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Political correctness, cancel culture and corporate communication online

A case study analysis

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Abstract

Corporate communication is an increasingly nuanced field, with a diversity of channels and challenges that organizations must consider. Because of its growing complexity, corporate communication can make or break a company's success and reputation and should therefore be a priority for companies. Much of this intricacy stems from online interactions, specifically social media, as the contact and access to the target audiences is more and more intimate. In this context, political correctness and cancel culture come into play; terms that search to hold brands accountable for problematic behavior. Consumers now have the tools at their behest to demand actions, policies, or standards from companies, or else they can "cancel" or boycott their brand. The present work studies the effects of these dynamics in three cases studies: Pepsi, Victoria's Secret and J.K. Rowling. The case study analysis aims to determine unsuccessful patterns of behavior, as well as underscoring effective actions.

Key words: corporate communication, online, social media, cancel culture, political correctness

Resumen

La comunicación corporativa es un área cada vez más compleja, con una diversidad de canales y desafíos que las organizaciones deben considerar. Debido a su creciente complejidad, la comunicación corporativa define el éxito y la reputación de una empresa y, por lo tanto, debe ser una prioridad para estas. Gran parte de esta complejidad se deriva de las interacciones en línea, específicamente las redes sociales, ya que el contacto y el acceso a las audiencias objetivo son cada vez más íntimos. En este contexto, entran en juego lo políticamente correcto y la cultura de la cancelación; términos que buscan responsabilizar a las marcas por comportamientos problemáticos. Los consumidores ahora tienen las herramientas a su alcance para exigir acciones, políticas o estándares a las empresas, o bien pueden "cancelar" o boicotear su marca. El presente trabajo estudia los efectos de estas dinámicas en tres casos de estudio: Pepsi, Victoria's Secret y J.K. Rowling. El análisis del estudio de caso tiene como objetivo determinar patrones de comportamiento fallidos, así como subrayar acciones efectivas.

Palabras clave: comunicación corporativa, online, redes sociales, cultura de cancelación, políticamente correcto

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1. Introduction

Corporate communication has become an increasingly relevant tool for organizations, especially in the light of social media use (Vasquez and Velez, 2011). The proper handling of communication for companies can make or break their strategy and reputation. Although online interactions are an already present factor considered by brands, there are new trends that companies need to keep up with which define their survival online and consequently, everywhere (Porter Novelli, 2021).

As a relatively new discipline, formally starting in the 70s, corporate communication has the privilege of being an adaptive field of study. Its forerunner, public relations (PR), has a much longer history (Bakar & Mohamad, 2018). In their book *A Century of Spin: How Public Relations Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power*, Miller and Dinan (2008) explain how the act of communicating on behalf of companies has always been based on power relationships. They describe how, since the beginning of the 20th century, with the development of large corporations, until today, public relations has been responsible for keeping (or taking away) companies' power.

Miller and Dinan (2008) credit industrialization for bringing this discipline to the forefront. For example, Ivy Lee, considered the father of PR, often controlled the narrative regarding production or accidents so as to not affect the reputation of the company or its owner (for example, Rockefeller) (p. 14). However, the rapid growth of the American industry was not the sole instigator; the wars that followed during the first half of the 20th century inspired techniques and the targeting of audiences (p.15). In general, the authors underline that corporate communication has been essential since the growth of brands and organizations. Grasping the consequences of it (or the lack thereof) is key to survive and, ideally, come out on top.

Yet public relations were only the beginning. Today, the spectrum of communicative channels is huge, and communication is more participative, where people engage and give feedback (Vasquez and Velez, 2011). According to Porter Novelli (2021), corporate cancel culture is where organizations are “accountable for both their brand voice but also those of their employees” (p.4) or they could face social scrutiny or boycott. Companies must take care of many variables and understand that they are all of importance. Disregarding one could get you “canceled” (Porter Novelli, 2021). Assuring that the company is politically correct and listening to stakeholders' expectations could avoid getting involved in cancel culture.

The issue lies in the fact that the movement of cancel culture and the expectations of political correctness are varied, unpredictable and changing. Even Ivy Lee would hesitate as to what to do today.

In the following project, there will be sections outlined to organize the study. Firstly, the purpose and motivation will be explained, followed by the state of affairs. Then, the theoretical framework will be presented so as to understand the pillars and background of the present paper. The next point of the paper lists the hypothesis, objectives and research questions of this work which aid in understanding the analysis, followed by the methodology used. Finally, the analysis section will be developed, explaining each of the case studies chosen, ending with the conclusions of the study.

2. Purpose and Motivation

Political correctness and cancel culture online have an increased popularity. Whether it be for or against, both are a tidal wave that does not discriminate on social media. The frequent use of both the terms and what they entail is a trend that cannot be ignored by brands as they can make or break the reputation of even the most settled household name (Porter Novelli, 2021). Even though online presence has been moderated since the beginning, the rising relevance of public opinion, the demands for political correctness, and the resource of “canceling” have changed the playing field for brands online.

Social media is increasingly used as a tool for corporate communication, to the point where companies can no longer afford to not be present (Capriotti et al, 2020). This baseline gives importance to the terms that star in this project: political correctness and cancel culture. As these terms are mainly applied online, and their application can determine the success of corporate communication (Porter Novelli, 2021), they are inherently current and significant. As a nuanced field, corporate communication must consider these updates so as to not fall behind. For these reasons, cancel culture is part of the motivation behind the present paper. It is current, overbearing and evolving. Grasping its implications now could benefit brands, or anyone for that matter, to manage their communication and reputation.

The purpose of this paper is more fundamental. As the interest of the paper is to follow the current trends of corporate communication online, the aim is to understand how companies manage, and whether their initiatives are successful or unsuccessful. The strategies of companies who have failed will be identified, as well as the reason behind their failure.

Furthermore, successful cases will be portrayed to understand the difference and pinpoint a useful strategy for brands to consider in the future.

Therefore, the purpose and motivation of the present project can be summarized in three points: the relevance of the terms studied (political correctness and cancel culture), the importance of social media (particularly in corporate communication) and the opportunity to spearhead the arena of social media business communication. Through the case studies, examples, and analysis, this work will aim to serve as a guide of what to avoid and what to ensure when communicating.

3. State of Affairs

3.1 Initial discussion and context

As an initial discussion, it is interesting to study the popularity of the terms “political correctness” and “cancel culture” online, to better understand their presence and relevance for today’s corporate communication. Using Google Trends as a tool, we can better understand the *why* behind this thesis. For the sake of thoroughness, we will see the trends both on a global and US American scene, as well as including their translated counterparts “políticamente correcto” and “cultura de cancelación” in Spain, over the last 15 years. There are three reasons behind this choice: firstly, the terms are mainstream in the English language, and therefore the global trends will reflect this, making the English search essential. Furthermore, the English terms are used in non-English speaking countries, which must be reflected in the search. Secondly, the USA is at the forefront of social media usage and trends. Not only is Meta, the social media giant, American (Meta, 2021), but so are the terms “political correctness” (Florence, 2015) and “cancel culture” (Romano, 2020a). This will also allow us to understand the origins and trends of the study. Finally, we will look for the terms in Spain as it is the country where this project is taking place. Although the objective is to understand a global view of political correctness and cancel culture, examining its presence in another language and culture will also underline the relevance of the topic at hand.

3.1.1 Political correctness

Figure 1. “Political correctness” as a worldwide trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)

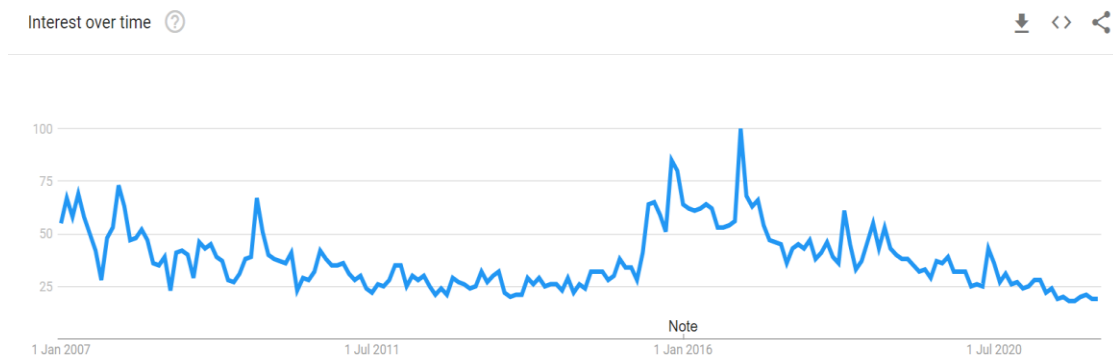


Figure 2. “Political correctness” as a US American trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)

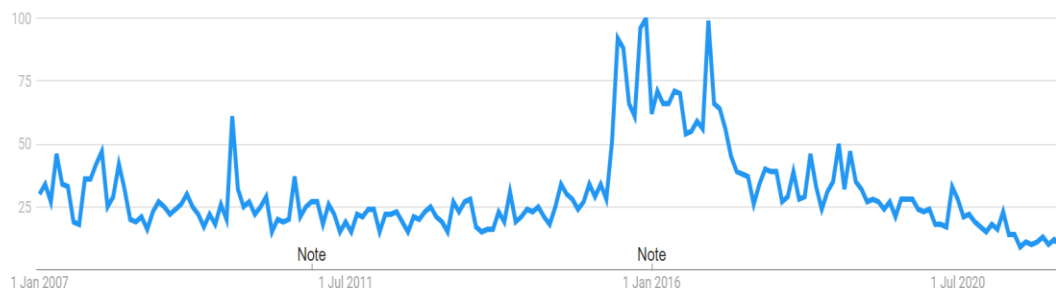


Figure 3. “Political correctness” as a Spanish trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)

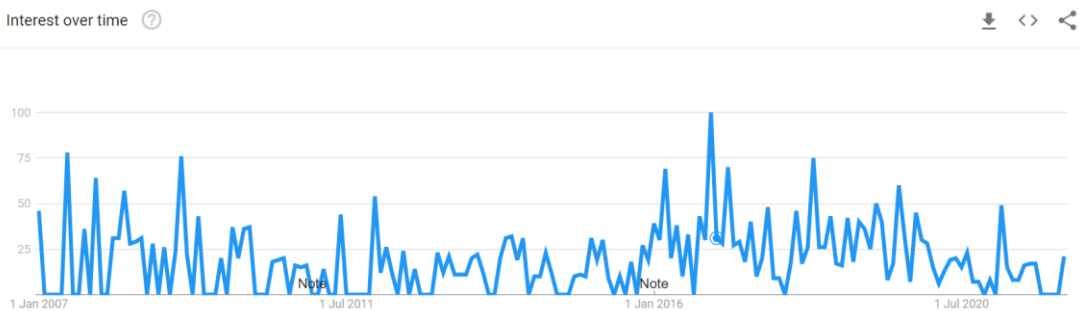
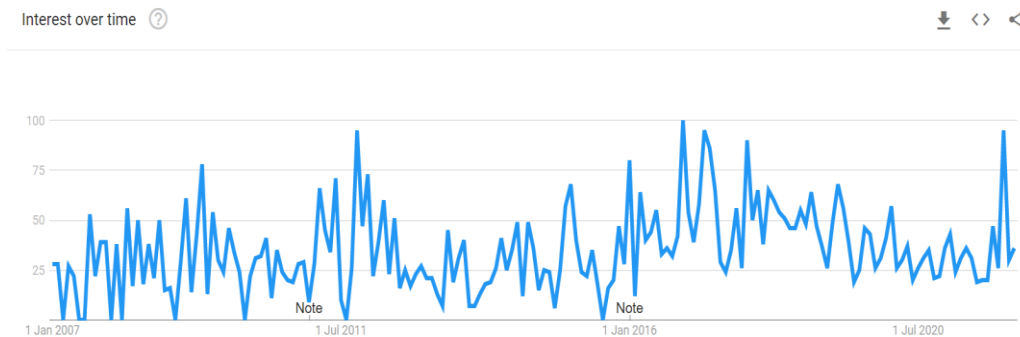


Figure 4. “Políticamente correcto” as a Spanish trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)



In the graphs, we can appreciate that the trend of searching “political correctness” is higher in the United States than it is in Spain. We can also see how the pattern of the Worldwide and the United States searches are very similar, especially from the mid-2010s onwards (Google Trends, 2022). This hints to the fact that this term originated in the USA, as well as highlighting the impact of US American trends on global searches.

Looking closely at the first two graphs (USA and Worldwide trends), we see that both peak almost at the same moment. In the United States, the term was most searched in December 2015 (at 100%), reaching 99% in November 2016. Although on the worldwide scale the second most searched moment was November 2015 (reaching 85%), it peaked (at 100%) November 2016. The likely reason behind this surge is the presidential candidate and consequent election of Donald Trump. The number 1 related query (meaning what accompanied the search for the term political correctness) in both the global and US American instances is “political correctness trump” (Google Trends, 2022).

Other related queries in either include the word “fascism” or “political correctness is bad” and related topics include “Donald Trump”, “Gender” or “Harry S Truman” (Google Trends, 2022). We can therefore conclude that political correctness has been searched heavily in sociopolitical contexts and that the term is not inherently positive.

The Spanish case, for both languages, also reached a fever pitch in November 2016. It is interesting to underline that, while both searches were popular in Spain at the end of 2016, it

has since been clearly more popular to search for the Spanish counterpart. This can hint at an adoption of the term as mainstream in Spain, as the Spanish version of the term has become more popular. Furthermore, while the search in English has a related topic of “United States”, the term in Spanish has related searches of “jokes” and “euphemism” (Google Trends, 2022).

Finally, to nuance the importance and use of the term “political correctness” we can point out where the term has been searched more. Worldwide, the top four countries searching for the term were English-speaking. In order: Australia, United Kingdom, United States and New Zealand. This can tell the trend-setting nature of the English language, as well as the fact that it is very much a global term. In Spain, the region that searched “politicamente correcto” the most was the Community of Madrid (Google Trends, 2022).

These trends go to show how political correctness is an everyday consideration (and now, even a translated one), and one that is increasingly considered by the general public. It is non-discriminatory in that it is a global, rather than local phenomenon, as well as powered by sociopolitical events. Although the popularity of searches has decreased in recent years, it is nevertheless important to include in this thesis as the backbone and guiding principle of the next term: cancel culture.

3.1.2 Cancel Culture

Figure 5. “Cancel culture” as a worldwide trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)

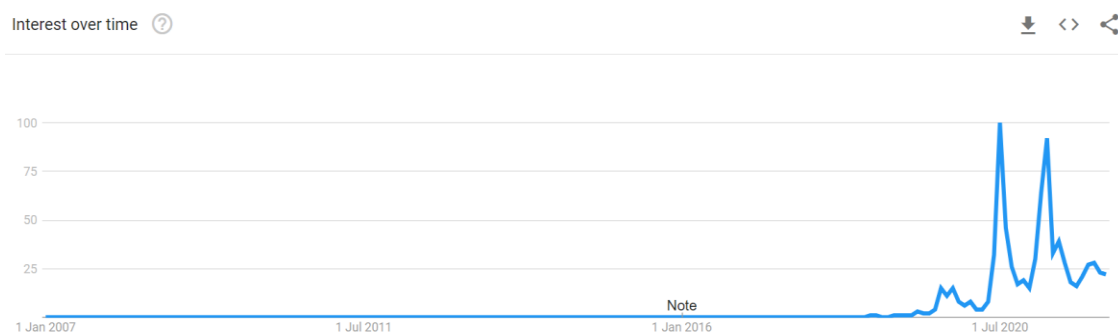


Figure 6. “Cancel culture” as a US American trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)

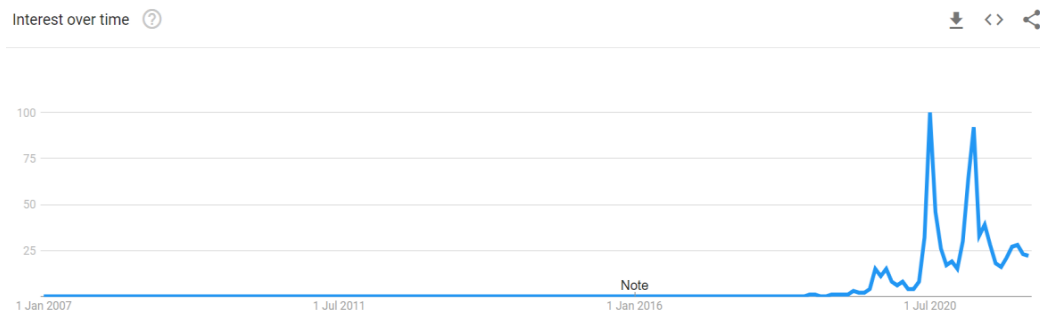


Figure 7. “Cancel culture” as a Spanish trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)

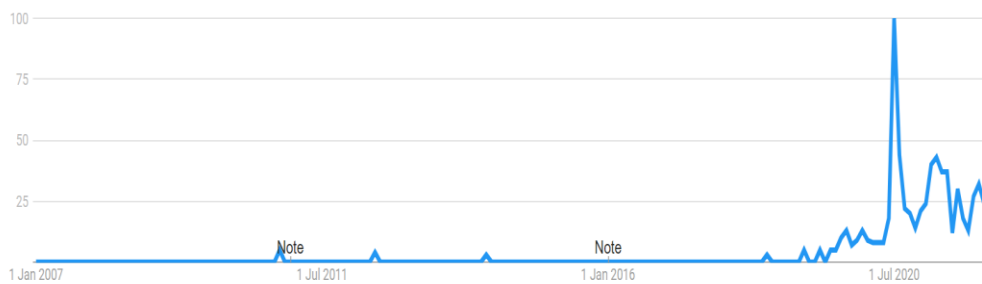
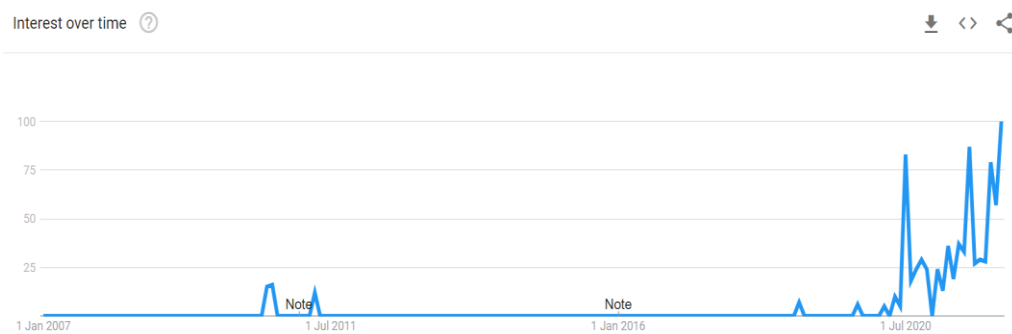


Figure 8. “Cultura de cancelación” as a Spanish trend (2007-2022) (Google Trends, 2022)



As a general trend, we can clearly see how “cancel culture” is a newer term than political correctness; it began as early as 2019. The worldwide and US American trends, once again, are eerily similar. The main difference is that on a global scale, cancel culture was searched for most in July 2020, while in the case of the United States it was March 2021. In both the worldwide and USA searches, related queries appeal to the definition of cancel culture (with searches like “what is cancel culture”), however, the related topics vary. On the global search,

related topics include “racism”, “woke” or “ostracism” while in the USA’s case also include specific names, like “Dr. Seuss” or “Dave Chapelle” (Google Trends, 2022).

In the Spanish case, both the English and Spanish search for the term spiked in June 2020. What is interesting in this case is that since then, the translated version seems to replace the English term; “cultura de cancelacion” has continued to grow, peaking the last month included in the study, January 2022. Related searches in Spain also include “woke” or “meaning”. Interestingly enough, the term is most searched for in Catalonia, contrasting with the previous term that was most popular in Madrid (Google Trends, 2022).

These graphs also portray the motivation behind the present work. Cancel culture is a new, yet monopolizing term. Its popularity is undeniable and recent. By studying the considerations and consequences of cancel culture now, businesses can be at the forefront of communication, reputation, and customer satisfaction. Although seemingly unapparent, political correctness and cancel culture hold anyone and anything accountable, and companies can be better prepared if they increase their awareness of these two factors.

3.2 Trends of both terms

3.2.1 Political correctness

Political correctness is previous to cancel culture. While political correctness has been a worry of communicators, academics, educators and even comedians for decades, cancel culture has just only begun to rise. As of 1996, Edna Andrews was already investigating the ramifications of political correctness in the way the English language labels people, for example, calling someone *hearing impaired* as opposed to *deaf* (p.389). This is an example of how political correctness has been relevant since the late 20th century and is still today. Scalcău (2020) highlights that those debates on political correctness, on who falls victim to it or who yields it as a tool, and whether it does more damage than good, are still ongoing. The persistence of the topic and the debates it creates justifies the interest in the topic and the importance of investigating it.

3.2.2 Cancel culture

Cancel culture is much newer, but clearly the offspring of political correctness. It is the consequence of political correctness put into action. Its root is searching for accountability for

those who are not politically correct. However, Mishan (2020) states that the main quality of cancel culture is that its presence is online. While political correctness can exist within conversations or media outside of social media platforms, cancel culture stems from them. Cancel culture is a tool for individuals to show their discontent towards someone’s stance with the power to hold them accountable. As Bouvier (2020) showcases, it takes something as banal as a twitter hashtag to boycott or penalize people or brands. For these reasons, cancel culture is part of the motivation behind the present paper. It is current, all-encompassing and evolving. Grasping its implications now could benefit brands, or anyone for that matter, to manage their communication and reputation.

3.2.3 The Power of Cancel Culture

To highlight the power of cancel culture, Porter Novelli published a report in 2021 that underlines exactly how cancel culture can define the future of a person or an organization. For example, they have found that 72% of US Americans feel “more empowered”(p.4) than ever to express their opinions on brands, 64% of them feel this is due to the access to social media. Also, almost 70% of American consumers think that canceling a brand can get attention and induce change in the behavior of a company (p.4). More importantly, two-thirds of Americans insist that even if they love the company’s production, they will cancel them if they do something they find wrong, meaning that no company is truly safe from cancel culture (p.5). However, all is not lost, as almost 90% of those surveyed insist that if they see a change in the behavior they originally found problematic, they would forgive the company. Furthermore, 73% explain that they are less likely to cancel companies that are “Purpose-driven” (p.5) and are also more likely to forgive a brand if it's their first mistake. The following data portrays more information about consumer patterns and cancel culture.

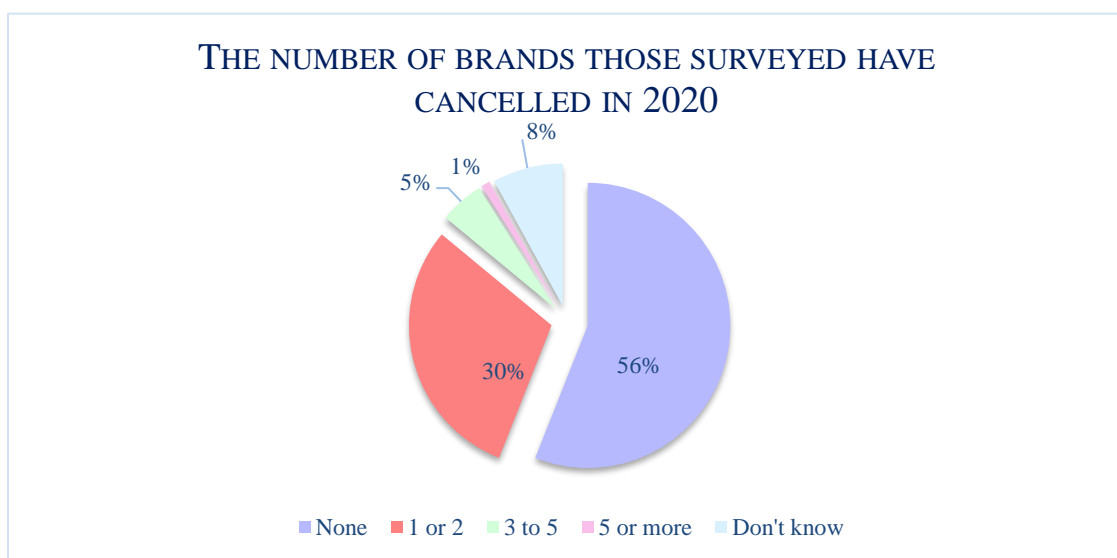
Figure 9. Main reasons why those surveyed would cancel a company. Source prepared by the author based on Porter Novelli (2021).

38%	A company to change its ways
27%	A company to change policies/stances surrounding political involvement
26%	A company to fire those responsible for an offensive statement
22%	A company to disassociate itself from someone who did something offensive
19%	A company to take a financial or reputational hit
18%	A company to change branding and/or external representation

15%	A company to share feelings/disapproval to social networks
14%	A company to “go away” completely
2%	Other

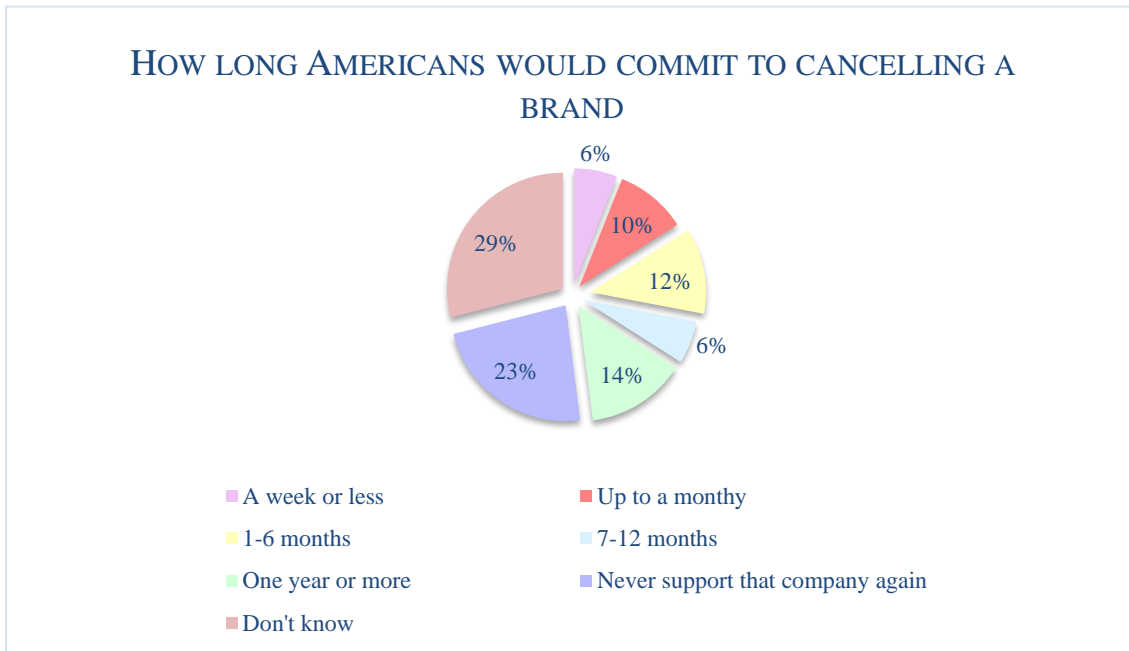
As we can appreciate, the vast majority of those surveyed “cancel” to ensure a certain behavior of the company, while fewer want permanent damage done. This sheds a light on the fact that companies can and should be aware of how to control the possibility of being canceled.

Figure 10. The number of brands those surveyed have cancelled in 2020. Source prepared by the author based on Porter Novelli (2021).



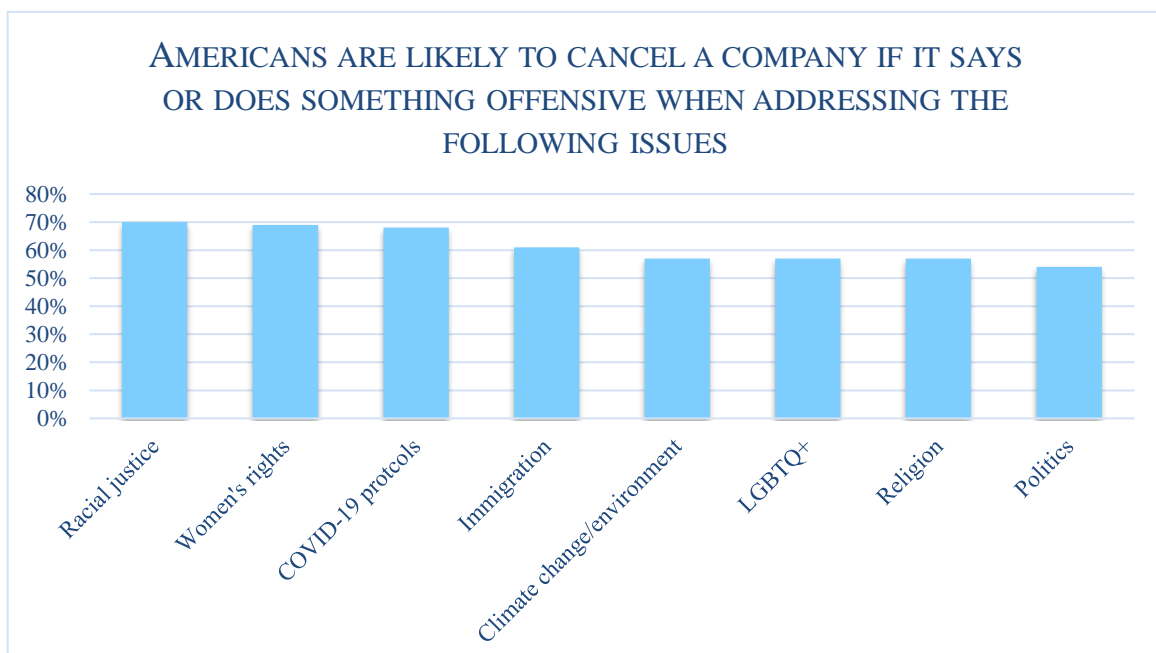
As shown above, although most of those who participated in the study did not cancel a brand during the year 2020, 44% of them did. Despite being in the minority, it is still a substantial number of consumers that have used “canceling” as a tool for advocacy, underlining once again the relevance of the topic.

Figure 11. How long Americans would commit to cancelling a brand. Source prepared by the author based on Porter Novelli (2021).



Despite the data proving a chance of recuperation after being “canceled”, most of those surveyed who chose a timeframe for cancelling, said they would never support a company they have canceled (23%). This poses a clear threat to organizations and underlines the relevance of corporate communication as a buffer to reputational risks.

Figure 12. Americans are likely to cancel a company if it says or does something offensive when addressing the following issues. Source prepared by the author based on Porter Novelli (2021).



Among the reasons behind canceling a brand, those surveyed highlight issues to do with discrimination or inequality, like race or women’s rights, as seen in Figure 12. However, a significant factor is also their commitment to COVID-19 protocols, which shows that consumers are updated and demanding.

Figure 13. Americans cite the following actions a company could take to be “uncancelled”. Source prepared by the author based on Porter Novelli (2021).

43%	Make a public statement of apology
41%	Clarify the situation (e.g., why a statement or action was made)
40%	Create programs and policies internally to address the change needed
33%	Fire the person responsible for making the offensive statement/ policy
20%	Change branding and or external representation
17%	Make a donation to an associated nonprofit

However, despite the probability of unforgiveness as shown in Figure 11 (almost one-quarter would never support the company again), most proposed a solution to the cancelation, as seen in Figure 13 above. This is significant to consider since it is important for companies to, not only understand the implications of cancel culture, but the possible actions to take if cancelled.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Defining the terms

4.1.1 Political correctness

Political correctness, as mentioned, has been prevalent for the last few decades (Andrews, 1996), and has become increasingly relevant as of late. Not only does it define our political debates but has also seeped its way into the day-to-day communication of organizations. Pop and Sim (2021) explain how the prevalence of “non-discriminatory language” (p.317) is a must for today’s companies; both for communication within the company and without, towards external stakeholders. The new rules that guide communications (in saying what is right and what is not) are defined by political correctness. The authors define political correctness as “unspoken rules of respectability” which include inclusive and impartial language as well as one that does not target any minority group.

Although Pop and Sim (2021) highlight the importance of political correctness as a guiding light for organizations to ensure respect and avoid inconvenience, they also underline the many negative factors related to it. They explain how many times, in choosing political correctness over anything else, people might feel censored, or the very opposite of its objective: intolerant. While political correctness in business helped push companies towards a larger social equality, it has also built unwanted tension out of fear or disagreement over these ambiguous rules.

Political correctness and cancel culture are inherently related; they are both ambiguous movements that dictate social, acceptable rules. Thiele (2021) describes both phenomena as a “question of power” (p.50), as they both have the power to shape, praise or condemn anyone or anything. The author explains that they are similar in their aspirations of inclusivity, as well as their flaw of censorship. Although similar, political correctness is a more flexible term, while cancel culture has steadfast definitions of what is correct and what isn’t, as well as being action-based: cancel culture calls for accountability (Romano, 2021).

4.1.2 Cancel culture

Cancel culture could be seen as the follow-through of political correctness. Clark (2020) sees it as “an expression of agency” (p. 88) as there is action behind it, mainly boycotting. People withdraw their support if they do not see their values or the respect for their standards. She continues saying that it is a sort of justice of last resort where people cancel celebrities or brands to ensure accountability.

Cancel culture is the consequence of the previous, short-lived “call-out culture” (Romano, 2020a, para. 18). While call-out culture simply points fingers, underlining inadequate behavior, cancel culture strives to end careers, products or induce deep change among the perpetrators (Romano, 2020a). Romano (2020a) explains how canceling behavior became more and more present as social injustices, especially those consequents of racism, were amplified through social media. The trend of cancel culture is especially US American, as they are the origin of both the term political correctness and cancel culture (Florence, 2015).

Given that the US is the origin of the term, it is unsurprising that most research about it is based on the American population. For example, a study of Pew Research Center in 2020 concludes that 44% of the population has heard about cancel culture (para.1), with a much higher frequency among the younger cohort (64% of those aged 18-29 have heard the term) (para.3). Most of those surveyed ensure that cancel culture to them means accountability, while fewer

described it as censorship. However, there was a clear schism, the more left-leaning the person, the more favorable view of cancel culture (para.6-8) (Schaeffer, 2021).

4.2 The terms put into practice

Online trends are not the only reason that highlight the consequence of this current movement. Originating in Trump's unorthodox language, many journalists agree that political correctness is of the utmost importance in expressing oneself, as it is seen as a symbol of "diplomacy", and it is being careful towards others' beliefs and cultures (Hannah, 2016). However, years earlier, Coates (2009) also underscored political correctness as a sign of "tolerance". He further explains that by being politically correct, you keep improving and become better at understanding people.

As a consequence of political correctness, cancel culture is, as well, a growing concern for brands. The fear of being canceled and the increased degree of accountability make companies vulnerable to the constant changing will of the general public. Bakhtiari (2020) assures that cancel culture is reshaping how brands approach social issues: while they could stay silent before, they "can no longer remain neutral" (para. 7) as silence is seen as compliance. He mentions the case of *Oatly*, the oat milk "eco-friendly" brand, being boycotted because they sold their shares to a company engaged in deforestation, which didn't align with their environmentally oriented consumers.

Edelman's 2019 Trust Barometer Special Report sheds a light on how important the seemingly banal aspect of voicing socio-political opinions can be. 64% of the consumers surveyed would buy or boycott a product according to the position of a company. A year earlier, this percentage stood at 51%, clearly showing how this is a blooming trend. 69% feel trusting companies is important because of their impact on society, but only 38% of them actually do trust brands. Edelman's Barometer goes further by showing that the more trusted the brand is (trust built through their product, through the customer, and their position in society as a whole), the more loyal consumers are, and the more likelihood to "buy first" (p.17), meaning the brand is their first option. Therefore, being politically correct and avoiding getting "canceled" can translate into profitable numbers.

4.3 Social media and Corporate Communication

Social Media is a key component of our lives today. The most popular platforms have billions of users. This represents access to countless clients at arm's reach of any company, and a challenge for corporate communication. According to Gómez et al. (2019), as of 2018, users spent an average of 135 minutes a day on social media, showcasing how said platforms have become conventional. This significant usage of social media has changed the paradigm where corporate communication operates, from one of full control and one way information to one of partial control and bilateral information.

Such is the importance of social media, that the absence of companies online can deprive them of access to consumers, as well as valuable information that could improve both their communication and their brand equity. Capriotti et al. (2021) assure that the “organization’s active presence” (p.39) and interactivity can create a bi-directional communication between companies and social media users as well as increase engagement. However, the triumph of a company online does not merely rely on the presence of the brand on given networks, but the interaction between them and the audience. It is the success of these exchanges that truly impact a company's reputation (Capriotti et al., 2021). It is for this reason that political correctness and the threat of cancel culture are so relevant in business communication today. By studying these dynamics, a corporation can be at the forefront of communication and, of course, avoid crises.

4.4 Corporate communication theories as typologies

Communication is essential and seemingly all-encompassing, but it is still a relatively new discipline. Theories about it are therefore in constant development and adaptation (Cornelissen, 2013). In the following project, several theories will be underscored to aim for a comprehensive view of corporate communication theories but will finally choose one that fits best with this work, and that will ease understanding of the research questions.

Mayfield et al (2020) categorize corporate communication theories into seven typologies, where theories with commonalities could be easily classified, and therefore referenced. Each typology notes a tool, a mechanism, or a predominant characteristic of the theories they represent. This is better understood through the typologies themselves, which are as follows. The first is “Channel and Barriers” (p.28), which relates to how communicators transfer their message. The second is “Cultural Characteristics and Influences” (p.28), which highlights how corporate communication is defined by cultural aspects. The third is “Flows and Patterns”

(p.29) which relates to the path of communication and the network it uses. The fourth is “Meaning-Making and Discovery” (p.29) which underlines communication was more than a transmission, but also as an exploration of ideas. The fifth is “Motivation and Persuasion” (p.30) which is guided by how communication can influence its target. The sixth is “Organizational Structures” (p.31) which answers as to how the arrangement of an organization stimulates communication. The seventh and final typology is “Reasons and Representation” (p.31) which highlights the rationality behind communication and the motivation for it.

Understanding these different typologies allows for a full-scale view of the different approaches of communication theories. For the sake of thoroughness, two theories will be explained further to make sense of the different perspectives on corporate communication, especially those related to political correctness and cancel culture.

The first is the Social Influence Theory (p.154), part of the Motivation and Persuasion typology. Mayfield et al (2020) describe this theory as one that focuses on how an entity can influence another’s opinions or attitudes. This applies specifically to the present research as cancel culture and its consequences focus on how values are spread and how the belief in them can have a negative, or positive, repercussion on others' patterns of consumption or reputation. In straightforward terms, this theory contemplates how we influence each other and our actions through communication.

The second is the Critical Theory of Communication Approach to Organizations (p.174), part of the Reasons and Representations typology. This theory claims that corporate communications should aim to bridge the interests of the organization and the rest of the stakeholders; corporate communications are not to be “neutral”. This links back to political correctness and cancel culture as they are a reaction of consumers’ not seeing their interests reflected in corporate communications. It is a demand to be politically correct, in other words, a lack of neutrality, just like the theory delineates.

4.5 Theory and Practice of Corporate Communications

Cornelissen (2013) highlights two main theories regarding corporate communications: communications theory and management theory. The first considers “rhetorical strategies and symbolism” (p.17), meaning that it focuses on how these aspects influence their communication, and as a result, the target audience. It focuses more concretely on the

procedure and effects of organizations when communicating, which are affected by other processes and actors in the organization.

The second one he points out is management theory, which focuses on more practical and applicable activities. Symbolism is seen as a “means to an end” (p.17) rather than the final result. Under this perspective, communication is yielded as a tool to ensure processes and the involvement of actors, rather than being a byproduct of these. Cornelissen subscribes more to the latter because he believes it is a more faithful reflection of corporate communication today. While the more passive approach of communications theory may be an appropriate one for last century communication, today, communication in and by organizations is more holistic.

Within management theory he identifies two further functions: strategic management and operational management. The first relates to the fact that communication is an evolving, unique concept, and is an area in and off itself that can and should be applied to others (for example, a communication department that has a say in the finance department’s communication, communicating their goals). It aims for a long-term, sustained relationship with communication, as it sees it as an integral part of the organization’s strategy as a whole. The second, operational management, is the opposite. It has a more tactical approach, meaning that rather than being an area, it is applied practically as it is needed. It is more short-term and pragmatic and is viewed as a case-to-case basis (for example, a finance department that communicates their goals with their own basic guidelines). Cornelissen subscribes to the first rather than the latter.

This links to his other dual perspective on communication. Besides the two proposed theories and functions, Cornelissen (2013) also highlights two approaches to corporate communication. He explains how the domain of corporate communication has long been divided by two rival approaches, that of “theoretical inquiry” and “professional practice” (p.13). While he believes the two are valid, he clarifies that the better approach is to combine both. There is no way one can understand the practice of corporate communication without the theory, and vice versa.

4.6 Corporate communication, the Internet, and social media

Fawkes and Gregory (2000), years ago, already delineated the huge impact of the Internet on corporate communication. They explain that, given the changing environment of where communication takes place, theories and models should make sure to consider the nuances of this. As a baseline, they explain that the Internet has redefined the traditional levels of

communication. These include interpersonal communication, group communication, institutional communication, and society-wide communication (p.110). While before the Internet there were defined spaces for each level (for example, interpersonal communication was face-to-face interactions), the existence of online networks has blurred these spaces. This is especially true as the Internet can even join different levels (for example, having a person-to-person interaction in a public network where others can see).

They continue explaining how there is a benefit to this, as the increased interconnection allows a larger flow of information and therefore makes communication more powerful, but they also warn that communication on the Internet is dangerous if not done carefully. While “traditional gatekeepers” (p.112) like journalists, have lost power to control the narrative, so have brands. Furthermore, this power of control has been transferred to powerful people online (or influencers).

Today, this has been exacerbated. Social media rules much of the interactions online, and brands cannot afford to ignore them. Vasquez and Velez (2011) point out how around 80% of global companies have presence in at least one social network. They also stress the importance of social media as a low-cost tool, but above all, a tool that guarantees opportunities. This is because companies can not only share information as needed but measure the success of it.

Linos (2018) also draws attention to the fact that social media has changed the way organizations communicate. It has improved internal communication, making it more effective; it has made customer service more accessible and “responsive” (p.37); it has readapted communication and general corporate strategy and has been credited with the growth of Corporate Social Responsibility.

In the present project, the analysis and investigation will follow Cornelissen’s (2013) perspective of strategic management. This is because it seems as the most specific yet comprehensive approach. While the typologies of communication are valuable in their specificity, Cornelissen’s more general approach allows for adaptation. Furthermore, since the main issue discussed is inherently an online phenomenon, the work is also adapted towards Fawkes and Gregory’s (2000) perspective on the Internet nuancing the way we communicate.

5. Objectives and questions

As presented in the title of the present work, the aim is to study the effects of the social phenomena of political correctness and cancel culture on corporate communication, specifically through social media. With the support of case studies, this project will shed a light on how different enterprises are handling these phenomena, and how they could handle it better.

Main objective: investigate how political correctness and cancel culture are defining today's online communication due to their impact on the company's functioning and determine what to avoid and what to indulge when it comes to these two factors. In other words, understand, through case studies, how political correctness and cancel culture are determinants in corporate communication today, and what behavior is best when confronting them.

Specific objectives:

1. Establish the relationship between political correctness, cancel culture, and online corporate communication
2. Specify in what ways these two aspects affect corporate reputation and their subsequent communication
3. Evaluate the success of the case studies, and suggest a path towards improvement in future crises

The questions considered as guiding principles are:

- Are political correctness and cancel culture a threat to corporations online?
- Are companies successful in avoiding the potential damage brought by these two aspects? How?
- How relevant are political correctness and cancel culture to corporate communication?
- Is it possible to improve or prepare for the impact of said phenomena?

The hypothesis is:

“Political correctness and cancel culture can impact a company's profit and reputation via online communication; ignoring their potential will have a negative effect for the company”

6. Methodology

The present work has been researched and organized with the following sources.

Firstly, throughout the project, there will be a constant reference to academic literature review. Since there is a reliance on definitions, such as political correctness or cancel culture, it is important to outline these. Among these sources, there are academic articles, books and online resources. Since the attempt of this work is to be as comprehensive as possible, the wide variety of sources strives to ensure a high level of accuracy. There are articles from communication journals, such as *Strategic Corporate Communication in the Digital Age* and books such as *Corporate Communications: Theory and Practice*.

However, there is an inclusion of non-academic sources due to the inherent novelty of the topic, as well as it being native to online spaces. As such, sources like *Forbes* or *Vox*, online journalistic sources, have been used. This is not only useful in that these sources appeal to the topic, but also contribute to the objective of accuracy.

Secondly, quantitative data will also be used to better portray the research questions. Data sourced from reports or surveys will be mentioned. This is to make sure that information is supported by formal data, as well as ensuring the comprehension of this study. Opinion polls, significant in a topic like cancel culture will be studied, like *Edelman's Trust Barometer*. Furthermore, data from *Pew Research Center* or private reports will also be showcased to guarantee as much precision as possible. This quantitative data will support the qualitative aspects drawn from the mentioned literature review.

Thirdly, the analysis is based on three case studies. According to Zainal (2007), case studies are a fundamental type of investigation as they allow us to understand the context of the research questions. It can exemplify the issue at hand through concrete instances. In the present case, the three case studies are meant to showcase the diversity of cancel culture put into practice. The first case will follow the issues faced by Pepsi after an unideal advertisement, even though this ad tried to be politically correct. The second case follows the canceling of Victoria's Secret, due to their not-updated values and disregard for the public's demands. The final case will investigate the canceling of J.K Rowling, author of Harry Potter, due to comments about the LGBTQ+ community.

The reason behind this choice is, once again, the ambition of accuracy. The first will highlight how, despite best efforts, a company can still face scrutiny when trying to be politically correct. It will consequently investigate why this attempt failed. The second will underline the importance of social listening, and not undermining the power of the public. The third will

pinpoint how an apparently inconspicuous comment can start a domino effect that ends with the brand, in this case, personal brand, suffering.

Fourthly and finally, this project will attempt to draw conclusions based on a comparative analysis between the three cases, trying to diagnose what went wrong in each, how they differ, and what we can learn from them. Through this analysis, the research questions will be answered. The threat of political correctness and cancel culture and the best way to deal with them will be underscored.

7. Analysis

In this section, three case studies will be explored: the case of Pepsi's ad featuring Kendall Jenner; the case of Victoria's Secret dealings with an unfortunate leadership and general discontent; and the case of J.K. Rowling, author of Harry Potter, which will illustrate how cancel culture does not discriminate and can affect brands, people, or both at the same time. All cases follow a similar structure: the context and what happened surrounding the brand or person, the reaction online and canceling of the entity, the consequences for those involved, and a comparison with a successful case and the learning one can draw from the situation.

7.1 The case of Pepsi: inactive activism

7.1.1 Context

In the United States, since 2013, there's been a movement denominated as "Black Lives Matter", which follows racial justice issues in the country, mainly those regarding police shootings of black people (Cowling, 2021). For this reason, there have been constant protests appealing to a change of system. Although controversial in many states and in some age cohorts, the Black Lives Matter movement has, in general, taken root in diverse and young US American communities. During 2016, the movement gained traction with football stars like Colin Kaepernick voicing their opinion in favor of it (Cowling, 2021).

Dozé (2018) explains how the [Pepsi advertisement](#) came out in April 2017, within the context of social activism and increased celebrity involvement. The video shows how, little by little, a diverse group of people start joining a demonstration, while drinking Pepsi. The protest does not have any explicit objective, but you can see signs with neutral slogans like "join the conversation" or peace signs, with no real relation to a movement. Kendall Jenner, famous

supermodel, leaves a photoshoot stripping away her makeup and outfit to join the group. When the demonstration reaches policemen, Jenner hands a Pepsi can to the officer, and everybody smiles and laughs, followed by the slogan of the campaign “Live for Now”.

Figure 14. Screenshot of Kendall Jenner in the Pepsi advertisement (Yadav, 2017).



The advertisement was heavily criticized and was soon taken down. Why? It will be explained in the following sections.

7.1.2 Reaction to the ad: getting cancelled

The production of the ad hints towards a Millennial, younger demographic, given the cast and choice of celebrity for it. Consequently, the reaction was the largest from this target audience, which took to Twitter to voice their concerns (Dozé, 2018). There was widespread mockery online, highlighting how tone-deaf the advertisement was. Among those reacting online, we find Martin Luther King’s daughter, Bernice King, who tweeted the following.

Figure 15. Tweet by Bernice King alluding to the controversial Pepsi Ad. (King, 2017)



She portrays her father, Martin Luther King Jr., leader of the US American Civil Rights movement, mocking how if he had had a Pepsi, the movement would have been easier for him. The tweet gained traction, with more than a quarter million likes. Other tweets on the topics ridicule the ad comparing real-life experiences of protesters in demonstrations being victimized by the police, and the image of Kendall Jenner happily handing a Pepsi to an officer (Grady, 2017).

In their book *A Deeper Sickness: Journal of America in the Pandemic Year*, Peacock and Peterson (2022) explain how Pepsi was canceled online due to them “making light of the situation” (p.159). The most common accusation towards Pepsi was that of “woke-washing” (Sobande, 2019). Sobande (2019) defines being “woke” as being a person who is “invested in addressing social injustices” (p.2723). Just like any kind of washing, woke-washing is pretending, or superficially committing, to being woke (Howard, 2021). Sobande (2019) explains that there was public outcry against Pepsi because they chose a model that was privileged and white, which was the opposite representation of the Black Lives Matter movement. She continues saying that portraying Jenner as the savior, with the help of Pepsi, made the campaign distance itself from a real movement, and consequently, its target audience.

Despite the immediate criticism, Pepsi initially supported the release of the advertisement, underlining the idea of diversity, which only added fuel to the fire (Dozé, 2018). Eventually, they issued a formal apology, explaining how their intentions were not to make a mockery of any movement, and how they “had missed the mark” (Victor, 2017). However, this was too little, too late. The ad has become an Internet sensation, a culture phenomenon that is cited whenever there is a police and racial issue in the United States. After George Floyd’s death in 2020 (years later the initial release of the ad) which motivated massive demonstrations worldwide, people started deriding the advertisement once again. Neither the brand nor Jenner have managed to fully escape this misstep, already 5 years ago (O’Malley, 2020).

Figure 16. Tweet about Pepsi and Kendall Jenner during the George Floyd movement, three years after the initial advertisement aired (Young, 2020).



7.1.3 Consequences

Pepsi was promptly scrutinized on social media. Five days after the ad's release, there were two and a half million posts about it on Twitter alone (Meister, 2019). Joyce (2017) analyzed the online effects of Pepsi's mistake. The mentions of Pepsi on social media skyrocketed, with a "21000%+ increase" in two days (para. 4); they were mostly criticisms. The sentiment towards the brand dropped drastically, with almost 60% of mentions labeled as negative two days after the ad's release. Two days before the streaming of the video, Pepsi had around 80% positive mentions, showcasing the uproar caused by the advertisement. The most popular word to describe the campaign online was "tone-deaf" (para.13).

Nevertheless, Pepsi's revenue was seldomly affected. The growth of profit was of 1%; although this is not a large change, and very much in line with the history of the company's profit, it appears the scandal did not have a large consequence in terms of profit (PepsiCo, 2017). However, Pepsi's profits only in the United States did leave something to be desired, as their market grew the least; Pepsi's CFO called it a "toe stub" (Hirsch, 2018). Nevertheless, even though the consequences did not affect PepsiCo's profits directly, we can appreciate how the reputational loss is still ongoing. Add to the fact that Pepsi is a reference every time there is a police brutality incident, as mentioned earlier, Pepsi has now become a cautionary tale to other companies about involving oneself in movements only partially. Neuro Insight (2018) explains how the advertisement was not clearly thought through, and how Pepsi's mistakes have ensured other companies do not follow suit, as an example of a "legacy you don't want for your brand" (para.1).

7.1.4 Lessons learnt and role models

Much to Pepsi's own despair, their case has been a lesson learnt for many brands in the face of social conflict. Berkowitz (2020) explains how many of the reactions from brands since have been inspired by the on-the-fence attitude Pepsi portrayed in their ad in 2017. While Pepsi didn't satisfy any audience due to their ambiguity, brands are now decisively picking an ideology to represent.

In her article *Believe in Something*, Nair (2019) explains how the failure of Pepsi was huge because it was "easy to see right through" (p.18) and clearly superficial. She continues saying that it is logical that the ad has been included in marketing lessons and case studies. It failed to

consolidate a favorable image among its target audience and managed to dissatisfy so many groups of people. However, she continues explaining that the failure of Pepsi was not due to the impossibility to satisfy demanding audiences, but simply a lack of research and courage of commitment when airing the ad.

Nevertheless, Nair (2019) continues saying that there are successful companies that have managed to exploit movements in their favor, even the more contentious Black Lives Matter movement. She explains how “corporate wokeness is now big business” (p.18), meaning that it is the companies’ best interest to get involved. In sum, like the title of article states, it is important for companies to “believe in something” (p.18). A prime example of success of this is Nike.

Nike, a sponsor of the NFL (US American football league), took a huge risk in 2018 when they made Colin Kaepernick the face of the brand (Nair, 2019). During the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, Kaepernick, a football player, decided to kneel during the US National Anthem as a sign of protest regarding police brutality against black people in the country. To many Americans, especially demographically white and older men, this was an offensive move, but to younger more diverse audiences, this made him an icon of the movement (Boykoff & Carrington, 2019).

However, the decision was not anodyne. Nike almost took back their decision of making Kaepernick their brand ambassador. It was when they realized that the consumers loyal to Nike as a brand (diverse and young) exceeded those loyal to the NFL (older, white, and more traditional) that they took a leap of faith (Nair, 2019). There were many who boycotted the brand, especially the more traditional sector of American society. However, even with the dissent expressed, Nike’s sales increased by 31% after the release of the ad (Martinez, 2018).

The choice of words was also key. The ad reads “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just do it” (Ullate, 2018). The link of the company’s slogan with the campaign linked their personal values with that of the ambassador’s. As it has been mentioned, consumers are less likely to cancel purpose-driven companies, making this ad a successful move for Nike (Porter Novelli, 2021). Furthermore, the ad was acknowledged as a risky move by the public, meaning that the perception was not deemed as ego-driven, which worked in

favor of Nike (Kim et al, 2020). The Nike ad was a two-fold success: an increase in sales, and a new-found reputation of being brave.

Figure 17. Nike’s ad featuring Colin Kaepernick (Ullate, 2018)



Pepsi set a precedent and underlined two lessons learnt that other companies have considered since: the company must be explicit in their values and their beliefs (Nair, 2019) and they must not underestimate the value of “e-word-of-mouth” (Taylor, 2017), meaning that they must be conscious that their every move can be scrutinized online. Pepsi learnt that, with a single input, the consequences can be magnified and devastating online.

7.2 The case of Victoria’s Secret: un-model behavior

7.2.1 Context

Chrisler et al. (2013) already outlined a decade ago how reactions to the Victoria’s Secret Fashion show on Twitter were starting to question the integrity of the event. Through their study, they examined tweets about the show before it started. There were many more tweets categorized as “neutral” than “positive” (p. 650), and around 10% were negative. Furthermore, around 15% of tweets were related to the topics of weight, eating disorders and social comparison. The authors conclude that, considering the tweets related to the show, one can presume that it promotes body image distortion and a general threat to those most vulnerable to these issues.

Body image has not been the only concern that has followed Victoria's Secret; the general lack of diversity has been a point of contention for years. Andrews (2015) explains how the star-

studded catwalk is distracting from the fact that the brand has made little to no effort to become more inclusive. She continued saying that out of 44 models, 7 were Black and 2 were from Asian descent: very few considering Victoria's Secret's international nature. She is also keen to underline how this diversity is not news: other brands have been quick to include a diverse spectrum of women in their runway shows, leaving Victoria's Secret as an emblem of stagnation.

Clearly, through the years, Victoria's Secret has accumulated a reputation of being slow to progress with the demands of society. However, the controversy reached its limits when Ed Razek, the company's CMO, stated that his show (as he was the main driver behind it) would not have plus size or transgender models. According to him, they do not sell the "fantasy" (para.3) he wanted to accomplish (Cadenas, 2018). Furthermore, his comments put Razek in the spotlight, and many were quick to bring up further controversies. Silver-Greenberg et al. (2020) point out that Razek has had a history of harassment in the show, to the point where models who have complained were never re-hired, earning Victoria's Secret a reputation of protecting predators.

7.2.2 Reaction: getting cancelled

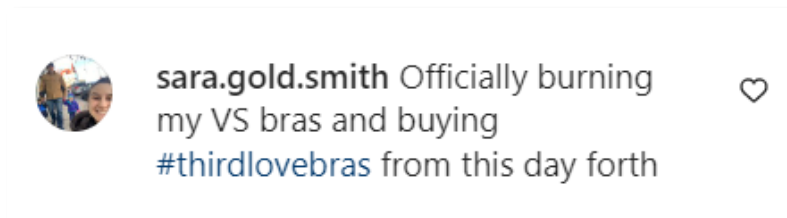
As explained earlier, Victoria's Secret has been under fire for years, and many of the dissent towards the brand has been taken to social media (Chrisler et al., 2013). However, the Ed Razek polemic was the breaking point for many. As a consequence to his comments, there was an uproar on Twitter, with hashtags such as #CancelVS or #ByeVicky, where users complained and even went as far as to burn their Victoria's Secret products (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021).

Figure 18. Tweet showing the discontent born from Razek's comments (Mantle, 2018)



Furthermore, Robin (2018) illustrates that the lingerie brand *Third Love* was quick to publish an open letter to Victoria's Secret in the *New York Times* only days after the comments by Razek were published. Third Love's co-founder and co-CEO criticized Razek's comments underlining that the fantasy he wants to sell is nonexistent and serves to sell to the male gaze (meaning they cater for men), rather than to real women. She continued by saying that it is amazing to her that in 2018 a CMO is so careless with his words, and so bluntly admits his lack of inclusivity. The open letter ends by slamming Victoria's Secret comparing it to Third Love, citing that the latter has reality in mind, for women who "go to work, breastfeed their children, play sports, care for ailing parents, and serve their country" (para. 3). This ensured support for Third Love, especially as a response to their posts. Comments like the following figure were overwhelmingly present on their Instagram post, which received over twenty-thousand likes.

Figure 19. An example of a comment showing support for Third Love while removing support for Victoria's Secret (Third Love, 2018).



7.2.3 Consequences

Only a few days later after the open letter by Third Love was published, Victoria's Secret announced that its CEO, Jan Singer, was being replaced (Robert, 2018). The almost immediate reaction hinted towards a change in Victoria's Secret. However, the leadership change in 2018 was not the only one. In 2018, the operating income of the third quarter dropped by 89% (Cheng, 2018). Furthermore, they suffered losses of over 43 million dollars, as well as closing down over 50 stores by early 2019 (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). Another significant change happened in 2019: Ed Razek quit as CMO of Victoria's Secret. After the 2018 Victoria's Secret Show being the least watched in its history, a result of Razek's comments, the former Chief of Marketing decided to leave the brand (Mevlani, 2019).

However, the management outcomes were not the only ones. The Victoria's Secret brand has lost reputation and trustworthiness in the face of consumers. Elan (2020) explains that recently,

Victoria's Secret has undergone a change towards a more inclusive and diverse image, however, this change is only "skin deep", as it seems that they are still not satisfying consumers who ask for diversity. Many consumers have deemed the move as too late and cannot support Victoria's Secret in their newfound diversity as they expected more from the industry leader (Tweedy, 2020).

However, the most significant consequence in light of the storm was the fact that the 2019 Victoria's Secret fashion show was canceled. Due to the poor sales and the controversies experienced during the year 2018, the once token of fashion was lost for that year. The official statement of the brand was one where they had decided their marketing had to evolve (Gajanan, 2019).

The rebrand of Victoria's Secret is underway and we have yet to see if it will be successful. Their rebrand includes diverse models from different backgrounds, trans women and pregnant women, as well as including influencers that represent their new image. New staff and creatives have been hired to portray a more modern image of what Victoria's Secret is today (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). The question remains whether this will be enough to neutralize the bad reputation garnered over the years.

7.2.4 Comparisons, role models and lessons learnt

As we have established, Victoria's Secret presence online has been controversial for years. Ahuja and Kerketta (2021) explain that, even with the new attempts at rebranding the lingerie giant, they have lost most of its appeal. On the one hand, they are still deemed as controversial by the most politically correct audiences, and on the other they have lost the sex appeal they offered when their image was one of fantasy. They further explain that the attempt at changing is superficial, and therefore people are still reluctant to support them out-right, as they might suffer some "form of social ostracization" (p.39) because they support a brand still deemed as contentious.

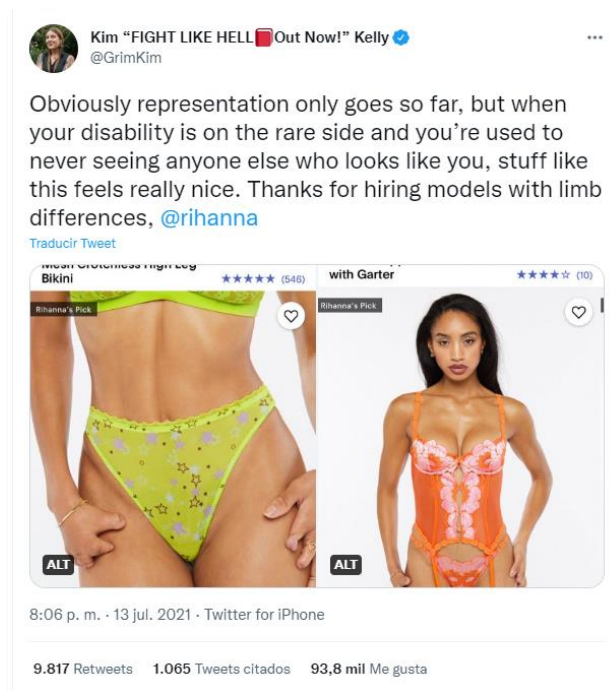
Diversity on the roster of brands is welcomed. Thompson (2020) explains how Adobe's report on consumer choice shows how American consumers want diversity, as over 60% of those surveyed think it an important factor in a company's communication. Also, almost 40% say they are more likely to trust a brand that showcases diversity. She describes how the recent

missteps of several brands regarding diversity is due to a lack of “consumer intimacy” (para.13), which is understanding the interests and needs of a broad spectrum of consumers. Consumer intimacy is accomplished with research and making sure that those making decisions have access to different opinions and filters. Similar to the lesson of “believing in something” in the previous case, it is important that the values that represent a brand start from within; if decision-makers welcome diversity, this will be reflected in their communication.

A prime example of being led by diversity is one of Victoria’s Secret main competitors, Savage x Fenty, the singer Rihanna’s brand. In general, the parent brand Fenty, which also produces make-up, has been praised for considering diversity like never before (Chan, 2019). Lian and Gwynne (2022) explain how Savage x Fenty represent an image of women for women (contrary to Victoria’s Secret reputation), and how they explicitly said that their show aims to “celebrate everybody” (p.99). Sutton (2021) highlights how body diversity, including women who have “limb differences” (para.1) is something other brands should imitate.

Evidently, the reaction to Savage x Fenty did not go unnoticed.

Figure 20. Author Kim Kelly tweets about the new Savage x Fenty model, receiving over ninety-thousand likes (Kelly, 2021)



Hakeem (2020) points out that Savage x Fenty has successfully challenged the industry status quo, by redefining what is seen as sexy or elegant, as well as challenging the norm in terms of

fashion shows. Their innovative approach in choosing models and presenting their products has established Savage x Fenty at the forefront of the business. Her research shows that, although not free of critics, consumers see the brand's actions and values as one and the same, and therefore its reputation and perception is positive. She further claims that this positive reputation inspires women to publish online to illustrate how related they feel.

Figure 21. Reality TV show star and Drag Queen Aquaria tweeting about the diversity of the show where she participated, among many other celebrities (Aquaria, 2019).



7.3 The case of J.K. Rowling: author of controversy

J.K Rowling is not a corporation. Although it may seem unrelated, the choice of an individual was purposeful. It is important to analyze the canceling of someone online to understand the ramifications. Although many have been canceled or ostracized due to statements or actions, J.K. Rowling has been a strategic choice because she represents a brand, that of her work, mainly Harry Potter. It was therefore considered as pertinent to include a case such as this so that organizations can understand a full spectrum of possibilities in being politically correct (or incorrect) and the judgement of cancel culture. Individuals very often represent their brands and can become the pillar of their reputation (as we have seen earlier, Rihanna and Rizek were both patrons of their brands).

7.3.1 Context

Ward (2016) explains how J.K. Rowling is the now famous author of the Harry Potter books series. She is the world's richest author with an estimated net worth of one billion US dollars. Her story is one from rags to riches, where she had to live paycheck to paycheck until her work finally took off. In 2017, Khosla wrote how the relationship between Rowling and her fans was

one that “would define a generation” (para.1). Her public persona was charming, and the J.K. Rowling name was always available to fans. The author set up webs and meetings so that fans could meet her and discuss their love for Harry Potter. However, this relationship started to weaken around 2018, due to Rowling’s activity on Twitter.

Despite the nurturing relationship between Rowling and her fans, she started to gain the wrong kind of attention due to her views about trans people. Burns (2019) explains her activity on twitter. From 2017, she had been liking questionable tweets about the definition of trans people, and in 2018 she liked a tweet that described trans women as men wearing dresses. Her team responded saying it was a mistake. However, these were swept under the rug and did not gain traction. It was not until 2019, Burns (2019) explains, where J.K. Rowling tweeted in favor of an infamous trans-excluding activist, that the situation truly escalated, to the point where her stance continued to 2020, with further support and comments of renowned anti-trans opinion-leaders. This is significant especially in light of the demographic of her fanbase: Palmer (2013) clarifies that it is majorly women, and most under the age of 34 (today, in 2022, 43), making them mostly a Millennial base.

7.3.2 Reaction: getting cancelled

The tweet caused an uproar in Twitter. Specter (2020) explains how the LGBTQ+ community had an almost immediate response on Twitter denouncing the tone-deaf nature of Rowling’s tweet. She summarizes much of the sentiment online, highlighting how she was voicing an unconventional opinion about a community she wasn’t a part of, meaning that not only was the comment considered problematic in these circles, but also unnecessary. The issue was exacerbated when Rowling’s response to this was to write an official essay about her opinions on the matter. Romano (2020b) explains that this essay was “full of harmful transphobic stereotypes” (para. 8).

GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), a non-governmental organization highly involved in the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in the media (GLAAD, 2022) tweeted condemning Rowling’s actions, garnering over twelve-thousand likes.

Figure 22. Tweet from GLAAD’s account, mentioning Rowling’s stance on trans people. (GLAAD, 2020).



However, members of the LGBTQ+ community were not the only ones to join the uproar. As Luu (2020) points out, members of the Harry Potter fandom made statements regarding the author’s comments. Popular fan sites like *Muggle Net* released a statement denouncing the comments made, removed Rowling’s name from their site and highlighted that the message of Rowling’s work was one of tolerance, which opposed her personal views. They further criticized J.K. Rowling’s choice to make such statements during pride month (Luu, 2020).

Furthermore, the cast of Harry Potter came out in defense of the trans community as well. Luu (2020) continues saying how Daniel Radcliffe, who played Harry Potter himself, came out in defense of trans women, underling that saying the opposite “goes against all advice given by professional health care associations who have far more expertise on this subject matter than either Jo [Rowling] or I.” (para.6). Emma Watson, who plays Hermione, also released her statement via Twitter, which received over nine-hundred-thousand likes.

Figure 23. Emma Watson Tweets her support of the trans community amidst the Rowling controversy (Watson, 2020).



7.3.3 Consequences

Rowling's online reputation has not recovered. Fresneda (2022) clarifies how even Putin has pointed out J.K. Rowling as a victim of western cancel culture. O'Neill (2021) explains how a book event centered around Harry Potter in New Zealand was canceled as a direct consequence of Rowling's comments. The organizers claimed that their event was one which aimed for inclusivity, and that the author's comments opposed this.

Vary (2020) interestingly analyses the book market during the first summer of lockdown. While it boomed in general, the exception to that rule was J.K. Rowling, who experienced a third of the average growth of the industry. Although he speculates it might be due to a lack of proper consumer research on behalf of Rowling's team, he also highlights that this stagnation comes very close to Rowling making headlines as a transphobe; he guesses that the two are likely connected. Nevertheless, Nolan (2020) adds that this stagnation has been primarily in the United States, citing that the UK numbers do not show such changes. This could hint towards a larger loyalty to the books in Rowling's home country, or simply a less discerning process when choosing to buy a book.

7.3.4 Comparisons, role models and lessons learnt

J.K. Rowling's case is different from the rest because she is not an organization; consequences are linked directly to her and cannot be remedied with the dismissal of individuals or changing company culture. However, as stated, her actions do involve a larger web, the Harry Potter brand.

Other celebrities have found themselves in the same situation. According to Newcomb (2021), model and cookbook writer Chrissy Teigen faced a huge backlash when several tweets of her bullying people resurfaced. People started questioning Teigen's once charming personality. The response of the author was immediate. She published a long apology, claiming to be sorry, to have learnt and promising to continue learning. She distanced herself of brands she managed, such as *Safely* cleaning supplies (which she started with reality TV-star, Kris Jenner). Today, *Safely* is no longer related to Teigen. Her distancing was a success and the brand managed to remarket itself as a high-end cleaning supply brand, led by Kris Jenner (Savoie, 2021).

It is important for brands to distance themselves from canceled celebrity endorsers or owners. Similar to the cast of Harry Potter, or its fanbases, brands should underline that their values do

not necessarily reflect that of their ambassador, and if possible, get the ambassador to do it as well, as it was in the mentioned case of Teigen and Safely. For example, Knittel and Stango (2014) explain how Tiger Wood's sponsors lost 2% of their value in the following two weeks after his scandal (he had had several affairs). Therefore, a representative of the brand suffering a cancellation can directly impact the brand. The essential action is to distance oneself from the brand ambassador by highlighting how they do not align with your brand values. It is important to, when involving brand influencers, understand their values, strengths and weakness, in order to be fully prepared in case a scandal breaks out (Jankowski, 2021).

7.4 Comparative analysis of the cases

As established throughout, the power of cancel culture due to a lack of political correctness can affect brands in a diversity of ways, and in a variety of corporations. From each case we can learn different priorities that are equally important for companies to consider in their communicative efforts.

The uniqueness of the first case is that it is the only case in which the communication actually tried to be politically correct. The other two cases didn't hit the mark of political correctness due to a lack of trying; Pepsi was aiming to appeal to this. Therefore, this case proves that unfounded efforts are useless: proper research is required for success (Sobande, 2019). However, it also underlines the importance of reputation. The second case exemplifies the risk of ignoring one's reputation.

Victoria's Secret had been accumulating years of dissent from consumers: body image issues and a lack of diversity were starting to irk consumers (Chrisler et al., 2013; Andrews, 2015). When Rizek's comments caused an uproar, they simply added intentionality to the already unideal image the brand had accumulated. While Pepsi's mentions before the ad aired were generally positive, Victoria's Secret's were not. This hints to the reason behind Pepsi's lesser suffering of being canceled (Chrisler et al., 2013; Joyce, 2017). While Pepsi issued an apology and barely saw the consequences of the controversy in their profit, Victoria's Secret suffered a leadership change, a physical change (the closing of stores) and a profit change (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). This underscores the often-ignored significance of constant reputation building. Had Victoria's Secret eradicated their poor image sooner, maybe Rizek's comments would have simply been a blip on the company's history.

The final case, J.K. Rowling's polemic, is unique in that it involves a personal brand linked to a larger organization. J.K. Rowling is also unique in that she revindicated her position, rather than aiming to neutralize the situation. The consequences were drastic for her personal reputation, where fans and media have criticized her stance and distanced themselves from her, but little damage was done to the larger organization of Harry Potter (Luu, 2020). This could point to two possible reasons: the first, that the damage is larger if done by the brand or in name of the brand, rather than someone's private opinion outside the confines of the brand, and the second, that consumer loyalty is a larger force than cancel culture, as Harry Potter fans were still willing to consume Rowling's work despite her comments.

All cases show one thing in common: the lack of connection to their target audience. While Pepsi failed because they didn't explicitly support a movement, seeming ambiguous and exploitative (Nair, 2019), Victoria's Secret ignored the pleas for diversity in their model roster (Andrews, 2015), and J.K. Rowling dismissed her fanbase, despite being a young demographic (Palmer, 2013). The cases put in contrast (Nike, Savage x Fenty and Chrissy Teigen) show the opposite. Their success was guaranteed because they risked their communication in favor of aligning better with their target audience. They communicated explicitly, with diversity and quickly, a key takeaway for future communications, which will be further clarified in the next section.

7.4.1 Key takeaways

The cases explained as successes establish norms that can define a path to success in the face of future crises, or even to consider as a pillar of communication.

The Pepsi and Nike cases allow two conclusions: the first is that of believing in something (Nair, 2019), the second is the power of online word of mouth (Taylor, 2017). The downfall of the Pepsi ad was the fact that their target audience was not properly defined, as, if they had, they would have appreciated that they wanted unambiguous commitment. This is something we do find in Nike's case, with their support of Colin Kaepernick despite his controversial position (Nair, 2019). Furthermore, in both cases, their impact was spread through social media. Companies must consider the online nature of today's communication and understand that it is essential to consider the positive and negative ramifications of this (Taylor, 2017). It is reasonable to assume that Pepsi's ad would probably not have had such impact had it not been snowballed on social media.

The Victoria's Secret and Savage x Fenty cases also give way to two lessons: the importance of consumer intimacy and the value of diversity (Thompson, 2020). Consumer intimacy essentially strives to understand the needs and ethics behind the target audience; what moves them. Knowing this superficially, or ignoring it, as was the case with Victoria's Secret, can accumulate years of questionable reputation (Thompson, 2020). However, Rhianna's brand was unique in their diverse starting point, including a wide spectrum of models, engaging in social listening that made their target audience feel seen and at the same time building a good reputation (Lian & Gwynne, 2022)

The case of J.K. Rowling and Chrissy Teigen points to a single yet important supposition: personal opinions of individuals can hurt a brand. Although J.K. Rowling's case did not widely affect the Harry Potter brand, it did affect her own (Luu, 2020), and she is the backbone of the brand. The result is garnering resentment from a loyal fanbase which, if gone unchecked, can cause more damage, as we have learnt from the Victoria's Secret case. The case of Chrissy Teigen is a good example of efficiency. She immediately distanced herself from the brand she represented, and, although her own reputation took a hit, the company was saved from further scrutiny (Newcomb, 2021).

These takeaways should be integral to a company's online communication if they want to avoid the inescapable hand of cancel culture if they want to efficiently recover from getting canceled or if they want to begin anew.

8. Conclusion

Throughout the present work, the power of cancel culture, due to political incorrectness, has been established. The cases exemplify the extent cancel culture can reach, as well as the variety of organizations affected; this points to its new and all-encompassing nature. Therefore, we can determine four main conclusions, which answer the proposed research questions.

Firstly, political correctness and cancel culture are a considerable threat to corporations online. The three main cases delineated exemplify exactly how cancel culture is responsible for a brand's success. There can be massive social mobilization online, encouraged by the aim of accountability. The worst-off case described, Victoria's Secret, faced losses, the closing of stores and a change in leadership due to the domino effect that occurred online. These phenomena are consequently a significant vulnerability for corporations, which must take care of their communication and online presence.

Secondly, there are companies who are successful in navigating political correctness and cancel culture, and some who are not. As explained above, the lessons each case presented are a solid pillar to understand which companies are most successful at it. Brands who are explicit in their beliefs, who consider the ramifications of e-word-of-mouth, who consider consumer intimacy and diversity and manage the reputational hazard of brand ambassadors are more effective at dealing with demands of accountability than those who do not.

Thirdly, the relevance of political correctness and cancel culture reside in their growing impact. As explained initially aided by Porter Novelli's (2021) research, consumers are increasingly willing and able to boycott a company that does not align with their values. The access to social media helps in this ambition and gives consumers a tool to potentially damage an organization.

Fourthly, as seen by the cases explained, it is possible to both improve and prepare for the impact of the phenomena outlined. We have seen how companies who are purpose-driven and are keen on social listening are less vulnerable to the impact of cancel culture. Even Pepsi, after their questionable ad, managed to make profits due to their established reputation. Although its image still suffers today, the impact is slight compared to that of Victoria's Secret, whose case was negative on both the profits and the reputational points of view.

These four comprehensive points prove correct the initial hypothesis of "Political correctness and cancel culture can impact a company's profit and reputation via online communication; ignoring their potential will have a negative effect for the company". These two aspects are therefore essential and should be considered for the company's communicative strategy to ensure success.

The case of corporate communication, the online aspect of it and cancel culture, is one that is one that has grown in relevance, and is bound to continue to do so, as has been outlined throughout this paper. For future research, it would be interesting to study longer effects than the ones presented here. Since cancel culture is relatively new, we can only study the more immediate consequences. However, future studies could include a temporal aspect of cancellation that could, for example, measure how long it takes for a brand to recover economically and reputation-wise from cancel culture. Furthermore, it would be interesting to expand research to other continents. While most focus on the West, notably the United States, it would be interesting to understand whether cultural factors come into play when canceling. For example, is South America as ruthless as North America when defining how politically

correct a company is? If so, should communicative strategies vary from place to place? These questions could be answered with more in-depth research, but also depend on future dynamics. In the meantime, it would be wise for companies to tread lightly and ensure a full research of target audiences to enjoy a controversy-free communication.

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