

Liability, Control & Reprimand: The Day and Age of ‘Cancel Culture’

One night in 1960, the renowned songwriter Nile Rodgers went on a bad date. His band Chic, had topped the charts with hits like “I Want Your Love,” and “Good Times.” At heart, he was still a modest young man. So, when his date asked the maître d’ to withdraw people from a table so they could sit there instead, Rodgers recoiled. Her attempt to control people around by exploiting his “rock star” prestige was a dealbreaker.

Rodgers said: “I don’t play that card.”

Sitting at home one night watching TV, he replayed the bad date in his head.

He then came up with these lyrics:

Watchin’ the late show

I made up my mind, oh

A love that is free like a love should be

Fallin’ behind, oh

Don’t you see you are the one

I couldn’t have begun

No, your love is cancelled

The song, “Your Love Is Cancelled,” appeared on Chic’s 1981 album, “Take It Off.”

Despite this song not reaching “hit song” status, Rodgers had conceived the idea of “cancelling” a person for unacceptable behaviour.

I have found that it is getting increasingly difficult to speak to others about their opinions regarding social issues in the world we live in today. This is especially true regarding people's views on marginalized communities. Because social media has now granted every single person on the planet a "platform," there are numerous individuals who are using it for the wrong reasons. Suddenly, everyone's outlook is now publicized on various social media platforms for the public to observe and comment on. Like myself, many people flock to the comment section to see what the latest take is on a particular touchy subject. We are curious creatures who yearn for information, but we are also heavily influenced by the views of others, which we might not always be cognizant of. "Cancel culture," is now a term used to describe what is making people upset, which is the trendier way of being "politically correct or incorrect."

One of the biggest examples of a celebrity being 'cancelled' is none other than the famous miscreant: Kanye West, now known as "Ye". This article states that "In the past, Ye's outbursts were often excused, in part, because he struggled with bipolar disorder. But his recent actions have become more impossible to defend or overlook, and some brands like Adidas have begun to pull away."

<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3196788/fall-kanye-wests-billion-dollar-empire-adidas-and-gap-are-cutting-ties-divorce-battle-kim-kardashian?module=inline&pgtype=article>

A troubling pattern exists in celebrity culture where power and status are often used to exploit those with less influence, particularly minors and young women. James Franco

is one notable example. In 2018, five women came forward with allegations that Franco had engaged in sexually exploitative behaviour, taking advantage of his position in the entertainment industry. Despite the seriousness of these accusations, Franco eventually returned to acting, his career dented but far from destroyed. His case underscores the entertainment industry's ongoing struggle to hold powerful figures accountable in meaningful ways.

Taylor Swift is a prime example of a celebrity who masterfully recreated her image to repair her reputation. Swift has spoken openly throughout her career about navigating fame and working through various feuds. “A mass public shaming, with millions of people saying you are quote-unquote cancelled, is a very isolating experience,” she noted in a 2019 *Vogue* interview, referring to her 10-year back-and-forth feud with Ye. The 12-time Grammy award winner added, “When you say someone is cancelled, it’s not a TV show. It’s a human being. You’re sending massive amounts of messaging to this person to either shut up, disappear, or it could also be perceived as, ‘kill yourself.’”

<https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/pictures/taylor-swift-controversies-through-the-years-lawsuits-and-more/>

After hashtags on Twitter that went viral like #KimExposedTaylorParty, Swift prominently went silent on social media for a large part of 2016-2017. This period of silence had all swifties and Swift haters on edge. In 2017, Swift successfully rebuilt her reputation when she released her first single off her album, “*Reputation*,” called “Look What You Made Me Do.” This song and record caught the world completely off guard,

perhaps also because her absence made her fans' hearts grow fonder and more inquisitive – including her haters. In this song she sings the lyric: “Maybe I got mine, but you’ll all get yours.” Of course, she was right. She is now a global enterprise, and her infamous “Eras Tour” has mobilized the U.S. economy. The “Eras Tour,” has grossed up to \$2.2 billion – making it the highest grossing tour of all time.

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/17/business/taylor-swift-eras-tour-two-billion/index.html#:~:text=That%20comes%20to%20%242.2%20billion,at%20New%20York%20University%20Steinhardt.>

The irony of Nile Rodgers being the first to coin the term “cancelled” paired with Taylor Swifts ability to repair her reputation with her album literally called “Reputation,” is an interesting one. It began with musicians and their lyrics, and now the term “cancelled” is being used in almost every possible communicable context on social platforms.

In an era where every word is subject to scrutiny, the role of the communicator is more precarious—and more important—than ever. Navigating the noise of labels and backlash can make silence feel like the safer option, but silence, too, speaks volumes. Communicating responsibly today requires more than fearlessness; it demands discernment, empathy, and a commitment to fact over frenzy. The truth may be contested, but that doesn’t mean it’s unreachable. As communicators, our task is not to please everyone—it’s to pursue clarity, to question power, and to speak with purpose, even when the ground beneath us is shifting.

