phenomenon evokes reactions that can oscillate between constructive or unfavourable. This could be both for those getting 'cancelled' and even for those 'cancelling' at large.

The meaning of cancel culture as understood by the respondents are varied as seen in the Fig.1 below. Majority of the respondents (38.5%) considered cancel culture an ambiguous phenomenon, which can have no one particular meaning; 28.2% understood it as 'actions taken when you don't agree with someone', while 23.1% consider it as 'actions taken to hold others accountable'. Only 10.3% consider it as 'actions taken to demean someone or cause harm to others.' Essentially then cancel culture can encompass multiple meanings and is therefore highly subjective in nature.



(Source: Primary survey, July-Aug, 2025)

Social media as a space for Cancel Culture

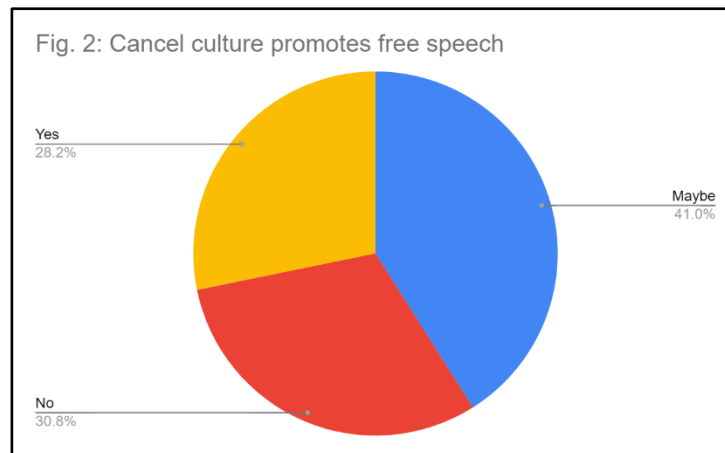
In order to assess the meaning assigned to cancel culture, it was also essential to understand the nature and use of social media platforms by the respondents. All of the respondents were users of some form of social media platforms, spending on an average 1-2 hours a day (42.5%) and even more than 2 hours a day (57.5%). Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, were the most preferred social media platforms, while platforms like Twitter or X, Snapchat, Reddit, Telegram, Discord, Weverse, had much lesser respondents using it.

The respondents perceive that Instagram (42.5%) and Twitter or X (30%) are the two social media platforms where cancel culture is most prevalent, whereas mention of sites like Facebook and YouTube (27.5%) were lesser. Consequently, social media becomes the dominant platform that permits the flourishing of cancel culture. However, cancel culture is a complex participatory multi-step process, that oscillates from evidence-reveal or sharing to reaction and support (Haskell).

Social media algorithms play an extremely important role in curating the production and consumption of content by the youth. The aim of these algorithms is to maximise user engagement, prioritising those content that are either dramatic or controversial. It was through these social media platforms that some of the respondents had also been a part of cancel culture on issues related to sexual harassment, celebrity-related activities, politics, warfare and other social issues. Few respondents also revealed instances of being 'cancelled', when they were either 'defending' an acquaintance or any other social media user who was being unjustly harassed by others.

Free Speech and Accountability

Fig.2 below highlights the opinion of the respondents as to whether cancel culture promotes free speech; where 28% agrees that former enables the latter; 41% had a mixed opinion, while 30.8% perceives that it restricts it. This at first appears to be ambivalent, but the narratives of the respondents divulge its complex nature.



(Source: Primary survey, July-Aug, 2025)

The digital space in particularly social media platforms, can be equated with what social theorist Jurgen Habermas, describes as 'public sphere'. A space for effective public discourse regarding vital social issues, free from coercion and emphasizing on inclusivity. This is an open space that people can participate in, despite possessing heterogenous characteristics; are inconstant, developing based on requirement and can be multiple (Habermas; Ibrahim 8). This digital space offers media democracy, allowing sharing of information across the globe and a scope for multiple opportunities, be it economic, social or even political (Ibrahim 11-12). In the context of cancel culture, does the democratisation of information actually transpire, as speculated in a public sphere by Habermas? Cancel culture demands an immediate form of accountability and can hold power to 'raise voices.' Digital setting provides for the 'publicness' of the event, thus shaping and influencing cancel culture. This can be noted by the statements of the respondents in this present study, who feel that cancel culture is a 'powerful weapon' that helps to make a statement against an oppressor openly and therefore forming allies against their struggles. Cancel culture amplifies the voices of the marginalised and make them seen. As observed by Traversa, Tian & Wright, cancel culture consistently increased feelings of 'collective validation' among harmed groups, therefore empowering. It can be a democratic tool and can make it known, that people are still led by their conscience and not be a part of the herd by just conforming. It is a 'right' that is exercised by the people, that they do have opinions of their own and act according to it. However, the later sections reveal a contradictory scenario.

Cancel culture does promote free speech by giving individuals the agency to stand up for what they truly believe in. A respondent further noted and experience, "for example, when well-known author J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter series made transphobic comments, I felt like to speak out against her, despite having loved Harry Potter as a child. Although I knew my voice might not reach her or make a significant impact online. I chose to stop purchasing Harry Potter merchandise as a way of being true to my values and to stand in solidarity with the queer community."

Cancel culture flourishes in an environment of 'collective consciousness' within a digital space. Eminent Sociologist Emile Durkheim opines that collective consciousness is a collectivity of shared beliefs, ideas and ethical attitudes that function as a unifying force in society (Jones 26). The nature of collective conscience is such that, although it is accomplished

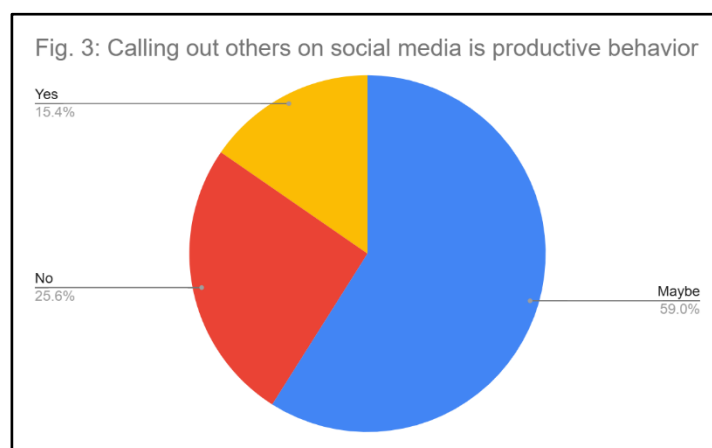
through individuals, yet it exists outside of the individual. It is this collective consciousness that acts as a form of social control in society and varies in extent and force. This collectivity is then indicated in the solidarity of a society. The digital space produces 'digital collectivism' (Sociology easy) that establishes a newer ground for developing a shared sentiment amongst the users that surpasses borders. This collectivism then provides the possibility of forming online communities or sub-cultures and trends.

The reaction towards an 'offending' post by the respondents were mixed; reporting the post and ignoring the post was opted by majority of the respondents, the respondents choosing to unfollow or block the person who has posted the post and speaking out regarding the post were relatively few. The anonymity that social media facilitates, encourages reporting or reacting to the offensive post. It therefore allowed the respondents who participated, to take an action towards the offender or the offense, without disclosing their actual identity. But an equal percentage of respondents also chose the option of ignoring the post, stating to remain neutral. Some of the respondents felt that rather than getting embroiled in unnecessary 'drama', it was best to ignore the post. Therefore, as Janssens & Spreeuwenberg opine, cancel culture is morally mixed which can either act as a form of punishment or as a tool for redistributing attention (89).

Thus, the freedom to express lies in circumnavigating the changing digital norms. The earlier form of traditional activism has undergone a major transformation. The Indian youth, is now guided by algorithm determined digital platforms that alters the very nature and practice of democratic participation. Just as how Romano posits that the ideological differences and strategic practices of dealing with wrongdoing is transforming (12).

Silencing and Discipline

However, as stated earlier, many of the respondents also perceived that cancel culture does not promote free speech or remained mixed in their statements. Whether calling out others on social media is productive or not is debatable, as observed in the fig. 3 given below.

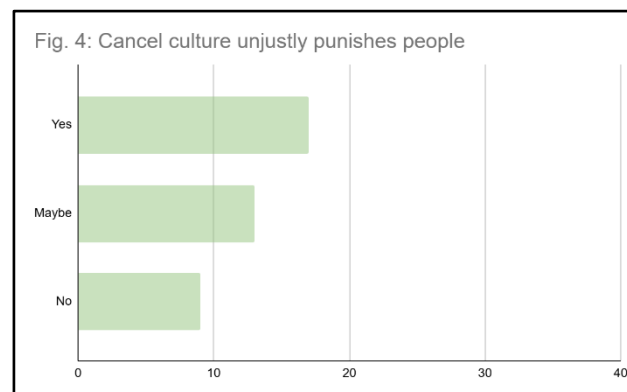


(Source: Primary survey, July-Aug, 2025)

Cancel culture on the one hand may hold accountable the influential persons for their wrongdoings. On the other hand, an alleged offence may change a person's life in a matter of hours – as noted by a respondent. Some people may feel compelled to participate in online call-outs simply to conform or belong. So, what appears to be free expression may actually be performative. So, the pressure to be cautious of what is being shared can restrict open dialogue rather than encouraging it. Calling out acts can hurt the sentiments of certain sections of the population and used as a tool to silence someone whose view does not align with one's own personal view. Often it can also be restrictive, as people refrain from speaking about it, in fear of getting cancelled. This can be seen in the case of celebrities, national and international, who opt to not speak about many current issues in fear of offending groups that would disagree with their perspectives, for fear of career damage.

The fear of public backlash, boycotts, trolling, bullying is also shared by the respondents, something which was noted in the studies of Wairagade and Dhawankar 168; Foelster and Leon 442. Sultan et al opines that how cancel culture has transmuted the once thriving space for healthy discourse into a ground for digital violence. Nowadays, cancel culture has turned into something that people partake in for publicity or for shaming people they do not like. "Cancel culture has shifted from educating people to tearing them down", remarked another respondent. Cancelling occurs when there is a disagreement to an opinion, however, nowadays, the phenomenon has become more about 'silencing instead of having a healthy conversation', thereby leading to censorship. The cancellation reaches the point where the act is attributed towards someone not just for major crimes but for even smaller actions (Romeo). Thus, the fear of public outrage often produces conformity, unlike the collective consciousness visualised by Durkheim.

A related question was asked as to whether the phenomenon of cancel culture unjustly punishes the offenders. About 43.6% agreed to it; 33.3% were of mixed opinion and 23.1% did not (Fig.4).

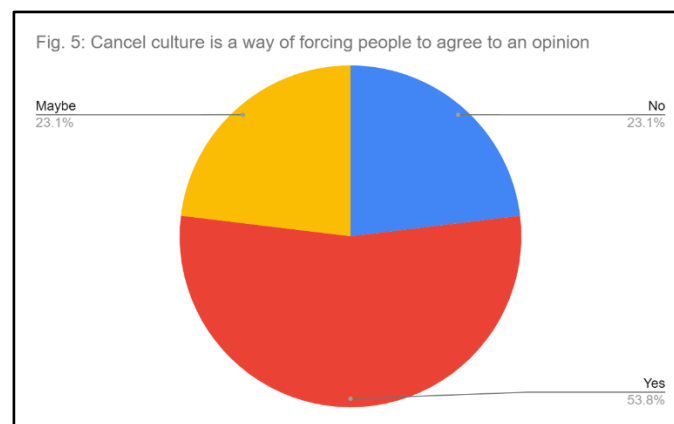


(Source: Primary survey, July-Aug, 2025)

The practices of cancel culture resemble the rational-critical debate that people engage in a public sphere, yet a larger part of it occurs through 'viral' outrage and not through cautious deliberation. Online media algorithms fashion what is known as 'echo chambers', based on the users preceding frequent searches or social media engagements. These mechanisms tend to confine the users to a restricted, sometimes repetitive content, thereby strengthening

polarities towards a particular viewpoint. As such, the users are directly or indirectly steered towards a particular predetermined belief, that may not have any factual logic. This sense of solidarity may then be exploited by few people. This moulds users into passive recipients devoid of any thinking mechanism. Popular sentiment over individual opinion is fostered (Wairagade and Dhawankar 169). Consequently, cancel culture is often misused by people to appear relevant or for publicity, which was agreed by 79.5% of the respondents in this study.

Cancel culture as observed in the study is also a way of forcing people to side with an opinion, where majority of the respondents have agreed (53.8%) (Fig.5). There is a kind of forceful shaping of outlook on others like their peers. The imminent fear of cancellation, creates an environment where the participants are constantly seeking approval and hindering a healthy and meaningful discourse. This often masks the authentic, individual identity of the people, reflected in the way they express themselves (Foelster and Neon 444). On the whole, cancel culture, thus, induces fear, self-censorship and the creation of a 'mob mentality through the 'homogenization of ideas' (Foelster and Leon 442). The major point of contention exists when it comes to the freedom of expression. These platforms then instigate a sense of impulsiveness that obstructs personal judgement. Cancel culture can be examined as a discourse of surveillance and discipline, where power operates through visibility and speech. But who then has the power or the right to define truth or justice online?



(Source: Primary survey, July-Aug, 2025)

Clark (91) notes the scope of shift of power dynamics in the realm of social media platforms that produce 'counterspheres' rather than a dominant public sphere. So, what started as a social media collective for Black vernacular traditions, has now been appropriated by contemporary social elites. These elites then reorganize the narratives threatening the overall objective of a public sphere. Foucault's idea of power, in contemporary times, is exerted and amplified through the medium of social media platforms. Cancel culture aids in reordering power, providing the scope for marginalised groups to challenge the status quo of dominant groups. Discipline and surveillance then manifest in both intra and inter group relations and also externally and internally. The fear of public outcry or censure persuades people to conform to social norms. At the same time, it also engenders visibility thereby advocating self-surveillance of behaviour or actions.

The constitutions of different nations lacks a consensus towards the tenets of safeguarding freedom of expression. The negative facets of cancel culture are often highlighted due to the unregulated nature of digital spaces. There is a lack of guidelines and checks on online behaviour. The phenomenon of cancel culture lacks the definite boundary demarcation between what is considered socially unacceptable behaviour and those that require legal intervention. It is not that all social actions are legally binding. Just as the meaning assigned to cancel culture is highly subjective, the manner in which people react towards an offense is also of the same nature. Foester and Leon's study emphasises the fundamental role of empathy, respect and self-restraint when participating in such movements (443). Wairagade and Dhawankar argue that cancel culture ought not to be seen as a path to justice, emphasising that adherence to legal boundaries is essential for maintaining fairness within the judicial system (167).

Retribution of offense in the scope of cancel culture is equally questionable. It could swing in either direction – one where the brutality of cancel culture is such that there is no scope for retribution of offense provided for those cancelled or it could be simply an act displayed on the part of the offender. The atonement of mistake by those cancelled may be undertaken more out of fear of damaging professional outcomes rather than sincerity (Forester and Leon 442). The necessity for intersubjectivity is important. Context and intent are essential for assessing the level of participation in cancel culture. So, while cancel culture may not leave much scope for 'redemption', yet "everyone needs space to learn and evolve".

Conclusion

The study has been an attempt to explore how the youth in West Bengal perceive and participate in cancel culture. The findings reveal that the meaning of what is considered as offensive or worthy of 'cancellation' is exceedingly subjective, as evident by the polarities that one particular post can encompass. The practice of cancel culture by the youth of West Bengal resembles their global peers. The subject or topic of cancellation may vary considering what is currently locally or globally 'trending' in the social media platforms, but the perception and performance of it remains more or less uniform amongst the youth. This performance in cancel culture is rooted in the age-old tradition of youth protest and intellectual engagement, yet bearing newer implications in the digital age and providing a local resonance.

The study reveals that cancel culture in West Bengal cannot be understood as either a freedom of expression or castigation; it encompasses both. The line of passivity to activism is easily crossed when it comes to newer forms of media like social media platforms. On the one hand, cancel culture enables accountability, collective validation and at times empowerment. But on the other hand, it undermines debate and freedom of expression, something which is contradictory to the objective of new media, that should encourage open dialogue and scope for a 'civilised' discourse. The duality as observed in this study suggests that cancel culture does not merely enlarge or curtail free speech, it rather reshapes it. The dynamics of power too is constantly shifting, crafting newer forms of discipline and surveillance.

There is this urgent necessity to emphasise on the need for a measured and judicious application of cancel culture. In the light of cancel culture, the advantages of social media

platforms with regard to forming a collectivity of shared beliefs, enhancing solidarity amongst the members, immediate accountability and flexibility amongst others, indisputably cannot be circumvented. Future research with a larger and diverse sample size along with assessing the intersections of class, education would enhance the understanding. However, there is a need to comprehend that freedom always co-exists with a sense of responsibility.

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