

An Examination of Colleen Ballinger's Experience in Social Media: Cancel Culture Chronicle

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the rise of cancel culture through the lens of a famous YouTuber, Colleen Ballinger. This unique culture was progressed after the release of her apology video on June 29, 2023, following allegations and controversies with her previous video. A qualitative approach is used to investigate the public reactions on her statement and the subsequent cancellation process. The data included thematic coding of 107 comments left under the video, which were divided into positive and negative codes, as well as an analysis of social media engagement rate with the help of a media analytic tool, Social Blade. According to the research findings, Colleen's YouTube subscriber count significantly decreased between June and September 2023, suggesting a reduction in withdrawal of support. However, there was a slight rise in video views, indicating increasing public interest. 69 out of 107 comments were negative, according to the thematic coding, which revealed most rejections for Colleen's apology. The comments frequently emphasized her apology lacked accountability. On the other hand, 38 responses criticized cancel culture and expressed empathy. The study emphasized the effects of increased visibility and backlash that cancel culture has on public figures. The findings highlight the value of sincerity, accountability, and appropriate ways to communicate in handling public apologies and resolving online disputes. Future research should investigate extending the study's reach to more platforms and analyzing the long-term consequences on the subject's reputation and professional trajectory.

Keywords: Cancel Culture, Social Media, Social Media Influencer, Crisis Communication

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, social media has become a powerful tool that shapes how individuals interact, communicate, and perceive others in society. Social media is a collection of software-based digital technologies, such as websites and applications, that provide users with virtual places to exchange information, material, and opinions within an online network. (Appel et al., 2020). The widespread use of these technologies has connected over half of the global population and significantly transformed societal norms and cultural interactions.

One of the more controversial phenomena emerging from this shift is cancel culture, a concept rooted in the environment of Web 2.0 and fuelled by the rapid expansion of social media platforms (Haskell, 2021). Cancel culture refers to the public rejection or boycott of individuals often celebrities, public figures, or influencers who are deemed to have acted inappropriately or offensively. Unlike traditional forms of social accountability, cancel culture is driven by user-generated content and amplified by digital virality, often resulting in widespread public humiliation or backlash.

This cultural shift is particularly impactful in the context of social media influencers, who rely heavily on public approval for their visibility, income, and brand partnerships (Chang et al., 2020). While these influencers gain fame, credibility, and financial rewards, they are also more vulnerable to scrutiny and online judgment. The phenomenon of cancel culture has thus become a pressing issue for influencers, whose online personas are constantly evaluated by followers and critics alike.

This study focuses on understanding cancel culture by examining a specific case involving American social media influencer Colleen Ballinger. Known for her YouTube character Miranda Sings, Ballinger gained international popularity with over 22 million followers across platforms. However, her career took a dramatic turn following allegations that she had engaged in inappropriate and exploitative communication with minors. The resulting backlash serves as a significant case study to explore how cancel culture manifests and escalates on social media.

Despite the growing attention the term "cancel culture" receives in public discourse, scholarly research on the topic especially in relation to social media influencers remains limited (Jaafar & Herna, 2023). Cancel culture can result in profound consequences, ranging from damaged reputations to financial losses and mental health impacts. In extreme cases, it has even contributed to suicides, such as that of British television presenter Caroline Flack, highlighting the urgent need for a deeper understanding of this social dynamic (Blanchard, 2020).

This study seeks to analyze how cancel culture unfolds, with particular attention to its initiation, public responses, and implications. The findings are expected to provide meaningful insights for influencers, communication strategists, and digital media researchers on how to navigate online controversies and mitigate reputational damage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cancel Culture and Social Media Influencers

Cancel culture is a phenomenon that typically originates on social media, characterized by the public withdrawing support from public figures or organizations who are perceived to have acted offensively or made unacceptable statements. This form of disengagement can range from ending support for an individual's work to public humiliation through insulting comments and social ostracization (Chiou, 2020). Scholars have defined it in various ways, with some emphasizing the negative digital impression it leaves (Anderson-Lopez et al., 2021), while others focus on the act of withdrawing support (Ng, 2020). Cancel culture often targets public figures such as celebrities and influencers, particularly when issues of racism, sexism, or homophobia are involved (Chiou, 2020; Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020). Unlike call-out culture, which highlights discrimination and misconduct without targeting individuals, cancel culture aims at excluding the subject from the public domain. Its roots lie in the black counter-publics movement, where marginalized voices sought social justice (Clark, 2020). The concept is closely related to Thomas Mathiesen's (1997) synopticon, where the masses observe a few public figures, allowing social media to amplify scrutiny and accountability (Tucker, 2018; Velasco, 2020).

Public Engagement and Influencer Dynamics

Cancel culture is more than just ceasing support it includes a variety of responses such as criticism, public shaming, and financial consequences. When a public figure commits a controversial act, online criticism can intensify, leading to mass unfollowing, brand disassociation, and termination of projects (Velasco, 2020). Public participation in cancel culture often involves collecting "receipts" screenshots, videos, or posts to validate accusations, which are then shared across platforms like gossip accounts and YouTube channels (Lawson, 2020). Social media influencers, who gain fame by cultivating a digital following rather than through traditional media, face amplified consequences in such scenarios (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). These influencers are defined by their ability to shape followers' behaviors and attitudes while maintaining a large and engaged audience (De Veirman et al., 2017; Chang et al., 2020). Negative engagement behaviors, such as criticism or content co-destruction, can drastically alter an influencer's image and career (Dolan et al., 2015).

Crisis Management and Strategic Communication

In response to cancel culture, influencers often attempt damage control, yet their strategies can backfire. Tactics like issuing apologies via Instagram Stories or manipulating platform algorithms to limit exposure may be seen as insincere or evasive (Lawson, 2020). If not handled with authenticity and social responsibility, these

efforts can escalate the backlash (Johnson, 2021). Crisis communication on social media demands careful strategy, involving timely, appropriate messaging, monitoring, and adapting to platform-specific dynamics (Eriksson, 2018). Transparent and interactive responses are more likely to gain public trust (Du Plessis, 2018). Despite the affordances of digital tools, the mismanagement of crises as in Colleen Ballinger's case demonstrates how a lack of genuine engagement can intensify reputational damage.

Case Overview and Theoretical Framework

Colleen Ballinger rose to fame through her character Miranda Sings and successfully transitioned into mainstream entertainment with her Netflix show "Haters Back Off." However, her career was derailed by allegations of inappropriate conduct, particularly with a minor, which culminated in a widely criticized ukulele apology video. This incident exemplifies how influencers mishandling crises can face intensified cancel culture responses. To analyze her case, two theoretical frameworks are used: The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT). SCCT suggests that crisis responses must align with the crisis type, audience perception, and severity, which helps to evaluate Ballinger's failed strategy (Coombs, 2007). Simultaneously, IRT outlines strategies such as denial, blame-shifting, and minimization (Benoit, 1997), many of which Ballinger employed. However, these strategies did not resonate with the audience, emphasizing the importance of context-appropriate and sincere communication efforts in mitigating public backlash.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative single-case design to examine the public's reaction to cancel culture through the lens of Colleen Ballinger's controversial YouTube apology video posted on 29 June 2023. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration of user responses, focusing on the complexities of emotions, tone, and attitudes expressed in online commentary. Thematic analysis was applied as the main analytic method, allowing the identification and interpretation of patterns in the collected data. A total of 107 comments were purposively sampled based on their relevance to the study's objectives, with NVivo software used for thematic visualization and Social Blade analytics applied to assess public engagement levels, such as views and subscriber trends.

The sampling involved extracting top user comments from the video, which had gained over 13,000 responses, using criteria based on positive and negative operational definitions. Positive comments were identified by supportive language, empathetic tones, and critiques of cancel culture, while negative comments reflected hostility, rejection of the apology, or calls for accountability. To enhance reliability, the coding process was guided by a structured codebook, and investigator triangulation was applied by engaging a faculty expert to validate the coded dataset. Ethical considerations were maintained by anonymizing commenter identities while retaining the authenticity of their words.

The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic process: preparation, transcription, familiarization, coding, triangulation, and report production. Manual coding of the comments was supported by clear operational definitions, and examples were included to demonstrate how comments were classified. This methodological rigor allowed for nuanced insights into how users interpreted Ballinger's apology and how their reactions reflected broader societal sentiments on accountability and cancel culture. The final report presents the key themes and findings that emerged from this analysis, offering implications for understanding digital responses in high-profile controversies.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic coding approach. The data analysis process consists of six phases that were outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Braun and Clarke (2021) as well as Lester et al. (2020).

Phase 1: Preparation and organization of Data

A total of 107 comments were manually copied to a word document from Colleen Ballinger's apology video on YouTube. Each comment was listed in a table with separate columns for the username and total number of

likes for the comment. The document was then labeled as a comments list. (Refer to Appendix A for the document)

Phase 2: Transcription of Data

Colleen Ballinger's apology video was transcribed using an online transcript extractor software (Genelify) to save time and then copied into a word document. The transcribe is then read meticulously in order to understand the context of the comments during data analysis. (Refer to Appendix D for the transcribe)

Phase 3: Familiarizing with the information

Every comment taken from YouTube is read and re-read, noting down the first thoughts in a copy of the comments list (Appendix A) that was already prepared with an additional column added as notes. (Refer to Appendix B for the document). Then the notes are used to guide the next phase of the data analysis process.

Phase 4: Generating and organizing Codes

The operationalization of positive and negative comments shown in table 1 & table 2 are then used as a codebook to assist in the deductive coding process. Each comment was coded into positive or negative based on the criteria that were set for each code as predetermined in the operationalization. To ensure the data was organized well and to avoid any confusion, the same comment list (Appendix B) that contained the initial thoughts about the comments were used to classify the comment into positives and negatives. (Refer to Appendix C for the coded data) Below are a few examples of how each comment was analyzed and coded as positive or negative.

Example 1

Commenter I :

“this is definitely an odd way of apologizing, but it seems genuine and i feel bad for her”

Tone of Speech:

The comment has a supportive tone as the commenter used “genuine” to describe it. Through recognising the sincerity of the apology, the comment expresses support for it.

Type of Reaction:

Did not show any hostility, defense, or insulting remarks. Instead, it conveys a personal and compassionate reaction

Reaction to Apology:

"I feel bad for her" is a statement that expresses empathy. This shows that Colleen's attempt at an apology was met with a pleasant and understanding attitude.

Mention of Withdrawal of Support:

The statement does not imply withdrawal of support. However, the sympathetic remark "I feel bad for her" denotes neutrality or continuous assistance.

In general, the comment meets the criteria for a positive comment, based on operational definitions as shown in Table 1 with its encouraging tone, empathic attitude, and positive response to the apologies. Hence, it was coded as positive.

Example 2

Commenter II :

“Spot on. Cancel culture is so dumb, just a bunch of people getting high on hating together I truly enjoy your content as one of the last youtubers that still dares to share as much as you do. And as an awkward person myself, its so sad and scary how people gang up and prescribe intent behind other peoples actions, and defense seems futile => I hope that hate won't win this time ”

Tone of Speech

Generally, the tone is encouraging and sympathetic towards Collen. The commenter shows appreciation for her courage as well as love of her content.

Type of Reaction

Criticizing people who participate in cancel culture and displays empathy and support for Colleen.

Call for Action

It is implied that action is necessary in the hope that "hate won't win this time." The commenter is in favor of a less hostile and more understanding stance.

Mention of Cancel Culture

The comment specifically calls out cancel culture, calling it "dumb" and fueled by a general hatred. This satisfies the criteria for criticizing cancel culture for exaggerating issues.

Mention of Withdrawal of Support

With an encouraging attitude and no plans to revoke support, the comment demonstrates ongoing admiration and support for Colleen.

In general, this comment satisfies the requirements for a positive comment by displaying a tone that is sympathetic and encouraging, criticizing cancel culture, pushing for continuous support and understanding as well as offering hope that hate and negativity will fail. Thus, coded as positive.

Phase 5: Investigator triangulation of Data

According to Noble & Heale (2019), triangulation lowers any potential bias of the researcher while increasing the credibility and validity of findings. Hence, after all the data gathered was coded by the researcher, a copy of the document containing the comment list along with the operational definitions used to code the data was sent to a lecturer from the faculty of social sciences to be examined to get an outside perspective to validate the researcher's coding. (Refer to Appendix E)

Phase 6: Producing Report

All the information collected from the data analysis are then presented in the following chapters, providing evidence and justifications to support the classification of codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, Braun and Clarke, 2021).

FINDING

The findings include data derived from thematic analysis of YouTube comments as well as social media analytics, specifically focusing on engagement metrics such as subscriber and view counts. The results interpreted in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, shedding light on the public's perception of the apology and the broader implications of cancel culture.

Social Media (YouTube) Engagement Rate

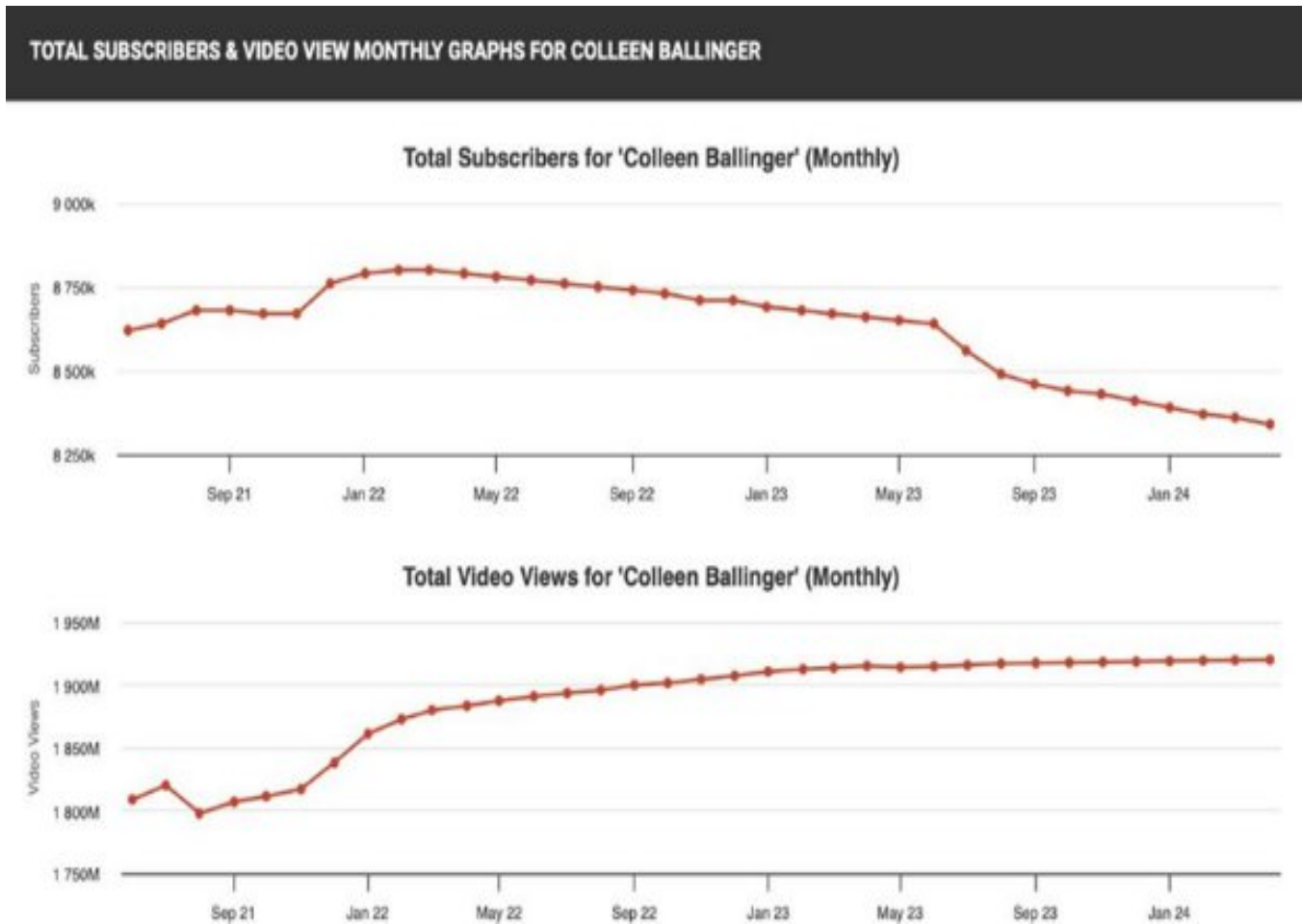


Figure I: Social Blade analytics of subscriber and video view trends on Colleen Ballinger’s YouTube channel

The engagement trends for Colleen Ballinger's YouTube channel were assessed by using the Social Blade. (social media analytics platform). Based on the figure 1, there is a notable decline in her subscriber count from June to September 2023. This decline corresponds with the timeline of public allegations and her apology video which was published on June 29, 2023. Despite the subscriber loss, video views experienced a modest increase during the same period, suggesting heightened attention to her content in the aftermath of the controversy.

This contrast indicates that while many users chose to unfollow the influencer, others remained engaged, possibly to scrutinize her response or follow the ongoing discourse surrounding the scandal.

Social Media (YouTube) Engagement Analysis

The engagement trends captured by Social Blade reveal a significant drop in subscriber numbers during the controversy, which suggests that many followers withdrew their support—a hallmark of cancel culture. This aligns with Dunlap (2023), who noted that public backlash often manifests through unfollowing or unsubscribing.

Interestingly, despite the decline in subscribers, there was a slight increase in video views. Amalia and Mohammad (2023) suggested that increased views typically correlate with rising subscribers, yet this study observed the opposite. This paradox is characteristic of cancel culture, where controversy can amplify visibility even as it erodes support. The spike in views may reflect a combination of curiosity, criticism, and continued public interest.

Thematic Coding

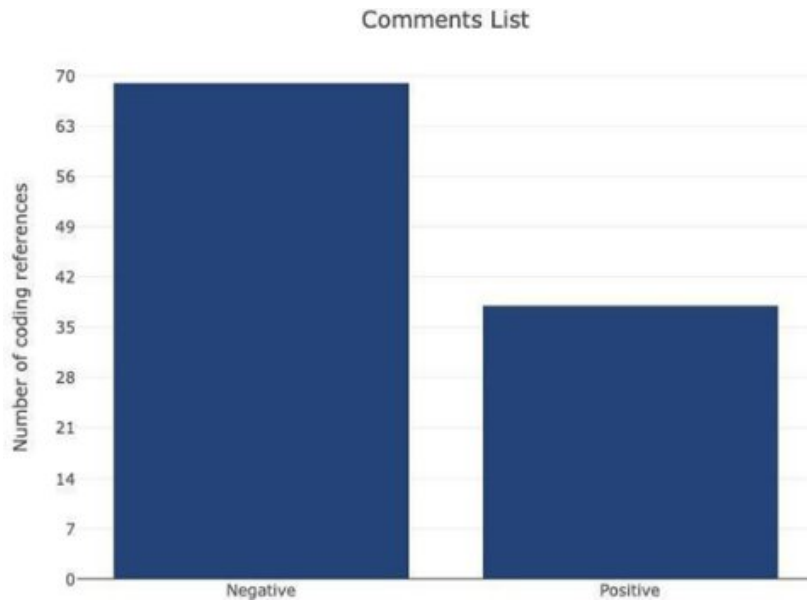


Fig II: Distribution of positive vs. negative YouTube comments, visualized via NVivo

After manually coding YouTube comments using a deductive thematic approach the data was uploaded to NVivo software for visualization. As illustrated in Bar Chart 1, of the 107 analyzed comments, 68 were negative and 39 were positive. This indicates a predominantly critical reception from the public regarding Colleen Ballinger’s apology video.

Thematic Analysis of Comments

The thematic analysis reveals that the majority of the comments were negative. Many commenters expressed dissatisfaction with the tone and content of Ballinger’s apology, describing it as insincere and deflective. Some comments mocked her delivery, such as:

- *“Girl when’s this dropping on Spotify?”*

This sarcastic remark reflects disapproval of her musical approach to the apology.

Others offered more serious critiques:

- *“She only feels sorry for herself. What about the affected children?! Not an ounce of accountability in this ‘apology’ video...”*

Such comments demonstrate public expectation for accountability and genuine remorse, particularly in cases involving serious allegations.

Another recurring sentiment was disappointment:

- *“All I can think about is the victims watching this. I can’t believe this.”*

These responses align with Chiou (2020), who identified a pattern where cancel culture leads to harsh public reactions, including mockery, criticism, and disengagement from influencers perceived as morally compromised.

On the other hand, a minority of comments expressed support, sympathy, or criticism of cancel culture itself. For instance:

- *“This song is taken as insensitive, but knowing Colleen, it’s her way of showing she cares.”*

Another comment stated:

•“Cancel culture is horrible. There is no way that she is a groomer, she has children herself. I don’t get it.”

These comments reveal that despite a predominantly negative sentiment, there remains a subset of supporters who value forgiveness, context, or are sceptical of cancel culture practices. Karg, Lim, and Schnall (2022) suggest that highly devoted fans may revise their moral assessments to preserve a favourable view of the influencer, even in the face of serious accusations—often as a mechanism to reduce cognitive dissonance.

DISCUSSION

The data underscores the profound impact of cancel culture on public figures. The significant decline in subscribers and the wave of critical comments reflect the immediate consequences of public backlash. Chiou (2020) found similar outcomes in prior studies, where social media scandals led to mass unfollowing and online condemnation.

The findings also emphasize the importance of authentic and accountable crisis communication. The negative public response was primarily driven by perceptions that Colleen Ballinger’s apology lacked sincerity and responsibility. This aligns with Du Plessis (2018), who argued that audiences are more receptive to organizations and individuals who engage in transparent and interactive communication during a crisis.

While most comments were critical, a minority voiced empathy or opposition to cancel culture. This diversity of opinion highlights the need for public figures to consider varied audience expectations. A one-size-fits-all approach to crisis communication may not be effective, especially when different segments of the audience respond differently based on personal values, loyalty, or perceptions of fairness.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the cancellation of Colleen Ballinger by analyzing public responses to her apology video through qualitative thematic analysis and social media engagement data. The results revealed a noticeable drop in her YouTube subscriber count during the controversy, despite a slight increase in video views—indicating the complex dual nature of cancel culture, where public figures may experience both heightened scrutiny and increased visibility.

From the 107 comments analyzed, the majority (68) were negative, while 39 were positive. Thematic findings highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with her apology, often perceived as insincere and inadequate. These observations align with Coombs’ (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which posits that crisis communication strategies must be tailored to the context and severity of the issue. The study suggests that Ballinger’s response did not adequately address the public’s expectations or the nature of the allegations, thereby failing to restore trust with her audience.

The findings underscore the importance of authentic, accountable, and timely communication during crisis situations. They also reveal the paradox of cancel culture: while it can damage reputation and support, it may simultaneously drive engagement. This dual effect has important implications for how influencers and public figures navigate online backlash.

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