

Cancel Culture and its effects on freedom of Speech. An analysis with a focus on the entertainment industry

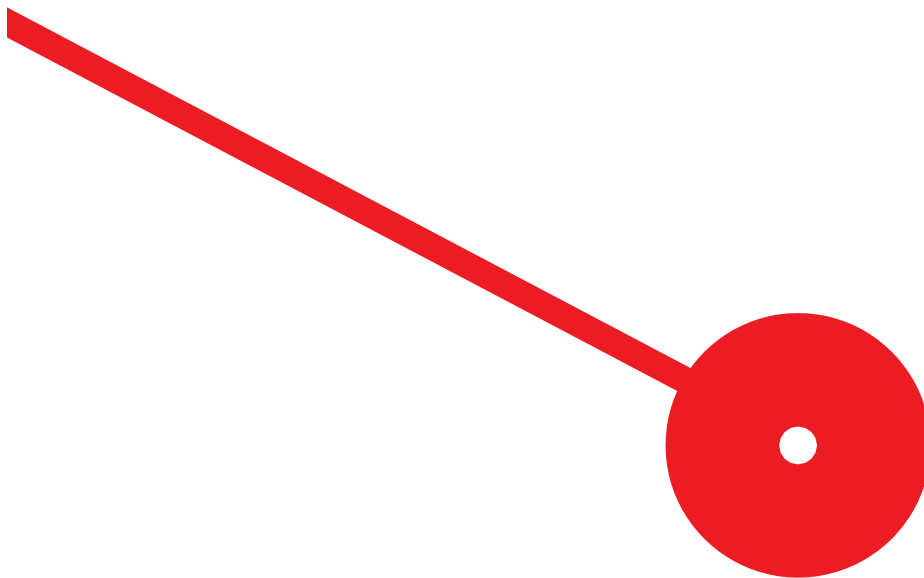
Ana Beatriz Cunha Ferreira

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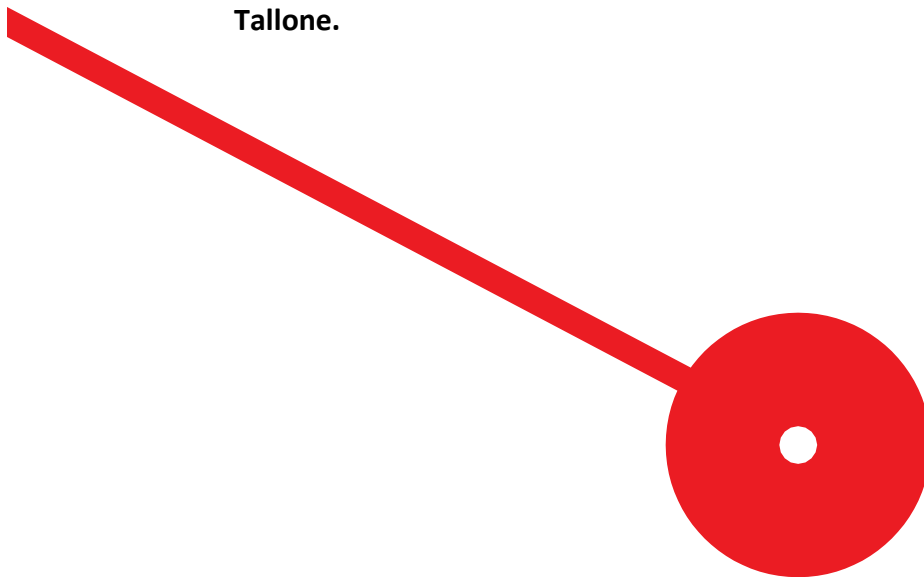
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ABSTRACT:

We are moving towards an increasingly developed society in terms of the use of online platforms, but this progress also brings with it some dynamics that raise questions about freedom of expression and the sharing of opinions.

This dissertation aims to better understand and analyse the concept of cancel culture, a phenomenon that has been gaining more and more voice on social networks, with the focus more closely linked to the entertainment industry, so that we can understand a little more about the dynamics of sharing opinions. Freedom of expression and what it encompasses is also associated with this phenomenon, in order to understand what the two have in common and what they mean for each other.

It will also be possible to verify the analysis of the themes addressed throughout the dissertation to reach a conclusion regarding the main theme, the analysis of the impact of the culture of cancellation on freedom of expression.

Key words: Cancel Culture, Freedom of Speech, Opinions, Social Media.

RESUMO:

Caminhamos para uma sociedade cada vez mais desenvolvida no que diz respeito à utilização de plataformas online, mas este progresso traz consigo também algumas dinâmicas que levantam questões sobre a liberdade de expressão e a partilha de opiniões.

Esta dissertação pretende compreender e analisar melhor o conceito de cultura do cancelamento, um fenómeno que tem vindo a ganhar cada vez mais voz nas redes sociais, com o foco mais ligado à indústria do entretenimento, de forma que se possa perceber um pouco mais da dinâmica de partilha de opiniões. É também associado a este fenómeno que a liberdade de expressão e o que ela engloba se enquadra neste trabalho, de forma a perceber o que ambas têm em comum e o que significam uma para a outra.

Será também possível verificar a análise dos temas abordados ao longo da dissertação de forma a chegar a uma conclusão relativamente ao tema principal, a análise do impacto da cultura de cancelamento na liberdade de expressão.

Palavras-Chave: Cancel Culture, Freedom of Speech, Opinions, Social Media.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LGBTQIA+- Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The additional “+” stands for all the other identities not encompassed in the short acronym.

UNIFEC- The United Nations Children's Fund.

UK- United Kingdom.

US- United States.

NBC- National Broadcasting Company.

WHO- World Organization Health.

MIT- Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

INTRODUCTION

The term "culture of cancellation", also known as "culture of denunciation", was first used in 2016 and refers to the elimination ("cancellation") of support for people (and their work), groups of people, organizations, or companies due to a belief or behaviour that the "denouncing" parties find disagreeable.

A cancellation campaign is often initiated by drawing attention to the person being cancelled on social media to raise awareness of the alleged offense. Cancellation can take many different forms, such as pressuring organizations to cancel public appearances or speeches by the parties, or, in the case of companies deemed objectionable, organizing boycotts of their products (ProCon. Org, 2023).

The main objective of this dissertation is to relate the culture of cancellation in the entertainment industry and the freedom of expression of users of social networks and other types of online platforms, since this topic has had some debate and notoriety in the media due to the proportions it has gained over the years.

This thesis is divided into four chapters to study and analyse the subject. The first chapter begins by describing the background and origin of the cancellation culture phenomenon, so that it is possible to see its development through time. In the second part of this chapter, it is also possible to understand the evolution of the phenomenon and its dissemination on social media, seeing how it has evolved over the years. Then, in the third and final part of this chapter is presented some of the most famous cases of people associated with the entertainment industry who have suffered from cancellation during their careers, so that the impact of the cancellation on them can be verified.

The second chapter focuses on the impact associated with the culture of cancellation by studying both sides, those who are cancelled and those who cancel, to understand the reasons why people go ahead with this type of procedure. In the second part of this chapter, it will be possible to see whether this procedure is effective in changing the behaviour and attitudes of those who are cancelled.

The third chapter is associated with the second theme and object of study of this dissertation, so that it is possible to link the two themes, cancel culture and freedom of

expression. This chapter will analyse the concepts associated with this topic, namely media literacy and the importance of this point in relation to the proper use of social platforms. This is followed by an analysis of the challenges associated with online communication, which is also an important objective for the discussion of this main topic. Digital activism and the meaning associated with it is also a topic that will be addressed so that we can understand how impactful the online movement is today. Online censorship and freedom of expression are the penultimate topic addressed to understand the concept in concrete and what it encompasses, once again bringing the entertainment industry as an example and object of study, this time with a renowned Portuguese artist. Finally, to link both themes, an analysis will be made of freedom of expression, associating it with the culture of cancellation.

The fourth and final chapter is associated with the brief quantitative approach, as a way of investigating the main theme in a more practical way and with cases and opinions from people all over the world. Although it is a secondary analysis, i.e., an analysis made only to add a little more information to the analysis of indirect and secondary sources (the main methodology used for this thesis), the quantitative analysis brings important input to link the opinions of the respondents with the analysis made so far. At the end of this chapter, the results associated with the survey will also be analysed so that it is possible to merge the information with the review of the literature carried out in the first 3 chapters of this thesis, as already mentioned.

1 - DEFINITION AND ORIGIN OF CANCEL CULTURE

A sociological phenomenon known as "cancel culture" has gained attention recently from the media and the public, including authors and academics. The idea that a person might be "cancelled" — that is, culturally barred from having a large public platform or profession — has become a polarising topic of debate in recent years (Romano, 2020).

In this chapter it will be possible to look at the origin of this concept and its purpose, so that it is possible to understand why it has gained so much popularity in recent years, as indicated above.

The different elements that contributed to the development of the cancel culture will be covered in this chapter, including:

- **An overview of the concept of cancel culture:** Focusing mainly on the emergence of this phenomenon and what has led to its great popularity in recent years.
- **The origin, the evolution, and the influence of Cancel Culture in social media and digital media:** Focused on developing the use of social media to put someone's cancellation into practice.
- **Notable examples of cancellation cases that drew public attention:** Some examples of people who have suffered some kind of cancellation during their career, mostly focused on people in the entertainment industry and why they have suffered any kind of cancellation.

1.1 An overview of the concept of Cancel Culture

Opinions have never been unanimous. The divergence of thought and ideals has always been a very well-established reality in the day-to-day life of each of us and, since there is the possibility of expressing any type of opinion on any type of subject in the most varied online platforms, there is also public disagreement on the most varied topics. The notion that someone might be "cancelled" — that is, prevented from having a large public platform or career due to their opinions— has generated intense debate over the past few years (Romano, 2021). The rise of "cancel culture" and the concept of cancelling someone follows a well-known pattern: A public figure, such as a celebrity, says or does

something objectionable and so, a public backlash follows, frequently encouraged by politically liberal social media. Cancel culture is the widespread cessation of support for public personalities or celebrities who have engaged in behaviours that are no longer considered acceptable. On social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, this mass shaming or "cancelling" practice is common nowadays (Slyt, 2020). However, the truth is that, considering the opinions of the public, cancel culture not only applies to celebrities and famous people, but it may be extended to entire nations and cultures, as shown at the onset of the war in the Ukraine. The University of Milan cancelled courses on the Russian author Dostoevsky due to "political reasons" considering the Ukraine crisis. According to Italian media, writer Paolo Nori was scheduled to teach a course, but the institution cancelled it. (Net, 2021). It should be noted that the author in question died in the 19th century, many years before the outbreak of war in Ukraine. In the article written by Net, is it possible to confirm that some influential figures in Italian society have expressed their discontent with what has happened, including the former economy minister, Pierre Bersani, stating that: "They canceled the Dostoevsky course because of the 'delicacy' of the moment? What is this, a joke?" (Bersani, 2022).

The Cambridge Dictionary gives a definition and perspective on the culture of cancellation. The definition states that Cancel Culture is "a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you" Cambridge Dictionary (2023). This statement demonstrates a sort of collective accountability in which the general public's view, which is occasionally fuelled by anger, has a considerable impact on what happens to people who openly express their opinions. The fundamental criticism of cancel culture is that there will always be someone who takes offence at something regardless.

Although currently the topic is often present in the vocabulary of social media users, this phenomenon of cancelling someone for their opinions and thoughts is relatively recent. Despite being an existing term, it only gained traction between 2016 and 2017, with less than 100 tweets¹ being written on the topic before 2018, which shows that this mediatic topic has gained its force in recent years (Greenspan, 2020). As a social network

¹ A Tweet is any message posted to Twitter which may contain photos, videos, links, and text. (X, help Center, 2023, para.3).

with a great impact on the generations of the 90s and 00s, Twitter is mostly used to spread information, like an online newspaper of various events.

Tiffany (2023) indicates that twitter is where people cancel others, it has grown to be a significant court of public opinion. Twitter's character limit and accelerated pace may cause conversations to become overly simplistic and polarizing. Disputes can escalate quickly and result in the "cancelation" of individuals or public figures when certain users make a certain behaviour or viewpoint visible. An example of this is shown in the image below, where the tweet's author, Mimi Jane, expressed her opinion about a well-known singer, Travis Scott.



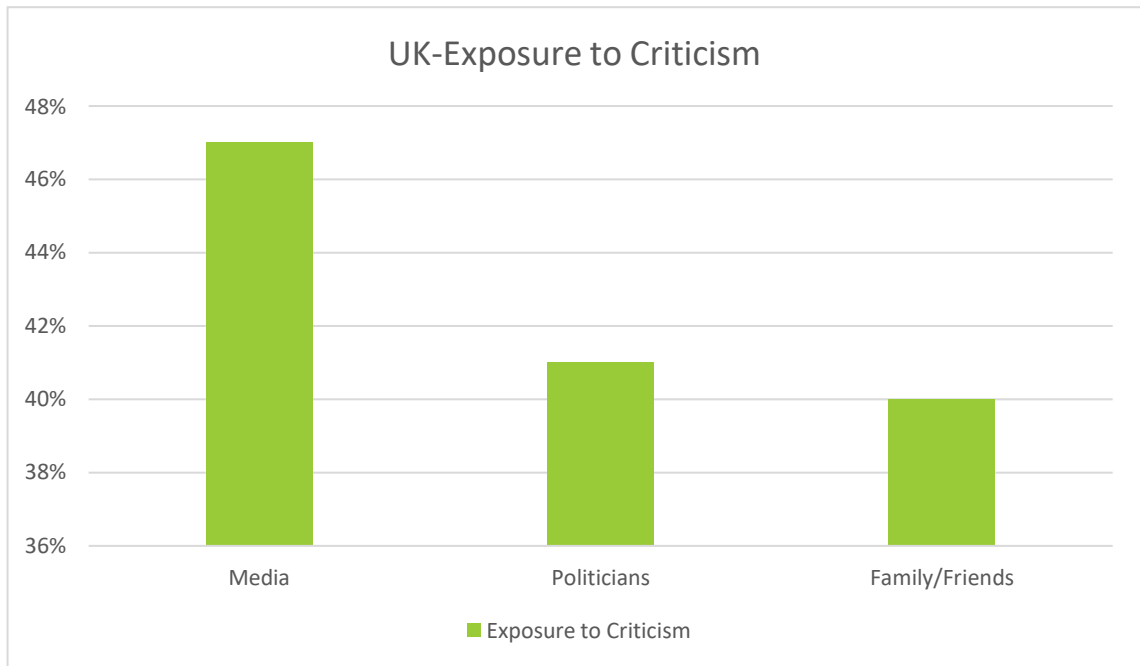
Figure 1- Tweet about Travis Scott

Source: Twitter Account of '@themochalisa', 2015.

A large portion of politics and public life is influenced by the news media as an institution. Public criticism frequently comes with this function. The countries with the highest number of people connected to the entertainment industry, such as film and comedy, are the countries with the highest rate of criticality, namely the United Kingdom and the United States (Robertson, 2023).

Robertson (2023) conducted a study related to the impact and criticism in the UK of the niche of people related to the entertainment industry. Celebrities, comedians, and social media figures are among those who are regularly penalized for their views on the news media. These people frequently share their opinions on many news topics, making them popular targets for both public support and judgement. In the UK, 47% of those who

have been exposed cite these sources, followed by politicians at 41% and family/friends at 40%.



Graphic 1- Percentage of people that were exposed to criticism in the UK, according to Robertson 2023. Source: Robertson (2023).

It is therefore possible to see that a significant number of people associated with the world of entertainment have already suffered some form of criticism during their careers. In an analogy, is associated the phenomenon of the culture of cancellation with the Spanish Inquisition. With this association it is possible, in an exaggerated way, that the censorship that took place centuries ago is also a reality today, just experienced in a different way (Mishan, 2020). The comparison with the Spanish Inquisition, although rather extreme, is made so that the reader can have a perception of the theme and the new form of censorship experienced in the 21st century.

It is, however, argued that cancel culture, in contrast, is rudderless, a succession of unplanned disruptions with no logical progression and no official machinery to enact or enforce a policy or philosophy (Mishan, 2020). Instead, cancel culture works through the actions and reactions of individuals on social networks. This lack of formal structure, which results from individuals opposing certain opinions given by third parties, results, in a way, in people being cancelled randomly.

It is also possible to associate this phenomenon with the constant need of some human beings to feel accepted by the digital world, so that they can belong to a group

and, in a way, be accepted by that same group. The phenomenon of cancellation culture is also associated with thinking in a collective format, better known as "Mob Mentality". People are affected by larger groups so that, as already indicated, they can feel more integrated and motivated (Brennan, 2021). People who are a part of a big group may feel invincible and invisible. In other words, someone's fear of consequences is diminished. People think that if they hide behind the protection of the group, they would not be discovered or made to answer for their deeds (Brush, 2023). The association of this phenomenon with the cancellation culture is since, when the internet mob decides, they do not want to tolerate the present scandal, calls to have the person in question cancelled immediately follow. Additionally, the rhetoric being used is offensive, intolerable, and foolish (Cassidy, 2023).

1.2 The origin, the evolution, and the influence of Cancel Culture in social media and digital media

While content creation allows for self-expression and global connectivity, it also exposes authors to a wide range of reactions, including criticism and conflicting interpretations. The mix of pleasure and criticism in today's online exchanges demonstrates how criticism is still critical in our changing society, particularly in the digital realm (Dizikes, 2023). Almost all the criticism ever written dates from the 20th century (Britannica, 2023). The evolution of this phenomenon brings us to the present day, when most of the criticism is done online and on social media because creating content on social media can arouse people's interest.

There is an older term in our society to refer to the act of calling someone out for something they have said that does not meet one's ideals, the call-out culture². "Cancel culture and call-out culture are often confused not only with each other, but also with broader public shaming trends, as part of a collectivized narrative that all these things are examples of trolling and harassment" (Romano, 2020, pp. 18). The terminology of cancellation culture may have started in the 1990s in the film *New Jack City*, the author describes the scene "...in which Wesley Snipes plays a gangster named Nino Brown. In

² A way of behaving in a society or group in which people are often criticized in public, for example on social media, for their words or actions, or asked to explain them. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

one scene, after his girlfriend breaks down because of all the violence he's causing, he dumps her by saying, "Cancel that bitch. I'll buy another one" (Romano, 2020, pp. 11).

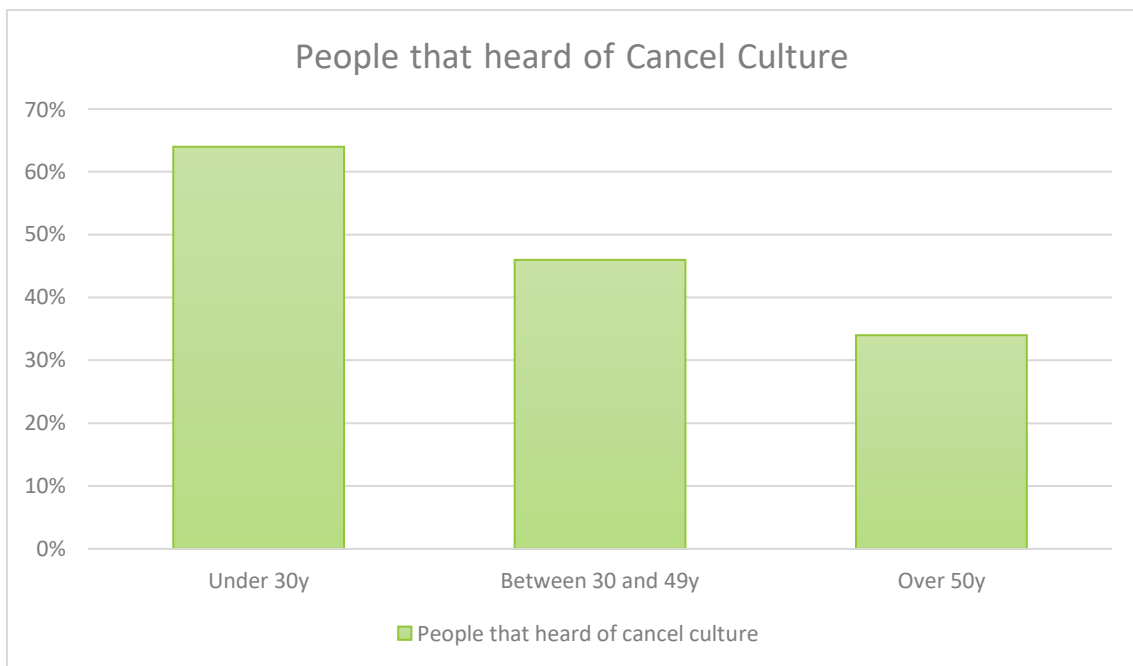
It should be noted then that the term 'cancel' has long been used in reference to human beings, in a way of 'eliminating' the person to whom we are referring, taking away their social value. Although its use of the terminology is relatively recent, as previously indicated, it has been used for many years in the industry to which it is mostly directed, the celebrity industry, namely the music industry, where cancellation strikes solid. In 2010, the singer Lil Wayne referenced the film in a line from his song "I'm Single": "Yeah, I'm single / n***a had to cancel that bitch like Nino" (Wayne, 2010). Nowadays, the terminology and the general idea of being "cancelled" are more popular among the fan bases of these musicians, as seen above with the case of artist Travis Scott. The expression is usually used to distance oneself from musical passages and lyrics that are seen as controversial or unfavourable by society, which also includes words that refer to ideas that are different from those accepted by society.

The discussion around the musical production of these artists is a recurring theme on the social networks we use today. With social networks, opinions and comments about musical productions are quickly and repeatedly discussed and analysed online, so the great impact of online platforms highlights their importance in promoting discussions, debates and expressions of acceptance or disapproval in the context of music criticism and appreciation, and they play a crucial role in sharing information and disseminating new information to all those involved, as we will be able to investigate later in this work.

Perenkov, a Researcher at the Center for European Studies, wrote an opinion piece about the cancellation culture. What stands out from this article is its opening sentence: "The culture of cancellation is above all an American phenomenon and is based on American technology." (Perenkov, 2022, pp. 1), which may be an indicator of how this concept has gained momentum in recent years.

Associated with this information, it was also possible to find an object of study of the American population in relation to the concept of cancellation culture. A think tank, the Pew Research Center, steered a study on how many Americans are familiar, in the year 2021, with the concept of cancellation culture. As indicated by the study's authors, the level of public understanding of "cancellation culture" varies among demographic groupings, sometimes significantly.

Publications of the study results indicate that of the 10,093 U.S. adults conducted from September 8–13, 2020, 44% believe they have heard at least a fair amount about the concept, including 22% who have heard it a lot. However, a considerably higher percentage (56%)—including 38% who have heard nothing at all—says they have heard little to nothing about it. Before several recent discussions and disputes around cancel culture, a poll was conducted (Vogels et al., 2021, pp. 4-23).



Graphic 2- Percentage of people that heard of Cancel Culture, according to Vogels et al., 2021, para. 4-23. Source: The author.

Although it is a topic that is extremely present today, it is also one that many people are still unaware of, as can be analysed from the graph of respondents. A large proportion of the American population, around 56% of those who took part in the study, revealed limited knowledge of the term "cancellation culture", which means that, despite it being talked about more and more in the media, a significant percentage of people are still unfamiliar with the term. The study also revealed that around 44% of people had some level of familiarity with the culture of cancellation, with 22% reporting a great deal of exposure to the term. This suggests that the concept has gained visibility and is a topic of discussion among some of those surveyed, revealing the weight of the concept in people's minds (Vogels et al., 2021).

Social media's major goal is to give consumers digital platforms on which they may produce, distribute, and engage with content. Social media platforms make it simpler for people to interact and engage with one another by facilitating conversation and the

exchange of information, ‘‘social media is one of the most publicly used platforms which can be used to get information related to highlighted events’’ (Miraj 2022, pp. 1). Approximately 50% of the general audience, according to figures provided by the competent agency, will learn about news through social media because it spreads specialised information very quickly. 52% of traditional media reporters and editors use Twitter for story research, compared to 65% who use Facebook and LinkedIn.

With the examples below, one can see the format for sharing opinions and how social media work in a nutshell, so that one can understand how attractive they can be for sharing and criticism:

- **User-Generated Content:** Consumers can generate and share content on social media platforms in a variety of formats, including text, photos, videos, and live streams. This user-generated content has the potential to go viral and spread quickly throughout the platform and beyond. It can quickly reach a large audience (Custódio, 2019).
- **Sharing and Reposting:** Social media platforms include functions like sharing, retweeting, or reposting. These particularities let users share content from others they find interesting or pertinent. The exposure of information to each user's followers through this sharing mechanism expands its reach (Read, 2023).
- **Interactivity and engagement:** Likes³, comments, shares, and direct messages on social media promote interaction. Users can communicate with each other and content producers, promoting discourse and supporting the sharing of ideas (Kang et al., 2021).

Social media platforms play a vital role in raising awareness about specific topics, as even journalists from mainstream media outlets use it to share information (Miraj, 2022). The typical newspaper has been partly replaced by the mobile phone screen when it comes to finding news about world events. Bearing all this in mind and returning to the analysis of the study on the previous page, it should be emphasised that social networks have played a crucial role in the evolution of this phenomenon over the years, as indicated above. Most people who are already familiar with the concept of cancellation culture are

³ A like is a feature incorporated into social networks and other online platforms that allows the user to give positive feedback to any type of content, and thus connect with what interests them. (Armetrics 2022).

also social media users and have at some point seen some kind of post related to the topic or even witnessed a moment when the concept was put into practice. Some of the participants also agree to the practice so that those involved can benefit from the experience (Vogels et al., 2021).

The impact of social media and how quickly information reaches us today raises many questions about the main topic. Romeo (2022) calls our attention to an interesting event analysis regarding the partial cancellation of someone in the music industry, using as a first example of comparison the concert given by the Rolling Stones in 1969. The author begins by describing the concert and the events of the concert that raise questions about the topic and the time in which the scandal is positioned since, in 1969, the Internet was yet to be invented. During the performance, four deaths occurred. Meredith Hunter was one of the victims; she was intentionally beaten and stabbed approximately 20 feet from the stage.

Despite the turmoil in the audience, the Rolling Stones persevered and completed their set, showcasing their notable ability to sustain a successful career even as they approach their sixth decade in the music industry. However, a similar case happened recently during a concert by artist Travis Scott. A crowd surge that occurred during the festival resulted in many injuries and 10 fatalities. More than 300 patients were admitted to hospitals, many of whom suffered cardiac arrest. Even though several people were shouting and attempting to catch his attention as well as that of security, Scott insisted that he was unaware of what was happening. Since then, he has avoided the spotlight; for instance, he was denied the opportunity to headline Coachella 2022⁴, and even his social media activity has been sparse.

Both cases have the same origin, but ended in different ways, with one group of artists having a continuous career and presence in the music industry and another artist, where the Internet presence is greater, with a partially paused career (Romeo, 2022).

Social media impact has emerged as a powerful driver in altering the trajectory of diverse events in the current digital era, frequently exerting its influence in unexpected ways. The tragic Travis Scott concert incident and the Rolling Stones concert serve as

⁴ Coachella, also known as the Coachella Valley Music and Arts event, is an annual rock event held at the Empire Polo Club in Indio, California, with music performed on numerous stages (Britannica 2023).

examples of the significant influence that social media platforms have on the public's perception, cultural narratives, and the careers and lives of musicians.

The comparison of these two incidents reveals the complex interactions between online speech and its effects on individuals and groups in the entertainment sector. The tragedy at the Travis Scott concert is a prime example of the enormous potential of social media to quickly escalate public indignation and calls for responsibility. Instantaneous distribution of videos, posts, and testimony created a situation where public emotion soon became out of control, requiring a response from the artist. Discussions about "cancelling" Scott were heard alongside the cries for justice and safety measures, illustrating the growing influence of online critics in defining an artist's reputation and career path. In contrast, the experience of the Rolling Stones serves as a counterexample, illuminating the ability of well-established artists to endure crises in a time when social media predominates (Romeo, 2022).

The Rolling Stones enduring history and established fanbase, supported by decades of experience and a devoted following, led to the continuation of their career despite the deaths that occurred during their concert. Even while the event generated a lot of conversation and public reaction, other elements beyond social media's immediate control ultimately shaped the story of the Rolling Stones, as Garvey states: "Celebrity cancellations – in most cases – start on social media. Something unpleasant or downright terrible surfaces and quicker than a 280-character tweet, a star goes from admired to vilified." (Garvey 2021, pp. 13).

These occurrences highlight the complex interaction between the voices on social media and the possibility for dramatic shifts in public opinion and decisions. The ability of the digital era to spread ideas, opinions, and calls to action quickly has a profound impact on both the reputations of artists and the larger cultural conversation. A key takeaway from these opposing incidents is that social media's influence on destinies is influenced by a variety of elements, including an artist's background as well as the reactions of the public and industry.

1.3 Notable examples of cancellation cases that drew public attention.

Due to its wide-ranging effects on public figures and individuals whose acts or comments are regarded offensive, undesirable, or contradictory with changing society values, cancel culture has attracted public attention. A subdivision of situations that connects with the complex dynamics of humour and its interpretations as well as the essence of cancel culture has emerged within the field of cancel culture. These famous cancellations, which have dominated public conversation, highlight the complex interrelationship between comedy, satire, and cultural sensitivities.

Understanding the interaction between freedom of expression, social responsibility, and the power dynamics present in modern public discourse can be done by studying these cases, which shed light on how humour is interpreted, and occasionally contested within the context of cancel culture. This part of the essay seeks to critically examine a few examples of cancel culture that have received significant public attention.

Humour has been present for a long time, and it has been seen in different forms from a very early age. Morreall (2012), in one of his articles written on the evolution and philosophy of humour, indicates that it has been seen and analysed in many ways since very early in history. The author points out that whenever asked what matters most in their lives, people frequently say humour. Two aspects about what philosophers have stated about humour are surprising since they are interested in what is significant in life. In the first instance it is indicated, according to the author, humour has not been fully studied and deepened. Only a few philosophers, including Descartes, Freud, and Bergson, as well as lesser-known individuals such as Frances Hutcheson and James Beattie, have written important works about laughing or humour from antiquity to the twentieth century.

The subsequent unexpected finding, pointed out by the author on his article, is how poorly humour has been perceived by most philosophers. In contrast to comedy or joking, the bulk of philosophical observations on laughing and humour from antiquity to the 20th century centred on mocking, disdainful, or overwhelming laughter.

It is crucial to understand that humour isn't a universal concept. Where we are and who we are with affect it, and here is where societal standards come into play. When we consider the humour industry and the growth of cancel culture, this becomes especially obvious. These humour theories not only clarify the fundamentals of humour but also

show how societal norms define the limits of humour. Morreall's article serve as a reminder that humour nowadays must walk a fine line between freedom of expression and consideration for the possibility of offending or hurting people, especially in a culture like cancel culture, which carefully examines comedians' jokes for insensitivity or harm. Therefore, it is important to remember that the context of our times and society's changing sensibilities play a significant influence in determining what is amusing and what is over the line as we appreciate and analyse humour.

As mentioned earlier, the dynamics of public discourse and cultural participation have taken a turn for the worse since social media became part of our daily lives. The extensive presence of social media platforms has greatly helped the development of cancel culture. "When we think of the cancel culture what comes to mind right away is how social media is used to call someone out for their words or actions as offensive to a group. Those offended go on social media and start a firestorm of criticism against the offending party." (Mintz, 2021, para. 1). What happens, in most cases, is the sharing of an opinion or even a belief by someone and, usually, that someone belongs to the niche of people associated with the industries of music, entertainment, etc. The statement is not well received by the public and then the so called "cancelation" happens. Ellis (2023) approaches the theme on his blog by stating that: "Celebrities being the famous people they are, regardless of how famous are always in one controversy or another. With threats of cancellation." Also adding that: "It's like some of them can't escape it." (Ellis 2023, pp. 1-2). In many situations, well-known persons are more likely to experience these incidents because they frequently voice their thoughts, even when they may not have all the necessary knowledge or context. This can give the impression that cancel culture is making individuals less tolerant of different points of view in society (Mintz, 2021).

Society has experienced a transformation in the modern environment, which is characterised by the digital connectivity, and is also categorised by a specific tendency for innovation in the selection of themes for conversation within the context of social media platforms. An intriguing aspect of this practise is the methodical and meticulous analysis of historical digital footprints, where people actively engage in 'diggings' through old posts and interactions to find statements that are contentious. The goal is to find statements, comments, or thoughts that defy accepted social norms or have the potential to cause conflict by carefully reviewing archived digital expressions. This

practice demonstrates how the digital age, in this case social networks, plays a crucial role in preserving information and opinions previously said, making them susceptible to re-evaluation and analysis according to the parameters of contemporary discourse, i.e., what was said previously can be brought up again for discussion in a pejorative way.

In the realm of the cancel culture, this specific method has begun to be the preferred one among social media users, ‘Haters digging up old tweets’. (Ellis 2023, pp. 10). An example of this practice was the succession of events and discourse that took place when a tweet by comedian Kevin Hart from 2011 was brought back to the present, so that new people could give their opinion on what the author said a few years ago. A member of the comedy industry from a very young age, Hart began his career straight out of secondary school, he started doing stand-up frequently in venues across the nation after winning several amateur stand-up competitions.

Hart wrote a tweet in reference to the homosexual community. Internet users decided to search for tweets from 2011 so that the comedian could be cancelled for his comments.



Figure 2-Tweet of Kevin Hart from 2011

Source: Twitter Account of Kevin Hart, 2011.

Although extremely sensitive, the comments made by the comedian are in line with his profession, humour. The author of the blog raises an interesting question: ‘Is what Kevin Hart said right? Is it insensitive?’ (Ellis 2023, pp. 20) and addresses a response to it that is also interesting: ‘The point here is NOT what he said, but how people on Twitter, more so when they don’t like a person will actively dig through old tweets to find dirt on your name.’ (Ellis 2023, pp. 21). After this moment, the artist

decided to publicly apologise (so that the comments would stop) and decided not to present that year's Oscars, to show regret for the comments made.



Figure 3- Tweet of Kevin Hart apologising about his past tweets.

Source: Twitter Account of Kevin Hart, 2018.

Now-a-days, people are used to the idea of subscribing services and want everything to be immediate, celebrities, somehow, are also viewed as commodities to purchase and sell, and the concept of "cancellation" is widely available (Bromwich 2018). In a society where we consume and discard items quickly and celebrities are considered as commodities, the concept of "cancellation" is simple to grasp and apply. Whether it is the possibility of arrest on obscenity charges that comics faced up until the late twentieth century, or the chance of being "cancelled," comedians have always had to tread carefully when evoking taboos in their gags (Kelley, 2022).

One of the biggest names in the industry saw his career partially paused due to some comments related to the LGBTQ+ community a few years ago. In high school, Dave Chappelle decided to pursue a career in stand-up comedy. In 1993, he made his acting debut in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, and in that same year, he starred in the stoner comedy *Half Baked*. Before unexpectedly leaving the phenomenally successful programme on the eve of its third season, the comic made a name for himself in 2003 with the debut of *Chappelle's Show*. In 2013, Chappelle started doing stand-up comedy shows again, and he later produced several well-received Netflix specials. Chappelle was charged of transphobia for making jokes about the transgender and LGBTQ+ community

in his 2021 Netflix special, "The Closer." The show caused some disturbance with clumsy assaults on MeToo⁵ and muzzles equating Asian people to Covid, but primarily with the subject he has been using on his gigs for years: transgender people (Kelley, 2022).

After this event, the comedian suffered some backlash on social media for his comments on the special episode, particularly backlash from some employees of the streaming platform that aired the episode, Netflix⁶. Because of this situation and because many people showed their discontent with the way Chappelle referred to the community, a sold-out Chappelle event in Minneapolis was cancelled hours before it was set to begin. The First Avenue in Minnesota made the cancellation of his show official right before the show (Kelley, 2022).

The fact that some people were unhappy with Chappelle's approach in the show meant that he received a severe punishment for the way he expresses himself, seeing one of his shows cancelled⁷.

⁵ Awareness movement around the issue of sexual harassment and sexual abuse of women in the workplace. (Brittain, 2023).

⁶ Netflix is a subscription-based streaming service that allows members to watch TV series and films on a device connected to the internet. (Netflix help-center).

⁷ Recently, on October 19, the comedian was again the target of criticism during a show after addressing the current conflict between Palestine and Israel (NIT, 2023, own translation).



Figure 4- Tweet of Comedy Show Club, First Avenue, regarding the cancellation of Dave Chappelle's show.

Source: Tweet from the Account of First Avenue Comedy Club, 2015.

Jaclyn Moore, a transgender writer, executive producer, and showrunner who worked on Netflix's *Dear White People* for four seasons, said on Twitter that she will no longer work for the company if it publishes and profits from clearly and dangerously transphobic content, showing displeasure at Chappelle's humorous comments (Gardner, 2021), thus putting pressure on the people around them so that the type of humour used by the comedian changes.

For many years Chappelle became the target of much commentary regarding his approach to societal issues. The comedian uses humour as a way of working, yet he remains true to himself and the jokes he writes and uses in his performances. In one of his shows in 2022, Chappelle points out that: “Art is a powerful commodity”, he stated, adding that “if you're a good artist, you should never behave as a commodity.” (Chappelle, 2022). The comedian also points out that his biggest issue with the 'The

Closer' dispute is that it is impossible to report on an artist's work while ignoring artistic trace from his views. Chappelle indicates that doing so is like reading a newspaper and seeing a headline that says, "Man Shot in the Face by a Six-Foot Rabbit Expected to Survive", joking with the fact that the news is about the Bugs Bunny cartoon. With this statement, Chappelle argues that it is not possible to debate an artist's work without considering the impact of their own perspectives on the matter. The posed joke, concerning a cartoon headline involving a fake incident, tries to separate an artist's identity or values from their work. Essentially, Chappelle's comment underlines the need of understanding an artist's beliefs while studying or reporting on their creative output.

Despite all this, the artist's career has continued, and he always makes a point of being true to his beliefs. Zinoman (2021), implies that in debates about problematic art, particularly humour, there is a propensity these days to hastily combine language and violence.

Increasingly affecting people in the entertainment business, cancel culture has become an important societal phenomenon in recent years. Although cancel culture is most often connected to the entertainment industry, it has also spread to other industries, highlighting the power of social media and the growing impact of public opinion on numerous facets of society. The novelist J.K. Rowling, who is best known for developing the enormously successful Harry Potter series, is one famous example of an attempted cancellation. Contemporary discourse has increasingly centred on gender, a multifaceted concept with cultural, societal, and personal components. The debate centres on whether gender should be viewed as a flexible, socially formed term or as an undeniable biological fact. Public celebrities with strong opinions on either side of the issue have been the subject of several controversies and even cancellations as a result of this debate. Rowling's entry into the world of pop culture was influenced by her opinions and pronouncements regarding transgender people and gender identity issues.

According to Greenfield (2023), the author gave her public support to Forstater, a British woman who was fired for saying, among other things, that it is impossible to change gender, after a judge determined that Forstater's views were not protected by Britain's anti-discrimination laws. This is when the mainstream conflict between Rowling and trans activists/allies began. The public strongly reacted to her comments on social media and in public pronouncements because some people thought they were offensive

or hurtful to the transgender community. One of the most controversial cases was the author's retweet of an article dedicated to menstruation and everything it encompasses.

An article, written by Sommer is an opinion piece, but the reason for the debate starts right in the title: ‘Opinion: Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate’ (Sommer, 2020). The debate began with the fact that the author of the article chose the term "people" instead of "women" who menstruate, causing the writer to revolt and share a sarcastic comment on the subject, leading to thousands of people expressing their displeasure at the comment.



Figure 5-Tweet of J.K. Rowling on the article about menstruation.

Source: Twitter account of J.K. Rowling.

As also indicated in the article written by Greenfield (2022), during the ongoing public debate, a variety of well-known individuals including celebrities, activists, and LGBTQ+ organizations have expressed a range of emotions such as anger, disillusionment, and a strong rejection of J.K. Rowling's views. In a notable response,

Daniel Radcliffe, famous for his role as the main character in the Harry Potter film series, shared his perspective through a written piece published on the Trevor Project's platform. Radcliffe firmly asserted, "Transgender women are women. Any contrary statement negates the identity and respect of transgender individuals, going against the guidance provided by medical experts who possess greater knowledge in this area than either Jo [Rowling] or myself." (Radcliffe, 2022).

Radcliffe's statement aligned with the findings of the Trevor Project, an organization dedicated to LGBTQ youth, which revealed that a significant 78% of transgender and nonbinary young people encountered instances of discrimination tied to their gender identity. The J.K. Rowling cancellation episode exemplifies how complexly artistic expression, religious conviction, and social ideals interact. It emphasises the influence of social media and public opinion in influencing discourse, bringing about change, and holding people accountable for their words, particularly when those statements are seen as at odds with shifting ideas of inclusivity and equality.



Figure 6- Tweet of Delaney Tarr expressing her opinion about J.K Rowling statement.

Source: Twitter Account of @delaneytarr, 2020.

The cases of Kevin Hart, Dave Chappelle, and J.K. Rowling provide diverse examples of cancel culture's impact across many industries, linking personal convictions, cultural dynamics, and public power. Because of their words or, in some cases, opinions on sensitive matters, each person received some criticism and backlash.

Analysing each of the cases, Kevin Hart's cancellation was caused by the finding of previous tweets with rude language and humour intended at the LGBTQ+ community. His situation serves as an example of how old statements, even those that have been later denied, can resurface and harm someone's reputation and professional prospects. It demonstrates how previous declarations, even the ones made years ago, can have a huge impact on now-a-days way of criticism. It also stresses the fact that society norms of acceptability are changing as well as the influence of prior actions.

Dave Chappelle's comedy specials were, for some viewers, insulting, he became involved in the conversation about pop culture. In Chappelle's case, the delicate balance between responsibility and freedom of expression is highlighted because his humour addressed touchy issues like gender identity and sexual orientation, which is a hot topic these days. The comedian's attempt is to address the tabooest subjects in his shows. The responses to Chappelle's show demonstrate how artistic expression, cultural awareness, and social critique connect.

The controversy surrounding J.K. Rowling's cancellation resulted from her ideas on gender identity, which sparked a discussion on transgender rights and the limitations of free speech. Her situation serves as an example of how debating divisive issues can result in polarised opinions that influence not only a person's public perception but also more general society discourse. It illustrates how influential people with a platform could find themselves drawn into ideological disputes, even when sharing ideas and thoughts.

This chapter has focused on understanding the concept of cancellation culture, its origin and evolution, as well as giving some examples of people who have been victims of cancellation throughout their professional careers. To further understand this concept and its evolution, the next chapter will focus on the social and psychological aspects of people who cancel third parties, as well as the effectiveness of cancellation in changing the attitudes of those who are cancelled.

2 - SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF CANCEL CULTURE

Cancel culture on the internet is heavily influenced by online spaces. People can express themselves, connect with others, and share their ideas here. This gives them a sense of belonging to a community. Cancel culture frequently brings people together when they believe someone has done something wrong and act together to stop or criticise that person. Social media allows knowledge to travel quickly and encourages people to participate as soon as possible and this occurs because many people discuss it, and it becomes a major concern. When it occurs, individual perspectives are less important than what the group believes and, as a result, how people behave in cancel culture circumstances is influenced by their personal values as well as the beliefs of their online group.

This chapter will focus mainly on the following topics:

- **Exploring the Psychology and Impulses behind Cancel Culture:** It looks at how psychology interacts with people's intrinsic want to voice their thoughts, be accepted by others, and fit in with social networks. Additionally, it investigates how “likes” affects people's actions in this situation.
- **Psychological Effects on Cancelled Individuals and Cancelers:** Explores the attitudes and emotional states of those who engage in cancelling, illuminating the complex connection between moral outrage, social change, and the mind.
- **Assessing the Efficacy of Cancel Culture as a Behavioural Change:** Assess the degree to which cancel culture causes changes in behaviour and attitudes by looking at psychological factors such as cognitive dissonance and the fear of social isolation.

2.1 The motives and impulses behind Cancel Culture

“The crux of cancel culture is the attempt to censor what we dislike—whether that’s ideas, books, works of art, political positions or people.” (Khalid & Snyder 2022, pp.3). In this specific case, where the aim of the study is the culture of cancellation, one can link the word status to the phenomenon associated with the recognition attributed to those who share and stand up for past causes in the digital world, namely on social networks where, as previously indicated, the cancellation or disagreement of ideas happens more frequently. Social media platforms are a significant setting for identity development and a source of knowledge for today's young (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011; Mikal et al., 2016).

Peers are also a significant source of influence for young people, emphasising the importance of peer participation on social media (Boyle et al., 2016; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). This highlights the importance of having an online presence in today's culture, when social media platforms are effective instruments for people to define and project their identities, worldviews, and connections. The visibility, involvement, and influence a person gains within their online community frequently determines how much status they can accrue online.

Because of the nature of social media and how online interactions impact public opinions, cancel culture can improve social status: ´

- **Prominence:** Cancel culture attracts a lot of attention, which leads to more projection in both online and offline groups.
- **Increased Engagement:** Cancelled persons frequently get more social media followers and engagement, suggesting higher influence and popularity.
- **Sense of Belonging to a Community:** Cancelled persons frequently get more social media followers and engagement, suggesting higher influence and popularity.

An individual's online social standing is closely linked to their digital presence, which includes social media platforms, online communities, and virtual interactions. Building a powerful online identity can result in increased visibility, following, and interaction, transforming regular people into digital celebrities. This situation is especially pertinent in the context of cancel culture, where an individual's increased online status

can both enhance the impact of their cancellation and potentially serve as a cause that makes them a target. The dynamic character of cancel culture is formed by the online power of the people involved, whether they are those asking for accountability or those facing potential cancellation. According to Henderson (2019), the social gains are immediate and satisfying, but the risks are far away and abstract. Status and in-group friendship are rapid social rewards. The preference for immediate social rewards versus distant and uncertain calamity is not unique to any group; it is shared by all of us.

One of the main reasons why cancellation culture is known is that, in a way, it is part of a type of bullying done to people whom a group of people try to cancel. Over time, the behaviour is repeated or has the potential to be repeated. Both bullied children and those who bully others may suffer long-term consequences.

Jones & Writer (2021) argues that cancellation culture is now the new way of cyberbullying Internet users who share their ideas. The article written by these authors in 2021 begins as follows: “People can claim the practice is activism, but to be frank, it isn’t about calling someone out on their mistakes and is instead an opportunity for people to abuse their freedom of expression to cyberbully.” (Jones & Writer, 2021, pp. 2) dictating, in an opinionated way, the format of a new cyberbullying practice associated with the cancellation of third parties.

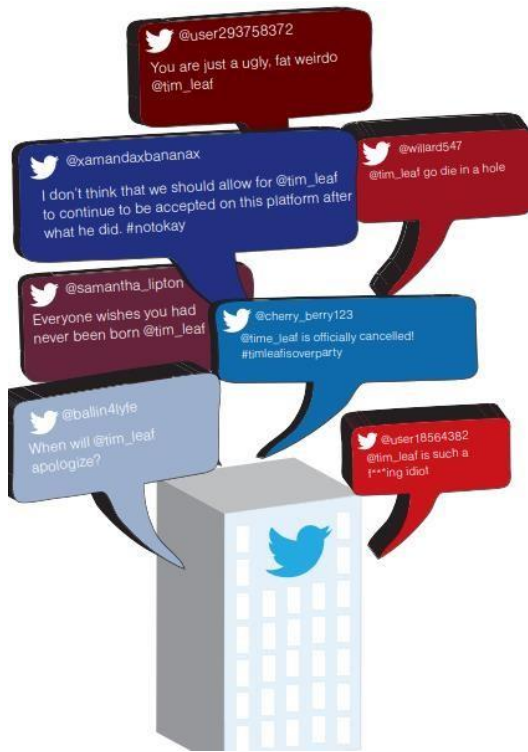


Figure 7- Cancel culture is the new cyberbullying.

Source: Image from the article written by Jones & Writer 2021, "Cancel Culture is the New Cyberbullying".

Although cancellation as we know it is practised online, what leads to someone being cancelled can sometimes be associated with something the person in question has said away from social media, for example on television. The practice of cancelling someone is based on disagreement, and sometimes the way in which users and practitioners of the cancellation culture must carry out the cancellation is cyberbullying.

It is important to understand why people who cyberbully do so and, according to the article written by Cuncic (2022), there are two possibilities that can explain cyberbullying:

- **Imbalance of Power:** The victim's power imbalance with their aggressor. This is especially true if the bullying occurs in a public setting.
- **Being Anonymous:** There is no requirement for a power imbalance in the relationship between the bully and the victim in this scenario. When engaging in bullying, some cyberbullies employ anonymity to hide behind their computer screen.

“What is bothersome about cancelling is it allows people to hide behind a screen and openly humiliate a person with the support of thousands, sometimes even millions,

of users.” (Jones & Writer, 2021, p. 3). This is one of the practices most associated with cyberbullying that can also be linked to the practice of cancelling someone, for the simple reason that when an attempt is made to cancel or bully someone, the person doing it is safe and comfortable behind a screen, possibly several miles away.

Contradicting this practice are individuals who choose to publicly air their opinions about something someone else has said or done and, in this case, the opinion can, in certain circumstances, bring publicity and as mentioned above, social status to the person who shares it. In the case of cyberbullying and, as indicated by Cuncic (2022), for someone to be a bully in real life, must usually have some sort of advantage over your victim. This could imply that you are physically bigger than them. It could indicate that you are more popular than them. It could also indicate that you have a power imbalance with them. A cyberbully, on the other hand, can be anyone. There is no requirement for physical superiority or popularity. This means that people who wish to bully can do so simply on the Internet regardless of their real-life standing.

Rutledge (2021) begins an opinion piece by linking cyberbullying to the culture of cancellation, indicating that it began as a tool for social change, a way to express individual truths to those in positions of power. However, where it was once reserved for authoritative officials, public humiliation and shame have become the "go-to" method of expressing disapproval, real or imaginary, against anyone. Cancel culture has evolved into bullying under a different term. It values exclusion over knowledge, judgement above compassion, and is deaf to redemption and transformation.

“Likes on social media are a form of communication allowing us to signal our validation and approval with a single click, without having to type anything.” (Moffat, 2019, pp. 3). One of the reasons why people can, in a way, bully, and linking this to the cancellation culture, is online status, but in this case, the importance of likes and engagement.

An article published by Irish Tech News (2020) indicates that scientists have now demonstrated that social media activates the same reward centre in our brain. In other words, the pleasure centre. When people see many likes, the brain produces a large amount of the hormone dopamine. It is generally referred to as a happiness hormone. While ‘likes’ serve to provide social approval, they can also not deliberately promote bad behaviours. Owing to the competitive nature of likes, emotions can rise, leading to

abusive comments and targeted exploitation. Furthermore, the popularity of divisive information influences the dynamics of cancel culture, since significant numbers of likes can embolden individuals to keep or amplify their positions. This progression can lead to the spread of cyberbullying and the cancel culture dynamics.

2.2 The effectiveness of cancellation as a way of changing behaviour

As argued by Dudenhoefer (2020), everyone appears to agree on one point: cancel culture entails publicly criticizing a person or organization for behaviour that is deemed unpleasant or disrespectful and so, it is important to understand whether the practice of cancelling individuals has proved effective over the years.

At a certain point, cancelling someone has become effective enough that the person in question stops sharing their opinion and making public appearances, as mentioned before. A broad appeal for civility was published in Harper's Magazine on July 7, 2020, by 153 of the most well-known journalists, authors, and writers, including J. K. Rowling, Malcolm Gladwell, and David Brooks. This entire article has been written to analyse the effects of the cancellation culture, as an attempt to understand the reason for it and the consequences associated with it. The article begins with an appeal, indicating that the cultural organizations are going through a difficult time. Strong demonstrations for racial and social justice have sparked long overdue calls for police reform as well as broader demands for more equity and inclusion throughout our society, including in media, higher education, charity, and the arts.

Taking a few pointers from the article in question, it is possible to see that, given what the authors wrote, some areas are being damaged by the culture of cancellation, namely authoring and journalism. Some of the authors involved in the article published by Harper's Magazine are journalists and, according to some statements made throughout the article, they have suffered somewhat from the practice of cancellation: "Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics" (Ackerman, 2020, pp. 2). There have been cases where editors have lost their jobs for publishing items that have sparked controversy. Books are often removed off the shelf because people believe they are not truthful or authentic. In other circumstances, journalists are told they are not permitted to write about certain topics. These acts are part of a larger trend in the media and publishing,

as well as cancel culture and freedom of speech. Because of the changing cultural context, this trend frequently leads to self-censorship by publishers. The omission of Queen's "Fat-Bottomed Girls" from a collection of their greatest hits by Universal Records in August 2023 (Justice 2023) is the most recent example of this. The words of the song, with their emphasis on a certain body type, might be considered rude or body-shaming in today's environment. Such activities are the outcome of the music industry's self-censorship to conform to shifting cultural expectations.

The extensive group pressure that forces employers or even individuals to take rapid and frequently decisive steps is frequently to blame for the numerous cancellations, or more specifically, situations involving dismissal from various fields. This trend is complexly linked to the larger context of cancel culture. Dudenhoefer (2020) links the cancel culture, as stated before on this study, to the 'mob mentality', naturally aligns with cancel culture's quick and frequently heated responses to perceived offenses. In addition to placing tremendous pressure on decision-makers and employers.

It should also be emphasised that the phenomenon of mob mentality is also associated with Gen Z⁸. Makoy wrote in 2023 that Gen Z is skilled at using social media platforms to express themselves and to interact with the topics they care about since they are digital natives. The author also added, by the end of the article that the cancel culture and the Gen Z herd mindset are two sides of the same coin. While they are motivated by the desire to change the world for the better, they can also have unfavourable effects on both them and other people. In the echo chambers of cancel culture, mob mentality prevails, discouraging disagreement and critical thought. As the lines between honest concern and emotional intensity distortion, the value of cancel culture in encouraging swift accountability acts becomes increasingly clear.

Also associated with the possible effectiveness of the cancellation culture are the side effects associated with the harassment of the individual or company where the cancellation takes place. As mentioned in the previous point, this practice may also be associated with cyberbullying and all that it entails, particularly mental health consequences. Dudenhoefer (2020) indicates in her article that whether people see cancel

⁸ Generation Z, also called Gen Z or post-millennials is the term used to describe Americans born during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Eldridge, 2023).

culture as empowering or harmful, which is affected by the increasingly digital world we live in.

As pointed out by Dubin (2022), cancel culture emphasizes personal responsibility while ignoring the structural problems that frequently underlie harsh conduct. As a result, the ideology behind cancellable actions is allowed to exist unchecked. To put it another way, cancel culture shames the offender into understanding that their personal opinions aren't always acceptable, but fails to inform the offender as to why these beliefs are problematic and cruel. Being exposed to public humiliation causes an outbreak of emotional distress that is marked by strong emotions of remorse and humiliation.

The effectiveness of cancellation as a method of causing behavioural change continues to be the subject of complex discussion. While cancellation supposedly seeks to hold people and organizations accountable for perceived offenses through the removal of support and public blame, its success in causing significant and sustained behavioural modification needs a more detailed analysis. The rapid dissemination of information and opinions regarding a certain subject, made possible by the digital, has aided in the rapid start of consequences.

This chapter has focused on developing the theme associated with the culture of cancellation as an effective way of changing the attitudes of those who have suffered some form of cancellation.

To get to the bottom of the main issue of this dissertation, the next chapter will focus on freedom of expression and the subtopics associated with it, so that it is possible to understand the impact of cancellation culture on freedom of expression.

3 – FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ETHICS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

This chapter will focus on freedom of expression and everything that underlies a careful approach to sharing opinions online. Coming to one of the basic topics of this work, it is important to understand what freedom of expression and the sharing of opinions between individuals is and how it should be worked with. The right to express one's thoughts and beliefs without hindrance or reprisal from the government is known as freedom of expression (Britannica, 2023).

To get to the point, it is also necessary to discuss media literacy and how much the way we communicate has changed over the centuries. As will be shown later, the most recurrent format of communication today is online conversation and, in these cases, the way we interact changes due to the distance of proximity and certain paradigms previously used to perceive the type of conversation.

Understanding the link between freedom of expression and the culture of cancellation is crucial to considering how individuals deal with sharing their opinions. It is in this chapter that the second theme of this analysis will be addressed, to understand the concerns about censorship and freedom of expression associated with the culture of cancellation.

The fear of social or professional consequences can lead to self-censorship, indirectly limiting freedom of expression. This will also be one of the points analysed in this chapter, followed by an analysis of the questionnaire respondents' perspectives, to link the bibliographical and quantitative versions of this research.

It is also important to point out, although it has already been mentioned, that social media, as the most used platform for discourse, are a space where everyone can share their opinions, but with the possibility of being cancelled for sharing them, people seem to be afraid to do so. It will be possible to see what kind of individuals struggle with the choice between expressing their opinions authentically or preferring not to share any kind of opinion for fear of the risk of cancellation by someone.

3.1 Media Literacy and Online Communication

The mixing of facts and ideas in online information and the overuse of adjectives are important in cases where effective communication is hampered, the consequences of which are exacerbated when the voices of individuals are marginalised and ignored. This chapter looks at the topic of voice in our society and the areas where social justice and media literacy are not practiced simultaneously or adequately (Abreu, 2023, own translation).

It is important to approach the subject of media literacy in a way that makes it possible to fit it in with freedom of expression and everything it includes. To practise careful discourse and the sharing of well-founded opinions, it is also necessary to deepen one's knowledge of the correct ways to use online platforms.

Media literacy and Internet ethics work together to enable consumers to interact with easily accessible media resources in a way that ensures universal access to both traditional and digital media. This strategy encompasses the use of media for learning, entertainment, communication, and professional endeavours in a safe and proficient manner. It also includes the development of critical analytical skills, the encouragement of reflexivity, and the cultivation of creative capacity for creating individualised media content (Tomé 2021, pp. 2, own translation). Media literacy is linked to the need to use online platforms safely and responsibly, as will be analysed later in this part of the chapter. There is a need to educate people to use the Internet respectfully and to share ideas/opinions.

With so much information circulating through the most widely used media, it is important that those who use online platforms use them responsibly, as already mentioned, but it is also important for the user to know how best to identify the veracity of the information they come across regularly. Recent research has shown that today's youth are increasingly accessing news about civic and political issues through social media accounts rather than newspapers or magazines, but they are often unable to determine whether the information on these platforms is credible. According to a recent study by the Stanford History Education Group, students are unable to identify and confront partisanship, bias, and outright lying in internet content. This lack of media literacy may have a negative impact on their civic awareness and involvement (Manfra & Holmes, 2018, p. 92).

Knowing how to use online communication tools is crucial to be able to collect information responsibly and without misinformation. Unfortunately, with all the information on the Internet, it is also possible to see some information that has no scientific basis, and which only has the purpose of misleading and deceiving the people who are checking the information in question. Fake news is false information that is presented as true. It was historically employed as propaganda by those in authority to promote specific beliefs or objectives, even if it was false. With the emergence of social media, anyone with an agenda can propagate lies, frequently using hired humans or automated programmes known as bots. Individuals' motivations for spreading fake news differ greatly (Smith, 2020, pp. 1).

3.1.1 Challenges in Online Communication

Communication between human beings is something that is part of our history as a species active in society. People have not always communicated in the way we know today. In the early days of human existence, communication was mostly verbal and, even if vocal communication was still practiced in ancient times, information was still conveyed through symbols and images (Novak, 2019).

Following the evolution of forms of communication, it is necessary to emphasise the situation one finds because of this same evolution. Today most contact takes place online. We live in a world where individuals communicate online more than ever, whether it be through text messages or video conferencing, which can change the way communication is understood. With more daily use of online media, people have become more distant, and the form of conversation has also become somewhat ambiguous, having various meanings depending on the interpretation of everyone, sometimes resulting in a distorted conversation (Dunham, 2023).

Online communication, in contrast to face-to-face communication, is devoid of nonverbal clues including facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. Because the intended tone of a message may not be understood, this can result in misunderstandings (Dunham, 2023).

When it comes to the way we communicate online, there are a few aspects to take into consideration:

- **Misunderstanding:** In an online conversation, messages can easily become distorted due to the lack of proximity, expressions, and intonation. Important factors in the communication of human beings, so that it is possible to anticipate whether the message is offensive. If users receive a distorted intonation of the message, the conversation could lead to disagreements and misinformation about what has been absorbed. Dunham (2023) indicates that the briefness of online communication is another issue. Messages are frequently constrained to a specific number of characters or a little period. This may lead to ambiguous or insufficient messages that allow for interpretation.
- **Non-Verbal Cues:** In spoken face-to-face discourse, there is a certain shift in the bodily paradigm, so that the person receiving the message can perceive the ease or lack of it in the spoken topic. In online conversations this doesn't happen because it is not possible to check the facial expressions and body language of the person writing the message. It is possible that people crossed their arms, turned away, or leaned in close. These illustrations of non-verbal indicators can help us understand the thoughts and emotions of another person and, to develop a relationship and convey meaning during an offline conversation, non-verbal clues are often used (Dunham, 2023).
- **Language and Cultural Barriers:** This point can be associated with misinformation and misunderstanding because what may be offensive to some, may not be to other cultures. An example of this practice is the Portuguese word "rapariga". In Portuguese, "rapariga" refers only to someone of the female gender, while in Brazilian Portuguese it is considered an offensive term.

Misunderstandings and misinterpretations can quickly get out of hand, and people may suffer serious repercussions for what they thought were innocent acts. To reduce the negative consequences of these two situations, people should be aware of these problems and take action to encourage more productive and respectful online discourse, always depending on respect: ‘By being mindful of cultural differences and language barriers, you can ensure that your online communication is respectful, effective, and inclusive.’ (Dunham, 2023, pp. 74).

Due to the shift to digital communication, conversations are now more likely to be misunderstood, which frequently leads to confusing speech. This change in communication dynamics is crucial when talking about hate speech because the impersonal nature of online debates can worsen misconceptions, facilitate the spread of hate speech, and further polarize beliefs. As we engage in more online debates, more interactions held through screens, it is crucial to gain a broader understanding of these challenges with the acquisition of media literacy.

3.1.2 Digital Activism

Given the significant mediatization of all human activity, social media platforms have emerged as essential places for activism (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Dijck et al., 2018). Digital platforms have developed into locations where people may show their support for social and political causes, feel like they are a part of a broader movement, plan protests on and off the platforms, or utilize to shape news frames and set political and public agendas. Today, a sea of mobile devices can be seen documenting any act of public protest or demonstration and broadcasting it, frequently live, through their Instagram, Twitter, etc (Esparcia et al., 2023).

As indicated above, digital networks and platforms are the main means used to share information and opinions. In recent years, social networks have also been used for online demonstrations on a wide variety of subjects. After events like the 2014 police shooting of Eric Garner in New York City and the 2015 death of Freddie Gray after suffering spinal injuries in the back of a Baltimore police van, social media's impact became apparent. The Center for Media & Social Impact researchers discovered that followers of the activism movement specifically utilized Twitter to broadcast breaking news, disseminate photographs, and interact with news reports on related protests. The Center's analysis of publicly accessible tweets from 2016 and 2018 supports the premise that while racial hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter are often used on social media sites like Twitter, surges in their usage frequently coincide with current events (Auxier, 2020).

In Portugal, as in other parts of the world, social media has played a significant role in spreading public discourse, especially in the context of criminal cases. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is the tragic murder of actor Bruno Candé in 2020, who was fatally shot by a 76-year-old man. The motives behind this murder were declared to be "racial hatred", a revelation that caused shockwaves across the country

(Diário de Notícias 2021, own translation). This case, like many others in Portugal and beyond (as seen above), attracted a great deal of attention on various online platforms, which served as a stimulus for a huge objection and calls for justice for the actor.

One of the most well-known instances of online activism is the BLM movement. The hundreds of protestors who gathered offline in cities throughout the nation this summer to denounce anti-black bigotry and support the Black Lives Matter movement serve as a reminder that online action is only one aspect of the story (Auxier, 2020). This protest, which began online and then spread to the streets of the United States, brought many people together digitally and in person due to the exposure the case received over many months.



Figure 8- Examples of famous people who participated in the online movement of #Blacklivesmatter.

Source: The New York Times.

Powell 2022 stated that:

Digital activism is not as simple as someone clicking “retweet” on Twitter—which all too often involves enormous risk to the activists themselves or can result in spreading disinformation. (pp. 7).

As stated before, it is necessary to pay attention to everything we click on when looking for or sharing information. On the one hand, digital activism is a good way of

sharing events and opinions so that society can unite for a specific cause, but on the other hand, online activism can also be associated with misinformation, where some people take advantage of the moment and the specific demonstration to spread disinformation, which can lead to heated conversations. In addition, the effectiveness of these initiatives may be questionable and short-lived.

The need to link these two subtopics to the main topic (3.1) arises to understand the risks associated with sharing ideas online and how a simple written sentence can be interpreted. It is also important to understand how online platforms are used as a means of spreading opinions and, in this case, as a means of creating manifestations such as those mentioned above.

3.2 Online Censorship and Freedom of Expression

The right to offend is critical for free expression. There cannot be freedom of expression if it implies agreeing on everything, it must also imply that we can disagree on anything. One cannot claim to have the right to free expression if it ends when one saying anything that people find offensive or goes too far (Hume, 2018).

It is also necessary to link this theme to one of the objectives of the thesis in question, which is the affectation of the culture of cancellation and freedom of expression in the entertainment industry, namely humour. In Portugal, there is an author who is also a comedian and who has some opinions on the circumstances in question. Ricardo Araújo Pereira is a defender of freedom of expression and speaks openly about its concepts and the influence it has on today's humour.

The comedian offers a humorous anecdote to explain his thoughts on free expression. He points out that the architect José António Saraiva stated that gays would not be allowed to undergo procedures if he had his way. ‘There isn't just one value here, there are several. I'm not just guaranteeing architect Saraiva's right to speak - I'm guaranteeing my right to hear him. For hygiene reasons - I want to know where he is so I can cross to the other side,’ the comedian further, suggesting that excluding some viewpoints stops them from being challenged: ‘Silencing that idea is not rebutting that idea. Architect Saraiva should be allowed to say that again.’ Adding that: ‘Our society has already understood that there are people born in a body that doesn't correspond to what they think of

themselves. The things he says do not harm anyone. The country won't go back. He's saying that and there are people saying the opposite. And with better arguments'' (Pereira 2018, own translation).

When asked about the limitations of comedy in 2018, Pereira said that there are some topics he prefers not to discuss. However, it never occurs to him to consider the conditions under which the amusing gaze may rest, whether it can end or not. Not least because, as the comedian put it, if you started limiting what may and cannot be the result of a joke, there would eventually be nothing left. The comedian argues that it is not because a message is offensive that it is no longer legal.

It is important to understand the importance of freedom of expression by associating it with humour, but it is also necessary to understand what it represents and how long it has been defended by some notorious authors. John Stuart Mill cites several reasons why protecting freedom of expression is morally important, entailing both the freedom to communicate one's opinions and values and the right to be informed by other people's publicly declared beliefs and values. A second reason why it is morally vital to safeguard freedom of expression is that it typically encourages the discovery and appreciation for the truth. When people are entitled to speak freely, expressing what they really think about a subject, the opportunity to form a debate about something specific and the sharing of ideas and perspectives takes place, making society evolve in a free and shared way, as indicated above. The knowledge obtained is important both in and of itself because, as argued by Mill, it leads to better decisions and consequently a higher quality of life (*apud* Maymbala 2008, p.8)

On the other hand, when freedom of speech is suppressed through censorship, it not only provides an additional source of social tension, but is rarely effective:

If any single lesson emerges from our lengthy and tortured history of censorship, it's that censorship never works. It gives fuel and ammunition to its targets, who get free publicity when free speech is violated. And it set up the censors to censored themselves once a new sheriff comes to town (Zimmerman, p.70).

Talking about freedom of expression is also, in a way, talking about its opposite, i.e., the culture of cancellation. As indicated prior, the culture of cancellation encompasses the opinions given by certain media people that generate discomfort and displeasure, for the most part, on social networks. The consequence of speaking freely on a given subject

nowadays is, if the opinion is not well received by a certain group, the attempt to or even the definitive cancellation of that same person. Freedom of expression is a right that has long been granted to human beings and is part of societies that are governed by democratic values.

Balkin (2004) tells us that:

A democratic culture is a culture in which individuals have a fair opportunity to participate in the forms of meaning-making that constitute them as individuals. Democratic culture is about individual liberty as well as collective self-governance; it concerns everyone's ability to participate in the production and distribution of culture (p. 1).

Individual autonomy, which emphasises personal control over one's life within reasonable limits, and equality, which guarantees everyone an equal opportunity to influence social decisions, form the moral basis of democracy's strength and popular acceptance. The justice and attraction inherent in these concepts emphasise the enduring popularity of democracy, which is still in practice today. Freedom of expression plays a fundamental role in the foundation of society, as it allows individuals to express themselves autonomously and ensures that different voices contribute to maintaining the principle of equality in the democratic process (Council of Europe, 2023).

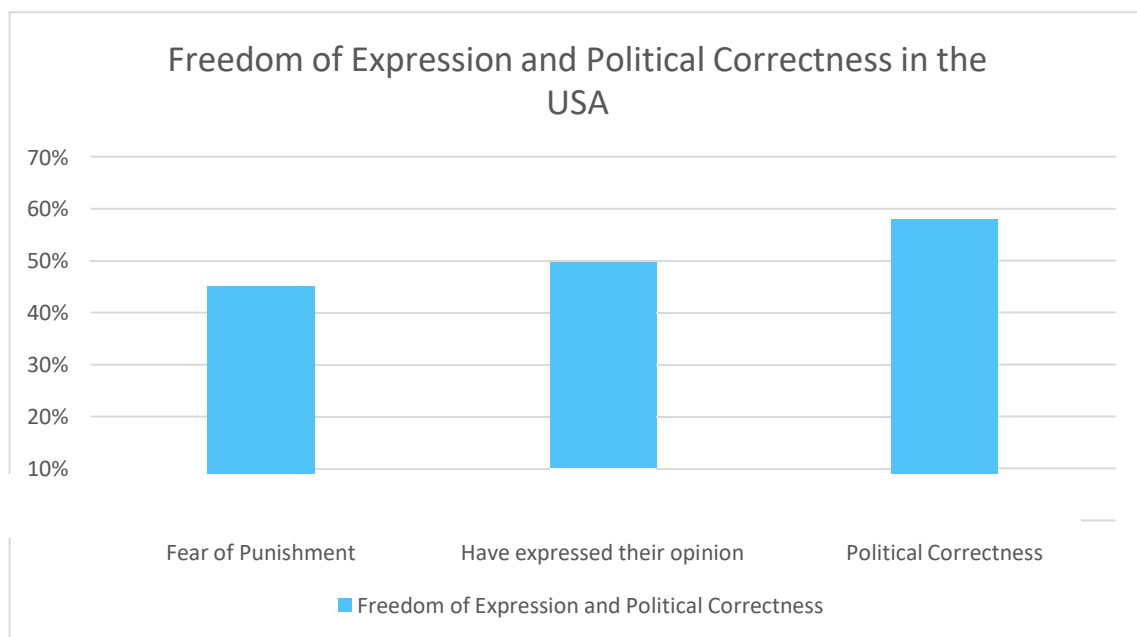
Although, as already mentioned, it is a comprehensive right in many cultures that are governed by democracy, freedom of expression and the sharing of ideas also has some added benefits. It is known to be an important factor in bringing people together, particularly when it is used sustainably and to share ideas and beliefs. Brooks (2022) wrote that citizens, when given the opportunity to participate in elections, try and hold their politicians accountable during elections. To pick who to vote for, voters must first understand how well a political party performed when in power and whether they kept their election promises. The necessity of open conversation in the pursuit of truth has historically been the most persuasive justification for a free speech principle. When speech limitations are accepted, society limits the gathering and dissemination of accurate facts and valued views (Barendt, 2005). In a democracy, evaluating a political party's historical performance and commitment to election promises is critical because it holds politicians accountable and raises transparency.

Individual intellectual development is aided by freedom of expression. It helps individuals to investigate and validate innovative ideas and notions by allowing for unlimited thinking and open expression. This capacity for open study and dialogue opens the door to the discovery options and factors. It is like having a key to unlock new intellectual borders, where people can challenge their ideas, participate in discourse with people from different backgrounds, and stimulate personal growth.

Barendt (2005) pointed out that:

Restrictions on what we are allowed to say and write, or (on some formulations of the theory) to hear and read, inhibit our personality and its growth. A right to express beliefs and political attitudes instantiates or reflects what it is to be human. The argument asserts that there is an individual right to freedom of speech, even though its exercise may be inimical to the welfare of society (p. 13).

Sharing opinions allows human beings to grow intellectually and to achieve different expansions of knowledge, absorbing new information and ways of seeing our surroundings by simply sharing opinions and beliefs. The right to express and receive opinions, ideas, and information is referred to as freedom of expression. Online, including social media platforms, websites, and search engines, people are increasingly expressing themselves and exchanging ideas (Taylor et. al 2022).



Graphic 3 - Percentage of people who gave their opinion on freedom of expression according to Pew Research Center, 2023. Source: The author.

A study was carried out in the United States on freedom of expression by the Pew Research Center (2023). Analysing the graph, 45% of respondents said they held back from sharing their ideas out of concern for retaliation, which is a high level of self-censorship. This can indicate that society is more prone to not share their ideas online because there are afraid of the consequences of their actions. A percentage of respondents, approximately 49%, say they have already expressed their political opinions on social media. This percentage could indicate that a certain section of society is not afraid to express its opinions and ideals online. According to the majority (58%) of respondents, political correctness imposes excessive restrictions on the right to free speech, reflecting a persistent concern about its effects on civil debate.

The information demonstrates the prevalence of self-censorship, the hesitation to express political opinions online, and the belief that political correctness can stifle free expression in the United States.

Communication formats have changed over the centuries, and today the sharing of opinions and ideas, as indicated prior, is done through existing networks and social media. To talk about freedom of expression in the 21st century is also to talk about how it is dealt with online today. As previously stated, those who understand how to practise media literacy and recognise true news would benefit greatly from surfing online and, in this case, sharing and absorbing ideas. Freedom of expression on the Internet, or in any other medium, is immensely important in fostering a culture of tolerance for differing points of view and acceptance of new ideas. It is also argued that the greatest way to counteract prejudice is for people of different cultures and backgrounds to communicate their thoughts and ideas in a more human and tolerant way, especially on the borderless Internet (Mayambala, 2008).

Bringing up a theme that has already been mentioned, it is important to emphasise the association made between freedom of expression and the hate speech that often circulates. It is important to note that freedom of expression is also associated with hate speech, which is part of the use of social networks and digital formats. As a fundamental principle of democratic governance, freedom of expression gives individuals the chance to express their ideas openly.

Guterres (2019) stated that:

Addressing hate speech does not mean limiting or prohibiting freedom of speech. It means keeping hate speech from escalating into something more dangerous, particularly incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence, which is prohibited under international law (pp. 12).

The transcript of Guterres highlights a crucial issue about the link between regulating hate speech and safeguarding free expression. It emphasises the contrast between managing hate speech and repressing freedom of expression, emphasising the need of preventing hate speech from serving as an impetus for discrimination, hatred, and violence, all of which are prohibited under human rights. The line also emphasises the importance of striking a balance between maintaining a culture where free expression is valued and addressing the negative consequences of hate speech.

The digital technology has made it all too simple for words to offend a wide audience. But restricting people's ability to speak even the most controversial opinions may not be the best course of action (McMillan, 2022). The freedom and openness that the internet provides its users with define it. The struggle to protect this freedom from attempts to restrict it by various parties, both public and private, is documented throughout its history (Benedek & Kattemann, 2020).

To understand the importance of freedom of expression, it is also necessary to link it to one of the topics associated with this dissertation, which is the culture of cancellation. In the next subtopic, it will be possible to verify the association between these two themes to understand the impact of both in each scenario.

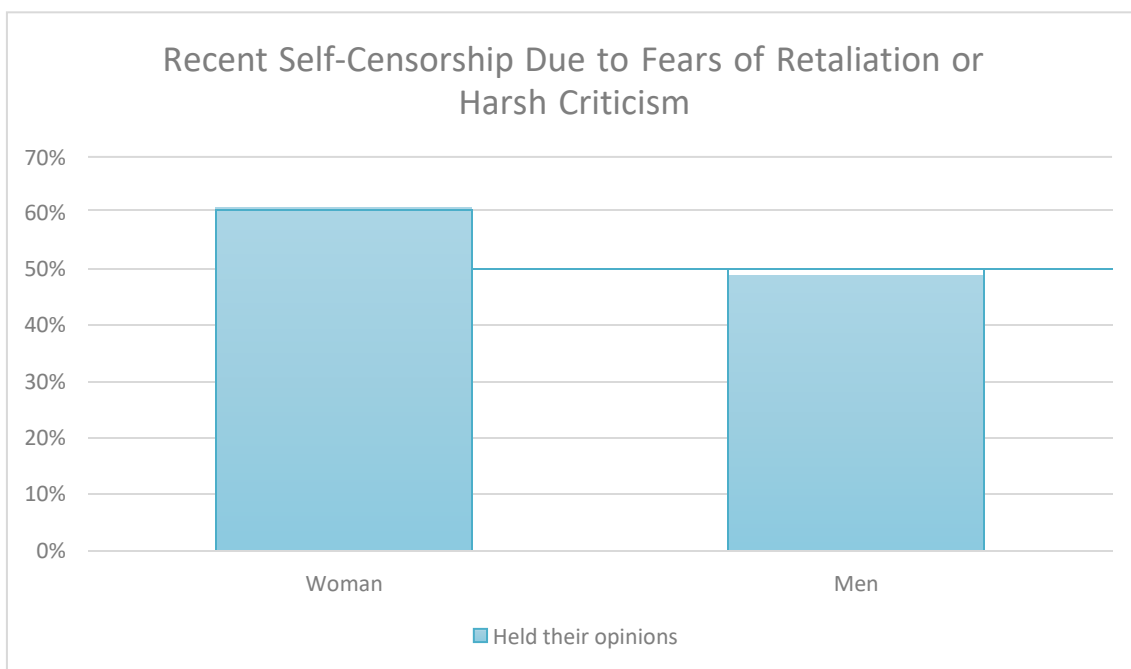
3.2.1 Conflict Between Cancel Culture and Freedom of Expression

It is also important to understand the connection between the culture of cancellation and freedom of expression, so that it is possible to see the link between one concept and the other. While freedom of expression means that people have the right to say what they believe without fear of repercussions, cancel culture, which occurs when people are criticized or even penalized for what they say or do, particularly if others deem it offensive or inappropriate. This debate examines the connections between and occasionally conflicts between the two concepts of freedom of expression and cancel culture.

Cancel culture and censorship have grown to be synonymous, and although some groups claim this is done to hold people accountable, others claim it prevents people from

realizing that the world frequently exists in the grey areas between extremes. The voices that have been silenced because they were unable to participate in the cultural conversation are more significant. College students' requests for cultural safe spaces are the outcome of this rift, which has also caused a breakdown and division in debate and critical thought. As a result, numerous lectures have been cancelled, comedians have declined invites, and protests have taken place. Universities and colleges used to be the epicentres of free speech and liberal thought, but now they promote a conformist culture (Abreu 2023, own translation).

“When speech is stifled or when dissenters are shut out of public discourse, a society also loses its ability to resolve conflict, and it faces the risk of political violence.” (Delcan 2022, pp. 7). As previously analysed, users of social networks and digital media these days have a certain fear associated with sharing their own opinions because of the possible repercussions those opinions could have, namely cancellation and/or hate speech. There is currently a crisis surrounding free speech because so many people do not get it, were not taught what it means, and do not understand why it matters (Nossel, 2022).



Graphic 4 - The New York Times/ Siena College Research Institute in 2022, regarding self-censorship due to fears of retaliation or harsh criticism. Source: The author.

Due to worries about harsh criticism, the graphic illustrates a considerable gender difference in self-censorship behaviours over the year of 2022. Most women who

responded said they had been reluctant to voice their thoughts over the last year, with 61% admitting to self-censorship. This shows that a sizable portion of women are hesitant to express their opinions. In comparison, just 49% of males reported self-censoring within the same period. This suggests that, compared to women, men were somewhat less prone to hold back their ideas out of concern for online retaliation or severe criticism.

It is important to realise, however, that freedom of expression is, as indicated above, a right afforded to human beings, but freedom of expression, as proven in the book written by John Stuart Mill, *The Harm Principle* essentially promotes personal freedom and autonomy, stressing that people should be allowed to make their own decisions unless doing so would directly jeopardize the rights or well-being of others. Modern disputes on civil liberties, free speech, and the boundaries of governmental authority in liberal democracies have been significantly shaped by this principle (*apud* Maymbala 2008).

It is important to realise that everyone's freedom must not jeopardise the freedom and rights of others, i.e., when one expresses an opinion, one must always be aware of whether we are engaging in hate speech and gratuitous bad-mouthing of others. One is said to have the right to damage another person's feelings and that doing so does not necessarily result in harm (The Ethics Centre, 2016). Government intervention isn't warranted until a person's acts truly injure or constitute a serious threat to someone, in which case social disapproval or dislike (referred to as "mere offence") is sufficient grounds for action (*apud* Maymbala 2008).

In short, the relationship between the culture of cancellation and freedom of expression lies in the fact that increasingly, as seen before, people feel uncomfortable sharing their opinions online because of their fear of possibly being cancelled or even misrepresented.

Zimmerman (2020) indicates that:

We should let everyone speak, even when-or especially when-it repulses us. It won't be pretty, but it's better than the alternative. Winston Churchill said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others. Ditto for free speech. It's messy and ugly and contentious, but it sure beats letting someone else tell you what you're allowed to say (p. 73).

The transcript in question acknowledges that freedom of expression may be perplexing and contentious, often leading to the presentation of ideas that are disgusting

or insulting to some, or even incite hatred. However, the author contends that allowing everyone to voice their thoughts, even if they are disagreeable, is preferable than restricting speech. Like Winston Churchill's famous remark about democracy, which, despite its flaws, remains the best system we have, the statement implies that freedom of expression, despite its flaws, remains the most important safeguard against the authoritarianism of allowing others to dictate what can and cannot be said.

Violence causes some people physical harm and injury; hence one has no right to instigate it. But today, it is more evident than ever that some forms of expression may be just as harmful as physical assault, particularly when they are directed at people in authority and their oppressive behaviour towards minorities (The Ethics Centre, 2016). It is therefore important to educate and encourage media literacy so that everyone can freely express their own opinion without encouraging hatred and violence in words.

Because humans are fallible beings, they frequently make the incorrect or insufficient decisions. The secret to jointly determining the most effective ways to advance goals like equality, progress, and justice is to create an ecology of open discourse, constructive listening, and critique (Menaldo, 2020). A richer and better-informed decision-making process is possible through open debate, serving to exchange various perspectives. To truly understand each other and promote empathy and co-operation, constructive listening is more than just talking. Criticism is a tool for improving our approaches and ensuring that they are in line with our common goals. This strategy essentially promotes collaboration, emphasising that by combining our resources and learning from each other's failings, we can lead society in a more enlightened direction, creating a fairer and more equal society.

This chapter has focused on the need to link freedom of expression and all that it entails with the culture of cancellation, so that it would be possible to understand the relationship between them. In the next chapter, it will be possible to see a new type of analysis associated with this dissertation, qualitative and quantitative analyses, to explore the topic in more depth and link it to the main theme of this thesis.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE RELATION BETWEEN CANCEL CULTURE AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The focus of this dissertation is to understand the relationship between the culture of cancellation and freedom of expression, and so three types of analysis were carried out to arrive at a result.

In the previous chapters, it was possible to obtain a bibliographical analysis of various documents and websites with information and opinions on the topic in question and, to complement my analysis, this chapter will analyse one other research format, namely quantitative research.

4.1 Quantitative research: Survey

Quantitative research is a research methodology that relies on numerical data and statistical analysis to examine and understand various aspects of a phenomenon, in this case a topic. Researchers use structured surveys, experiments, or observations to collect quantitative data from a sample of participants. This data is then subjected to statistical analysis to identify trends, patterns, and relationships. Unlike qualitative research, which focuses on the "why" and emphasises the exploration of context, quantitative research mainly addresses questions of "what" and "how". Quantitative research is key to establishing cause and effect relationships, confirming, or refuting hypotheses and providing empirical evidence to support or challenge existing theories. Regardless of whether the results are affirmative or contradictory, they can inform decision-making and further research, thus making quantitative research valuable data for analysing a topic (Hammerberg et al., 2016).

The platform 'Google Forms' was utilised to conduct a survey, and responses were collected anonymously from people using social media platforms across the world. To get the most responses, the survey was shared on Instagram and Reddit.

A survey is a series of structured and planned questions directed to a subset of the population, allowing the researcher to undertake statistical analysis and generalise the results across a community (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1993). One of the first aims of this instrument was to study a societal problem, and it became popular because it allows for the collection of large amounts of standardised and comparable data in a cost-effective

manner. As a result, it is regarded as the most practical and viable research instrument (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2021; Groves, Jr., Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, & Tourangeau, 2009).

To help validate some statements and conclusions, particularly as most of the literature on the topic is related to English-speaking countries, a brief survey was conducted in two social media (Reddit and Instagram). The objective was to obtain answers also from Portuguese people below 35 years of age.

The questionnaire was made public on 22 September 2023 and removed from the online platforms on 25 September, when it had reached 50 responses. It was published so that respondents could give their answers anonymously.

Associated with the questionnaire were 10 questions, all of which related to the topics in the previous chapters so that it would be possible to understand the opinions of each of the respondents.

The first part of the questionnaire has 4 questions to obtain the respondents' socio-demographic data, namely age, gender, level of education and location (See appendix 4). Next, some questions were also asked about the respondents' use of social networks. The questions were:

1. How often do you use social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)?
2. How confident do you feel in your ability to distinguish between credible and non-credible information?

To complement the previous questions, we also asked questions related to one of the topics of this dissertation, namely the culture of cancellation:

3. Are you familiar with the concept of "cancel culture"?
4. In your opinion, does the culture of cancellation promote healthy accountability or hinder freedom of expression?

For the purpose to understand how often respondents express their opinion, some questions were asked associated with the topic, namely:

5. How often do you share your opinions or thoughts online (e.g., social media posts, comments, blog posts)?

6. Have you ever refrained from expressing your opinion online due to fear of negative reactions or the cancellation culture?
7. Do you think that the culture of cancellation has a significant impact on freedom of expression?

In addition to the topic of media literacy, it was also necessary to question the respondents on the topic to understand their opinion of it, with the following question:

8. Have you ever received formal education or training on media literacy?

To make this questionnaire a little more interactive and dynamic, a text box was left for respondents to leave their opinions on the topic in question. The answers are available on appendix 5 for viewing.

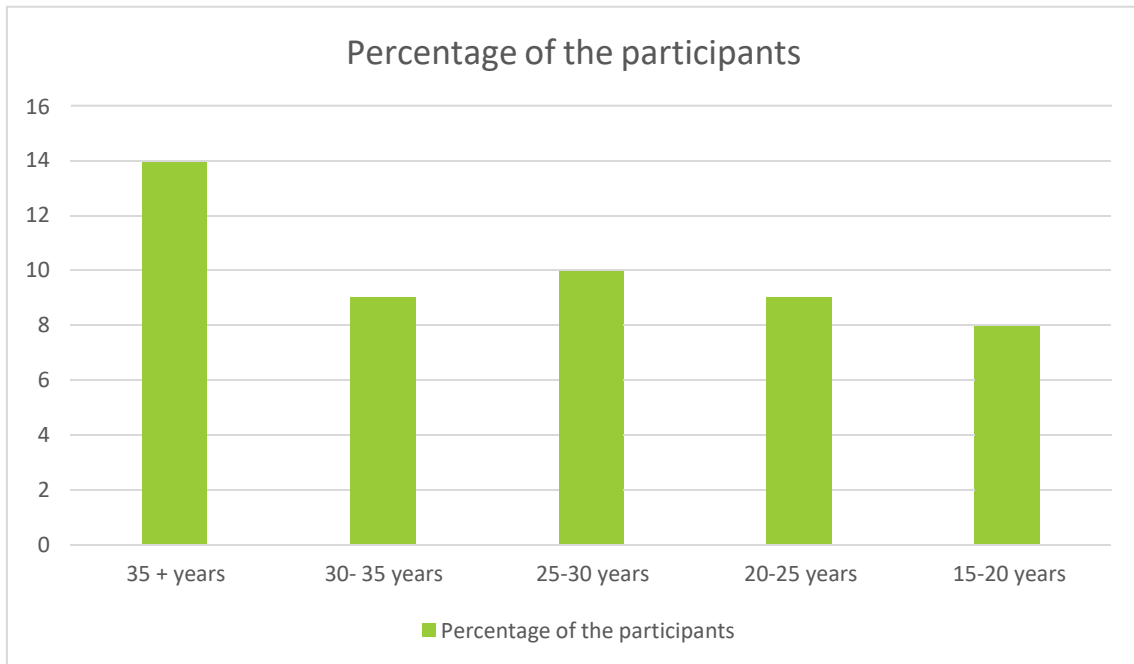
The main objective of this dissertation is not associated with the questionnaire in question. The purpose of the questionnaire is associated with the need for some input from users of online platforms so that it would be possible to understand the opinions of some people regarding the object of study of this thesis, the culture of cancellation and the extent to which it affects freedom of expression, in this case when using online tools. Although it could be argued that the short period of time during which the questionnaire was prepared, as well as the lack of field experience to validate the questions, the results can show a general trend for the final analysis of the results, linking them with the literary analysis made.

Researchers have proposed that social media channels be evaluated as a potential medium for reaching participants in social science studies, based on their discovery that these users are responsive and willing to contribute to the research (Kayam & Hirsch, 2012). As a result, to modernise the sharing process, the poll was distributed via social media, namely Instagram and Reddit. Reddit is a social news website and forum where information is socially vetted and promoted by voting by site members⁹. The site is made up of hundreds of subcommunities called subreddits. Each subreddit focuses on a different topic, such as technology, politics, or music (Stafford 2016), the survey was published on a subreddit named ‘Freedom of Speech’. The survey was also published on my personal Instagram profile to get answers from Portuguese people.

⁹ The name of the website is a pun on the phrase "I read it."

4.2 Results of the Quantitative Research

4.2.1 Age

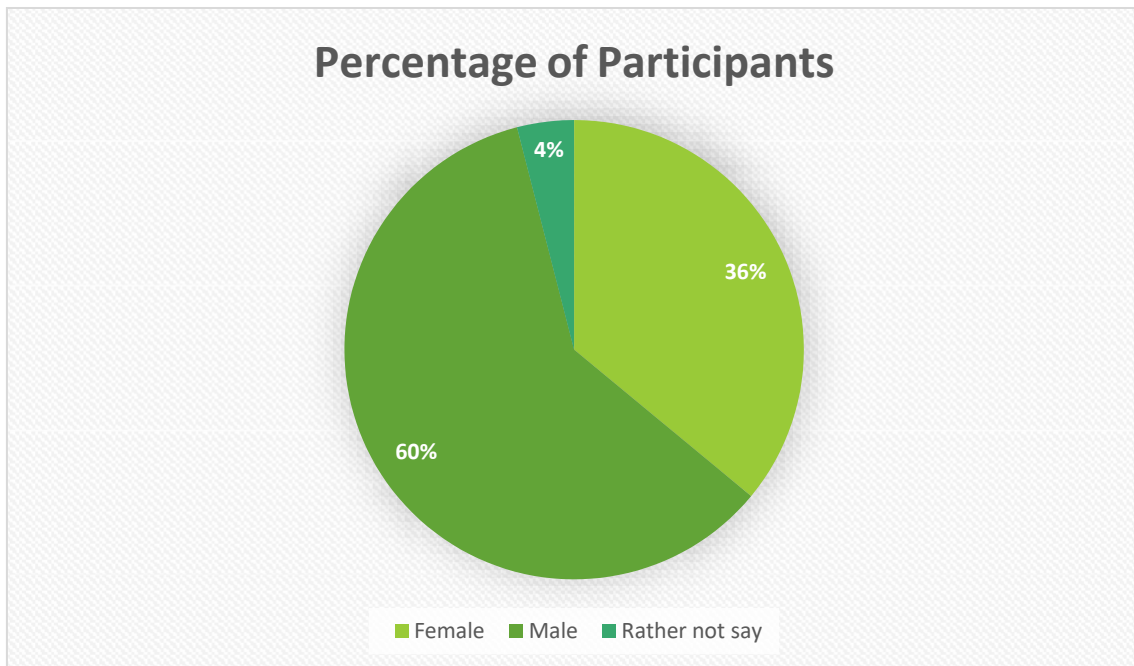


Graphic 5- Age group of the participants. Source: The author.

It is worth noting that most respondents in this questionnaire are people over 35, which was neither to be expected nor what corresponds to the analysis made in the bibliographical chapters of the dissertation. Reddit users are mostly between the ages of 18 and 29 (Gitnux 2023), while the respondents who answered via Instagram are overwhelmingly between the ages of 20 and 30, as shared via my personal account. Considering what has already been studied by other entities throughout the dissertation, this result does not correspond to the previous one, since most respondents, as already mentioned, are over 20-25 years old.

More research is required to understand the relationship between social media influence and perceptions of age. It is likely that respondents' participation was influenced by the various social media consumption habits, motivations, or experiences of different age groups on these platforms.

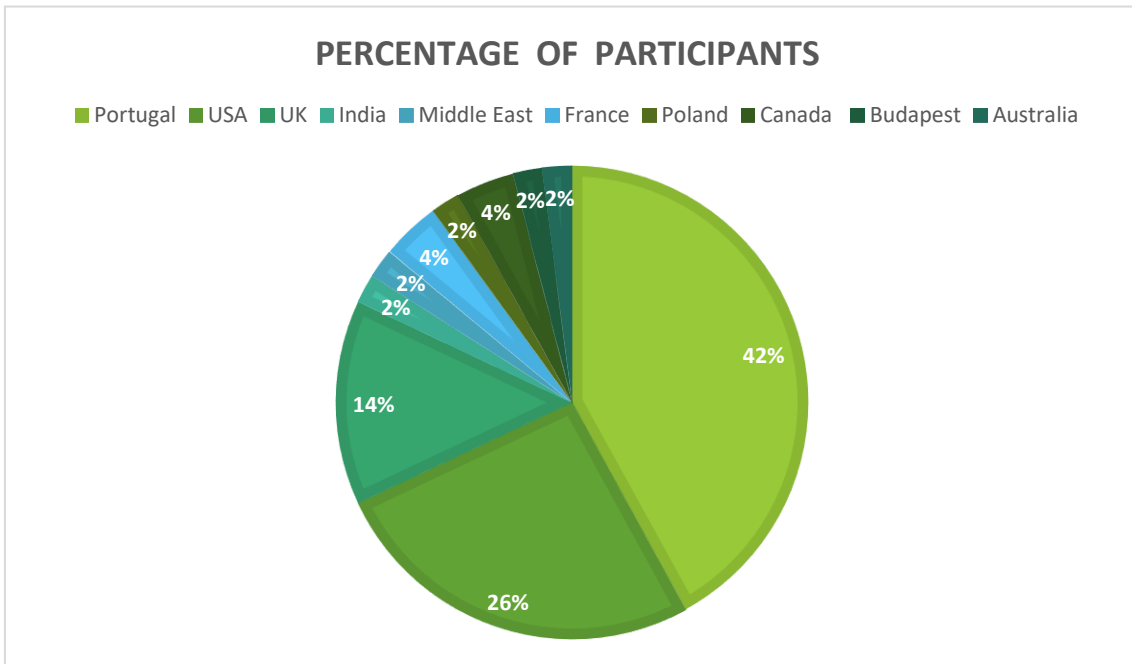
4.2.2 Gender



Graphic 6- Gender of the participants. Source: The author.

It should be emphasised that most people who answered this questionnaire were male, 30 participants. Only 18 participants belong to the female gender and 2 of the participants preferred not to indicate their gender. This distribution is justifiable, since the users belonging to reddit, considering Gitnux (2023), are mostly male and, associated with my personal Instagram account, the followers are also mostly male.

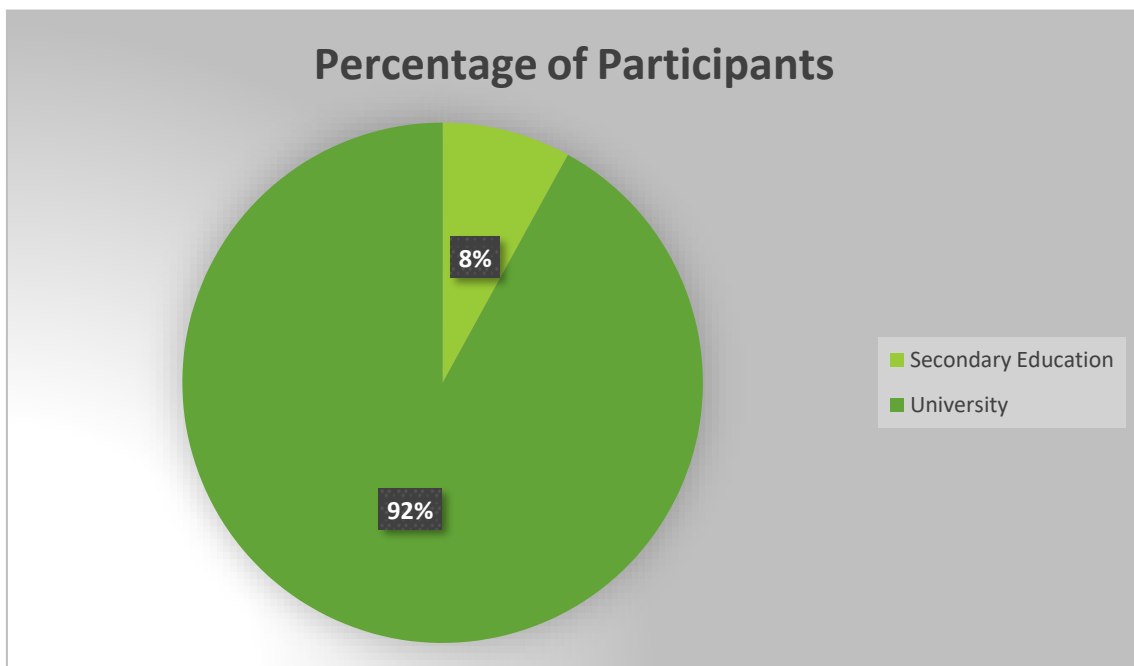
4.2.3 Location



Graphic 7- Location of the participants. Source: The author.

Although the questionnaire was all in English, most of the answers came from people living in Portugal, which makes this analysis interesting so that we can see the perspective of this region that was not explored during the dissertation. It should also be noted that other countries and regions of the world were involved in the responses to this survey so that it would also be possible to complement the analysis made so far.

4.2.4 Level of Education

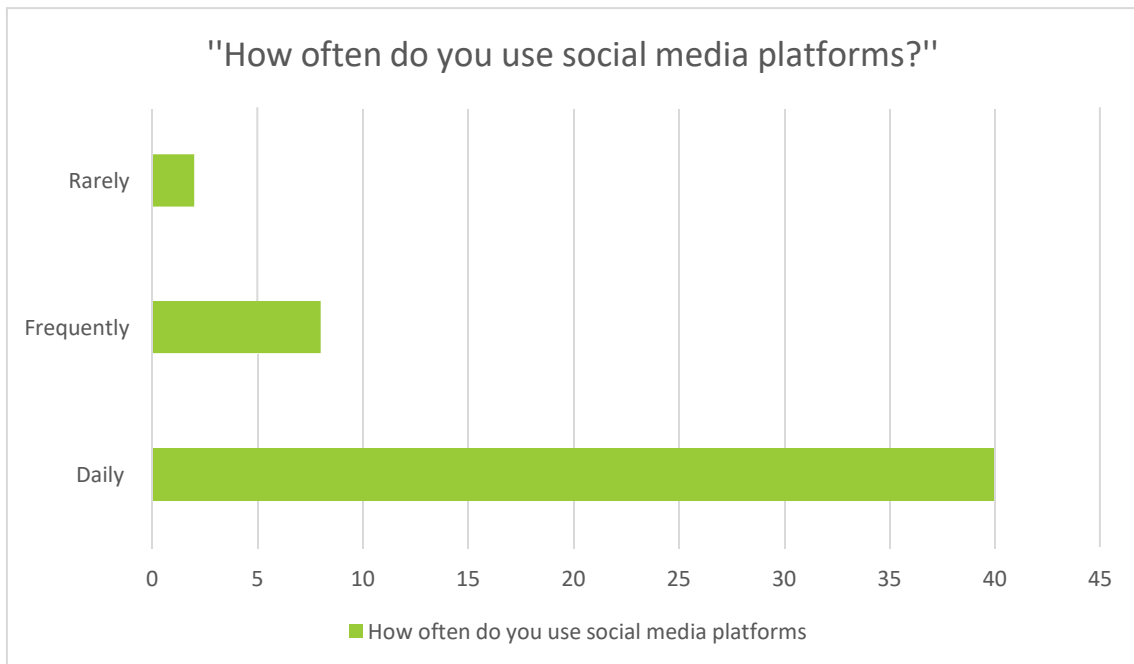


Graphic 8- Level of Education of the participants. Source: The author.

It should be noted that some of the participants were aged between 15 and 20, which may be related to the fact that some of the participants answered the question about the level of education associated with secondary school still.

Most respondents have higher education degrees. According to the Gitnux (2023) website, most Reddit users have a university degree.

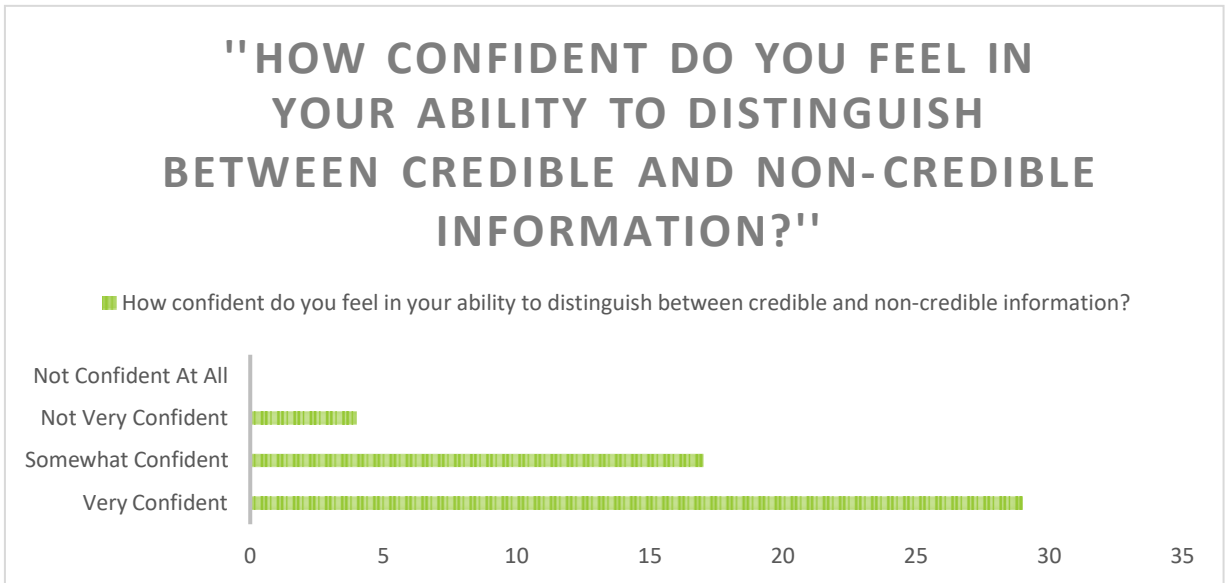
4.2.5 Use of Social Media



Graphic 9- Percentage of the participants and how frequently they use social media. Source: The author.

To answer the following questions, it was important to understand how much time respondents spent on online platforms. The overwhelming majority (40 people) responded and indicated that they use social networks daily, while 8 people indicated that they use them frequently and only 2 people indicated that they use them rarely. This response is in line with the analysis already made in the bibliographical part of the dissertation, considering the use of social platforms in each person's day-to-day life.

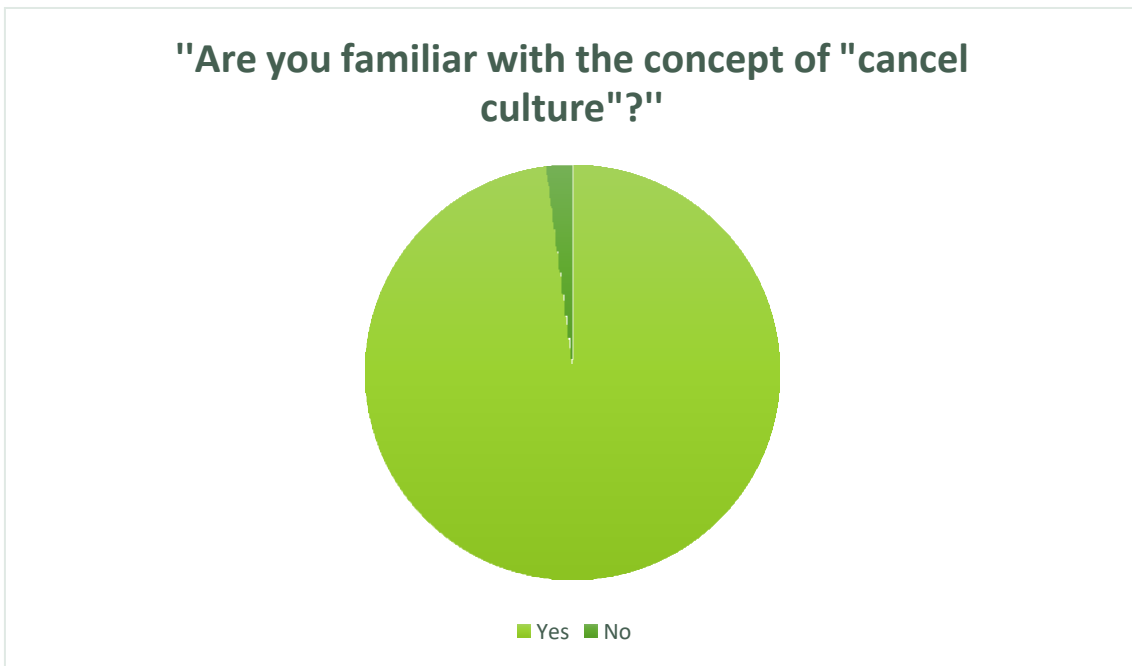
4.2.6 Online Information



Graphic 10- How participants feel on distinguish information online. Source: The author.

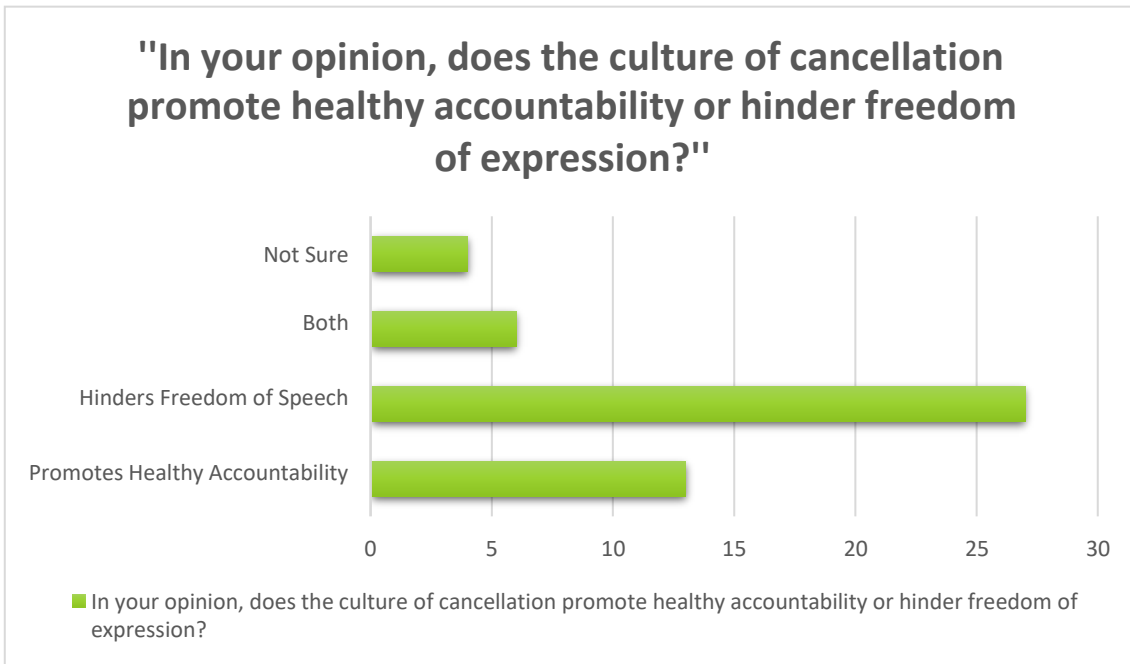
To understand how the social media users who completed the survey relate to the news they find online, namely knowing how to distinguish between what may or may not correspond to reality, a question was also asked about media literacy, where more than half of the respondents (29 persons) replied that they feel quite comfortable distinguishing between the information they find online. 17 of the respondents feel only somewhat confident in distinguishing information online, while only 4 people do not feel very capable of distinguishing the information, they find online.

4.2.7 Cancel Culture



Graphic 11- Familiarity of the Concept. Source: The author.

For the survey to make sense, it was also necessary to ask respondents about their familiarity with the concept of cancellation culture, to which 49 people replied that they were familiar with the concept and only 1 person replied that they were not. Which is to be expected given what was studied during the dissertation, the concept is well known by people who use the Internet.

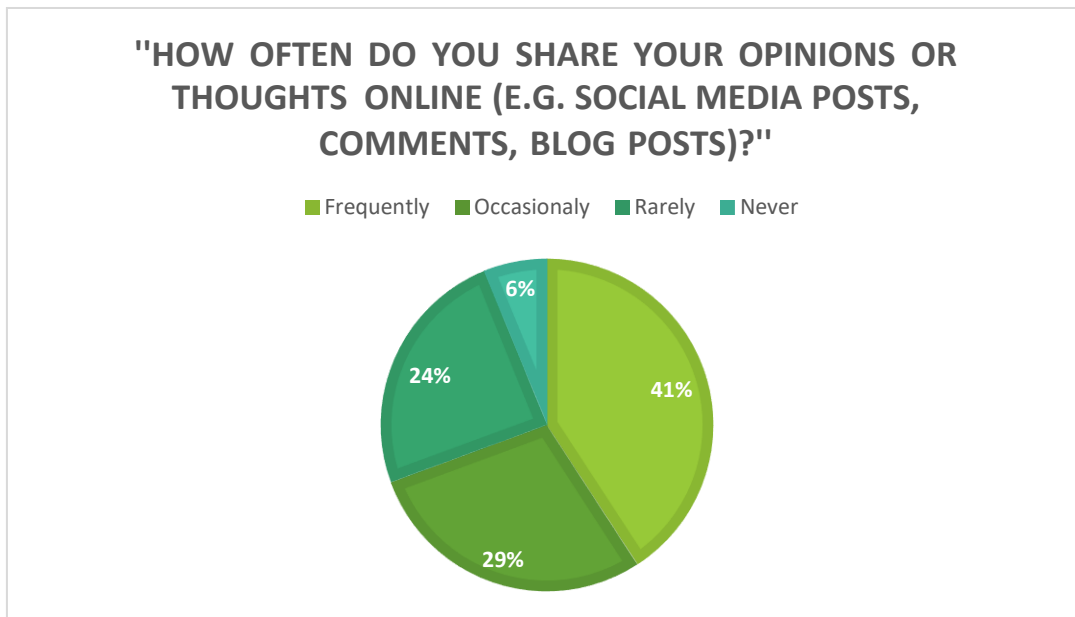


Graphic 12- Opinion on how cancel culture works towards others. Source: The author.

To understand what users think about the culture of cancellation, a question was also asked with this exact purpose after some study on the subject in the previous chapters.

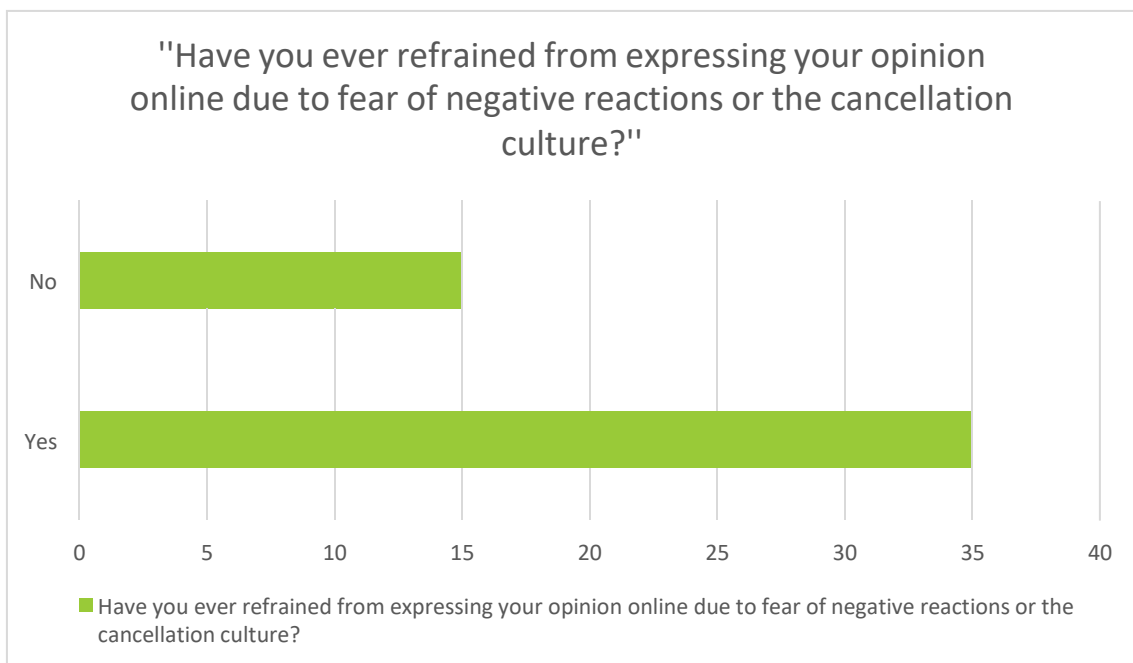
Respondents were asked if they thought that the culture of cancellation promote healthy accountability or hinder freedom of expression. 27 of the participants answered that the culture of cancellation hinders freedom of speech while 13 of the participants indicated that the culture of cancellation promotes healthy accountability. 6 of the participants indicated that both answers would also be correct, while only 4 participants indicated that they were not sure about either answer. This is in line with what was also seen in some of the articles investigated about the authors' opinions on this subject.

4.2.8 Online Sharing



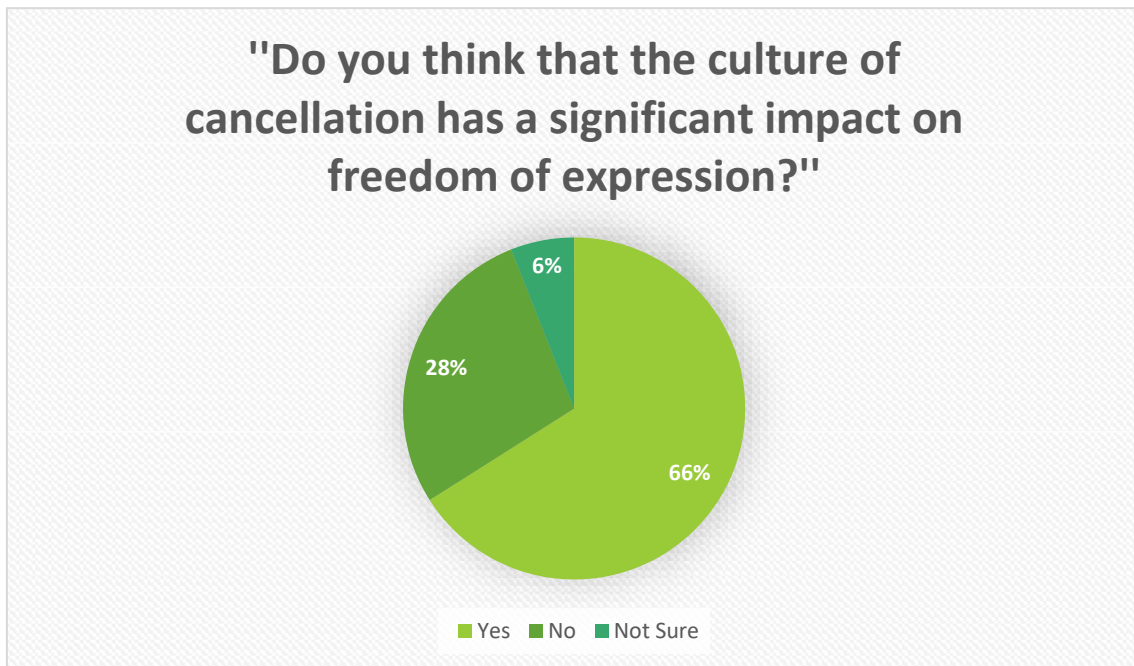
Graphic 13- How often does people share their opinions. Source: The author.

It was also possible to verify that the majority of respondents share or have shared their opinions on the Internet, which is also in line with everything that has been examined so far, namely the graphs indicated in the previous chapters, but as will be seen in the following analysis, this sharing is sometimes done with some trepidation.



Graphic 14- Percentage of people who felt refrained from expressing their opinion. Source: The author.

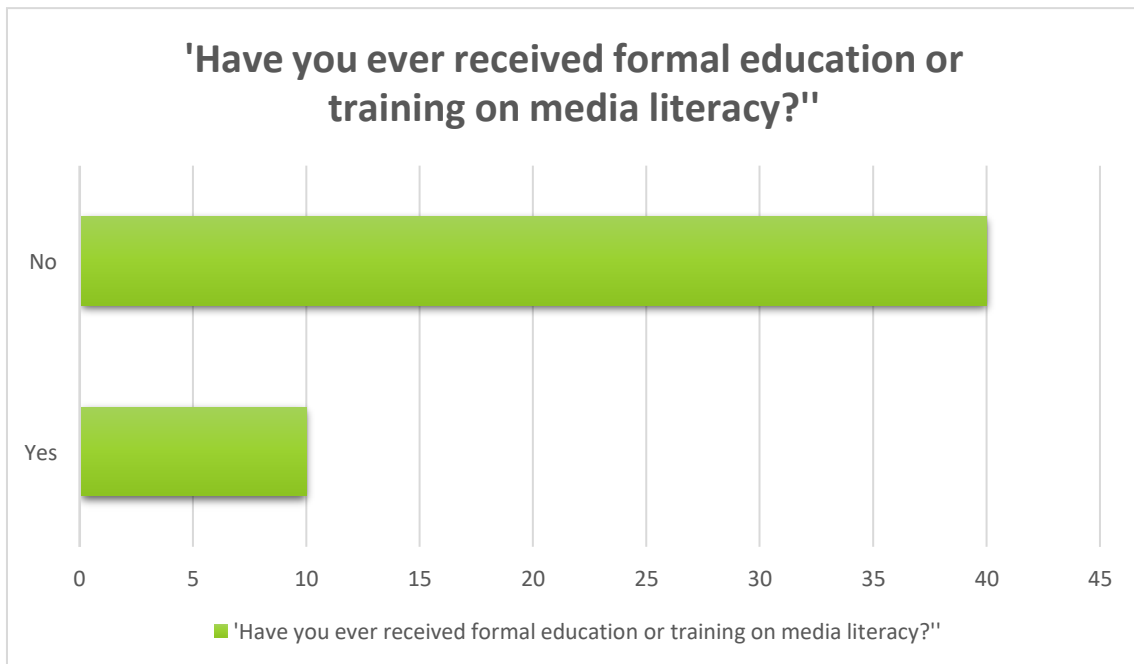
Following on from the previous question, it was also necessary to find out whether the respondents had ever been afraid to share their opinions for fear of receiving criticism or backlash for their sharing. The results of this data give a certain emphasis to the analysis made in chapter 3, where graph 4 shows us the percentage of people who refrain from sharing their opinions for fear of reprisals.



Graphic 15- Impact of Cancel Culture on Freedom of Speech. Source: The author.

As we have also seen in previous analyses, people do associate the culture of cancellation with the fact that it influences freedom of expression. Although the numbers are also distributed for other hypotheses, respondents agree that the culture of cancellation affects freedom of expression.

4.2.9 Media Literacy



Graphic 16- Media Literacy of the participants. Source: The author.

To finalise the questions in the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they had ever been taught how to use social networks responsibly and healthily and, taking the results into account, it was possible to see that the overwhelming majority had never had any kind of education associated with social networks and platforms (40 people) while 10 people admitted to having already received some kind of education on the subject.

The age factor could be associated with the fact that most people haven't had any kind of training/education on how to use online platforms responsibly, but it should be noted, as indicated above, that most users of the platforms where the questionnaire was shared have university degrees. At the same time, it is also worth noting that the highest percentage of respondents is over 35 years old, which could be related to the fact that they haven't had any kind of education on the subject.

4.3 Discussion of Results

After analysing the data obtained from the questionnaire, it will be necessary to link it to the topics and information covered throughout the thesis in the previous 3 chapters. Attempting to obtain data through a qualitative analysis would also be an interesting part, so that it would be possible to analyse the reality of those who have already suffered from the culture of cancellation and suffer daily from disagreements about their opinions. However, it will only be possible to relate the information and data obtained in the questionnaire to the bibliographical analysis carried out throughout the dissertation.

The focus of this dissertation, as indicated prior, is to understand and analyse the impact of the culture of cancellation on freedom of expression, particularly in the entertainment industry. It was possible to do this through surveys and questionnaires made by other platforms, namely the Pew Research Center (2020), which was used a few times throughout the dissertation to show some percentages associated with the topics (namely freedom of expression and the percentage of people who are familiar with the concept of cancellation culture). To assemble this information, a questionnaire was also carried out to understand the knowledge of the Portuguese (and others) on the subject in question.

Considering the data acquired after completing the questionnaire, it is possible to verify that a large percentage of the people who answered the questionnaire are familiar with the concept of the culture of cancellation and, as already mentioned and defined by some authors throughout this dissertation, the respondents agree that it makes it difficult, i.e., it hinders freedom of expression between people.

Although it is apparent from the questionnaire and has also been addressed throughout the chapters of the dissertation, people tend to share their opinions online even if it brings them some kind of reprisal, however, and also associated with this situation, it is possible to verify that the vast majority of respondents have already refrained from sharing their opinions on the Internet due to the fear associated with possible negative comments and/or backlash.

It was also possible to find out by questioning the respondents about media literacy and whether they had had any kind of help/education when it came to sharing and using online platforms, and most respondents indicated that they had never had any kind

of training in the proper use of online platforms. No one receives justice because of censorship and cancel culture, which also causes lost equity. Therefore, it is critical to promote discussion when it has been suppressed or absent through media literacy instruction (Abreu 2023, own translation).

The questionnaire data demonstrates a complex diversity of viewpoints on the subject, echoing a pattern observed among both the writers referenced and those surveyed. It is apparent that a considerable portion of the population, despite expressing a dread of sharing their thoughts due to potential repercussions, manages to retain a certain level of normalcy in their daily lives, refusing to let this fear prevent them from sharing their opinions. This idea is related to the experiences of the artists discussed in the first chapter, who endured hardships and criticism at various times of their careers yet persevered. Individuals' resilience can also be shown as they navigate the difficult balance between self-expression and social restrictions, recognising that, despite momentary failures, people persist in their pursuit of freedom of speech.

The idea of writing a dissertation on this specific topic was to make it possible for me to find out more about a subject that is increasingly present in the day-to-day lives of those who use social networks and those who make a point of sharing their ideas and opinions on them. To find out more about the topic, an interview was planned with some people from the entertainment industry, namely comedians, so that it would be possible to understand how the culture of cancellation has affected their freedom of expression, which is the basic theme of this dissertation. Due to the failure to obtain responses, the lack of a qualitative aspect of the research may be pointed out as a limitation in this analysis.

To enable an understanding of the topic in question, the first 3 chapters were crucial for the bibliographical analysis of the themes associated with this dissertation, namely the origin and evolution of the cancellation culture, as well as examples associated with the entertainment industry that were cancelled after sharing opinions. It was also possible to verify and link this concept with one of the key concepts of this work, freedom of expression. Chapter 3 focused mainly on everything associated with freedom of expression, from individuals' online presence to sharing opinions responsibly. It was also possible to analyse some aspects of this topic so that it was possible to link the information with the previous topics and understand the co-relation of the themes with each other.

Despite being a mostly theoretical dissertation, it opens the possibility of future research into the subject so that it is possible to begin a more in-depth study of the issue so that it can, if necessary, be combated or introduced as a way of teaching others how to use the Internet and digital platforms responsibly.

One of the most notable constraints of the dissertation is the geographical focus of the investigation. Most of the sources and realities under consideration are from English-speaking countries. While this technique provides essential insight into the broader context of the issues under consideration, it overlooks a more in-depth examination of the situation, for example, in Portugal. A more in-depth exploration of the Portuguese context could have enriched the study by shedding more light on the country's unique challenges, cultural nuances, and solutions, ultimately providing an understanding of the issue at hand.

Another significant drawback of this thesis is that it focuses on comedy and humour, even though it recognises that cancellation culture is more predisposed to thoughts about politics, religion, race, and other sensitive matters. While understanding the impact of cancellation culture on comedy is instructive in and of itself, it is important to recognise that the implications and dynamics can alter drastically when dealing with more serious and sensitive themes. However, while the research conducted provides information on one aspect of cancellation culture, the scope and impact of this phenomenon can vary depending on the subject in question, and additional research may be required to understand the implications depending on each subject.

One of the primary limitations of this dissertation, as already mentioned, was its examination of Portugal's cancellation culture; future research in this field may provide a thorough review of this phenomenon. This would entail a thorough examination of the ways in which the cancellation culture is expressed in the Portuguese setting, as well as the problems, the people impacted, and the reactions of the public and establishments. A study of this kind in Portugal would offer important insights into the dynamics of Portuguese society since the culture of cancellation can show itself differently in different cultural and socioeconomic circumstances.

Furthermore, further investigation into the appropriate use of the Internet is an issue that has been touched upon but not thoroughly examined. Future studies in this area could examine practical methods for fostering a more positive online community, tackling problems like disinformation, cyberbullying, and the effects of online behaviour on the users' lives. Through investigating ethical internet usage, scholars may help build a more secure and knowledgeable digital environment.

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Appendix 1 - Survey made on Google Forms.

Investigating the Effects of Cancel Culture on Free Expression and Media Literacy

As part of my dissertation for a Master's degree in Intercultural Studies for Business at the Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto, I invite you to take part in this survey so that I can investigate the effects of the culture of cancellation on the fundamental right to freedom of expression, with an emphasis on the role of media literacy.

Thank you very much for your co-operation.

beacunha30@gmail.com [Alternar conta](#)



Não compartilhado

* Indica uma pergunta obrigatória



Age *

- 15-20
- 20-25
- 25-30
- 30-35
- 35+

Gender *

- Female
- Male
- Rather not say
- Outro: _____

Location *

Sua resposta _____

Level of Education *

- Primary Education
- Secondary Education
- University
- Outro: _____

How often do you use social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)? *

- Daily
- Frequently
- Rarely

How confident do you feel in your ability to distinguish between credible and non-credible information? *

- Very confident
- Somewhat confident
- Not very confident
- Not confident at all

Are you familiar with the concept of "cancel culture"? *

- Yes
- No

In your opinion, does the culture of cancellation promote healthy accountability or hinder freedom of expression? *

- Promotes healthy accountability
- Hinders freedom of speech
- Both
- Not sure

How often do you share your opinions or thoughts online (e.g. social media posts, comments, blog posts)? *

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Have you ever refrained from expressing your opinion online due to fear of negative reactions or the cancellation culture? *

- Yes
- No

Do you think that the culture of cancellation has a significant impact on freedom of expression? *

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Have you ever received formal education or training on media literacy? *

- Yes
- No

Please share your ideas on how society may strike a balance between accountability and freedom of speech in the age of cancel culture.

Sua resposta

Enviar

Limpar formulário

Appendix 2- Feedback from the respondents.

Please share your ideas on how society may strike a balance between accountability and freedom of speech in the age of cancel culture.

18 respostas

We need freedom of speech and end cancel culture.

Cancel culture is often asked and used by the left wing to make sure to in some cases deny facts and other people's freedom to express their feelings and opinions

Cancel culture is a modern way of censorship and needs to end .

..

Let it be, cancelling is free speech

Normalize resistance to it.

We need to encourage those on the side of cancellation to be open to new ideas and outlooks on the world.

I feel like the idea of "cancelling" people went too far.

Not sure how it's possible. You would need everyone to be willing to listen to others and the mob has no interest.

I believe the main factor that leads cancel culture to be so extreme sometimes is the lack of nuance in it. However, it is incredibly difficult to figure something out that would solve this issue. On the other hand, this is a mainly-usa issue, I don't think that Cancel Culture impacts Portugal and most other countries as much.

.

What someone says in their private life should not impact their employment

innocence until proven guilty

"Society" has nothing to do with this.

Decentralization of internet discourse. The long, slow deaths of Facebook and Twitter will be good things.

More openness of communication and free speech. Let the bad ideas be ridiculed and be out in the open. Suppression breeds conspiracy theories.

(1) Educational initiatives, such as incorporating media literacy and critical thinking skills in general education curricula at the secondary and post-secondary levels. (2) Protecting freedom of speech and expression via legislation.

cancel culture doesn't exist.

As pessoas devem ter consciência daquilo que dizem e perceber que muitas das vezes podem ser mal interpretadas ou existem outras pessoas cuja opinião é diferente e vão responder-lhes e, por vezes, criticam-nos também. Acho que ninguém é perfeito e, portanto, quem sou eu ou qualquer outra pessoa para "cancelar" alguém? É preciso saber medir as coisas e as situações.

I am a proponent of free speech absolutism, I believe there is a close link between freedom of expression and freedom of thought and it is very hard to defend the latter without the former and vice versa, and I definitely don't want to be subjected to thought control. I object to Wittgenstein's claim that "words are deeds" and to the conclusion that there is any need for "accountability" for speech.