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The Rise of “Cancel Culture” and Its Impact on Brand Reputation Management

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Abstract

Cancel culture, a digital-age phenomenon, has significantly reshaped the way brands manage public relations and reputational crises. This article explores the complex relationship between cancel culture and brand reputation, analyzing real-world cases, the role of social media, and PR response strategies. With increasing consumer demand for ethical behavior and social responsibility, brands are now held accountable not only for their actions but also for their silence. The study provides insight into the evolving nature of public backlash and how PR professionals can navigate this high-risk environment.

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Keywords

Cancel culture, brand reputation, PR strategy, social media backlash, public relations, crisis management, consumer ethics.

Introduction

In recent years, the term «cancel culture» has become a dominant force in online discourse, influencing everything from celebrity status to corporate strategy. At its core, cancel culture is about public accountability. But in the realm of brand management, it's also about survival. For many companies, the threat of being «canceled» translates directly into reputational and financial damage—sometimes irreparably so.

Unlike traditional media crises, which may unfold over days or weeks, cancel culture eruptions often begin and peak within a matter of hours. One misinterpreted ad, one resurfaced tweet, or one association with a controversial figure can ignite a full-scale backlash on platforms like Twitter, TikTok, or Instagram*. This rapid acceleration gives PR teams minimal time to assess the situation and craft a response, putting unprecedented pressure on communication strategies.

Main Body

Take, for example, the case of Balenciaga in 2022. The luxury fashion house faced massive online condemnation after publishing an ad campaign that featured children holding teddy bears in BDSM-style outfits. Despite the brand's quick apology and removal of the campaign, the hashtag #CancelBalenciaga trended globally, and public sentiment remained largely negative. The brand was accused not only of poor judgment but of deliberately pushing boundaries for shock value. The controversy forced Balenciaga into a months-long reputation repair campaign, including legal actions and restructuring their approval processes.

The Balenciaga case demonstrates a key characteristic of modern cancel culture: even elite, well-established brands are not immune. A public apology, once the go-to strategy for PR crises, is now often seen as insufficient. Audiences demand more—structural change, transparency, and visible accountability. In this context, public relations professionals must do more than contain damage; they must also rebuild trust from the ground up.

Another revealing example is Gillette's 2019 campaign, «The Best Men Can Be,» which addressed toxic masculinity. While it earned praise from progressive audiences, it also sparked a backlash from conservative consumers, some of whom vowed to boycott the brand. Although Gillette did not retract the campaign, the polarized reaction highlighted a critical dilemma for brands: aligning with social causes can alienate parts of their consumer base. The risk is not just about being canceled, but about dividing your audience.

This brings us to an important nuance. Cancel culture is not always about genuine ethical failures. Sometimes, it's about perception and political polarization. Brands find themselves navigating a minefield where staying silent on a social issue can be seen as complicity, but taking a stand can provoke backlash from the opposing side. According to an analysis by Ruby Media Group (2024) [Ruby Media Group, 2024], over 60% of cancel-related PR crises in the U.S. involved political or ideological disagreements rather than proven misconduct.

In this environment, corporate social responsibility (CSR) becomes both a shield and a target. Companies that actively promote inclusion, sustainability, and ethical practices may earn public favor—but they also invite scrutiny. If there's a gap between declared values and actual behavior, consumers are quick to notice. This phenomenon, known as «woke-washing», describes the insincere adoption of social causes for marketing purposes. When uncovered, it often results in swift cancellation.

A notorious case is H&M's 2018 ad featuring a Black child in a hoodie with the slogan «Coolest

Monkey in the Jungle.» The backlash was instant, with critics accusing the brand of racial insensitivity. The company issued apologies and removed the ad, but the damage was already done. Protests erupted in several countries, and H&M faced calls for boycott from celebrities and activists. Importantly, the brand's previous CSR initiatives did little to soften the blow—showing that good intentions elsewhere cannot offset a single moment of tone-deafness.

These dynamics are not limited to Western markets. Russian brands are increasingly facing similar pressures, especially as online audiences in Russia become more vocal, politically aware, and globally connected.

One notable example is Yandex.Eda, the food delivery service, which faced backlash in 2019 after the company allegedly fired a courier for participating in a protest. Social media users launched a boycott campaign under the hashtag #УдаляюЯндекс (Deleting Yandex), accusing the company of political pressure and violation of workers' rights. The company responded by issuing a formal apology and offering to reinstate the employee. Nevertheless, the incident tarnished Yandex.Eda's image among urban liberal consumers—an important demographic in Russia's service economy.

Another case involved Wildberries, one of Russia's largest online retailers. In 2023, the platform came under fire after users discovered that it sold clothing and accessories with imperial or militaristic symbols, which many interpreted as a politicized gesture amid rising geopolitical tensions. The company's ambiguous response—refusing to remove the items while avoiding direct political commentary—led to polarized reactions. Some praised the company's stance; others called for a boycott. This duality illustrates a critical point: in a divided society, brands may find themselves «canceled» by one part of the public while celebrated by another.

Russian brands also face a unique challenge in the form of state alignment and public neutrality. In some cases, remaining silent can itself be viewed as a political statement. For example, several tech companies were criticized for not speaking out during key social events, such as the 2021 protests. Brands like VK (formerly VKontakte) faced backlash for allegedly deleting content or accounts related to opposition movements. These actions, regardless of whether they stemmed from internal policy or external pressure, sparked consumer distrust and online protests. While cancel culture in Russia may not always operate as swiftly or globally as in the West, its influence is growing steadily, particularly among younger digital users.

This is where the role of proactive PR becomes crucial. In contrast to reactive crisis management, a proactive approach involves continuous engagement with social trends, regular audits of brand messaging, and internal education on cultural sensitivity. As noted by Sync PR (2024) [Sync PR, 2024], brands that maintain open channels of communication with their audience are more likely to weather cancel culture storms. They are perceived as authentic, adaptable, and human—not just faceless corporations issuing press releases.

Social media, while being the battleground for cancel culture, can also be the solution. When used strategically, platforms allow brands to humanize their messaging, clarify intentions, and engage in two-way conversations. However, tone matters. A robotic or overly corporate response can worsen backlash. Conversely, admitting fault, showing humility, and outlining concrete steps for change can help shift the narrative.

A compelling case in point is Ben & Jerry's, a brand known for its progressive stance. The company has repeatedly taken positions on controversial issues—racial justice, climate change, refugee rights—yet rarely faces cancellation. Why? Because their messaging is consistent, backed by real action, and embedded into the brand's DNA. Consumers trust that their values are not performative. This trust acts as a reputational buffer in times of potential controversy.

PR experts agree that the age of neutrality is over. Brands cannot afford to remain silent or passive when social issues dominate the public agenda. At the same time, they must be prepared to explain, defend, or revise their stances if public reaction turns hostile. Cancel culture has shifted the rules of engagement: it's not just about what a brand sells, but what it stands for—and how consistently it stands for it.

Finally, cancel culture is not inherently negative. It has empowered consumers to demand better, more ethical behavior from brands. It has forced companies to think critically about their messaging, hiring practices, supply chains, and public responsibilities. But it also requires balance. PR professionals must differentiate between constructive criticism and performative outrage, between real accountability and digital mob mentality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cancel culture represents both a challenge and an opportunity for modern brand management. It forces transparency, demands responsiveness, and rewards authenticity. While the risks are high, the potential for building stronger, more trust-based relationships with consumers has never been greater—for those who are willing to listen, learn, and lead with integrity.

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Влияние феномена «культуры отмены» на управление репутацией бренда

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Аннотация

Культура отмены, феномен цифровой эпохи, значительно изменила подходы брендов к управлению связями с общественностью и репутационными кризисами. В данной статье исследуется сложная взаимосвязь между культурой отмены и репутацией бренда, анализируются реальные кейсы, роль социальных медиа и стратегии антикризисного PR. В связи с растущим спросом потребителей на этическое поведение и социальную ответственность бренды теперь несут ответственность не только за свои действия, но и за своё молчание. Исследование даёт представление о развивающейся природе общественного резонанса и о том, как PR-специалисты могут ориентироваться в этой среде с высоким уровнем риска.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Культура отмены, репутация бренда, PR-стратегия, критика в социальных сетях, связь с общественностью, антикризисное управление, потребительская этика.

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