

# Cancel culture on social media: its impact on public narrative and ethical challenges

## *La cultura de la cancelación en redes sociales: impacto en la narrativa pública y desafíos éticos*



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## Abstract:

This note examines how cancel culture on social media shapes public narratives and raises ethical challenges in digital communication. Based on three highly publicized cases on Twitter and Instagram between 2020 and 2023 –Chumel Torres, Zara, and María Elena Ríos– it identifies prevailing moral frameworks and the influence of algorithms on emotional amplification.

## Keywords:

Cancel culture, social media, public narrative, digital ethics.

## Resumen:

*Esta nota analiza cómo la cultura de la cancelación en redes sociales impacta en la configuración de narrativas públicas y plantea desafíos éticos a la comunicación digital. A partir del análisis de tres casos ampliamente difundidos en Twitter e Instagram entre 2020 y 2023 –Chumel Torres, Zara y María Elena Ríos– se identifican los marcos morales predominantes y la influencia de los algoritmos en la amplificación emocional.*

## Palabras clave:

*Cultura de la cancelación, redes sociales, narrativa pública, ética digital.*

## 1. Introduction

The last decade has seen so-called cancel culture become one of the most visible expressions of symbolic justice in online settings. It involves the exclusion or public shaming of figures or institutions for behaviours considered morally unacceptable. Its effectiveness derives from the platforms' immediacy and their capacity to amplify collective emotions.

Clark (2020) warns that cancelling "is not simply excluding but disputing one's right to participate in the public conversation" (p. 90). Ronson (2015) warns about the risk of online shaming turning into a lynching that exceeds the protest's original purpose. Between legitimate grievance and punitive excess, cancelling reflects deep tensions between symbolic justice and persecution.

Social media, as affective infrastructure, sets the boundaries of what is acceptable in the public sphere. Ahmed (2014) affirms that "affects set the boundaries of the moral community" (p. 10). Speaking from a Latin American perspective, García Canclini (2020) adds that "participation on social media does not guarantee dialogue; it can reproduce symbolic hierarchies under the guise of equality" (p. 72). This paper analyses how such boundaries are apparent in three paradigmatic cases that occurred between 2020 and 2023, and what ethical implications arise from the dynamics of outrage and virality that accompanied them.

## 2. Methodology

The study was carried out using a qualitative and interpretive approach, focused on understanding the social and emotional meanings that structure the dynamics of online cancel culture. Rather than measuring the magnitude of the interactions, the objective was to analyse the moral and discursive meanings that emerge around episodes of cancel culture and how these mould new forms of visibility and symbolic exclusion.

Three cases that achieved significant notoriety on Twitter and Instagram were chosen: Chumel Torres (2020), Zara (2021), and María Elena Ríos (2023). The selection was based on criteria of media impact, thematic diversity, and representativeness of different forms of cancellation (individual, corporate, and activist).

The Chumel Torres case saw the cancelling arise from comments considered classist and racist, made on Twitter and on his program, *El Pulso de la República*. The controversy grew when the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) removed him from a forum on racism and discrimination, sparking a broad debate about the limits of political humour and discursive responsibility.

The Zara episode originated in 2021 when the Mexican Ministry of Culture accused the brand of cultural appropriation for using Mixtec embroidery on commercial garments without reference to its origin. The official protest triggered the hashtags #ZaraRacista and #ApropiaciónCultural, along with calls for a boycott. The case illustrated the growing demand for cultural justice and corporate responsibility in global consumption.

The activist and saxophonist María Elena Ríos, a survivor of an acid attack, sparked controversy on social media in 2023 after responding vehemently to criticism she considered offensive. Some users felt her response to be aggressive, generating a wave of online hostility. The case highlighted the dynamic of counter-cancelling, in which an initially supported figure is later questioned for an alleged deviation from the moral norms of online activism.

The corpus was made up of approximately 2,000 public posts, identified through hashtags, mentions, and links to news outlets. The messages were gathered manually utilising advanced search tools; priority was given to those with the highest level of interaction (retweets, comments, or reactions).

The analysis combined thematic content analysis and moral coding techniques (Gee, 2014). The first phase identified the dominant topics –shame, justice, and policing–; the second interpreted their connections to processes of viralisation and collective reappropriation. “Cancelling feeds on symbolic lynching driven by emotional virality” (Ronson, 2015, p. 22).

The work respected the ethical principles of anonymization and the exclusive use of open-access material (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Thus, the research seeks to offer a critical reading of the affective and moral structure of cancel culture on social media, understood as a communicative, political, and emotional phenomenon.

### 3. Results

The three cases demonstrate that moral outrage becomes the driving force behind a conversation. The most emotionally-charged posts achieve greater visibility, while more moderate messages tend to have less impact. That pattern confirms the logic of what Bouvier and Machin (2021) call the outrage economy, describing how platforms reward content that provokes immediate anger or empathy.

As shown in Table 1, each case reflects a distinct type of social response and a dominant moral framework that shapes the public narrative.

**Table 1. Cases analysed and main characteristics**

Case	Main platform	Dominant moral framework	Emergent narrative
A	Twitter	Shame / lynching	Transformation of the individual into a moral symbol
B	Instagram	Justice / reparation	The public as brand auditor
C	Twitter + digital press	Counter-cancelling	Reconfiguration of the narrative towards the victim

**Source:** Created by the authors based on data gathered on Twitter and Instagram (2020-2023)

The results show that the online conversation surrounding cancel culture is typically organized around three main axes: public shame, moral reparation, and defensive reactions to being singled out. Shame acts as a social control mechanism in most of the exchanges analysed, amplified by the use of memes, punitive labels, and irony-laden messages. Discourses focused on reparation, or the pursuit of symbolic justice emerge simultaneously, where the online community assumes the role of moral judge and demands apologies, boycotts, or public retractions.

However, narratives often change, what begins as censure ends up turning into victimization of the accused when the criticism is perceived to be disproportionate or unfair. The phenomenon is in line with what Norris (2023) calls the “circularity of online outrage” (p. 231), a dynamic in which collective emotion feeds off itself, erasing nuances, and reproducing cycles of aggression and defence without real resolution.

Table 2 summarizes the frequency with which coded moral frameworks occur in the posts analysed.

**Table 2. Frequency of moral frameworks in posts analysed**

Moral framework	Number of mentions
Shame / accusation	14
Justice / reparation	10
Hectoring / policing	8

**Source:** created by the authors based on thematic coding (2023)

It should be noted that the frequencies shown in the table do not add up to the total number of posts in the corpus (2,000), but rather to the count of thematic items identified through the coding process. Each value reflects the conceptual recurrence with which the moral frameworks of shame, justice, or policing appeared in online discourse.

The figures should be understood as interpretive indicators of the predominance of certain discursive patterns, rather than as absolute statistical data.

The analysis of the three cases –Chumel Torres (2020), Zara (2021), and María Elena Ríos (2023)– reveals a common pattern in how online communities manage moral outrage. Although the situations differ, they all demonstrate the interaction between collective emotions, visibility algorithms, and discourses of ethical correctness.

The Chumel Torres case saw the conversation form around public shaming. Users reinterpreted the comedian’s comments as evidence of systemic racism and classism, generating a wave of memes and hashtags that functioned as tools of symbolic punishment. Public humiliation reinforced the moral identity of the cancelling group and consolidated the boundary between the acceptable and the intolerable.

With Zara, the focus shifted to moral redress. The accusation of cultural appropriation, launched from Mexico, became a global demand for symbolic justice. Social media acted as a transnational forum for online activism, where consumption turned into political action. However, the initial enthusiasm faded within days, revealing the ephemeral nature of online engagement.

The case of María Elena Ríos revealed a shift in the narrative: the accuser was gradually transformed into a victim of online harassment. That change serves to illustrate the fragility of public morality in the digital sphere, where initial empathy may flip over into aggression. The logic of cancelling and counter-cancelling coexist, generating cycles of tension that are never fully resolved.

Those three episodes show that cancel culture operates not only as a moral sanction, but as a collective ritual that combines emotion, identity, and symbolic power. Users find a form of civic participation in the act of protest, but also a space to affirm moral hierarchies. Ahmed (2014) warns that “emotions not only circulate, but also set the boundaries of belonging to a community” (p. 11).

**Figure 1. Moral dynamics of online cancel culture (2020–2023)**



**Source: Created by the author based on Twitter and Instagram posts (2020–2023)**

Taken together, the results allow for an understanding of the emotional and discursive structure of online cancel culture. The cycle of outrage tends to reproduce itself thanks to the logic of visibility on the platforms. As Gillespie (2018) states, the platforms do not operate as neutral intermediaries, but as curatorial systems that prioritize certain content based on its ability to generate interaction and visibility. In the same vein, Fuchs (2022) emphasizes that “platforms are not just technological media, but political systems that organize attention and punishment” (p. 44).

The interaction between technology and morality produces a kind of instant justice that depends more on algorithmic rhythm than on ethical reasoning. As García Canclini (2020) puts it, “participation on social media does not always expand democracy; it sometimes reproduces the symbolic inequalities of the offline world” (p. 75).

#### 4. Conclusions

The study confirms that cancel culture on social media functions as an emotional ecosystem where audiences actively participate in the building of public morality. The three cases analysed –Chumel Torres, Zara, and María Elena Ríos– show that collective outrage is the driving force behind processes of visibility and symbolic sanction. All three see shame, moral justice, and counter-cancelling entwine to generate narratives that swing between protest and punishment. The online attention economy turns emotion into symbolic currency: the more intense the reaction, the greater the visibility achieved. Algorithms are not neutral; they amplify conflict, organize a hierarchy of voices, and establish new boundaries of discursive legitimacy. Thus, cancel culture reveals a community's values, as well as the structural limitations of the platforms that mediate the conversation.

From an ethical perspective, the results highlight the need to develop ethics of online curation aimed at moderating the speed of judgment and encouraging deliberation. Such an ethic requires critical empathy that allows for the contextualizing of actions and recognizing the possibility of change, discursive responsibility that fosters reflection on the consequences of public shaming, and algorithmic transparency that compels platforms to acknowledge their role in amplifying outrage. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) state that “online responsibility involves recognizing that every interaction contributes to shaping the social norms of the online environment” (p. 18). Adopting this perspective means shifting from a morality of punishment to an ethic of dialogue, in which mistakes can become learning opportunities.

On an academic level, this research provides an interpretive framework for understanding the relationship between emotion, technology, and symbolic power in cancel culture. Its focus on Latin American cases adds to the global debate and incorporates cultural nuances often absent from English-language literature. Fuchs (2022) argues that “platforms are not just technological media, but political systems that organize attention and punishment” (p. 44), while García Canclini (2020) warns that online participation can reproduce the symbolic hierarchies of the offline world. Cancel culture is found at this intersection of emotion and technological power: a field where public morality is constantly being negotiated under the algorithmic logic of visibility.

Future research could explore the regional dimension of this phenomenon –for example, the discursive differences between Latin American countries or the influence of traditional media in legitimizing online punishment– and examine how new formats of audiovisual communication reinforce or mitigate punitive dynamics. Cancel culture is not going to disappear; it is now part of how contemporary societies negotiate their values and emotions. However, its transformative power will depend on online communities learning to balance outrage with empathy and denunciation with reflection. As Ahmed (2014) says, emotions are not just responses, but forces that configure bonds and exclusions. Understanding that affective dimension is fundamental to imagining a more just, pluralistic, and truly human online environment.

#### 5. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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