



# Social Media Engagement, Attitudes towards Cancel Culture, and Brand Attitude: A Conceptual Framework

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## ABSTRACT

Cancel culture has become a powerful social movement shaping Generation Z consumer behaviour, driven by public accountability practices such as shaming, withdrawing or boycotting entities perceived to have violated social norms. Although scholarship on digital activism and consumer behaviour has expanded, conceptual clarity remains limited in explaining how social media engagement shapes attitudes toward cancel culture and how participation in cancel culture affects brand evaluations. This conceptual paper addresses these gaps by advancing a theoretical framework that theorises the sequential pathway: Social media engagement → attitudes toward cancel culture → participation → brand attitude. The framework integrates the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) and social influence theory (SIT) as its core foundations. Two moderating conditions are specified: Self-identity in the engagement–attitude link and perceived influencer credibility in the participation–brand attitude link. Systems thinking is acknowledged as a meta-theoretical perspective but not positioned as a core framework; cognitive dissonance theory and generational cohort theory are treated as contextual references. The paper contributes to literature by offering a parsimonious conceptual model of social-media-driven consumer behaviour and by highlighting practical insights into reputational risk management in digital brand ecosystems. This study contributes by: (i) advancing a theoretically grounded framework linking social media engagement, attitudes towards cancel culture, and brand attitude through TPB and SIT; (ii) specifying two boundary conditions, self-identity and perceived influencer credibility that moderate these relationships; and (iii) establishing a foundation for empirical testing of cancel-culture dynamics in emerging-market contexts.

**Keywords:** Social Media Engagement, Cancel Culture, Generation Z, Brand Attitude, Perceived Influencer Credibility, Self-identity

**JEL Classifications:** M30, M31, M37, Z13

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, South African retailer clicks faced nationwide boycotts and store vandalism after a controversial hair advertisement, while spur steak ranch reported a 9% national sales decline within 6 months of a 2017 racial incident. These episodes demonstrate the disruptive power of cancel culture a phenomenon defined as the public shaming or boycotting of individuals, brands, or public figures deemed to have violated social norms (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020). What began as isolated acts of public accountability on platforms such as X in the early 2010s has matured into a systematic mechanism through which digitally native consumers hold brands accountable for perceived moral transgressions (Klassen et al., 2021).

Cancel culture represents a fundamental reordering of brand-consumer power dynamics within digital ecosystems. Two perspectives dominate scholarly and public debate: Supporters frame cancellation as a form of social justice and political accountability, while critics view it as performative virtue signalling (Hobbs and O’Keefe, 2024). Despite these differences, both perspectives converge on one point since Generation Z possesses unprecedented capacity to mobilise collective digital action that produces measurable consequences for brand equity and financial performance (Roldan et al., 2024).

This study develops a conceptual framework to explain how social media engagement influences attitudes toward cancel culture

and how participation in cancellation episodes reshapes brand evaluations among Generation Z. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) theorise the sequential pathway from social media engagement to brand attitude via cancel culture attitudes and participation, (2) identify boundary conditions that moderate these relationships, and (3) provide actionable insights for brand management in value-sensitive digital environments.

Generation Z (born 1997-2012) is defined by digital nativity, social consciousness, and expectations of brand authenticity (Kumar, 2024). In South Africa, this cohort actively engages with salient issues such as #MeToo and Woolworths WPride through both direct participation and passive lurking. Both forms diffuse cancellation dynamics and shape attitudinal outcomes (Baillie, 2023; Oetzel, 2023; Bucher and Chipperfield, 2021). South Africa provides a relevant setting since its complex social fabric, high youth social media penetration, and history of online activism (#FeesMustFall) amplify the reputational risks of cancellation. Documented brand crises show how these dynamics translate into financial and reputational harm. Furthermore, cancel culture accelerates electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) diffusion, which can negatively impact brand attitude and lead to changes in purchase intentions as consumers align their values with brand conduct (Ng, 2020; Maziriri et al., 2023). Beyond immediate sales effects, cancel culture can inflict long-term reputational damage and loss of revenue, reshaping how firms weigh risks in brand communication and positioning strategies (Roldan et al., 2024).

Although there has been an increase of research on social media, influencers, and digital activism, critical gaps remain. Prior studies establish connections between eWOM, brand attitude, and purchase intention but do not examine how social media engagement specifically shapes attitudes toward cancel culture as an accountability mechanism (Purwianti and Niawati, 2022). Similarly, scholarship has not sufficiently explained how participation in cancel culture translates into altered brand evaluations through specific psychological and social processes (Roldan et al., 2024). Available, South African consumer literature, documents youth activism and brand engagement patterns but lacks integrated models connecting engagement, participation, and brand attitude within a coherent theoretical framework. Underexplored areas include the boundary conditions that determine when engagement fosters favourable cancel culture attitudes, and the mechanisms through which participation leads into lasting brand evaluations. These gaps limit both theoretical understanding of cancel culture and practical guidance for brands navigating high-velocity digital environments.

To address these limitations, this study advances a parsimonious model anchored in a sequential pathway: Social media engagement → attitudes toward cancel culture → participation → brand attitude. Two moderating mechanisms are specified: Self-identity, shaping the engagement–attitude link, and perceived influencer credibility, moderating the participation–attitude link. Traditional linear models inadequately capture the escalation and feedback loops of online activism, hence systems thinking provides a necessary meta-theoretical lens by emphasising interconnections, feedback, and non-linear causality (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2023). It

highlights reinforcing loops, viral outrage amplifying participation and deteriorating brand attitudes, and balancing mechanisms, such as credible influencer interventions or authentic brand responses, which can mitigate reputational fallout.

The model presented in this study integrates two established theories. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) explains how attitudes and perceived control shape behavioural participation in cancellation episodes, linking evaluation to intention and action. Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958) accounts for compliance, identification, and internalisation on social platforms, clarifying how normative pressures and perceived influencer credibility drive participation and downstream brand attitudes. These lenses jointly explain how evaluations formed in social media contexts translate into collective participation and consumer responses.

This research contributes theoretically by integrating fragmented literature into a systems-based model of cancel culture as consumer behaviour. Furthermore, this framework explains the sequential and interconnected dynamics of engagement, participation, and brand attitude, while presenting the moderating conditions. Additionally, the study offers insights into reputational risk management, highlighting the importance of authentic and rapid response strategies in maintaining brand equity during cancellation episodes.

The South African context provides unique conditions for examining cancel culture. Unlike in developed economies, where cancel culture frequently revolves around celebrity misconduct, South African cases are often based on racial stereotyping, cultural inclusivity, and corporate accountability. These controversies interconnect with the country's post-apartheid history and present socio-economic inequalities, which amplify the reputational risks for brands. Positioning the study in this context highlights how cultural and historical aspects condition the operation of cancel culture differently than in other markets. This study therefore aims to answer the question: How does social media engagement influence South African Generation Z consumers' brand attitude through attitudes towards cancel culture and subsequent participation, and how do self-identity and perceived influencer credibility moderate these relationships?.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

Developed by Ajzen (1991), TPB posits that an individual's behaviour is influenced by attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In this study, TPB provides a framework that is used to analyse the various factors that lead to Gen Z's decisions to support or reject a brand that is facing cancel culture. Additionally, the TPB is a useful framework for this study as it presents that behavioural intention is a strong predictive factor of the actual behaviour (Trifiletti et al., 2022). A study by Ferraro et al. (2023) reveals that for Gen Z attitudes are usually influenced by their personal values which include inclusivity and equality. Furthermore, research by Van Tonder et al. (2023) notes that subjective norms influence

an individual's behaviour. Subjective norms refer to the belief that a close person or group of people will approve and support a particular behaviour (Trifiletti et al., 2022). A study by Djafarova (2022) also reveals that social media platforms amplify these norms as they provide a space where Gen Z try to observe and align with the opinions of peers and influencers. Hence, the TPB is a useful theory for this study as it provides a platform that aligns with the moderating role of self-identity and the moderating role of perceived influencer credibility which are variables used in the study.

Critically, while TPB provides the framework, it is limited in explaining how social contexts shape attitude formation and behavioural intentions. The theory treats attitudes as relatively stable individual constructs but does not fully account for how digital platforms create dynamic, interactive environments where attitudes towards cancel culture can rapidly evolve through exposure to peer reactions and influencer messaging. This limitation necessitates integration with Social Influence Theory to capture the contextual factors that condition attitude-behaviour relationships.

## 2.2. Social Influence Theory (SIT)

The social influence theory consists of three constructs, compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman, 1958). Compliance can be defined as the process in which an individual engages in a certain behaviour expecting the receiving of gain, or in avoidance of punishment (Bandhu et al., 2024). While identification can be defined as the process in which an individual would be prone to influence because they want to form or continue a relationship with another individual or a group (Baum et al., 2024). Then internalization can be defined as the process in which an individual becomes influenced by the message rather than the messenger, as it aligns with their personal values and beliefs (Bandhu et al., 2024). Bhukya and Paul (2023) note that social influence plays a role in shaping brand attitudes and purchase intentions in the context of social media. Furthermore, research shows that Gen Z adjust their brand perceptions and recommendations to align with peer opinions, demonstrating conformism in social media communities (Le and Ngoc, 2024). On social media platforms, normative and informational influences drive engagement thereby reinforcing brand attitudes and influencing purchase intentions (Haq et al., 2024). Furthermore, online Gen Z engage in social validation behaviours which influence brand attitudes and eWOM through active participation (Ozuem et al., 2021). Hence the application of SIT in this study is crucial for exploring the influence of social media engagement on cancel culture participation, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions.

This study deliberately employs TPB and SIT as its core theoretical frameworks due to their precise applicability to the attitudes, intentions, and social influences in the proposed model. However, the phenomenon of cancel culture exists within a broader theoretical landscape. Systems thinking (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2023) provides a crucial meta-theoretical lens, highlighting the interconnected, recursive nature of digital ecosystems where backlash can amplify through feedback loops. While this perspective informs the study's design, its full integration presents empirical complexities that

are reserved for future research. Similarly, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) underpins the fundamental motivation for cancellation (i.e., resolving dissonance caused by value violations), and generational cohort theory (Twenge, 2023) establishes the context of Generation Z's shared identity. These theories are treated as essential contextual references that provide depth and justification for the model's setup, while TPB and SIT provide the specific mechanisms for hypothesis testing.

Nonetheless, SIT alone may over-emphasise external pressures while underplaying individual agency. On social media platforms, users are not only passive recipients but are also active co-creators of meaning who shape and contest norms in real time. This limitation is acute in cancel-culture contexts, where Generation Z consumers simultaneously responds to social pressures and exercises autonomous moral judgement. Accordingly, SIT should be integrated alongside TPB and identity perspectives to capture both the persuasive pull of influencers and the reflexive, value-driven choices of Generation Z consumers.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS AND HYPOTHESES

### 3.1. Social Media Engagement and Consumer Behaviour

Social media engagement has emerged as a central construct in contemporary marketing research, yet its conceptualization and measurement remain contested across disciplinary boundaries. While early studies treated engagement as unidimensional user activity (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021), subsequent research established engagement as fundamentally multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components that manifest through consumers' interactions with brand-related content (Cheung et al., 2021). This multidimensional conceptualization gained empirical support through systematic reviews confirming engagement's polysemic nature, with the COBRA model capturing consumption, contribution, and creation behaviours offering a robust classification framework for understanding user participation across digital platforms (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021).

Despite broad theoretical agreement, engagement is measured inconsistently across studies. Do and Bowden (2025) developed cognitive-affective-behavioural dimensions based on service-dominant logic, while Vivek et al. (2012) emphasized conscious participation and connection. These competing frameworks create measurement challenges that limit cross-study comparability and theoretical cumulation (Li et al., 2021). More problematically, most engagement research adopts cross-sectional designs that cannot establish whether engagement drives attitudes or vice versa, creating inferential limitations for understanding causal mechanisms.

Empirical findings reveal that social media marketing elements, particularly interaction, eWOM, and trendiness, significantly stimulate consumer-brand engagement, thereby enhancing brand awareness and knowledge (Cheung et al., 2020). Yet these

studies focus predominantly on commercial outcomes rather than examining how engagement shapes broader social attitudes or participation in collective action. Bibliometric analyses identify emerging thematic clusters around brand interaction, loyalty, and digital marketing trends (Li et al., 2021), but notably absent are investigations of engagement's role in facilitating social movements or accountability practices.

Recent research highlights the critical importance of authenticity and credibility in engagement processes. Chen et al. (2023) demonstrate that transparency strategies in sponsored content such as clear sponsorship disclosure, positively affect digital engagement, challenging assumptions that disclosure necessarily diminishes persuasive impact. Conversely, Gamlin and Touré-Tillery (2024) show that overuse of self-indulgent content erodes willingness to connect with influencers, indicating that perceived value alignment determines engagement outcomes. These findings suggest that engagement effectiveness depends not merely on frequency or intensity of interaction, but critically on perceptions of authenticity, goal congruence, and digital trust.

Complementary research establishes digital trust as a necessary condition for user-generated content to influence purchase decisions, with verification features and authenticity cues amplifying engagement effectiveness (Hochstein et al., 2025). Social embeddedness mechanisms in digital networks further affect consumer decision-making through relational and structural ties that drive participation and interaction (Chung et al., 2021). However, these trust-building mechanisms have been examined primarily in commercial contexts rather than in social justice or accountability movements where different credibility criteria may apply.

Despite methodological advances and documented commercial benefits, the engagement literature exhibits three fundamental limitations that constrain its applicability to understanding collective consumer action. First, research has primarily examined dyadic brand-consumer relationships rather than collective mobilisation dynamics. Studies consistently demonstrate positive engagement effects on individual outcomes such as loyalty, satisfaction, and purchase intention (Appel et al., 2020) but provide limited theoretical guidance on how sustained engagement facilitates participation in collective accountability practices such as coordinated boycotts, public criticism campaigns, or social movement mobilisation. This limitation becomes problematic when engagement must be understood as a precursor to collective action rather than merely individual consumption behaviour.

Second, existing frameworks inadequately address how engagement interacts with generational characteristics and cultural movements. While demographic influences on engagement patterns have been documented (Li et al., 2021), studies have not systematically examined how Gen Z's distinctive characteristics OF digital nativity, social consciousness, and activist orientation, condition the mechanisms through which engagement shapes attitudes toward collective action. Given that generational cohorts develop shared interpretive frameworks that influence consumer behaviour (Aksar et al., 2025), this represents a significant

theoretical gap in understanding engagement among digitally native consumers.

Third, current models assume stable commercial environments and cannot explain how routine engagement behaviours transform into collective accountability movements during moral controversies. This represents a critical gap given present literature that shows consumer mobilization leads to substantial consequences for brand equity and financial performance (Ng, 2020; Maziriri et al., 2023; Klassen et al., 2021). The absence of frameworks linking everyday engagement to episodic social movements limits understanding of contemporary consumer-brand dynamics in value-conscious markets.

These gaps indicate that existing studies still privilege dyadic brand-consumer outcomes, with little attention to Gen Z's activist orientation or the transformation of engagement into collective accountability practices. This study addresses these gaps by theorising a sequential pathway from engagement to attitudes toward cancel culture, participation, and brand attitude, moderated by self-identity and influencer credibility.

### 3.2. Cancel Culture and Brand Attitude

Cancel culture has become a central subject of scholarly debate, yet definitions of the phenomenon vary. Clark (2020) is explicit that cancelling is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in) action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money. Ng (2020) frames the discussion by using cancel culture as an entry point to interrogate platformed participation and notes that social media platforms such as X, with its speed and textual brevity, militate against nuanced debate. Complementing this, Lewis and Christin (2022) reconceptualise accountability online as a form of platform drama in which the fractured and visibility-driven media environment of social media leads to the subtle blurring of substantive claims with individualized conflicts and ritualistic performances, so that accountability practices such as cancellation take on ambivalent meanings and come with ambiguous market effects. For the purposes of this study, Ng's (2020) definition is adopted because it directly captures consumer-brand dynamics while still acknowledging the wider political and cultural stakes. From an institutional perspective, cancel culture functions as "deliberate collective action" that mobilises consumers, influencers, and media actors to delegitimise brands and realign them with prevailing societal values (Demsar et al., 2023).

Present literature shows that cancellations affect consumer trust and brand evaluations. Studies document declines in loyalty and purchase intentions when consumers are exposed to cancellation campaigns, with even committed customers turning against brands when negative information circulates (Merlo et al., 2023). Hernández-Ortega et al. (2022) further demonstrate that social media-driven negativity accelerates negative eWOM and depresses brand attitudes across consumer groups. These findings highlight that cancel culture translates into measurable attitudinal consequences for brands.

Generational dynamics intensify these outcomes. Research shows that Gen Z consumers, whose digital nativity and activist orientation drive their online participation, are especially likely to engage in cancellation and align their brand attitudes with perceived justice concerns (Van Grunsven and Marin, 2024). This underscores the importance of studying how cancel culture interacts with social media engagement and influencer credibility in shaping the brand perceptions of this cohort.

### 3.2.1. Critical limitations in existing research

Despite these advances, the literature remains limited in several respects. First, definitional ambiguity persists, with few attempts to reconcile competing framings of cancel culture into coherent theoretical models. Second, applications of institutional theory often describe resistance without fully explaining how cancellations reconfigure the foundations of market legitimacy. Third, while South Africa presents a distinctive and relevant context, systematic scholarly attention remains scarce. Finally, although brand attitude impacts are acknowledged, few studies integrate moderating constructs such as influencer credibility or authenticity to explain how cancellations reshape consumer evaluations.

While cancel culture shares similarities with consumer boycotts, activism, and crisis responses, it differs in scope and mechanism. Traditional boycotts often operate through formalised, organised channels with economic aims, while brand crisis responses typically emerge from firm-driven communication strategies. In contrast, cancel culture represents a digitally mediated, rapid, and morally framed accountability practice. Its defining features include viral amplification, public shaming rituals, and the performative withdrawal of support within social media ecosystems. These characteristics distinguish cancellation from broader consumer resistance, justifying its treatment as a distinct construct within this study.

### 3.3. Digital Activism and Generation Z

Generation Z, generally defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, is often characterised as the first truly digital-native cohort. Having grown up with widespread access to social media and mobile technologies, they are distinguished by high levels of connectivity, technological fluency, and reliance on digital platforms for communication and commerce (Dimock, 2019; Wandhe, 2021). While younger members of Gen Z have little lived experience of a pre-digital world, older members still encountered transitional phases of internet and smartphone adoption, suggesting that claims of complete digital immersion should be treated with nuance (Peredy et al., 2024). Shared across the cohort, however, is an orientation toward authenticity, inclusivity, and values-based consumption, making activism an integral dimension of their engagement with brands. Global cultural flows have reinforced these values, yet scholars also caution that exposure to Western norms risks cultural homogenisation and the marginalisation of local traditions (Mohyeddin, 2024).

Evidence shows that Gen Z integrates activist concerns into their consumption practices (Confetto, Covucci, Addeo & Normando, 2023). Survey data indicate that more than half of this cohort

prioritises brands that support meaningful causes, and over half place trust in influencer recommendations when value alignment is perceived (Hochstein et al., 2025). Such findings highlight how activism, cause congruence, and peer influence converge in shaping brand trust, loyalty, and equity. Qualitative studies further suggest that this generation gravitates toward sincere and emotionally resonant messaging that signals cultural fluency, while showing aversion to ironic or superficial forms of communication (Nauman, 2021; Wandhe, 2021).

SIT provides a valuable lens for interpreting these dynamics. The theory holds that individuals adapt attitudes and behaviours through mechanisms of normative influence (conforming to group values), informational influence (accepting trusted sources as credible), and identification (aligning with admired referents). In digital activism, these mechanisms are visible in the ways peers, influencers, and online communities shape Gen Z participation in causes and brand-related campaigns. For example, participation in cancellation movements can be understood as normative influence, while trust in influencers reflects informational influence, and alignment with activist subcultures signals identification. By framing digital activism in terms of SIT, this study explains not only why Gen Z engages in activism but also how these social pressures convert into shifts in brand attitudes.

Empirical studies support the significance of these processes. Negative eWOM, especially when amplified by influential voices, reduces brand trust and purchase intention, with brand responses only partly mitigating damage (Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018). Quantitative research further demonstrates that exposure to socially charged cancellations depresses brand evaluations and accelerates the spread of negative sentiment (Hernández-Ortega et al., 2022; Merlo et al., 2023). These effects confirm the persuasive power of SIT mechanisms in shaping collective consumer attitudes.

In emerging markets such as South Africa, the salience of digital activism is intensified by the socio-historical context. Public controversies such as the 2017 Spur Steak Ranch incident and the 2020 Clicks hair advert controversy demonstrate how racial representation and inclusivity remain deeply embedded in consumer evaluations. These cases illustrate that cancel culture is not limited to commercial disputes but also extends to moral and socio-political reckonings in a society still navigating post-apartheid inequalities. This sensitivity to cultural representation underscores the importance of examining cancel culture and activism in South Africa as a distinctive setting where digital engagement intersects with broader struggles for equity.

Despite these insights, research gaps remain that connect directly to this study's propositions. Existing work describes Gen Z's values and activist tendencies but does not systematically link digital activism to social media engagement ( $H_1$ ), nor explain how participation in activism influences brand attitudes ( $H_3$ ). The mediating role of influencer credibility ( $H_4$ ) is often assumed but rarely tested empirically, while the moderating effects of activism on brand outcomes ( $H_5$ ) remain underexplored. Furthermore, the mechanisms identified by SIT have not been integrated into

models explaining how peer norms, influencer persuasion, and digital trust shape consumer mobilisation. Addressing these limitations, the present study situates Gen Z digital activism as a core construct in a systems-based model, linking it to engagement, influencer credibility, and brand attitudes in order to test these specific propositions.

Although digital nativity is a defining characteristic of Generation Z, it does not automatically translate into uniform participation in cancellation. Intra-cohort variation exists, with factors such as socio-economic status, political interest, and identity salience shaping individual engagement patterns. This study therefore recognises that while Gen Z is broadly predisposed to digital activism, participation in cancel culture is mediated by diverse personal and contextual factors. This nuance avoids essentialist claims and situates Gen Z as a heterogeneous rather than monolithic cohort.

Although Gen Z's digital activism is widely acknowledged, its translation into structured consumer-behaviour models remains underdeveloped. This study responds by embedding SIT within a systems-based pathway—linking engagement → attitudes toward cancel culture → participation → brand attitude—and by accounting for intra-cohort heterogeneity via self-identity and influencer credibility, offering testable mechanisms in the South African context

## 4. THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

### 4.1. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model (Figure 1) specifies a mediated chain from social media engagement to brand attitude via attitude toward cancel culture and cancel culture participation. Two boundary conditions are articulated: (i) self-identity moderates the path from social media engagement to attitude toward cancel culture, and (ii) perceived influencer credibility moderates the effect of cancel culture participation on brand attitude.

Critically, this model addresses three shortcomings in the current literature. First, it integrates fragmented studies on engagement, activism, and brand outcomes into a single sequential pathway, clarifying the causal ordering that prior work has left implicit. This integration is significant because it shifts the focus from isolated

examinations of individual constructs to their interconnected operation within consumer decision processes. Secondly, it extends traditional TPB-based models by introducing moderators that specify boundary conditions for the proposed relationships. Self-identity explains when social media engagement translates into cancel culture attitudes, while perceived influencer credibility determines how participation affects brand evaluations. Thirdly, it closes the systems thinking gap by offering an empirically testable framework that captures sequential mediation while situating these dynamics within the broader systemic context of online accountability practices.

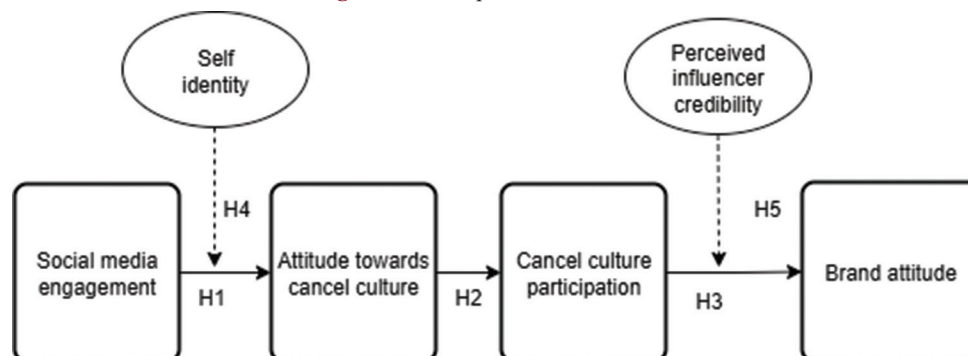
### 4.2. Hypothesis Development

#### 4.2.1. Social media engagement and attitude toward cancel culture

High social media engagement intensifies exposure to value-laden discourse and increases interaction with like-minded communities, which in turn strengthens the normative cues that frame cancelling as legitimate accountability (Clune and O'Dwyer, 2020). In contemporary engagement theory, engagement comprises cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions; sharing, commenting, and liking are the outward behaviours of engaged users (Ma et al., 2022). Everyday interactional traces therefore render social signals publicly visible and easy to emulate (Casagrande, 2022). Because these traces directly manifest engagement, repeated exposure to peers' reactions continually communicates what the community approves or censures (Sigurdsson et al., 2020). Engagement also deepens cognitive and emotional connection, embedding users in networks where group expectations are salient and actionable (Clune and O'Dwyer, 2020).

The arena for these dynamics is a technology-centric ecosystem that is pervasive, widely used, and culturally relevant, within which diverse behaviours, interactions, and exchanges occur (Appel et al., 2020). In such omni-social environments, virtually every part of the consumer decision process is susceptible to social media influence, allowing evaluative cues about accountability to travel quickly and widely (Appel et al., 2020). Within these flows, cancel culture operates as an accountability script. Clark (2020), conceptualises cancelling as an exercise of agency in which individuals withdraw attention from an actor whose values, actions, or speech are judged offensive, and thus unworthy of one's presence, time, or money. Ng (2020) likewise describes cancelling

Figure 1: Conceptual research model



as the withdrawal of support for those deemed to have acted or spoken in unacceptable ways, often on social-justice grounds. When highly engaged users encounter such withdrawals at scale, the visible behaviours operate as social proof that cancelling is legitimate and expected (Demsar et al., 2023).

Platform characteristics further amplify these attitude-shaping effects. The textual brevity, speed, and rapidity of online exchanges can encourage ideological rigidity and a lack of nuance, pushing communities toward clear-cut accountability judgements that consolidate favourable attitudes toward cancel practices (Ng, 2020). Social media engagement involves both cognitive processing and emotional investment that deepens users' connection to accountability narratives (Ma et al., 2022). The public visibility of peer reactions likes, shares, comments, creates social proof that cancelling represents legitimate community standards. Within social media ecosystems, these combined forces create a pathway through which higher engagement levels strengthen attitudes toward cancel culture as morally justified accountability. This argument supports proposition 1.

Proposition 1 ( $H_1$ ): Social media engagement is positively related to attitude toward cancel culture.

#### *4.2.2. Attitude toward cancel culture and cancel culture participation*

The theory of planned behaviour positions attitudes as proximal antecedents of behavioural intention; attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control jointly shape whether people act (Ajzen, 1991). In this context, when individuals evaluate cancelling as appropriate and effective, they are more likely to translate that evaluation into participation.

Building on the earlier conceptualisation, participation typically involves public shaming and the withdrawal of attention and support from a target, motivated by the aim that the target is ostracised or faces consequences for norm violations (Demsar et al., 2023; Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020). These acts map onto observable behaviours such as negative eWOM, avoidance, and boycott. Empirical work on brand-directed cancellation shows these behaviours co-occur: ideological incompatibilities trigger brand hate, negative eWOM, avoidance, retaliation, and intention to cancel; apologies can reduce these outcomes and lift purchase intention from post-crisis lows (Costa and Azevedo, 2024).

Social media settings also shape how favourable attitudes convert into action. Fast, brief, and rapid exchanges can reduce nuance and hasten movement from attitude to participation (Ng, 2020). Hashtag dynamics amplify shared outrage and collective mobilisation, creating affective communities that reward visible calls to cancel and make participation feel normative and efficacious (Bouvier and Machin, 2021). On creator platforms, cancellation often functions as a public accountability ritual that channels community values, even when outcomes are ambivalent, reinforcing participation scripts for audiences who view cancelling as legitimate collective action (Lewis and Christin, 2022).

Taken together, TPB's prediction that favourable attitudes lead to

behavioural intention aligns with how cancel culture is enacted in digital environments. When users judge cancelling as justified and useful, they are more inclined to post condemnations, amplify critical content, and withdraw support. Thus, this study derives the following proposition 2.

Proposition 2 ( $H_2$ ): Attitude toward cancel culture is positively related to cancel culture participation.

#### *4.2.3. Cancel culture participation and brand attitude*

When participation scales through social platforms, sanctioning narratives spread quickly via eWOM, increasing message reach and persistence (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Ng, 2020). Participation commonly targets brands perceived to have breached social norms, as consumers align or withdraw based on value congruence, accountability, and the perceived severity of the offence (Clark, 2020; Klassen et al., 2021; Demsar et al., 2023; Roldan et al., 2024).

Cancellation activates negative associations, heightens perceptions of moral transgression, and triggers blame attributions, which are established drivers of declines in brand evaluations (Dawar and Pillutla, 2000; Romani et al., 2012). Networked eWOM then reinforces and reproduces these judgements across audiences, compounding attitude deterioration (Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Because attitudes summarise brand evaluations, sustained reductions weaken downstream intentions (Andika and Ekawati, 2021; Nuzula and Wahyudi, 2022). Collective sanctioning can further intensify brand hate and anti-consumption tendencies, which in turn amplifies negative eWOM and sustains unfavourable attitudes (Hegner et al., 2017).

In Gen Z settings, cancellations are associated with rapid negative perceptions and reputational damage transmitted through eWOM, with observable shifts in brand attitude and purchase intention as consumers seek value alignment (Ng, 2020; Demsar et al., 2023; Maziriri et al., 2023). In sum, participation operates less as isolated outrage and more as a coordinated, networked cue that moves evaluations through value-laden discourse and peer signalling (Klassen et al., 2021; Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017). This reasoning strengthens proposition 3.

Proposition 3 ( $H_3$ ): Cancel culture participation is negatively related to brand attitude.

#### *4.2.4. The moderating role of self-identity on the engagement → attitude link*

Self-identity is the salient part of the self tied to a behaviour and reflected in the labels people use to describe themselves (Biddle et al., 1987). In consumer contexts, identity is expressed and reinforced through choices; possessions and brands can operate as extensions of the self, shaping evaluations and intentions when cues are identity-congruent (Belk, 1988; Saint Clair, 2023).

Identity also channels social information. Social identity theory explains how group membership and identification structure the interpretation of contested issues and the weight placed on in-group norms and justice frames; organisational identity work further links

those identifications to evaluative outcomes (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Moral identity clarifies why normatively charged content is especially diagnostic for some users and not others (Aquino and Reed, 2002). In digital settings, these dynamics appear in customer-company identification pathways that explicitly build on SIT to account for how identity alignment shapes downstream attitudes and citizenship-type responses (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003).

Meta-analytic evidence shows that self-identity is a distinct motivational input rather than a proxy for attitudes or norms. Across 40 independent tests with  $n = 11,607$ , the sample-weighted association between self-identity and intention was large ( $r^+ = 0.47$ ). Self-identity explained an additional 6% of variance in intention beyond the theory of planned behaviour components, rising to 9% when past behaviour was controlled; effects on behaviour were largely mediated by intention (Rise et al., 2010). Conceptually, this distinctiveness aligns with identity-theory claims that people act to verify identity standards, differentiating self-identity from attitudes and subjective norms (Rise et al., 2010; Stets and Burke, 2000).

Applied to cancel culture contexts, identity-based processing clarifies when engagement cues translate into favourable attitudes toward cancelling. For users who see themselves as the kind of person who upholds justice and accountability, value-laden content and peer signals encountered during engagement are interpreted as identity-congruent, increasing the diagnostic weight of in-group norms and moral breach narratives. In omni-social environments saturated with visible reactions and accountability frames, high self-identity therefore strengthens the mapping from engagement to attitude; low self-identity dampens it (Smith et al., 2008; Rise et al., 2010; Saint Clair, 2023). Thus, this study derives the following proposition 4.

Proposition 4 ( $H_4$ ): Self-identity strengthens the positive relationship between social media engagement and attitude toward cancel culture.

#### *4.2.5. The moderating role of perceived influencer credibility on the participation → brand attitude link*

Source-credibility theory holds that credible communicators exert stronger attitudinal effects (Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004). In persuasive settings, source cues shape how people process contested claims. Under the elaboration likelihood and heuristic-systematic frameworks, communicator credibility functions as both a heuristic and a gateway to deeper processing: credible sources are trusted, their messages face less counter-arguing, and their attributions are granted greater diagnostic weight (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1980; Chen and Chaiken, 1999). In endorsement research, credibility is commonly operationalised as trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness; higher scores on these dimensions produce stronger attitudinal and behavioural effects (Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004).

Applied to cancel-culture participation, this means that when a widely followed voice frames a brand's transgression as a meaningful breach, audiences are more likely to accept that

account if the influencer is seen as trustworthy and expert. Credibility heightens perceived message validity, reduces scepticism, and increases acceptance of blame attributions, which collectively move brand evaluations in a negative direction. Influencer studies corroborate this pathway: perceived credibility and authenticity strengthen attitudes toward the message, increase persuasive impact, and translate into downstream intentions and eWOM (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2020; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). In short, credibility interacts with participation by amplifying the negative informational signal embedded in cancellation posts: The higher the credibility, the steeper the decline in brand attitude for a given level of participation.

Two mechanisms are central. First, diagnostic framing: credible communicators increase the perceived severity and intentionality of the transgression and strengthen moral responsibility attributions, which depress evaluations more than non-diagnostic chatter (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Second, relational endorsement: Parasocial ties with credible influencers make followers more willing to internalise the evaluation and to propagate it, reinforcing the attitude shift through networked eWOM (Jin et al., 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

Accordingly, perceived influencer credibility is expected to intensify the negative participation → brand attitude relationship among Generation Z consumers: when credibility is high, cancellation posts are more persuasive and attitude erosion is greater; when credibility is low, the same level of participation is more easily discounted and attitude change is weaker (Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Ki et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). This reasoning strengthens proposition 5.

Proposition 5 ( $H_5$ ): Perceived influencer credibility moderates the relationship between cancel culture participation and brand attitude among Generation Z consumers.

## **5. RESEARCH AGENDA AND EMPIRICAL VALIDATION**

A key challenge concerns measurement. While validated scales exist for constructs such as social media engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and brand attitude (Spears and Singh, 2004), no established measure of cancel culture attitudes exists. This necessitates the development of new items grounded in TPB's attitude structure. Although this represents a limitation, it also provides an opportunity to contribute scale innovation to consumer behaviour research. Careful construct validation, including content and discriminant validity testing, will therefore be essential. A cross-sectional survey design is proposed as an initial validation strategy, targeting South African Gen Z consumers (ages 18-27). A minimum sample size of 300-400 respondents is recommended for structural equation modelling (SEM). Recruitment across multiple platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X) would ensure representation of diverse engagement patterns.

### 5.1. Key Variables and Measurement Approach

- Social media engagement: Adapt Hollebeek et al. (2014) cognitive–affective–behavioural scale
- Cancel culture attitudes: Develop new items consistent with the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) attitude structure
- Brand attitude: Employ Spears and Singh's (2004) semantic differential scale
- Self-identity: Adapt moral identity salience items from Aquino and Reed (2002)
- Influencer credibility: Use updated digital credibility measures from Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019).

### 5.2. Analytical Strategy

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) will first establish measurement model validity using maximum likelihood estimation. Model fit will be evaluated with multiple indices: CFI and TLI  $\geq 0.95$ , RMSEA  $\leq 0.06$ , and SRMR  $\leq 0.08$ . Following acceptable measurement fit, structural equation modelling (SEM) will test the hypothesised sequential mediation chain (H<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>3</sub>). Indirect effects will be assessed using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to obtain confidence intervals. Moderation effects (H<sub>4</sub>-H<sub>5</sub>) will be tested via latent interaction approaches in Mplus, with simple-slopes analysis at  $\pm 1$  SD of the moderator. The complete model will be evaluated against the same fit criteria, and modification indices will be considered only when theoretically justified.

### 5.3. Expected Contributions

This agenda provides a systematic empirical pathway to validate how social media engagement fosters cancel culture attitudes and subsequent participation among Generation Z consumers. It highlights self-identity and influencer credibility as critical boundary conditions that moderate these relationships and offers evidence for the proposed sequential mediation model (engagement → attitudes → participation → brand attitude) within the distinctive South African context.

### 5.4. Methodological Concerns

The proposed cross-sectional survey design provides an initial validation of the conceptual framework but faces several important limitations. First, it cannot establish strict causal inference; while SEM can test associations and indirect effects, the temporal ordering and causal mechanisms require longitudinal or experimental validation. Furthermore, while Systems Thinking informs this study as a meta-theoretical lens by highlighting feedback loops and non-linear causality, a cross-sectional survey is inherently limited in its ability to empirically test these systemic processes. For instance, the model proposes a linear pathway from participation to brand attitude (H<sub>3</sub>), but a systems perspective suggests a reinforcing feedback loop where a deteriorated brand attitude could fuel further social media engagement and participation in the cancellation campaign against that same brand. This dynamic, non-linear escalation is a hallmark of cancel culture that static data cannot capture. Second, common method bias remains a concern when all variables are self-reported by the same participants, even with procedural and statistical remedies. Third, social desirability may lead participants to underreport

controversial attitudes or behaviours related to cancel culture. Fourth, the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of cancellation episodes may be inadequately captured by static surveys that do not track real-time escalation or feedback processes. Future research should address these limitations through complementary designs, including longitudinal panels that follow participants through actual cancellation episodes, experiments that manipulate key cues and accountability frames, digital-trace studies that analyse observed social media behaviour, and mixed methods that combine surveys with qualitative insights. Such approaches would better capture temporal dynamics, feedback loops, and evolving consumer attitudes during cancellation episodes.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper advances a conceptual framework explaining how social media engagement influences attitudes toward cancel culture, participation, and brand attitude, grounded in the theory of planned behaviour and social influence theory. By incorporating the moderating roles of self-identity and perceived influencer credibility, the model clarifies boundary conditions that shape these relationships. The South African context illustrates how cultural and historical sensitivities amplify reputational risks for brands. While cross-sectional surveys provide an empirical starting point, future longitudinal and experimental research is needed to capture dynamic feedback loops. The study contributes by integrating fragmented literature and offering practical insights for brand management in digital ecosystems.

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