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Cancel Culture in College: A Phenomenological Study to Define Cancel Culture in the College Generation

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Executive Summary

The history of civic activism dates back centuries and in 2021, with the increased role of technology and social media, civic engagement rates are at all-time highs in the United States. The rise in popularity of smartphones and social media applications have given consumers new ways to connect with like-minded peers and develop a unified voice to fight for movements towards equality and justice in the US economy. College students represent a large point of emphasis for public relations and marketing teams as their generation is entering the US consumer market with high rates of social media use to make decisions about companies and products. With the growing reliance on electronic word-of-mouth advertising in many marketing campaigns, it is important to understand the college generation's opinions and tendencies regarding different situations with electronic word-of-mouth advertising, specifically cancel culture. A phenomenological approach allowed for the creation of a more wholistic, detailed picture of cancel culture sentiments among college students. As predicted, a key conclusion is that cancel culture is complicated; cancel culture among the general American population creates a wide array of opinions on its uses and the college generation has a similar reaction. Cancel culture has become a controversial topic in news media coverage, but the underlying principles of civic engagement persist and seem to be a key part of the decision-making process for college-aged consumers. Companies can fall victim to cancellations for a variety of specific issues pertaining to injustices to marginalized groups, but these cancellations do not have to last forever. College students are willing to forgive cancelled companies if a clear effort at retribution is exhibited, proving that students' goals in cancel culture are not to attack offending companies but rather create a cultural improvement for groups that they feel are victims to American corporations.

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Introduction

The increased role of technology in society during the 21st Century has led to great advances in production efficiency for businesses across the world. From automation and robots in the production industry to blockchain in the financial markets, computerized technology has solidified its significant role in process improvement for decades to come. Technology innovation firms such as Amazon and Apple now top the list of most valuable businesses in 2021 and are growing in influence and wealth in unprecedented proportions. However, just as businesses have benefitted from the Digital Age, consumers have seen their fair share of improvements as well, driven heavily by the invention and improvements of smart phones and global cellular data coverage. American adult cell phone ownership increased from just 35% in 2011 to over 85% ten years later (O'Dea, 2021). Information that once took days or even weeks to get across the country can now be accessed within milliseconds with a simple click of a button.

Along with the technology upgrades has come the emergence of social media platforms that allow consumers to share their life experiences with friends and family in an unprecedented fashion. Consumers and businesses alike take to Facebook, Twitter, etc. to create a presence and share ideas with their followers. Consumers can use the platforms to share both the good and bad experiences with companies and provide a vast database of reviews for references for any new potential customers.

A common phenomenon emerging on social media has been what many people have come to call "Call-out Culture" – "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" according to the Cambridge Dictionary. Call-out Culture, sometimes referred to as

Cancel Culture, has been used by consumers to hold companies and celebrities accountable for their actions, both past and present, in ways not seen before. The importance of a positive public online profile has become increasingly important for companies of all shapes and sizes. Especially with the social distancing practices implemented with the Covid-19 pandemic, consumers will continue to take to their reviews and research to the internet for decades to come (Paun, 2020).

Companies have responded to the rise in importance of social media with growing digital presences of their own. Companies use social media accounts to interact with their customers and showcase their product lines. Brand equity has become increasingly emphasized in marketing campaigns as corporations work to build value in their name and values.

Building Brand Equity

Brand Equity is defined by Oxford Languages as 'the commercial value that derives from consumer perception of the brand name of a particular product or service, rather than from the product or service itself." Building a reputation as a responsible corporate citizen is a key emphasis for any successful marketing campaign in the 21st Century. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, said in an interview a few years ago, "A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well." Brand equity is used to grow a loyal customer base and create value in the name and reputation of a company as a whole instead of its individual products and services. Social media marketing activities (SMMAs) can have a profound impact on the foundation of brand equity. A study done on SMMAs in the airline industry found that SMMAs are a strong contributor to brand image and have a positive impact on customer commitment and electronic word-of-mouth spread (Seo and Park, 2017). With over 70% of the American population having at least one active social media account, social media

marketing will only continue to grow in importance (O'Dea, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative

that companies maintain a strong focus on keeping up with their digital footprint.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth Advertising

With the rise of social media has come a new form of marketing, recognized in the

industry as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Word-of-mouth advertising has always been a

strong pillar to an effective marketing campaign. Brought into vogue in the 1960s, word-of-

mouth advertising contributes an element of trust in an era of growing distrust in business

leadership across the world (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1966) (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Word-of-

mouth advertising plays at the Theory of Planned Behavior in a consumer's mind. Icek Ajzen, a

distinguished social psychologist, defined the theory to describe how humans are most likely to

perform behaviors that are preapproved/suggested by their peers. In short, trust and acceptance

from others contributes heavily to the behaviors an individual decides to partake in (Ajzen,

1991). Applied to marketing, this theory proves the importance of individual consumer social

interactions in marketing.

Adding in the electronic aspect to word-of-mouth advertising takes the impact to a whole

new depth. First defined in 2008 as informal communication between consumers via the internet

regarding goods and services, electronic word-of-mouth has been a new focus for marketing

agents across the Fortune 500 in the past decade. Previous research on electronic word-of-mouth

has proven the stronger relationship between eWOM and sales than traditional media such as

newspaper and television advertisements (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012).

Electronic and non-electronic word-of-mouth have already proven to be wildly successful

and trustworthy in the marketing realm. According to a Nielson consumer report from 2015, 92%

of consumers trust a review from friends and family more than any other marketing activity from a company. Moving outside of the household, 88% of consumers trust reviews from strangers online as much as they do from friends and family. While this may seem obvious to many consumers to trust those closer to home, it is not quite as easy from the business side, where only 6% of marketing teams of studied Fortune 500 companies have "mastered" word-of-mouth advertising (Whitler, 2019). As consumers shift towards a heavier reliance on the internet for decision-making processes, companies must continue to put on a focus on developing their online presence and ability to advertise via eWOM.

Impact of COVID-19

March of 2020 forever altered the way that businesses operated in the United States. As the world was already moving towards a heavy reliance on technology in the economy, COVID-19 accelerated the movement by eliminating the ability to operate face-to-face for most businesses. Consumers experienced a similar shift; any in-person interactions before COVID where consumers could converse and share reviews on businesses and products were moved to Zoom and social media once lockdowns began. The virtual economy, defined as "jobs, assests, marketplaces, and traders that operate fully online," became a new reality for 75% of US consumers that turned to new forms online shopping between March and May of 2020 (Charm, et al., 2020).

Social Media and Electronic word-of-mouth Advertising

Moving online with the market, advertising agencies began to pour even more resources into social media engagements and marketing activities. Tik Tok, a short video platform that exploded in popularity during the pandemic, became a trusted source for consumer information.

49% of Tik Tok users, or more than half of a billion people, bought a product online after seeing it advertised or reviewed on the platform (Klunster, 2021). Similar trends persisted with the more established platforms including Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook. The key difference highlighted in Tik Tok's trend is the age of the users. With a significantly lower average user age, Tik Tok's strong electronic word-of-mouth advertising proved to be effective on the younger generations, meaning potential growth for decades to come.

Unpredictability of Word-of-Mouth Advertisements

While word-of-mouth advertising presents enormous value to companies that can harness its capabilities, it also presents great risk and uncertainty to the companies that fail to maintain control of their reputation. Word-of-mouth advertising is costly, uncontrollable, and very time-consuming for a business to pursue.

The common misconception with word-of-mouth advertising is that it is cheap or even free for companies to pursue. While speaking in terms of direct cost, there is no traceable financial impact to a consumer deciding to tell their friend about a product/service. But sometime further up the value stream, a new customer had to be obtained to begin the chain of communication. Obtaining initial customers can be an expensive task for companies, many times costing over thirty times the cost of maintaining an existing customer (Whitler, 2021). Acquiring customers is just the starting point of developing an effective word-of-mouth advertising technique, however.

Maintenance of existing customers, because of the relative low-cost to new customer acquisition, is instrumental to any business, but even more important to those reliant on the word-of-mouth abilities of their initial consumers. In word-of-mouth advertising, the focus

should be on the quality of customer engagement, not just quantity (Whitler, 2021). A start-up

that has a few committed customers willing to tell all their friends about the company has a much

better set-up for word-of-mouth than one with thousands of consumers signed up for a mailing

list without ever having interacted with the company itself. A great example of the emphasis on

quality over quantity is the BetterWorld start-up, a company founded by University of Virginia

graduate students with the goal of providing a free fundraising platform to non-profits. During

their first year, BetterWorld CEO Whit Hunter set up personal calls with each of their initial

clients to address specific needs and gain feedback about their new system. Two years later,

BetterWorld is set to become the biggest platform in their market and has a loyal customer base

that truly trusts in the young company (Whitler, 2021). While the strategy proved successful, it is

an extremely time-consuming and meticulous process that cannot be replicated on a large scale.

There are two types of consumers that typically post reviews online, those who are extremely

happy and committed to a company, and those so disgruntled that they want to make sure others

do not have their same experience. While a disgruntled customer can easily be caused by

misperceptions or simple mistakes in the operation, overly happy customers require concerted

effort to maintain and develop, an extremely time-consuming process.

Even with concentrated effort on developing a loyal customer base, there are still

uncontrollable risks that continually limit businesses' ability to focus on positive word-of-mouth

advertising campaigns. Positive word-of-mouth advertising can even be a foundational cause of

negative word-of-mouth. The uncontrollable customer base may even hype up a company so

high that the next wave of customers who try the product are all dissatisfied due to failure to

meet their unrealistically high expectations. A further domino effect occurs when these

disgruntled individuals decide to express their negative feelings. There is no warning to the

company and no time for the company to alleviate sour relationships before they are expressed to

fellow consumers. Companies have many chances to make a great impression on a consumer, but

only one negative experience and more than 65% of new consumers will not return to that

establishment (Kaemingk, 2021).

Electronic word-of-mouth techniques only amplify the results of negative reviews. It is

estimated a company loses 30 potential customers for every negative review left online. 86% of

consumers said that they were impacted by negative online reviews and 80% changed their mind

to not interact with a company after negative reviews according to a Qualtrics study done in

2019. Further, 60% of consumers will be turned away from a company completely after three

reliable negative online reviews (Ismagilova, 2019). The importance of online reviews has grown

significantly and only intensified with the pandemic limiting other forms of customer-to-

customer interactions to promote businesses.

Social Media Activism

An intensified version of negative electronic word-of-mouth advertising are social media

boycotts. Oxford Languages defines a boycott as a "withdrawal from commercial or social

relations with a company, organization, or person as a punishment." For the purpose of this

study, a social media boycott will be seen as a boycott that's primary mode of communication is

through social media users, having a similar relationship to traditional boycotts as that of

electronic word-of-mouth advertising and traditional word-of-mouth. In other words, they are the

virtual counterpart to traditional boycotts.

Cancel Culture

A common term associated with these social media boycotts is "Cancel Culture." Merriam Webster dictionary defines cancel culture as "the practice of engaging in mass cancelling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressures." Someone or something that is "cancelled" has been removed from social circles due to an inability to follow accepted social guidelines of the cancelling party. While the term was coined in the 1980s, the movement truly gained mass popularity in 2014 during the #MeToo Movement against sexual violence. From sports teams like the Washington Football Team and Cleveland Guardians changing their names to retail brands like Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben's Pancakes changing logos, the effects of cancel culture have been felt in nearly every industry.

Washington Football Team

The goal of cancelling a product, brand, or person is to combat an image represented by that party that is not seen as inclusive or may be alienating a minority group. One of the most prominent cases is the aforementioned Washington Football Team. The former name, the Redsk*ns, had been the center of backlash from the Native American population for decades before the organization officially decided to lose the name and its logo at the height of the cancel culture movement in 2020. The crude depiction of a Native American had been the symbol of professional football in Washington DC since 1937, though the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) had deemed the term "Redsk*n" a racial slur for decades. The team had fought through the criticism and refused to change the logo until, in 2020, a letter from shareholders and investors was publicized urging sponsors to revoke deals and stores to remove team merchandise from the shelves. Just weeks later, the team succumbed to the pressure and changed their name.

Aunt Jemima

One of the more prominent examples of cancellation practices with companies came from backlash surrounding the Aunt Jemima syrup brand. Aunt Jemima syrup bottles contained imaging of a black woman dressed in "minstrel" attire and many believed the connections to slavery imagery and Aunt Jemima were too closely drawn together. In June of 2020, the 130-year old brand announced that the bottle imaging and name would be changing in order to alleviate the potential racial stereotypes perpetuated in the logo. Quaker Oats, the parent company, announced, "Aunt Jemima's origins are based on a racial stereotype…. As we work to make progress toward racial equality through several initiatives, we also must take a hard look at our portfolio of brands and ensure they reflect our values and meet our consumers' expectations."(Keslen, 2020). Other companies with similar branding stereotypes, including Uncle Ben's brand under the Mars company portfolio, followed suit, and announced branding overhauls.

Walt Disney World

Outside of the retail industry, celebrities and the entertainment industry could not avoid the rise of cancel culture either. Disney, #7 on the Forbes 500 List for 2020, fell under social media fire over its Splash Mountain ride at Disney World in Orlando. The film *Song of the South* had recently fallen under criticism for its inherently racist depictions of African Americans in the South during slavery and Splash Mountain had many connections between the movie and its animatronics on the ride. Disney announced in a tweet on June 25, 2020 that the ride would be undergoing a complete reimaging to follow the theme of *Princess and the Frog*, a Disney production (Smith, 2021). As examples like these two make national headlines, other companies have started to learn from the high risk of imaging their brand and have taken more proactive

measures. As companies analyze the trends of Cancel Culture and their ensuing social media

boycotts, they can become more adept at mitigating branding risks and providing a quality,

inclusive service/product to the consumer base.

Greenwashing

While the biggest examples of cancel culture victims have been based on corporate

branding and imaging, the effects have moved into other aspects of companies as well. A

growing focus on hiring practices and supply chain ethics of companies has led many business-

owners to be more at-risk of cancellation. Greenwashing, the fraudulent advertising of

sustainability in a company's product development, is a great example of practices potentially

being cancelled by social media users. Windex and Nestle were accused of greenwashing by

misrepresenting how sustainable their products were obtained/produced and

TruthinAdvertising.org, a popular non-profit consumer-empowering organization, ran negative

social media advertising against the companies with the goal of educating consumers on more

sustainable alternatives.

The threat of Cancel Culture to a company's brand image is monumental in an era where

more and more business and communication is conducted solely over electronic platforms.

Defining Current Study

Identifying the Research Gap

Because of the relatively recent rise of cancel culture, the current research on the topic

lacks the true quantification of impact on specific companies, but there are some previous

examples that served as the framework for formulating this study. The most general and over-

arching study conducted that directly addresses cancel culture is "The Business of Cancel

Culture", published by Porter Novelli consultancy in 2021. The goal of the Porter Novelli study

was to gather a general sentiment of the American population on cancel culture and to quantify

consumers' interactions with the movement. Reasons for cancellations and general methods were

defined in the study and are discussed further in the **Discussion** section.

Outside of Porter Novelli's recent publication, the current research landscape has taken

unique, but relatively niche approaches to understanding cancel culture. One of the most

impactful findings in the field came from a study conducted at the Wharton School of Business

at the University of Pennsylvania that analyzed the reactions on Twitter to corporate

greenwashing (2021). The findings included an analysis of the information source credibility for

those reposting negative comments and found there to be no correlation between the credibility

of the source and the decision to cancel by users, establishing the potential for a strong causal

relationship between a negative comment online to a consumer's decision to cancel, no matter

the source.

Recovering from cancellation has been a hot topic for many companies that have found

themselves on the wrong end of the recent movements and there have been a few case studies

conducted on the recovery process. Studies done on the #MeToo movement at the University of

Nebraska have found that comedians who were cancelled have not made a full recovery to their heights of public sentiment before being cancelled but have slowly risen as time passes (2021). The Porter Novelli Cancel Culture study also featured case studies of cancelled companies and found varying results of a return of public sentiment based on the transgression and ways in which the company responded to the issue.

Seeing the current body of research, this study was designed with the goal of looking farther into the future of cancel culture. The first step in this process was to identify consumer groups that would be impacting the future of cancel culture and the new generation of college students became the focus. The majority of the body of literature on Cancel Culture as a whole typically revolves around quantitative data collection with multiple choice surveys, similar to the Porter Novelli study. With such an emotionally charged topic, this study was conducted with the goal of incorporating more of the emotional, qualitative data related to Cancel Culture, with a focus on the generation currently entering the consumer market.

Purpose of this Study

Building on the previous body of research, this study was conducted with the goal of providing both a quantitative comparison of college students' feelings on cancel culture as compared to the general American population, as well as a goal of identifying qualitative trends of sentiments towards cancelled companies among the generation. Key questions answered in this study include "What is the college generation's perceptions of cancel culture?" "What kind of company does a college student cancel and what actions do they take to do so?" "What are common methods that college students use to cancel?" and "How does social media serve as an engine for the spread of cancel culture attitudes in the college generation?"

Focus Group

The focus of this study is on college-aged individuals. This age group is significant because this generation is currently in the midst of emerging into the working force and general US working population. There are an estimated 20 million Americans between the age of 17 and 23 that are in college currently and over 98% use social media daily (Pew Research, 2021). With such a strong reliance on social media for communication among the generation, electronic word-of-mouth advertising and cancel culture will continue to be a strong focus point for advertising agencies as the generation moves from school out into the working force.

By focusing on the social media boycotts, this study gives a look into the most widely used platforms for word-of-mouth advertising of the next century. Influencer Marketer Hub, a research firm for social media advertising, identified many trends for social media use as it pertains to business moving forward from 2021. Among the trends identified include the continued growth of social commerce, a continued focus on influencer marketing, and an increased use in social listening, or social media data collection, by advertising companies (Geyser, 2021). There are 20 million new consumers entering the market from college in the next four years and in order for companies to gain the most comprehensive understanding of their new market, they must focus on the one underlying characteristic shared by 98% of the market: social media (Pew Research, 2021).

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that college students' reactions to social media boycotts and cancel culture will vary greatly. The term "Cancel Culture" has become a polarizing issue in American media over the last few years and based on personal experience, it is hypothesized students

embody the founding ideas of the cancel culture movement, without full commitment to the

practice. The term "cancel culture" itself has become ethically controversial based on current

media portrayal of the movement, but the underlying ideas of holding companies accountable for

their actions and the newfound power of the consumer persist.

Assumptions

The major assumption in this study is that college students are aware of the idea of cancel

culture and have interacted with it in some way, in order to have an understanding of the

phenomenon and how it works. The term "cancelled" became very popular in the past 18 months

and became part of the mainstream media vernacular in 2020. If participants had not heard of

cancel culture or did not understand it, they were invited to email the survey administrator with

any necessary questions.

Methodology

Survey

The survey was divided into four different sections, each serving a different purpose. A copy of the survey can be found in **Appendix A**.

Demographic Information

Due to numerous budgetary and administrative restrictions, a perfectly random sample of college students was not realistic and thus, certain groups were easier to access for survey participation. By collecting demographic information, biases among the sampling group could be acknowledged. Anonymity was maintained among participants and no names were connected to responses.

General Social Media Use

Next, study participants were asked five questions to quantify their social media usage. The rise in social media use among the college-aged generation is already well documented in previous research and the consistency in usage among the entire group was not in question, but rather the correlation between high general usage and use of Instagram accounts to cancel. Participants that check their Instagram accounts on a more consistent basis have many more opportunities to interact with cancel culture situations on the platform and this section of the survey allowed data to be gathered for this connection.

Cancel Culture – Porter Novelli Study

As discussed previously, the Porter Novelli consulting firm conducted a study to quantify the growth of cancel culture in 2021 among the general American population. Their study, titled

"The Business of Cancel Culture," featured a surveyed group of 1004 "US general market

adults" who were asked their opinions on various cancel culture issues. The study quantified

phenomenon such as how and why users have participated in cancel culture during the past 18

months. Six survey questions were modelled from this study with the purpose of developing a

comparison tool between the larger American population and the more niche college

demographic. The surveying method was solely multiple-choice questions which made for easy

summary of numerical points and provides an easy comparison for the focus group of college-

aged students in this study. The main goal of the section was to quantify any difference in

college students' opinions to that of the American public.

Phenomenological Questions

Though the shortest in length, the fourth section of the survey is what differentiates this

study from many already done in the field. A phenomenological approach, according to Janet

Waters, a research psychologist from Capilano University, provides survey participants the

freedom to express emotions on a detailed spectrum, expanding from the confines of a multiple-

choice question. With a topic such as cancel culture, which is typically very emotionally charged

in the eyes of consumers, a multiple-choice survey does not encapsulate the same range of

emotions that a phenomenological approach can. By giving the participants the freedom of open-

ended questions, this survey allows for a qualitative approach to data analysis to pair with the

Porter Novelli style of a more quantitative approach. Students were asked to describe (1) a

company that they would cancel, (2) what actions they would take to cancel said company, and

(3) what that company could potentially do to become "uncancelled." By allowing more freedom

in responses, participants can use imagination and exaggerate on the issues they feel matter most.

Many scholars compare phenomenological questions to interview questions but without the intrusiveness or time commitment.

Coding

Phenomenological questions require a few steps of analysis to compare responses, since each participant has a unique set of vocabulary that they use in their responses. A coding method of summarizing key themes was utilized to compare. Each response was given "codes" to shorten and summarize participant responses. These codes are short words or phrases, typically in the author's words, that capture the key details of the response. For example, a participant wrote "I would cancel Amazon because of their treatment of workers is improper due to harsh working conditions." The first round of codes for this sentence would be "Amazon," "treatment of workers," and "harsh working conditions."

After initial coding, themes could be identified among the responses. For example, "harsh working conditions" can be paired with the "unsafe factories" another participant described and after rounds of grouping, common themes emerge in the responses that can be used to represent an overall group attitude.

This method of coding is modelled based on the work of David and John Creswell in their book *Research Design* (2018). The two describe this method to as a way to "construct the universal meaning of the event, situation, or experience and arrive at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon" than can be done with other surveying methods. Because of the nature of this method, numerical data is not the end goal; there is no binary "yes or no" question to be answered. Rather, the resulting data are common themes and attitudes towards the idea of cancel culture.

Distribution

A phenomenological approach was taken to gain insight into college students'

perceptions of cancel culture. Surveys with 18 total questions, three of which were paragraph-

length, open ended responses, were distributed only to current undergraduate students at the

University of South Carolina. Google Forms was utilized as the mode of distribution because of

its easy-to-share capabilities. A short link could be emailed or texted to participants who could

complete the survey from their cell phone or computer. Due to monetary and administrative

limitations, a complete random distribution was unrealistic to obtain and thus, the participants

that were invited to participate were typically acquainted with the survey administer through

class, campus involvement, etc. This limitation and its potential admission of bias into the results

is discussed further in the **Limitations** section of the paper.

Results

Comparing College Students to the General Public

One of the key purposes of this study was to identify key trends that could be used to differentiate the emerging college generation from the general public, and thus, a simple quantitative comparison based on the results of the Porter Novelli study can be used as beginning of analysis. Porter Novelli found that 56% of Americans have not cancelled a company within the last 12 months and 30% cancelled just one to two brands. Compared to the general public, college students cancel less often; 73% answered that they had not cancelled a brand in the past year. However, the general trend between the general public and college students is maintained that a majority do not cancel, and of those that do, most only cancel once or twice. The trend of 27% of college students admitting to cancelling is substantially lower than that of the American public found by Porter Novelli, but there are some underlying trends discussed further in the phenomenological section that may explain this lower rate.

Looking at the length of cancellations again shows a similar trend among the average American and the college generation. Porter Novelli found the most common length of cancellations was indefinite. 37% of participants of the American public would cancel for more than a year and two-thirds of those would cancel that company/brand forever. Meanwhile, another 30% of participants would only continue to cancel for 6 months of less. College students showed a very similar trend. 40% of cancellations among participants in this study would last forever, and close to 40% would also be less than six months. This polarization in cancellation length alludes to differences in the causes for causation. No true consistent length in cancellation presents the idea that participants from both studies may view different situations as varying degrees of grievances, giving the companies to potentially recover from smaller mistakes.

How College Students Cancel

The methods that college students employ to cancel a company or brand tended to be more personally focused. Fourteen participants of the 16 that have cancelled in the past year answered that they stopped purchasing from the company that they cancelled, but the rate of responses decreased as the options for methods became more outwardly focused. Nine participants answered that they would also tell their friends and family about their decision and only two respondents said they would post about it on social media. Only one participant answered that they would stage a physical protest/activism march. These answers highlight the seemingly obvious trend that the more work required will result in less people being willing to partake, but also give evidence of a potential social stigma to cancel culture among the college generation, which is further analyzed in the **Discussion** section.

Juxtaposition in Social Media Use

An eye-opening phenomenon emerged when looking at college students' rate of social media use and their interactions with cancel culture on the Instagram platform. 96% of participants owned an active Instagram account and 85% checked their account on at least a daily basis – a trend already well documented in past research. Participants were also asked to quantify how often they heard of another user's choice to cancel a company while on Instagram, and over 50% answered that they interact with these types of posts at least once a week. However, 90% of users said they have never posted about cancelling a company. This discrepancy raises the question of who is posting these announcements of cancellations seeing that a majority of Instagram followers are friends who are typically close in age. The survey participants say that they do not personally post about cancelling yet hear about others' cancellations relatively often.

Trends in Social Media Usage

The participants of the study consistently check social media; 85% check their Instagram every day. However, actually posting to their account follows a much different trend. Only 30% of participants answered that they post to their account at least monthly and only 45% post to their Instagram story at least monthly. Connecting this trend to the previous observation that college students see cancellations online but do not post about them themselves, it can be hypothesized that the college generation posts less about cancel culture that the generations older and younger.

Gender Gap in Cancel Culture

The male versus female divide in social media usage and cancel culture interaction was eye opening. Female participants reported significantly higher rates of posting on Instagram than their male counterparts. 65% of female participants post to their Instagram story at least monthly, nearly 6 times the rate of male participants. Posting to the actual account showed similar discrepancies in rates; 47% of females reported posting at least monthly, whereas just 22% of male participants.

This gap between genders persisted when participants quantified their number of cancellations, they have made in the past 12 months as well. Female participants cancelled at a rate of 29% compared to the male rate of 17%. Looking at the phenomenological responses as well, six responses were coded as "anti-cancel culture." All six of these participants were male. Based on the data obtained in this survey, males tend to have a much more negative view towards cancel culture and the idea of cancelling. Seeing that cancel culture is predominantly a movement carried out by social media, it is reasonable to conclude that the gender who uses

social media most, females, would be more likely to interact with and participate in cancel culture practices more often.

Reasons to Cancel

Descriptions of companies that participants would cancel filled a wide range of grievances and offenses that have become all too common among real companies in today's news coverage. Characteristics of a company that a participant would cancel include one that treats their employees poorly, speaks out against a certain marginalized group, adopts an offensive policy, or funds certain egregious practices. Events that lead to cancellations ranged anywhere between big picture multinational policies all the way down to individual instances of poor customer service. A key point to learn from this, as has already been proven in the study of brand equity, is that there are countless ways that a company can lose brand equity and lose a once-loyal customer. Consumers expect near perfection from the companies that they chose to support in the current climate of cancel culture; with so many options of places to buy from ranging from large corporations to small businesses, companies are in a near impossible struggle to maintain a loyal customer.

Building on this idea, most of the responses only gave one core characteristic for cancelling a company. In the eyes of the consumer, companies do not get the benefit of the doubt; as soon as one violation of rights occurs or offensive action is taken, consumers can justify cancelling the entire company. A good example is shown in one student's response, "Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream. They are anti-Israel and made it clear with their decision to stop selling ice cream to Israel…" A singular business decision on the other side of the world caused this participant to stop buying the product in the United States. It is extremely hard to please everyone with a decision, especially when that decision is being made by a multinational

corporation with countless stakeholders, and when groups are not pleased, cancelation can be the first step.

Specific Company Names

Moving into the phenomenological portion of the study, greater insight into the perceptions of cancel culture were revealed. One of the most common trends that emerged from coding was the number of current company names that were given as a description of a company that participants would cancel. Twenty-one participants, in their open responses listed the name of a current American corporation or organization. Every company named shared the same characteristics of being a large corporation with headquarters in the United States; the most common responses were Chick-Fil-A, CNN, and PETA, all three of which have been in the news for various offenses within the past 18 months. Taking a deeper dive into these 21 survey participants opens the door for more investigation; only four of those answered that they have cancelled a company. The discrepancy between admitting a dislike of a company and actually "cancelling" said company highlights a potential shift in attitude occurring in the college generation surrounding cancel culture. College students are willing to dislike a company personally without openly cancelling them; a much more inclusive attitude than that symbolized by many proponents of the cancel culture movement.

Anti-Cancel Culture

Building on the trend of moving towards a more personal dislike rather than public cancel, another theme that emerged was the strong sentiment in opposition of cancel culture. One of the advantages of the phenomenological approach is that participants can not only express their opinions of indifference but also of opposition if they feel passionately enough about the

topic. Six participants chose to not only just say that they would not ever cancel, but also took

the time to write strong negative language towards the movement. The most common word used

to describe the movement among these responses was "stupid" and one participant dove further

into his explanation, saying that people make mistakes and there is no point in not giving them a

chance to learn from them rather than completely write them off. The same response cited the

example that everyone, including themselves, has said something immature, and that it is

unfortunate that some people's mistakes just happen to be on a bigger scale.

Methods Employed to Cancel Hypothetical Company

Coinciding with the responses to the multiple-choice section, by far the most common

response to the open response question of how participants would cancel the company they

described was to stop purchasing from/interacting with the company at fault. Over 75% of total

responses involved either stopping the purchase of a product, ending contact with an individual

or deleting a social media application, depending on the type of response participants gave to

start.

The next step participants most commonly took when describing how they would cancel

a company involved some form of spreading the word to friends and family. Participants said

they would share infographics online, tell their family about their poor experiences, or even host

in-person activism rallies in order to cancel the company. Each of these actions follows the same

goal of exposing the egregious behavior of the guilty company. "Spreading awareness" was a

common term used among participants when answering this question. This theme almost directly

originates with the definition of cancel culture – a movement to publicly shame and expose

companies for their poor actions. It is impossible to publicly shame a company without

distributing the damning evidence to the public. On a personal level, this means spreading the word to social circles.

Looking at the use of social media in these responses reveals a very mixed attitude among the participant pool towards its use in this context. Twelve participants explicitly stated they would post about the incident in some way. One participant said they would even go as far as reaching out to larger social media accounts to post about the issue as well in order to spread awareness as quickly as possible. However, six participants explicitly stated that they would take other actions but would not post on social media. "Social media bashing," as one participant calls it, "only brings more attention and customers to the company." The common theme of polarized opinions on the issue of cancel culture and social media continue in this question.

"Uncancelling" a Guilty Company

The final question participants were asked to answer involved a description of required actions for a company to become "uncancelled" or forgiven for the actions that got them cancelled in the first place. Confirming the trend found from the multiple-choice question regarding the length of a typical cancellation, responses to this question varied across an array of retribution techniques, some taking much longer than others. Most participants answered that a company must apologize for their actions, the most common response by a wide margin. As responses insinuated a more direct effort from the company, they took on a much wider array of actions and possibilities but retained the common theme that a company must have some sense of acknowledgement for the actions/events that led to their cancellation. There was a differentiation made between the internal change that typically goes on in response to cancel culture and "actual change" which represents the general sentiment of the majority of participants for this question. Participants wanted proof that a company had made a true cultural

shift within the company rather than a superficial, temporary fix just to silence the public. Words

such as "impactful" "large-scale" "clear" were used to describe these further desired actions past

just a public apology. In order to uncancel a company and forgive them of their wrongdoing,

participants expect significant cultural shift within the organization.

Discussion

Cancel culture is a polarizing topic, especially among college students.

Porter Novelli's study gave the participants the chance to give their general opinion on cancel culture and its impact on society in the 21st century. Their options to answer the multiple-choice question included the phrases "good for society" "effective, but over-used" and "bad for society." No response received more than 34% of the vote, indicating a very divided American population regarding cancel culture. College students seem to follow a similar trend.

Multiple students have very pronounced and detailed explanations of how and why they would cancel company and expressed many of the core principles of the cancel culture movement in America. Looking at those detailed pro-cancel culture responses, a clear picture of what cancel culture embodies emerges. Participants want companies to be held accountable for their actions; they ask for transparency and fight for those underrepresented minority populations. However, the positive, proactive cancel culture comments are matched by a large group of students that say they have never cancelled and would not cancel. 73% of students say that they have not cancelled any brands within the last 12 months, even though more than 50% of them say they hear about others' choices to cancel on Instagram at least weekly. While it is a strong majority of students that do not actively participate in cancel culture, the relative percentage of students that believe in its benefits and proactively partake is on par with the data obtained by Porter Novelli – about 34% of participants in their study said that cancel culture is "good for society- it gets companies/individuals to recognize bad behavior."

Directly opposed to those who participate in cancel culture, six participants, or 10% of the participants, answered with strong anti-cancel culture comments to the phenomenological

questions. These responses tended to attack the alleged faulty logic and overuse of the cancel culture movement over the past few years. This group matches with the "bad for society – companies/individuals can't do or say anything without being cancelled" section of the Porter Novelli responses; 20% of their participants felt that cancel culture was a negative trait of society. Though this is double the percentage of students identified in this study, there was a group of students that answered that they had not cancelled and left the phenomenological questions unanswered. While it cannot be implied that these students would fall into this anti-cancel culture group, they are a potential reason for the discrepancy between the findings of the multiple-choice study versus this study's phenomenological approach.

Social stigma surrounding cancelling

Like many hot-button issues in today's popular culture, cancel culture has become a very politically divided phenomenon and the polarization has led to extreme opinions on both ends. Especially among the college generation, where social media use is not just a habit but a norm, cancel culture has become very relevant and difficult to ignore. Looking at results from this study, 83% of students said they interact with cancel culture in some way online. With the inability to avoid cancel culture on social media, many students have become annoyed with the cancel culture and, pushed further by political polarization, have grown to strongly dislike the movement. One response in particular is very telling of this ideology. When asked how a company could become uncancelled, their answer was "The fact that people can decide to 'cancel' a global corporation and then 'uncancel' them a week later shows the incompetence of people and how they react with their emotions immediately as opposed to thinking things through." The key point to notice in this response is not the general distaste for cancel culture - that is common - but the attack of the people behind the movement. As the issue has become

more political and more emotional, Americans have moved past attacking ideas to now attacking

the people behind the ideas. With such aggressive comments like the example from the study,

many people may be afraid to admit to cancelling with the fear of being the target of personal

attacks in retaliation. It is worth examining whether some students do not admit to cancelling

solely because of the social stigmatization.

Trends seen in this study suggest that this social stigma may be a true limiting factor to

cancel culture. Twenty-two participants, when asked to describe a company that they would

cancel, answered with a specific name of a current company. However, only six of those

participants answered in the multiple-choice section that they had cancelled in the past year. The

sixteen others fill a gap that could be answered by the social stigma surrounding cancel culture.

These participants have an exact idea of a company to cancel and even gave real life examples of

things they had done to cancel those companies, but still answered that they have not cancelled

in the multiple-choice section. Students seem to be carrying out the ideological principles of

cancel culture, without admitting to the name of it – potentially a result of the strong polarization

of the topic by media coverage in the last few years.

College Students do not want to hold grudges forever against companies.

A key application to this study is the way that companies can react to being cancelled in

order to regain their customer base and brand equity. From responses to this study, it is clear that

companies can rebound from cancellations and that the general college consumer is willing to

forgive a company for its wrongdoing. Multiple of the responses to the phenomenological

question regarding uncancellations even explicitly mentioned that they do not want cancelled

companies to go out of business, but simply learn a lesson. Only one participant stated that they

would cancel a company forever and gave the specific qualifications that the company would

have had to violate health/cleanliness standards in the food industry. The multiple-choice question of how long a cancellation would last stays true to this trend, with only 10% of students responding that they would cancel forever. Otherwise, college students are generally willing to forgive guilty companies, but forgiveness is not free by any means.

Though most college students are willing to forgive cancelled companies, business owners should not expect an easy path back to past brand equity levels. When asked to identify ways that a company can become uncancelled, participants gave their longest and most detailed responses of the question set. A large majority of students' responses began by asking for a public apology from the company for their actions, but no response stopped at this simple answer; "Real change", management turnover, donations to non-profits, and company culture shifts highlighted a plethora of ways that college students expect companies to react in order to regain the trust of their consumer base. A key theme of these responses is a retribution effort for the groups that were marginalized or harmed by the actions of the companies. An example of this type of response is a raise in employee wages and safety standards for a company that was cancelled due to poor work treatment or, for a company that was cancelled due to an anti-LGBTQ culture, donations to LGBTQ communities and non-profits. Although college students will forgive guilty companies, focused efforts at repaying marginalized groups are the norm for companies to begin their brand equity climb again.

Conclusion

Defining cancel culture among the college generation is a difficult task with so many unique opinions and perspectives on the movement. But this presence of an array of opinions is in fact the definition of cancel culture. Cancel culture and the principles that it embodies are open to the interpretation of the individual. Some students fully embrace cancel culture and use it to have their voice heard in the economy; others are not fully committed to the title of "cancelled" but still enjoy the larger platform that social media has given the consumer; and some students have become agitated by the polarization cancel culture has caused and actively speak against it. Every person has their own opinion on the costs and benefits of cancel culture. In post-study interviews with a few participants, the increased platform and power of the consumer that social media and cancel culture have provided were consistent themes of conversation. The principles that cancel culture represents have become a crucial part of many students' use of social media.

However, though the principles of cancel culture have persisted through, the word itself, "cancelled," has become a more stigmatized phrase that many college students are not willing to own. Though cancel culture became part of the public vernacular in 2016 with the coverage of the Larry Nassar sexual abuse scandal, media use of the phrase grew by more than 5000% by June of 2020, coinciding with a rise in prominence of social justice organizations such as Black Lives Matter. As the idea became more closely tied to a contentious political atmosphere that surrounded the summer of 2020 in America, the phrase became more controversial, and many groups decided to take a stand against the movement. Hence, in this study, some participants expressed strong negative opinions to the movement. The principles of cancel culture seem to

have become an integral part of the market of the future, but the title itself does not have the

same popularity among the college generation.

Limitations

While there is no mathematical significance to be found in phenomenological research

since it does not provide true quantitative data, more responses help paint a more detailed picture

of the subject of the study. In this case, 56 participants took part in the survey, which could be

expanded to a larger audience through more monetary and administrative resources in order to

develop an even wider array of perspectives on cancel culture. A major limitation to this study

brought about by the participant group is the lack of a random sample of college students.

Participants were selected from the University of South Carolina under-graduate student body

population mainly through an ease-of-access basis. Surveys were distributed to the

administrator's peers through class, club/organization, and housing groups, causing each

participant to have some kind of tie to the survey administrator instead of a truly random sample

of the population. A disproportionate number of males (70%) and seniors (46%) compared to the

total of university population took part in the survey due to budgetary and resource restrictions.

A disproportionate sample of students opened the door to potential biases based on gender or age

that could have affected the results of this study.

Future Directions

Though phenomenological studies become very costly on large scales, a wider array of

student responses would further enhance the picture that is painted by the responses. Thus, it is

advised that to continue this study, more participants and a more representative population is

needed. A small-scale start can be to obtain a more representative population at one school

before moving to students across the country. Each campus has a different climate and norms that may lead to varying perspectives across campuses. A more in-depth look at responses can also be utilized as a means to gain more of an understanding on the college student perception of cancel culture. Phenomenological studies sometimes feature follow-up interviews with participants whose responses are found to be more intriguing and emotionally charged. Due to time restrictions and the anonymity of this study, it was not possible to interview students after they had responded specifically based on their responses, but post-study discussions were generated at random by participants that found the topic more interesting.

Applications

Public relation departments in large corporations can use this data to understand how their new consumer base is going to react to different offenses committed by members of their organization. While the only true solution to avoid getting canceled is to become a perfectly socially responsible corporation, it is clear from history that mistakes are going to happen, and it becomes increasingly difficult to please large customer bases with unique backgrounds. However, if a company is cancelled, it is important to know as a PR employee that recovery is possible. College students do not want to cancel forever and would rather see their cancellation lead to cultural shifts within the corporation. Social media has become a norm in the life of college students and will continue to be ever-present moving forward. It is important for social media teams in corporations to engage online with followers, and after being cancelled, use social media to communicate with and educate consumers on the change that is going on inside the company. An electronic word-of-mouth campaign ignited by the social media engagement of a corporation can go a long way in growing customer bases and improving client relations.

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Appendix A: Survey

Questions 1-2

What year are you in school? *

○ Freshman

○ Sophomore

○ Junior

○ Senior

What is your major? *

Short answer text

Do you have an Instagram account? *

○ Yes

○ No

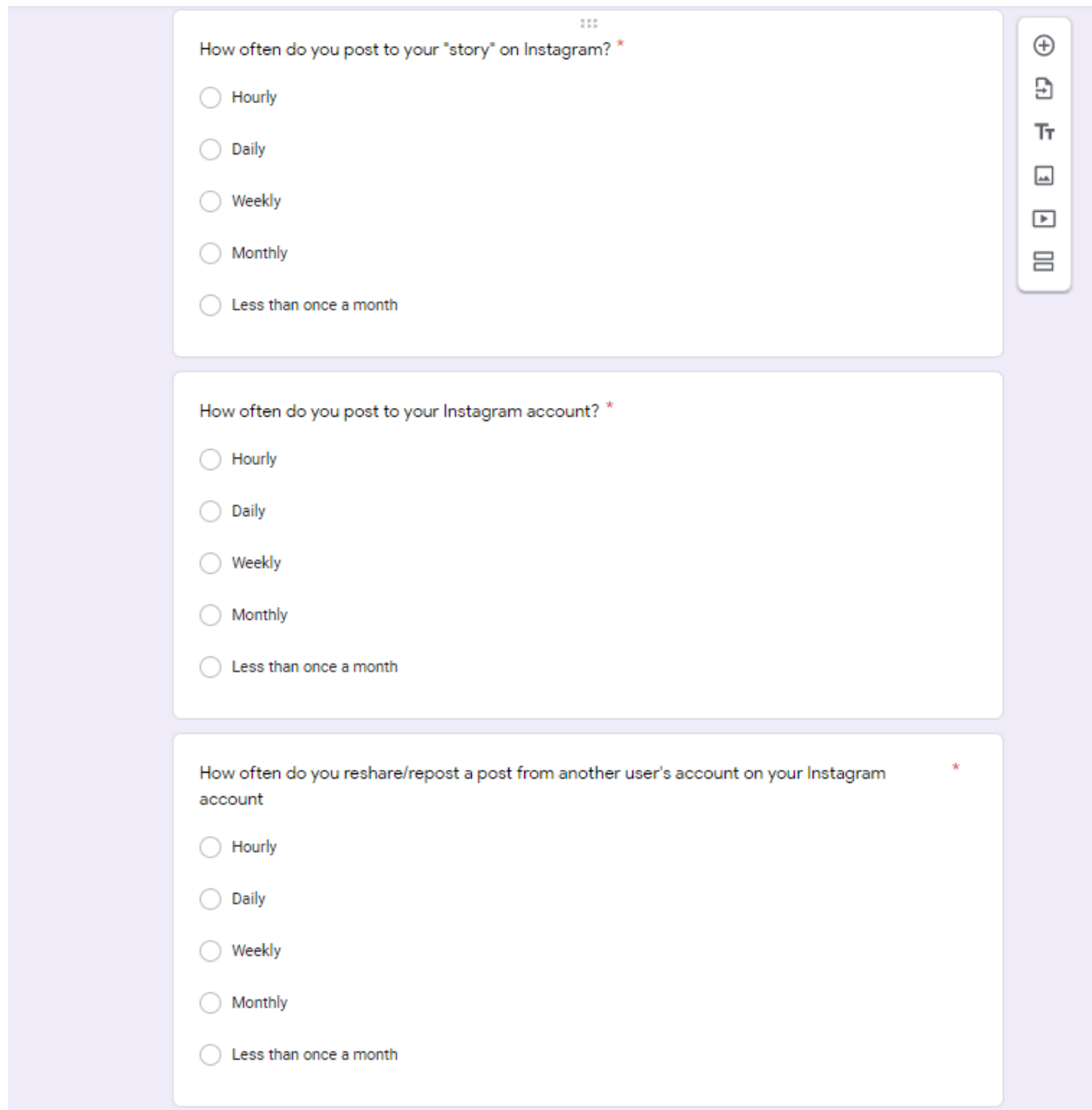How often do you check your Instagram account? *

○ Hourly

○ Daily

○ Weekly

○ Monthly

○ Less than once a month

Questions 3-6

How often do you post to your "story" on Instagram? *

○ Hourly

○ Daily

○ Weekly

○ Monthly

○ Less than once a month

How often do you post to your Instagram account? *

○ Hourly

○ Daily

○ Weekly

○ Monthly

○ Less than once a month

How often do you reshare/repost a post from another user's account on your Instagram account *

○ Hourly
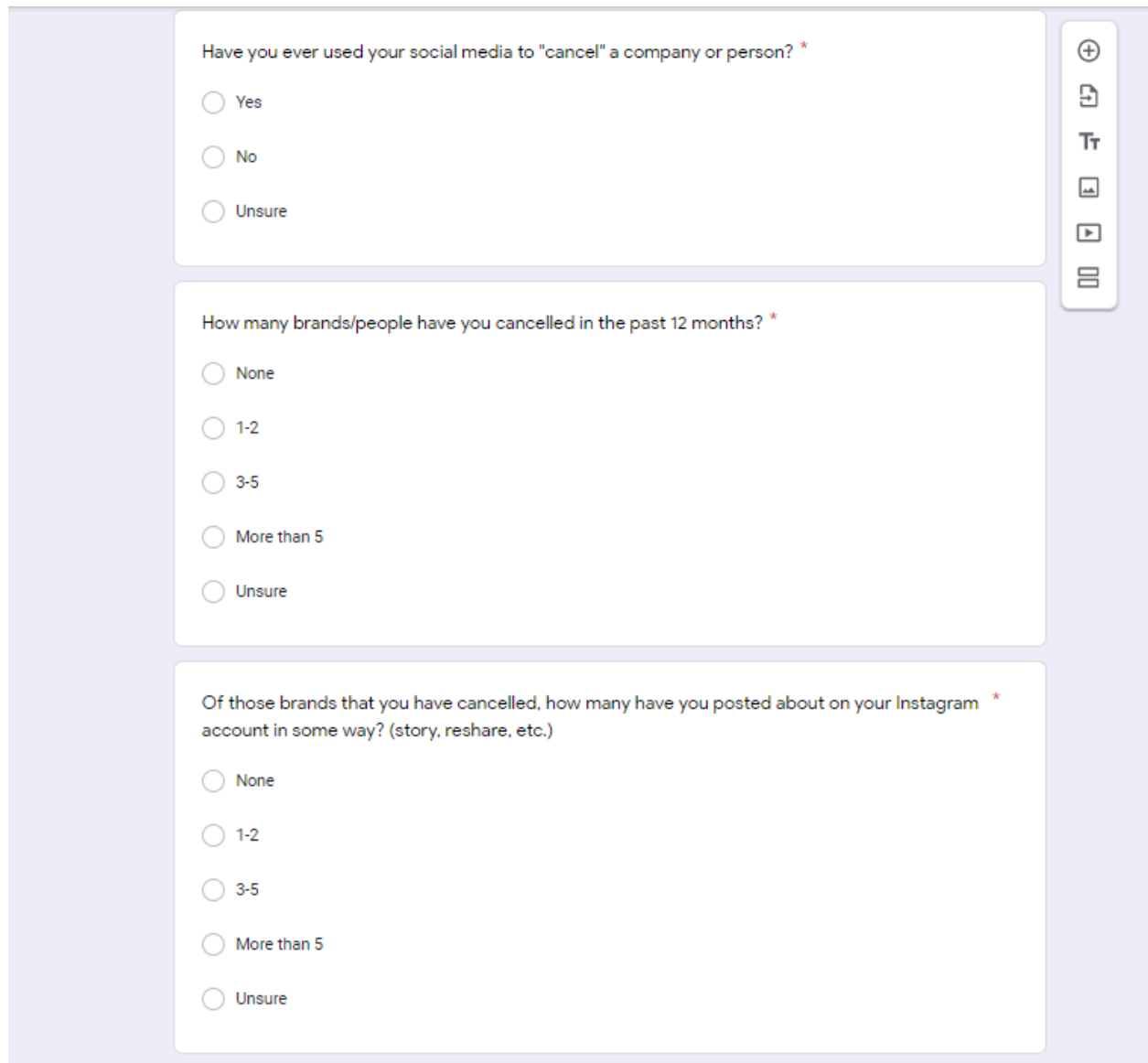
○ Daily

○ Weekly

○ Monthly

○ Less than once a month

Questions 7-9

Have you ever used your social media to "cancel" a company or person? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ Unsure

How many brands/people have you cancelled in the past 12 months? *

○ None

○ 1-2

○ 3-5

○ More than 5

○ Unsure

Of those brands that you have cancelled, how many have you posted about on your Instagram *
account in some way? (story, reshare, etc.)

○ None

○ 1-2
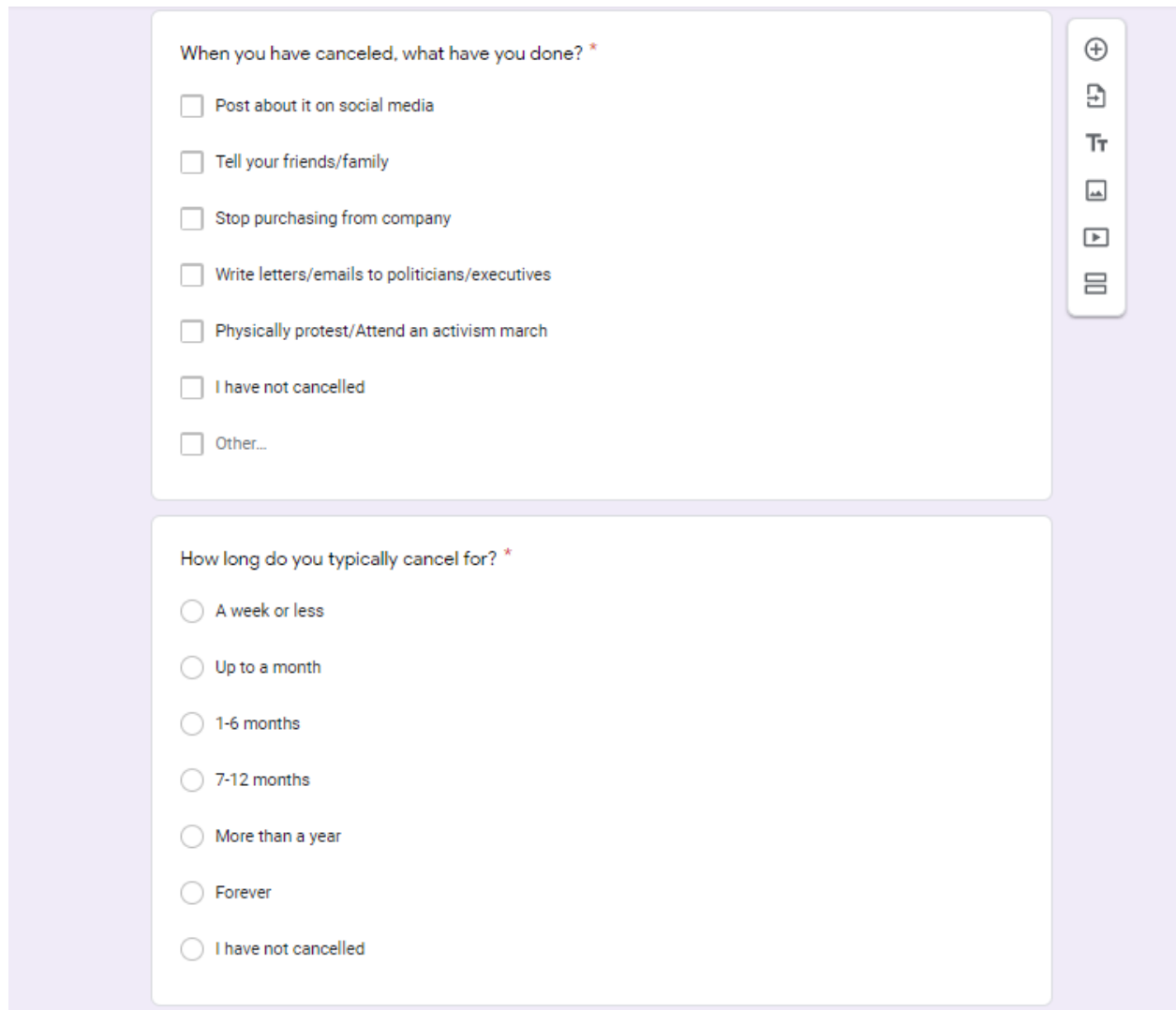
○ 3-5

○ More than 5

○ Unsure

Questions 10-12

When you have canceled, what have you done? *

- ☐ Post about it on social media

- ☐ Tell your friends/family

- ☐ Stop purchasing from company

- ☐ Write letters/emails to politicians/executives

- ☐ Physically protest/Attend an activism march

- ☐ I have not cancelled

- ☐ Other...

How long do you typically cancel for? *

- ○ A week or less

- ○ Up to a month

- ○ 1-6 months

- ○ 7-12 months

- ○ More than a year

- ○ Forever

- ○ I have not cancelled

Questions 13-14

How often do you hear of other user's choice to cancel a company on Instagram? *

○ Hourly

○ Daily

○ Weekly

○ Monthly

○ Every few months

○ Annually

○ Never

In a paragraph, describe a company that you would cancel. What did this company do that led you to make this decision? *

Long answer text

In a paragraph, describe how you would cancel this company that you have described. *

Long answer text

In a paragraph, please explain what actions this company could take for you to "uncancel." *

Long answer text

Questions 15-18