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Research Article

Qualitative Insights Into Cancel Culture Prevention, Its Potential Individual Impacts, and How to Explore them

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The concept of cancel culture has gained traction over the past 10 years, with the continuous rise of social media and online platforms. The limited literature on this topic tends to focus on possible definitions and characteristics. However, we have yet to fully understand how cancel culture, canceling, and canceling prevention impact individuals and their lives. As such, we set out to build an empirical base that would allow us to delimit, understand, and study these individual impacts of cancel culture by proposing a new model—the pressure for a perfect conduct (PPC) model. We interviewed 20 people from different age groups to understand how cancel culture impacts their lives and which variables could be related to the pressure that derives from it. We also gathered data on their opinion regarding our proposed model and key variable, "PPC." Our results seem to indicate that our model and the PPC variable can be used in the study of cancel culture's individual impacts. Additionally, participants posited that this pressure negatively impacts individuals' mental health, opinion construction, and social media participation. Furthermore, they reported that cancelling can be performed by and to anyone, not being limited to powerful figures. Further results and potential future studies are discussed. This work can help unlock future research on the topic by bringing forth a novel way to tackle it, as well as by exploring some of cancel culture's implications at an individual level.

Keywords: cancel culture; culture; interviews; perfect conduct; qualitative analysis; social media

1. Introduction

Connecting with people worldwide has never been easier. Technology and the internet have developed at incredible speeds, making many previously impossible tasks achievable with devices that fit in our pockets [1–4]. Information that once took months to relay is now shared instantly through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok. However, while this connectivity is often beneficial, it also poses significant problems. Information that individuals strive to keep private has the potential to be leaked and shared. Given the widespread collection of personal data and the seemingly infinite storage of it, past actions can be easily accessed by the public at large and impact those in the present [5]. Given the potential risk of such records, it is expected that individuals will make a conscious effort to minimize controversy in order to avoid being the subject of cancel culture.

Cancel culture (with associated terms such as "canceling" or "cancelation"; [6, 7]) functions as a modern form of the "court of public opinion", facilitated and exacerbated by social media platforms [8]. Canceling is a broad term used to describe the collective behavior of online users who boycott or withdraw support and attention for an individual, a company, an organization, or a system deemed inappropriate or vile in the eyes of the public [6, 9–11]. At present, there is no consensus regarding the existence, nor the valence, of cancel culture. Some scholars have argued that cancel culture does not exist [12–15], while others contend that it does, but is used too liberally [7]. Additionally, there

is controversy regarding cancel culture being a form of social repression [7, 16, 17] or as a manifestation of the democratization of discourse (e.g., #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter; [9, 18]).

Given the speed and permanence of social platforms, we posit individuals must strive for perfection to avoid online scrutiny and cancelation. In this article, we propose a new concept—the pressure for a perfect conduct (PPC)—as well as the first version of a new theoretical model to study the individual effects of canceling prevention. As informed by Foucault's panopticon metaphor (1977), Goffman's self-presentation model (1959), and the extensive body of research on perfectionism [19, 20], the PPC accommodates the contributions of social psychological research (e.g., self-pressure, perceived social status, the repercussions of cancelation, group identification, and agreement with public opinion) to explain and predict how individuals avoid cancelation. To evidence the external validity of the PPC, the present study presents the findings of 20 qualitative interviews with social media users who shared their experiences navigating the chilling effects of cancel culture on users in the digital age.

1.1. Theoretical Background

1.1.1. The Causes and Effects of Cancel Culture.
Literature on cancel culture is scarce due to the aforementioned controversy, and most work has focused on definitions and instances of cancelations [7, 9, 10]. As companies are prime targets for canceling campaigns, consumer science and business scholarship have investigated the effects of cancel culture on consumer behavior, brand perception, and the impact on profit margins [21–23]. There has also been limited research on users' motivations to participate in cancelations, which point to a desire to seek justice and education [17, 24]. However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the effects cancel culture has on individuals who have been canceled, as well as on those who attempt to avoid cancelation.

It has been argued that cancel culture creates a "chilling effect" on public discourse and digital social life, largely due to the serious consequences that follow those who are canceled [25, 26]. Being the target of cancelation can impact an individual's ability to socialize and support themselves financially, which can include, but is not limited to, losing one's job, missing out on potential sponsors, or losing credibility [6, 7, 27–29]. Being canceled is seen as a legitimate threat, and the perceived effect of this potentiality promotes the silencing of iconoclasts, the promotion of groupthink, and the stifling of social progress at the macro level [17, 30]. For example, there is a rich body of scholarship dedicated to the ways researchers react to their work being engaged with by social media audiences [31–35]. Thus, one potential method to prevent cancelation is to closely monitor one's presentation online by engaging in self-censorship [7, 36, 37].

1.1.2. Living in the Digital Panopticon.
Given the large amount of collected and stored user data on the part of social media sites, individual users are subjected to at-will social inspection of their digital footprints. Due to the seemingly random nature of cancelations, users may experience a state of constant vigilance while online, as they do not know if or when their behavior is being surveilled. Based on Bentham's panopticon [38], Foucault [39] proposed the idea of self-surveillance (or self-monitoring), which suggests that if individuals know they might be watched but do not know precisely when, they will control their behavior to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Foucault argued this was a form of social control, which offloaded enforcement of social norms onto the individual. Thus, social media platforms may create the condition for which self-surveillance, self-presentation, and perfectionism may operate as adaptive, but costly, processes to prevent being canceled.

The connection between social media and the panopticon has already been proposed regarding China's use of the internet to enforce control over its citizens [40]; however, China is not unique, as there is a wealth of scholarship that has made the comparison between the two in Western contexts [41, 42]. Further, it may be the role of cancel culture to perpetuate self-surveillance in the digital panopticon, as it operates to effectively silence expression and descent from the public (e.g., spiral of silence; [7, 43–46]). As such, we anticipate that users are engaged in high levels of self-surveillance and attentiveness of their self-presentation in order to be perceived as perfect.

Both heightened self-surveillance and acute public self-awareness require a significant degree of attentional resources in order to be maintained over a long period of time, which may limit other cognitive resources [47, 48]. Constant self-surveillance has been associated with conflicting self-presentation goals between platforms or between what is desired by the individual and by the outside public [49] and a general feeling of not being able to express oneself (the so-called "self-censorship"; [50–52]). Self-presentation is the attenuation toward how one is perceived in social environments and is thought to manifest within two extremes: virtually oblivious to others' reactions and acute public self-awareness [53]. Self-presentation is linked to one's self-concept and influences one's self-esteem and self-identification [54, 55]. Thus, users are under social conditions in which they must constantly monitor their behavior and attend carefully to their online self-presentation, with the aim of being perceived as being perfect, to avoid detection.

Perfectionism involves setting excessively high personal standards and engaging in overly critical self-evaluations to avoid mistakes at all costs [19, 20, 56]. The literature suggests that perfectionism can be categorized into two higher-order dimensions: perfectionistic strivings (PSs) and perfectionistic concerns (PCs; [57]). The contemporary 2×2 model [58] intersects these dimensions to create four quadrants: nonperfectionism (low PS/low PC), pure evaluative concerns perfectionism (pure ECP; low PS/high PC), pure personal standards perfectionism (pure PSP; high PS/low PC), and mixed perfectionism (high PS/high PC) [57]. The impact of perfectionism on individuals varies based on its manifestation and the sources of the need for perfection [59, 60], with both positive [61] and negative [62] effects reported.
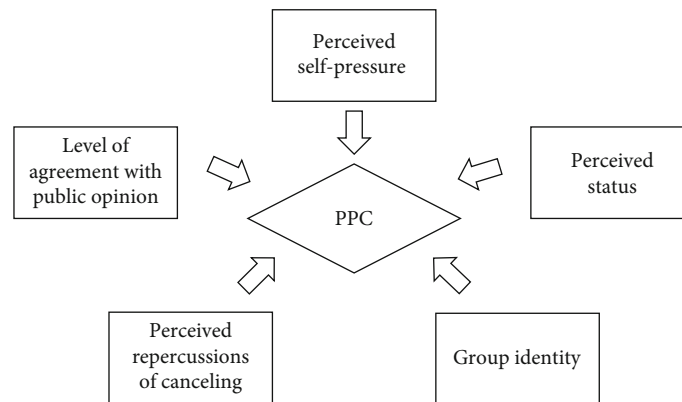
FIGURE 1: Pressure for a perfect conduct (PPC) model.

Thus, individuals are compelled to maintain their self-presentation meticulously, striving to avoid any errors through perfectionistic self-promotion, concern over verbal disclosures of imperfections, and concern over behavioral displays of imperfections [63]. The idea that social media pressures people to appear perfect is not new [64]. Recent studies have explored this interaction, examining topics like online pictures and body dissatisfaction [65], social media burnout [66], and depressive symptoms [67]. However, in the context of the digital panopticon, perfectionism may also serve as an adaptive process to avoid the threat of cancel culture.

1.1.3. The PPC. Due to the growth of social media platforms and their influence over both online and in-person behavior, we echo past research that compares the current digital landscape to Foucault's panopticon with cancel culture as the control mechanism to enforce self-surveillance, self-presentation, and perfectionism. We believe that users are motivated to engage in these behaviors as an adaptive strategy to prevent cancelation via the psychological, mediating variable: the PPC. The PPC is defined as "the pressure one feels to conduct themselves perfectly under the threat of being canceled." This variable is linked to the contemporary feeling that one's actions must be free of perceived mistakes due to constant monitoring by others facilitated by social media platforms [42]. Our goal is to understand how the threat of cancelation induces this pressure and what factors contribute to or mitigate it. This structured approach will facilitate future research and provide a deeper understanding of this pressure and its effects.

1.2. The PPC Model—A Preliminary Proposal. By advancing the PPC construct, we propose the first version of a new theoretical model to study the individual effects of canceling prevention. We reviewed the literature on cancel culture and related psychological concepts to build a model that schematizes the pressure one feels to avoid cancelation and its main antecedents. A representation of our model is presented in Figure 1, followed by a brief explanation of why we believe these variables are relevant to the study of cancel culture. Following the 2×2 perfectionism model [57, 58, 68], this model is aimed at compiling the essential variables

for more structured research on this concept, allowing other constructs to be considered. We propose five different variables, divided into two broader categories: those related to PSs, which in our model are the "perceived self-pressure" and "perceived status" variables, and those aligned with PCs, which include "perceived repercussions of canceling," "group identity," and "level of agreement with public opinion."

1.2.1. Perceived Self-Pressure. The perceived self-pressure variable addresses the inherent pressure one might feel to behave perfectly, stemming from individual factors rather than cancel culture specifically. This concept is drawn from the extensive literature on individual differences in social phenomena [69] and literature specific to our model. Perfectionism literature often discusses "self-oriented perfectionism" [57, 70], "perfectionist strivings" [71], and "PSP" [19, 20]. While these concepts are not identical, they have been used interchangeably in the 2×2 approach to studying perfectionism [57, 58, 72]. Psychological literature supports this claim, with various established concepts suggesting a potential effect on a variable such as PPC. For example, personality traits like higher agreeableness [73] or one's regulatory focus [74, 75] can significantly influence their interaction with the PPC phenomenon. We hypothesize that perceived self-pressure will be positively correlated with PPC.

1.2.2. Perceived Status. Drawing from the existing literature on social status and subjective social status, perceived status is included in the model as a variable to assess an individual's perception of their public standing, perceived power, and/or influence, as well as their obligation to follow specific behaviors or values due to their position [53, 76–82]. The links between cancel culture, social status, and social media platforms have also been discussed in the past [28, 83, 84], which strengthens this variable's inclusion in our preliminary model. We believe individuals' perceived status will positively relate to PPC and may have a nonlinear impact on PPC. For example, in line with loss aversion research [85, 86], it is expected that individuals with higher perceived statuses and significant public outreach will be more inclined to avoid being the target of cancelation attempts, leading to increased PPC levels. However, while it stands to reason that individuals with extensive social exposure and more to lose

would report higher levels of PPC, it is also possible that certain figures (e.g., J.K. Rowling, Donald Trump; [87–89]) achieve such a high level of perceived status that they believe their words and actions will not bring notable consequences, especially if they appeal to groups feeling silenced by the general public [45]. This could result in such individuals reporting lower levels of PPC.

1.2.3. Perceived Repercussion of Canceling. The "perceived repercussions of canceling" dimension relates to what an individual believes can happen to them as a result of being canceled and to what extent they perceive these consequences to warrant avoidance. Psychology research on risk aversion [90] and related fields [85, 86] indicates that people will attempt to avoid being the target of a cancelation process if they perceive it to have negative consequences. This aligns with the theoretical difference between injunctive and descriptive social norms, where the former serves as a social guideline to be followed, not merely acknowledged [91, 92]. If individuals perceive cancel culture as having no real implications on their lives, holding a mere descriptive effect on what they should be doing or saying, they are less likely to feel pressured to behave accordingly. Therefore, we believe individuals will feel more PPC the more severe they perceive the consequences of a possible cancelation.

1.2.4. Level of Agreement With Public Opinion. In our model, we propose that individuals who tend to agree with what they perceive to be the commonly held opinions of the general public are less likely to be concerned about cancel culture. In practical terms, they would not need to change their behavior or values to align with perceived noncancelable behavior and beliefs. This rationale aligns with the literature on the spiral of silence [45], which indicates that one's perception of public opinion influences their willingness to express their opinion, impacting its perception and creating further unwillingness to express oneself (thus creating the spiral). This relationship has extensive empirical support, including in online settings, as seen in a recent meta-analysis [93]. The effects of the spiral of silence have been replicated in social media contexts [43, 94, 95], and it has been established that online audiences can impact real-world actions [25]. This idea has also been explored in research related to cancel culture [7, 96], with a consensus that at least part of the general public feels their opinions are stifled by the concept of "canceling." For example, Norris [7] showed that individuals with different political views reported distinct values when asked if the "pressure to be politically correct" had increased. As such, based on the available research, we expect individuals who agree more with perceived public opinion to report lower levels of PPC.

1.2.5. Group Identity. Beyond what is perceived as supported and acceptable by society (i.e., current public opinion), an individual is significantly influenced by those closest to them [97–102]. Group identity and group dynamics play a crucial, distinct role in PPC and are therefore separated from the previously mentioned "level of agreement with public opinion." Research on conformism and social influences indi-

cates that members who deviate from established norms facilitate similar actions by others [91, 103]. If we consider larger norms as representative of society at large (i.e., public opinion), one's group can help mitigate the perceived pressure to conform by challenging these norms and reassuring individuals about their behavior. This concept also draws from other group and social influence theories, such as the diffusion of responsibility [104] and belief polarization [105]. Belonging to a group with which an individual strongly identifies can validate their otherwise controversial ideas [106]. Consequently, we expect individuals to report lower levels of PPC when they have a higher sense of group identity and greater agreement with the group's perceived ideals.

1.3. Goals of Our Study. The present study qualitatively explored the representations and perceptions individuals have regarding cancel culture and PPC, as well as the factors participants deemed as the most important and appropriate to avoid cancelation. Additionally, we aimed to assess the external validity of our PPC model through lay feedback, grounded in the lived experiences of Portuguese social media users. The findings of this study help situate the phenomenon of cancel culture within broader psychological literature and inform future quantitative research on the social–psychological impacts of cancel culture on social media users.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Procedure. We submitted our study for ethical approval to the host institution's ethics council and received clearance to conduct our research (Process 86/2023). Participants were recruited through social media platforms, such as Instagram and WhatsApp. We controlled the age of the participants to ensure sample heterogeneity and to avoid an age effect, as younger people tend to use social media more frequently [107, 108]. After affirming consent, participants were interviewed either in-person (60%) or via videoconference service (40%). Participants were asked questions regarding their demographics and social media use, cancel culture, followed by the PPC and its associated model. Finally, participants explored other potentially relevant variables or impacts of PPC and provided general comments. The written debriefing given to participants after the interview clarified the minor deception used at the beginning and provided reading materials for those interested in learning more. The interview recordings were transcribed to ensure participant anonymity and facilitate our analyses. After transcription, the original recordings were destroyed. We then performed content analysis [109] to explore our data, allowing us to codify and quantify the various responses given by participants. Since our research was conducted in Portugal with Portuguese-speaking participants, the data obtained was in European Portuguese. English translations of the selected quotes are provided when necessary. These translations are literal and not direct quotes.

2.2. Sample. Following best practices for interview-based studies [110], we interviewed 20 individuals aged 20–40 ($M = 27.45$, $SD = 4.99$). All participants were Portuguese, with a majority being women (65%). Most were employed

full-time (75%), with the remaining participants being students (20%) and interns (5%). Most participants had some level of college education (75%), with six holding a bachelor's degree (30%) and nine having attended graduate school (45%). The remaining participants had completed high school (20%) and middle school (5%).

All participants reported using social media platforms, with Instagram (95%), WhatsApp (65%), Facebook (65%), TikTok (30%), LinkedIn (30%), and X (25%) being the most common. All participants reported daily, leisure-based usage, with most engaging passively (i.e., consuming content rather than creating it; 90%). Many participants also reported professional use of social media, primarily on platforms like LinkedIn or WhatsApp for direct contact with colleagues (70%).

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Interview Script. We developed an interview script based on the available literature and the goals of this study. The script was divided into two parts: (a) before presenting our proposed variables, participants spoke freely about the topic without being primed for specific answers; and (b) after presenting the variables, participants were invited to comment on the PPC variables and discuss how they would organize these variables around PPC. Note that our variables were presented and discussed individually, and the participants themselves would organize them into their own model proposal. Additionally, the script included brief descriptions of each variable to allow participants to comment more consciously. See the documents "Interview_Script" and "Variables Lay Definition" in the Supporting Information section (available here) for their proposed translations.

2.3.2. Semantic Differential Scale (Adapted From Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum [111]). Based on the rationale proposed by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum [111], we created a semantic differential scale with 10 pairs of adjectives. Participants were asked to rate their perceived broad concept of "cancel culture" using these adjectives and their antonyms on a scale from one to seven (e.g., "If 'Bad' was one and 'Good' was seven, how would you rate the concept of Cancel Culture?"). The proposed translation for the scale is presented in the document "Semantic Differential Scale" in the Supporting Information.

2.3.3. Visual Representation of the Model. Participants were shown cards to build a visual representation of our theoretical model. This interactive aspect of our interview was particularly relevant when participants were asked to organize the model to see if they considered these variables as predictors or consequences of PPC. This methodology was inspired by the concept mapping technique [112, 113] and allowed us to assess participants' opinions in a more structured way. For online interviews, we displayed the corresponding images online, and participants reported their opinions through the Qualtrics platform. The proposed translation for this visual representation is presented in the document "Interview Support Material" in the Supporting Information.

3. Results

3.1. Definitions of Cancel Culture. Prior to receiving the definition of cancel culture by Ng [10], not all participants initially recognized the term "cancel culture." For those who did not (around 20%), we briefly explained high-profile cases that could be considered cancelation attempts. After the explanation, all participants acknowledged awareness of such cases, though they did not associate them with the term "cancel culture." This suggests that cancel culture may influence individuals beyond those who explicitly understand the concept, attributing cancelation attempts to social media platforms. This implies that the effects of cancel culture do not depend on the explicit knowledge of its definition, which is relevant for future studies on this topic.

When asked to loosely define cancel culture, most participants referred to the ideas of "being erased" or "completely discredited" (80%), often mentioning the difficulty of rebuilding one's image after being canceled. For example, one participant reflected that, "it's almost like taking away their right to use social media or invalidating everything that person says… Almost classifying that person as bad, 100% bad, which is something a bit strange…" (P19). Most participants also highlighted the inherent relationship between social media platforms and cancel culture (60%), which was highlighted by participant P03, who observed, "by cancel I mean to ban them from that social media platform for some kind of action or comment." However, some noted that the behavior deemed cancelation-worthy does not necessarily have to occur online (35%); for example, "it's the public disapproval of some behavior, some action, something said by a certain person or company. It's a social and public disapproval on social media, following something that someone or some group has done" (P09). These findings align with the "chilling effect" cancel culture has on public discourse [25, 26].

After being presented with Ng's [10] definition of cancel culture and asked for their thoughts, participants reported two issues: the use of "marginalized voices" and "powerful figures." The consensus was that anyone could initiate cancelation attempts, so any type of "voice" is not necessarily "marginalized" (50%). As one participant observed, "I would also say that they are not necessarily marginalized voices. I would say that they are voices that call themselves marginalized" (P07). Additionally, those who took issue with the target being a "powerful figure" noted that anyone could be canceled due to the ease of publication and dissemination through social media platforms (40%). For example, another participant remarked, "It can happen, perhaps, to anyone. It doesn't necessarily have to be a public figure" (P12). These findings emphasize that cancel culture may not necessarily be perceived as a form of justice directed from the powerless toward the powerful.

Overall, the opinions on cancel culture were predominantly negative. Most participants (70%) agreed that this concept could have various adverse impacts on individuals, frequently mentioning the speed and magnitude of canceling situations as concerning. Many participants believed cancel culture to be an unnecessary evil arising from social media

and its capabilities, as one participant specifically identified cancel culture as totalitarian: "I consider this kind of behavior coming from cancel culture, it's totalitarian. In the sense that it is oppressive, undemocratic and unconstitutional, in my opinion" (P02). Some also noted that cancel culture has led to the common practice of labeling people with negative terms, such as "homophobe" or even "Nazi," based on limited interactions. Further, other participants had more nuanced responses, ranging from mixed to positive (30%; e.g., "I think it's a good thing, yes. I would say so" (P04). The common theme among these responses was that cancel culture could alert people to the negative actions of others or even their own. When thinking about cancel culture, one participant reflected, "in my opinion, there are people who don't deserve a platform and who should be canceled. But I feel it's dangerous because there are many people who made mistakes a long time ago and since we're in the age of the internet, everything is accessible, isn't it?" (P06). However, there was disagreement with these nuanced responses, as one participant shared, "I don't think Cancel Culture is trying to warn, it's trying to cancel" (P01). This perception has been reported in previous qualitative research, where participants claimed that cancel culture could be helpful if it aimed first to alert, not cancel [17].

3.2. Semantic Differential Scale Results.

After discussing thoughts on cancel culture, participants completed the semantic differential scale. The results reveal a negative view of cancel culture, aligning with our other data. However, there are four points of note: (a) some participants reported higher values in categories such as "bad/good" or "unfair/fair," indicating that perceptions of this issue are not entirely homogeneous; (b) the category with the highest reported value was "fake/real," suggesting that the general public believes cancel culture does indeed exist. This was the only value significantly higher than the scale midpoint (see Table 1); (c) the category with the most significantly distant value from the scale midpoint was "scary/peaceful," illustrating the psychological impact cancel culture can create; and (d) the spectrums "immoral/moral" and "unjustifiable/justifiable" were the only ones not to report a mean value significantly different from the scale midpoint, revealing the ambiguity surrounding perceptions of this phenomenon.

3.3. Individual Effects of Cancel Culture in General.

In addition to definitions of cancel culture, participants also reported various effects of cancel culture on individuals. While most of these perceived effects were negative, as with the definitions and appraisals, the participants observed that cancel culture was ambiguous in the ways it affected individuals and society at large. For example, participants considered the negative consequences cancelation has on both those who are canceled and those who engage in canceling, especially as it relates to well-being. Further, the participants identified areas of concern regarding misinformation and freedom of speech. Lastly, there was significant discussion involving the pressure cancel culture places on individuals and the different levels and effects in which said pressure is distributed.

TABLE 1: Results of the semantic differential scale as applied to cancel culture.

Item (1–7)	M (SD)	Min	Max	t
Unfair/fair	2.75 (1.45)	1	6	−3.86**
Bad/good	2.85 (1.69)	1	7	−3.04**
Immoral/moral	3.30 (1.56)	1	6	−2.01
Unnecessary/necessary	3.10 (1.92)	1	7	−2.10*
Scary/peaceful	2.15 (1.14)	1	5	−7.28***
Fake/real	5.15 (1.93)	1	7	2.67*
Useless/useful	3.15 (1.81)	1	7	−2.10*
Unjustifiable/justifiable	3.35 (1.73)	1	7	−1.68
Intolerable/tolerable	2.95 (1.36)	1	6	−3.46**
Irrational/rational	3.15 (1.79)	1	7	−2.13*

Note: One sample T-tests were run for each item, comparing the mean to the midpoint of the scale (4).
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.

3.3.1. Professional, Financial, and Personal Consequences.

One of the most recurring topics mentioned as an effect of cancel culture was the direct consequences of being canceled (70%). These ranged from professional and financial consequences (such as losing one's job and/or platform) to personal consequences (such as losing relationships). One participant shared the story of an American couple who adopted a Chinese child with severe disabilities and ultimately decided to return the child after they discovered they were not able to provide the care the child needed. Because the couple posted on social media about their experience through the adoption and eventual surrender, the participant observed that "They were heavily canceled. They stopped making videos for YouTube and everything. They stopped posting on social media" (P16). While it does not directly relate to the individuals serving as bystanders that PPC aims to study, it is no surprise that it is listed as a consequence here.

3.3.2. Negative Influence on Cancelers.

An interesting topic that was brought up was the possible effects of cancel culture on those who cancel (i.e., the perpetrators; 40%). Participants reported that indulging in cancelation attempts can lend a negative worldview for the perpetrators (e.g., "For those who cancel, I think it cultivates a culture of hate"; P10). Some went as far as saying that those who enjoyed canceling others could suffer from some sort of antisocial pathology and/or harbor narcissistic personality traits. Additionally, some reported that repeatedly seeing cancelation situations around them could entice individuals to participate in such situations actively. For example, one participant identified, "It gets to the point where they lose their sense of what they should and shouldn't say, and they end up thinking it's normal" (P16). This perception aligns with recent research on online hate, which posits that witnessing and perpetrating online hate are positively correlated [114]. These responses illustrate the varied possible effects of cancel culture.

3.3.3. Freedom of Speech. Another frequently mentioned effect of cancel culture was the perceived loss of freedom of speech (70%). Participants reported that it is now harder to feel completely free to discuss any topic they wish to, especially online. One participant observed, "Cancel Culture has undoubtedly affected freedom of expression and the chance to learn in spaces that should allow us to learn, in a more utopian way, such as social media platforms. It should be a space for discussion and learning, and in my opinion that's where this Cancel Culture is most present, and therefore makes them not spaces for learning and free discussion, but spaces for cancellation" (P01). Most agreed that there was a level of self-censorship concerning cancel culture.

3.3.4. Well-Being and Other Psychological Effects. The most common theme regarding cancel culture's possible effects was its impact on general well-being and other psychological effects (95%). Most participants reported that this phenomenon can significantly and negatively impact individuals' well-being and either create or exacerbate psychological problems, such as depression and anxiety. One participant identified that the effects of cancel culture are intimately tied to self-censorship, stating, "I think mental health can suffer a bit, there can be more manifestations of anxiety, which also come with this self-censorship" (P05). Notably, these effects were not reserved for those being actively canceled.

3.3.5. Misinformation and Accountability. Across interviews, participants seemed conflicted between the social outcomes of cancel culture, namely, misinformation and accountability. Some participants (20%) mentioned that one of the most important effects of cancel culture, if not the most important, was spreading false or misleading information. They noted that the allegations brought upon someone could permanently damage their reputation and public image, even if it is later revealed that the allegations were partially or entirely untrue, "If I hadn't seen it, I'd already have this preconceived idea about that person. There's nothing the attacked person can say that will change my mind anymore" (P08). This aligns with social psychology research, such as inoculation theory [115], which has been used in the study of social media and misinformation [116, 117], and seems quite applicable to the case of cancel culture. However, one positive effect mentioned was that cancel culture can help individuals keep themselves and each other accountable without the need for structured and bureaucratic processes (20%). This would generally make people more pleasant toward each other. For example, one participant shared that cancel culture "has positive effects, in the sense that it's like a kind of warning to a certain person, who isn't acting in the right way, and is therefore being alerted to something that isn't right. I think that's education, it's necessary" (P04).

3.3.6. Pressure Stemming From Cancel Culture. Most participants (95%) agreed that there is a level of pressure to behave and think in a certain way to avoid cancelation. They reported this as a common, inescapable feeling; however, it is not well defined. This reported feeling was not, however, unanimous. A single participant believed this pressure did not exist, expressing that people are free to do and say whatever they please. They also mentioned that social media platforms and technology already offer the tools needed to deal with these negative interactions, such as those of cancel culture (e.g., blocking and muting).

Most participants equated many of the previously mentioned effects to this pressure. As such, they revisited topics such as decreased well-being, self-censorship, and opinion manipulation as consequences of this pressure. One participant observed, "If we can't speak or express our opinions, we're not free" (P07). Other effects, such as the consequences of being canceled, were logically left out. However, the positive effect of being held accountable was also mentioned at this point, with some participants reporting that they believed this pressure to be an overall positive concept, "I think that pressure, obviously in normal and acceptable doses, because I feel there are people who are much more paranoid about it, but as a general rule, I feel it helps people to be better in public, in society. I think it helps people to be less unpleasant" (P06).

All participants agreed that individuals do not experience the same amount of pressure and provided several possible explanations for these differences. The most common explanation relates to individual differences, such as a general tendency toward anxiety or a predisposition to conform to others, "I think a person's own personality has a lot of influence on this. There are people whose nature is to feel more pressured than others, and to pay a lot of attention to what other people thin" (P13). Differences in political views were also cited as a potential reason for varying levels of pressure. Some participants mentioned contextual variables, such as upbringing or the quality of one's support system. Further, one participant theorized that exposure to the pressure of cancel culture was related to "Cultural issues. Generational. For example, sometimes people from other cultures, or even older people, who don't use social media as much either, so they have no idea. They're not even aware that cancel culture exists, let alone that they are being affected by it" (P13). The amount and type of social media usage were also discussed, with distinctions made between using these platforms for professional versus personal reasons. Additionally, many participants noted that public exposure could influence the levels of pressure felt. This exposure is not necessarily linked to political power, as many participants cited social media influencers as examples.

3.4. Discussion of the Theoretical Model. Next, participants who acknowledged some form of pressure stemming from cancel culture continued beyond this point, while the sole participant who reported otherwise (P15) was informed that their participation had ended. Broadly speaking, when presented with the dimensions of the PPC model, most participants (85%) reported that all the variables discussed were logical and pertinent to the study of the topic. Consequently, they did not alter any of the variables in the model. The majority (85%) simply indicated whether they agreed with a particular variable without offering major comments. Thus, a preliminary analysis suggests that the model reflected the lived experiences of the participants.

The most commonly accepted variable in the model was the perceived repercussions of canceling (95%), which makes sense, given its economic-based rationale and the fact that it touches on the more practical implications of cancel culture, with which participants would be more familiar. Participants were less secure about the inclusion of perceived status, with some questioning its link to PPC (25%); however, through discussion, many eventually considered it important and equated it to greater public exposure rather than a higher level of political power. Consequently, participants generally viewed perceived status as an important variable. There was some discussion regarding the line between the group identity and the level of agreement with public opinion variables. Some participants argued the practical difference between them was unclear, with some reporting that it made sense to remove the former (10%). While the added importance of group identity might be shared in social psychology research [99], this relevance is not immediately apparent to participants, leaving them to wonder why we include two variables related to agreement with other individuals. This data point should be kept in mind for the future. Finally, an interesting discussion regarding the level of agreement with public opinion arose with some participants (15%). They argued that the level of agreement with public opinion could be irrelevant to individuals if they set out to disagree with the most established view on any specific topic. They argued that this variable might not have a "simple relationship" with PPC, as illustrated by P11, "For example, we all know Snoop Dogg. Snoop Dogg is a fan of weed and smoking, and he's not afraid to show that. I, for example, don't like rap, it's not something I listen to, I don't listen to Snoop Dogg, but his behavior is also only interesting to his target group, which are the people that consume it. And maybe if he made music for more conservative people, for example, the elderly, that's something he wouldn't be able to say. Because that would have an impact on the music he sold. Now, with the target group being young people who like rap and who also often like to smoke weed, I don't think it really has an impact. In other words, I'm not talking about society as a whole, but just a specific group of people."

In addition to the assessment, participants sorted the variables into two categories: antecedents and consequences of PPC. No variable was solely placed into either category, illustrating some ambiguity about the topic. Some participants reported that specific variables could be placed before and after PPC in a graphical model representation. With the exception of the level of agreement with public opinion, all other variables were more often considered predictors (not consequences) of PPC. Given that we proposed all these variables as antecedents of PPC, this is the second-best possible outcome. If we search for final structures that include all variables on either side, we can only find cases where all the variables are grouped as predictors of PPC (P05, P11, and P14).

Lastly, participants were asked to generate other variables for the model. Most participants (75%) struggled with this task, reporting that everything they could think of was already included. Some mentioned they could suggest specific topics but believed these suggestions could easily be included in the larger components offered by the model (e.g., how they were raised to be included in perceived self-pressure). There were, however, three general suggestions participants proposed. The first was a "group effect," which emphasized peer pressure and group think, as opposed to group identity [118–120]. Additionally, social media usage was mentioned as a variable that should be included in the model itself, not simply as a control variable or part of statistical models to be tested in future studies. Finally, variables such as "need for approval" or "need to belong" were brought up, with some participants reporting that it could be more relevant than our idea of perceived self-pressure or at least something to be studied alongside it.

3.5. Experiences of PPC. Participants were then invited to discuss how they experienced PPC, if there were any strategies to deal with the pressure, and any antecedents left out of our proposed model. Participants exhibited an interesting response pattern when asked whether they felt the pressure we were discussing. Approximately 35% of participants reported feeling this pressure to some degree. However, nearly all participants indicated that this pressure would undoubtedly be felt by others, including some acquaintances. Participants also struggled to provide answers when asked how to reduce the levels of PPC. Some even reported no viable strategies to truly combat the feeling (35%). Among those who did suggest strategies, the most common was reducing social media participation, whether in terms of consumption or engagement (45%). This avoidance strategy aligns with literature on coping mechanisms [121, 122] and relates to the "self-censorship" mentioned earlier in the interviews. Additionally, some participants noted that there was no clear strategy to deal with PPC and that individuals should attempt to minimize and discredit hateful and hurtful online messages (20%). Many acknowledged that achieving positive results with these strategies would be challenging. Finally, some participants suggested reinforcing one's support system and attending therapy.

Finally, we asked participants if there were any other general antecedents or variables they felt were important to address when studying cancel culture and/or PPC. Most participants revisited some of the variables they had already mentioned, but two topics frequently emerged: political context (30%) and culture (45%). Participants noted that cancel culture has an inherent political dimension that influences what is deemed acceptable, thereby affecting the amount of PPC felt and its consequences. Additionally, the cultural context was highlighted, with participants indicating that cancel culture would likely manifest differently across countries, influencing what is considered cancel-worthy and the repercussions of canceling scenarios. These factors logically affect individual perceptions and impact their levels of PPC.

4. Discussion

In this study, we made an initial attempt to establish a model that explores the individual effects of cancel culture, specifically focusing on canceling prevention. Through interviews with 20 social media users in Portugal, the results pointed to cancel culture being a powerful idea that may influence

individuals' affect, behavior, and cognition. Further, we found evidence supporting our proposed PPC model, which indicates that perfectionism in both online and offline behavior may serve as an adaptive strategy for users to avoid cancelation. Lastly, the majority of participants indicated that cancel culture was a real social phenomenon with diverse consequences for one's mental health, social life, and ability to earn a living. The findings indicate a need for future scholarship to take cancel culture seriously through empirical, systematic investigation and address the way in which social dynamics have shifted in the digital age.

Due to the rise of social media and digital technologies, humans are now more connected than ever before. This connectivity includes the ability to comment, share, and spread information about others through massive archives of personal data and history. From this landscape, cancel culture has emerged as a digital court of public opinion, which tries individuals, public figures, organizations, and corporations to break social mores [6, 9–11]. The inherent link between cancel culture and social media platforms, previously established in the literature [17, 30], was also found in our data. Interestingly, this was the case even for participants who did not immediately recognize the idea of "cancel culture." This could mean that this phenomenon may also exert its effects through the highly public nature of its manifestation. In this way, it can reach and impact individuals familiar with canceling situations without necessarily being knowledgeable of cancel culture.

Research on cancel culture is scarce, dispersed, and disputed [7, 12, 14]. One of the most cited papers on the topic is titled "Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?" [7]. However, as Lofton [32] argued, "myths" are not the opposite of "facts." Cancel culture holds power as an idea, and if people believe it exists, then it is real enough to exert influence [7, 17, 32, 33]. Our data corroborates the power of cancel culture, at least as a social representation, as the vast majority (80%) of our participants had heard of cancel culture and could, even if loosely, define it. Because cancel culture is viewed as a legitimate threat to one's personal well-being, social status, and financial security, we expected participants to strive to avoid cancelation, especially as related to self-censorship, self-presentation, and perfectionism.

The idea of self-censorship resulting from PPC is evocative of Foucault's work on self-surveillance (1977), indicating that social media and cancel culture have created a contemporary version of the Panopticon, as previously proposed [42, 44, 46]. Much like active surveillance in a panopticon [38, 39], cancel culture needs only to exist as a concept. Once again, this idea is echoed by Lofton [32], where the author mentions that the "myth or reality" dichotomy is inconsequential: myths hold power within themselves and exert their influence whether they are factually based or not. The results confirmed this sentiment, as participants shared how their experiences watching others get canceled online inform the way they engage with social media.

Two relevant findings reported in the present study regard the role of cancel culture in spreading misinformation, as well as disputing the claim that it only affects powerful and/or public figures. The possible effect of cancel culture on the spread of misinformation had been proposed previously [123] and is highly reminiscent of inoculation theory [115, 117]. Given the proportions canceling can achieve and the subsequent lack of news about the canceled person, it stands to reason that a regular social media user might only learn about a particular individual exclusively during their cancelation, leading to a negative perception of this person. The discussion regarding the possibility that cancel culture and PPC could unknowingly lead to a change in one's opinion has also been previously reported [17]. Further, our results indicate a shift in the perception of the people around whom cancel culture manifests. Previously, it had been proposed that cancel culture is closely related to powerful and/or public figures [10]. However, other studies pointed toward a more inclusive view of cancel culture, one where most, if not all, people can indeed be canceled [17, 25]. Our results seem to agree with the latter: anyone can be canceled. This is not to say that public exposure or political influence cannot play a role in the magnitude of any one cancelation; simply that this concept is not reserved solely for those cases.

4.1. The PPC Model.
While the primary aim of the present research was to establish external validity for the PPC variable, it also aimed to establish external validity for its related model. We anticipated that participants would feel a sense of pressure to monitor their behavior in order to avoid being targeted by others (e.g., PPC) and that this pressure would be influenced by five main dimensions: perceived self-pressure, perceived status, group identity, perceived repercussions of canceling, and level of agreement with public opinion. Most participants had minor to no concerns regarding the proposed variables and envisioned relationships among them mainly as we had hypothesized. Regarding the prevalence of PPC, the response pattern reveals a level of irrational optimism about cancel culture [124]. People attributed PPC to others rather than themselves, perceiving themselves to be at a lower risk of cancelation than those around them. The disconnect between the perceived threat to oneself and others is an intriguing area within the study of cancel culture. It is reminiscent of terror management theory [125–127], where individuals believe they are less likely to be canceled (akin to cancel culture's mortality) due to their self-importance and perceived correct worldviews. It is also evocative of the "false uniqueness" concept [128], in so far as individuals seem to believe their unique case makes them less susceptible to cancelation, while not being significantly different from their peers.

4.1.1. Variables of Interest.
Through the interview processes, participants were asked to consider how our variables of interest (i.e., perceived self-pressure, perceived status, perceived repercussion of canceling, group identity, and level of agreement with public opinion) may influence the pressure one feels to be perfect to avoid cancelation. Results indicated that no variable in the model was exclusively placed as a predictor, but 15% of our participants reported

structures where all the variables were considered predictors, which not only aligns with the proposed model but is something that did not happen once for the "consequence" category. Thus, our results indicate that the proposed variables are mostly considered as we predicted: the antecedents of PPC.

While there was wide consensus on the placement of most of the variables in the model, there is something to be said about the level of agreement with public opinion variable. The participants reported that it could be both a predictor and an outcome, which indicated some level of ambiguity about its role. Cancel culture is thought to lead to changes in beliefs, both explicitly and implicitly, due to the pressure it exerts [7, 17]. As such, it seems logical that this would be the variable included on both sides of our PPC. Further, this finding is supported by the literature on the spiral of silence [45], precisely through the spiral aspect it entails. When an individual disagrees with public opinion on a given topic (especially if they are a "hardcore individual"; [45, 129]), they are more likely to feel they cannot express their opinion because of cancel culture. The result will, in turn, make it easier for said individual to feel less inclined to agree with said public opinion, thus creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Thus, the findings suggest that the level of agreement with public opinion does not have a linear impact on PPC, with extremely high values leading to lower levels of PPC.

4.2. Implications and Future Directions. The implications of our research are extensive. Our study is the first to propose a model that provides a structured approach to examining cancel culture–related issues. This opens numerous potential research avenues, such as cultural, gender, and political comparisons in the context of cancel culture, all variables that appear in both our results and previous research [7, 130]. Additionally, it will be interesting to understand how cultural differences manifest in this context [6, 7]. We also gained valuable insights into potential variables to include in future studies on the impacts of PPC and aspects to consider when examining how our variables relate to each other. Based on our exploratory data, we can now work toward developing a scale that measures each of the variables proposed in our model, especially PPC.

Further, investigating the individuals actively engaging in cancelation can help us better understand the cancel culture phenomenon. It is important to examine the relationship between participating in cancelation processes, the level of pressure, and previous experiences with being canceled. Research on perfectionism explores the concept of other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., demanding others be perfect; [131]), and a recent systematic review reported that prior victimization may deter individuals from participating in online hate activities [132]. Therefore, the negative relationship between being a victim and becoming a perpetrator of cancel culture warrants further study. Additionally, variables such as social vigilantism [133] and intolerance to differences [134] might help explain one's level of involvement in cancelation practices.

4.3. Limitations. As with any research, there are limitations we must address. Due to the lack of available literature to base our rationale on, a qualitative methodology provided the most fruitful and exploratory data, allowing us to develop our initial ideas broadly. However, our results may be specific to our unique sample, potentially hindering replication and extrapolation. Additionally, it is challenging to fully validate our model's adequacy using only qualitative data. Rather than fully testing its theoretical applicability, we assessed the external validity of our PPC model through lay feedback, grounding it in empirical evidence rather than theoretical considerations alone. Additionally, it is also important to note that collecting data from a Portuguese sample may lead to differences in responses due to cultural differences between Portugal and other countries. Most major social platforms (e.g., Facebook, X, and Instagram) are of American origin, and the use of English as a universal language on these platforms means they often reflect North American culture. Therefore, our results might differ if we had interviewed American participants.

5. Conclusions

Cancel culture is a new and largely unexplored topic, making it imperative to dissect and understand it. The present study represents the first attempt to develop a theoretical model to explain the individual effects of cancel culture on users' online behavior. The findings indicated that cancel culture is perceived as a legitimate threat to participants, and tactics such as self-surveillance, self-presentation, and perfectionism practices represent adaptive processes. Additionally, the results point to the PPC and its associated model as an externally valid, which require future, quantitative investigations to determine generalizability. Additionally, more research is needed to determine if the proposed variables (i.e., perceived self-pressure, perceived status, group identity, level of agreement with public opinion, and perceived repercussions of canceling) are sufficient to understand and predict the PPC variable. In sum, the present study reports that cancel culture has curated a hostile environment in which individuals must deploy strategies to avoid detection and maintain security away from Medusa's watchful gaze.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data stemming from our interviews used to support the findings of this study have been deposited in the "Open Science Framework" repository under the name "Master File (Portuguese)" (10.17605/OSF.IO/YNCBU).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. *(Supporting Information)* Supporting Information for this work includes five pdf documents: (a) "Interview Support Material," which includes the physical materials used in interviews to facilitate the model arrangement task; (b) "Interview_Script," the proposed English translation of the script used in our interviews; (c) "Master File (Portuguese)," which includes the transcription of the interviews in their native Portuguese; (d) "Semantic Differential Scale," the proposed English translation of the script of the semantic differential scale used; and (e) "Variables Lay Definition," which includes the proposed English translation of the definition presented for each variable during the interview. Supporting Information can also be found in the "Open Science Framework" repository for this study (10.17605/OSF .IO/YNCBU).

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