

Book review / Prikaz knjige
UDK 659.2
316.75
DOI 10.17818/SM/2024/1.5

Corporate Cancel Culture and Brand Boycotts: The Dark Side of Social Media for Brands, New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2024, 258 pp. / Korporativna kultura otkazivanja i bojkotiranje brendova: Tamna strana društvenih medija za brendove, New York i Abingdon: Routledge, 2024, 258 str.

Angeline Close Scheinbaum (ed.)

The book *Corporate Cancel Culture and Brand Boycotts: The Dark Side of Social Media for Brands*, is edited by Angelina Close Scheinbaum, and was published by Routledge on September 30, 2024. It contains 258 pages and includes 28 black-and-white illustrations. This book addresses the topic of cancel culture in the corporate world and how it affects brand reputation. The content is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter, "Canceling Cancel Culture: How It Can Hurt People, Brands, and Sport Organizations", discusses the harmful effects of cancel culture and includes three papers. The second chapter, "Misinformation and Social Media: How Coordinated Influence Operations Use Social Media to Spread Threats and Fear with Misinformation", focuses on the role of misinformation in amplifying fear and threats through social media platforms and includes two papers. The third and the last chapter, "Influencers and Memes: How Even the Fun Aspect of Social Media Has Downsides for Brands and Societal Well-Being", examines how popular elements of social media, such as memes and influencers, can create unexpected challenges for brands and society, includes three papers.

What makes this book different is its focus on the macro level of cancel culture. Most studies about cancel culture come from fields such as social science, psychology, or law, and they tend to focus on individual experiences. However, this book looks at the larger effects of cancel culture on organizations and brands. In the preface, Scheinbaum mentions that this perspective is important for understanding how cancel culture operates and how it can influence brands on a broad scale. As cancel culture significantly impacts brand reputation, this book's approach provides useful insights for understanding and addressing the issue. It can be particularly relevant for professionals in corporate management, branding, or public relations, as well as for researchers studying social media and its effects on organizations.

The first chapter discusses how cancel culture can harm individuals, brands, and sports organizations. As cancel culture is a relatively new topic in academic literature, the authors take a macro approach and introduce the term "corporate cancel culture," along with a new definition: *a phenomenon wherein consumers and other stakeholders use digital platforms to collectively withdraw support and enact*

social, psychological, and economic sanctions on businesses, brands, or corporations; people cancel companies or brands as an intended way to show care/prevent harm, seek fairness, loyalty/account for betrayal, show authority/subversion of the company, and establish sanctity/ degradation (1) The authors also propose a new framework and provide examples of individuals, organizations, and academics who have been canceled. They emphasize the power of social media, highlighting a significant shift in influence from companies to consumers. Consumers now possess the ability to elevate a company through positive word of mouth or destroy it with accusations and revelations (p. 4). The chapter also identifies categories of people who have been canceled, including celebrities, professionals, and academics. The authors also reference categorization theory, which likely refers to a framework for understanding how people group and classify information. Consumers may subconsciously place companies into categories based on perceived values, actions, or characteristics, which influences how they respond to those companies.

While first chapter explores corporate cancel culture, the second shifts focus on coordinated influence operations and the spread of misinformation. It examines how bad actors engage with their audiences and how social media platforms contribute to the dissemination of misinformation. The first part of the chapter is on the activities of troll farms, particularly the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) and groups within the People's Republic of China (PRC), and their efforts to influence public opinion and promote alternative narratives. To deepen the understanding of these mechanisms, the authors present a formal economic model that explains decision-making processes in four case studies. This model extends its relevance beyond politics, offering valuable insights into commercial influence and other forms of coordinated manipulation. The second part of the chapter addresses the issue of misinformation, emphasizing its potential to cause significant and harmful consequences. It highlights how digital trends and mass persuasion have become deeply embedded in our lives, leaving us navigating an overwhelming ocean of information. It explains how AI tools generate content without regard for quality and accuracy and how it can generate misinformation.

The last chapter examines the darker aspects of social media, focusing on influencers and memes, and their potential negative effects on brands and society. The authors discuss several examples of how social media influencers (SMIs) can become sources of toxic influence and contribute to social polarization. They ask important questions, such as which vulnerable groups might be targeted or harmed by SMI campaigns. The authors also call for brands and platforms to take more responsibility and create thoughtful and meaningful content instead of allowing the current trend of toxic, polarized, and superficial content to dominate. This discussion connects well with the topic of memes, which are often seen as harmless jokes but can also cause harm by spreading dangerous messages or reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Memes, as the authors argue, have significant cultural power; they can build communities, but they can also hurt individuals, target vulnerable populations, and desensitize people to serious issues. The authors recommend avoiding memes that encourage risky behaviors, such as those that glorify dangerous trends, and advise against sharing harmful memes, even for criticism, because doing so still amplifies their visibility.

Overall, this editorial book addresses important topics related to polarization. The authors raise critical questions and propose practical solutions. However,

considering the book's title, there is a missed opportunity to explore the concept of corporate cancel culture more thoroughly. While the editors provide a new definition of corporate cancel culture, a deeper analysis of its meaning and implications would have made the book more impactful. Although topics like misinformation, SMI's, and memes are relevant to corporate cancel culture, the chapters do not always clearly connect them. For example, how has misinformation directly led to cases of corporate cancel culture? What roles do memes and SMIs play in creating or amplifying these situations? While the chapters are well-structured and systematic in their approach, the lack of explicit connections to the main theme risks making the book feel fragmented. Establishing clearer links between the individual chapters and the concept of corporate cancel culture would create a more unified narrative. This would help readers better understand how issues like misinformation, SMIs, and memes fit into the broader framework of corporate cancel culture and its systemic challenges.

Monika Cverlin