

Cancel Culture is Cancelled.



Taylor Swift is 'cancelled', James Charles is 'cancelled', even Bill Gates is 'cancelled'. Now that the power is with the people, we should ask ourselves if the responsibility is one we're willing to take.

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Nowadays people can be 'cancelled' because of just about anything. The term refers to a public boycott of the person being 'cancelled', usually on social media. While this may seem to paint a picture of an online army with a united stand, standing up against those who have wronged them, it's time to ask - When does Cancel Culture start to cross the line?

As an avid Twitter user, the wrath and destruction of Cancel Culture is not something unfamiliar to me. I remember watching James Charles' subscriber count drop by the hundreds each second after he found himself involved in an online scandal. It was shocking yet there was still some sense of calmness in knowing that it was a movement by the public, a side I was on. However, this changed when the movement of Cancel Culture hit closer to home.

In April this year, Bang Chan, a member of Stray Kids, a Korean idol group I liked was styled with dreads for one of their performances. Every Korean pop (K-pop) fan, knew dreads were a definite no-no, a move some would even consider as 'unforgivable' – as many idols before had come to learn. This was because many considered being styled with dreads 'cultural appropriation' and extremely disrespectful to people of colour who faced actual discrimination for the same hairstyle the idols used as a fashion statement.

Many were angry and even started hashtags such as '#BangchanleaveStrayKids' and '#BangChanisoverparty'. Others expressed their disappointment. "Black stays deserve an apology" Twitter user @staysos said. "All of the members deserve to be able to educate themselves and to learn from their mistakes."

Fast forward to July 2019, 3 months later, many have yet to let the issue go forgotten. It's not uncommon to find comments calling Bang Chan a 'racist' or 'homophobe' on videos and tweets of Stray Kids. Some even use the term '2racha', refusing to acknowledge Bang Chan's position in a subunit within the group called '3racha'.

Fans of Stray Kids were isolated by others and subjected to similar comments and insults. "Bang chan was only 13 when he gave up his life to be a trainee" a fan praised. "Bang Chan was only 21 when he was racist", someone mocked not long after. Another distinct feature of Cancel Culture was the indirect suggestion that current supporters of celebrities were advocates for their mistakes as well.

It was then that I began to see Cancel Culture in a new light. This was no longer just about trying to educate Bang Chan on his mistakes as many claimed they were doing. It had spiralled into an unwillingness to let him or his fans forget that same mistake. The so called activism, had snowballed into some sort of online witch-hunt.

Nobody would know this better than local actor, Tosh Zhang. Zhang, 30, was set to be an Ambassador for this year's Pink Dot, an event for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community. However, in May 2019, a month before the event, homophobic tweets of his were dug up dating back to 2011. The tweets were first brought to light by Facebook user Sarah Yip. In the post along with the screenshots, Yip stated that she was not "trying to shame Pink Dot" but that she "doesn't believe people should get away with behaviour like this without apologising for it." However that's where the contradiction kicks in.

Unlike Bang Chan, Zhang addressed the issue publicly and even personally apologised to Yip. In a video, Zhang revealed that he had decided to step down as an ambassador for Pink Dot 2019 as he felt that it would be a "distraction" for the event. He also apologised for the tweets he had made and emphasised how he was not that person anymore. "I hope you guys will judge me for the man I grew to be, and not the boy that I used to be", Zhang said while he shed a few tears.

In spite of his heartfelt apology, as we have come to learn, Cancel Culture shows no mercy. Zhang released a separate Instagram post on the same day where he said that he would be taking a break from social media as the amount of hate he had been receiving was "overwhelming".

This goes to back up my point of how Cancel Culture is never really about "educating" a person. Though the intention may be there, it almost always snowballs into something the original poster has no control over. Though Yip's intention may have been to shed light on or educate Zhang, it ended up with an opportunity being taken away from someone who had genuinely grown and learned from his mistakes.

Lisa Nakamura, a professor at the University of Michigan likened this cultural boycott to "depriving them of a livelihood". Cancel Culture ruins reputations, takes away opportunities and completely forbids the process of learning from ones' mistakes. Many are so caught up in anger to realise that this isolation the celebrities are put through does not undo the harm they've done nor does it create an environment which properly educates others why that mistake should not have been made. Instead, fear becomes the driving force. Cancel Culture creates an environment whereby public backlash becomes scarier than the actual consequences people would have to face.

However, some still argue that Cancel Culture isn't real. "Celebrities don't lose their jobs" just because "a few angry teenagers decided to call out their ignorance on twitter" user @khansreactor said in a tweet that has garnered over 10,000 retweets. Many fail to realise that it is true only to an extent.

When it comes to globally recognized celebrities who have spent years developing their careers, of course an uprising online would hardly cause a dip in their net worth. In fact, celebrities like Kanye West feed off controversy and aren't afraid to anger the public. He made that clear in 2018 when he openly supported Donald Trump, a regular on Twitter's blacklist. However, insisting that the same can be said for smaller celebrities who's success is based on keeping themselves in the good graces of the public eye, is unrealistic.

You may be wondering, how do we stop Cancel Culture? Truthfully, we can't. Stopping a public movement that has become so normalized would be close to impossible. What we can do however, is to learn to think for ourselves. Instead of adopting a mob mentality, we should read up on issues on our own and form our own judgements instead of allowing someone else do it for us.

At the end of the day, regardless of status or wealth, they should be allowed to make mistakes and they should be allowed to grow and learn from them just as we are allowed to. As lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson says, "people are not the worst thing they've ever done." Once we start keeping this in mind, maybe in our own little ways, we can start to cancel Cancel Culture. (1200 words)

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