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What if I mess up my lines?

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Has the prevalence of cancel culture online led to more anxiety about saying the wrong thing in person?

From Andrew Tate to Ariana Grande, Kanye to Kris, and Elon Musk to Ellen Degeneres, it seems no-one can escape the claws of cancel culture anymore. The existence and increase of this phenomenon has led to a shift in the expression of controversial and discriminatory language online over the last decade. But, is this culture “chronically online” or do we live under a growing blanket of anxiety, constantly watching our words in fear of being stamped with a big red metaphorical X?

It is apparent that this fear of being cancelled is never ending on social media, particularly on platforms such as Twitter, with 62% of respondents to a survey conducted by Cato Institute, agreeing that “the political climate these days prevents me from saying things I believe online because others might find them offensive.” This has grown to be clear in all corners of the internet and for those in the public eye, however, the question of how much it affects regular people during in person interactions, is a slightly different story. According to many critics, cancel culture has led not only those with typically controversial views to be concerned about censoring their language, but has also caused bystanders to “become overwhelmed with anxiety that people will turn on them if they fully express themselves.” It is becoming more and more clear that cancel culture does not exist solely on the internet anymore.

There is still a large number of people who would argue that the fear of being cancelled does not affect their day to day life, both online and in person. However, according to a survey taken with over 70 responses, 69% of respondents replied with ‘yes’ or ‘sometimes’ when asked if they feel anxious when talking to people, in fear of getting cancelled. It is clear, not only from this survey, but from much of the debate surrounding cancel culture, that the effect that it can have on people’s mental health is a large concern.

Despite it being unlikely that you will be cancelled by your friends, your boyfriend or even your lefty, little sister (often the harshest critic), the awareness of other people's reactions to your words is something people seem to have taken from the online culture, and are now facing in day to day interactions. It has developed into a growing source of anxiety, more prominent in certain settings than in others, with the fear of offending someone or making a controversial comment, being unsurprisingly stronger amongst work colleagues, bosses, educators or even classmates.

There are critics of cancel culture all across the political spectrum, varying from those who feel that freedom of speech is being damaged by the rhetoric surrounding cancel culture, and those who feel that is not a healthy or way to approach the issue of controversial or offensive language; 'It doesn't recognise the idea that people might say/do things out of ignorance, and rather than promoting education and understanding, it makes people unwilling to learn out of fear.' However, despite the countless negative opinions of cancel culture, there is value in the premise and, beyond this, an arguable element of positivity in the anxiety it is inducing in people. Obviously this is not applicable when severe anxiety is inflicted by cancel culture and the fear of being ostracised or confronted is overwhelming, but it can be seen as helpful for people to be more cautious of the words that they use when they are conversing, both online and in person. The ability to avoid offending someone when speaking is important, and whilst there will always be mistakes made in ignorance, a level of caution is worth being implemented when communicating with others. The simple lesson of "think before you speak" is no less valuable now than it was in the preschool playground, and if cancel culture has succeeded in teaching society that lesson, even to a small degree, there is an element of success in its wake.