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# IDEOLOGY AS/OF PLATFORM AFFORDANCE AND BLACK FEMINIST CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF “CANCELLING”: READING TWITTER

temi lasade-anderson, King’s College London

Francesca Sobande, Cardiff University

## Introduction

As Elon Musk’s 2022 takeover of Twitter highlights, the ways in which affordances operate extend further than the User Interface (UI) and content formats that are emphasised. Such platform affordances are also imbued with the owner’s personal ideologies, as well as being impacted by broader societal power regimes. Digital studies, platform studies, and political economy studies have critically analysed and illuminated the functions, affordances, and capitalist roots of social media, microblogging, and content-sharing sites such as YouTube and Twitter (Srnicsek 2017; Weltevrede and Borra 2016; van Dijck 2020). However, much of such work stems from a point in time prior to the rise of rhetoric regarding so-called “cancel culture”. Experiences of “cancel culture”, like affordances, can shift depending on the context of use, and primarily, who is being targeted (Clark 2020). Although extant work has addressed how power relations and political perspectives are implicated in the affordances of platforms, the notion of ‘ideology as/of affordance’ (lasade-anderson 2022a) provides a critical intervention that uses affordance scholarship to illustrate its ideological power. Such theorising is in conversation with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s work on *race as technology*, where they argue that ‘as’ operates in a way that “facilitates comparisons between entities classed as similar or dissimilar” (2009, 9). ‘Ideology as/of affordance’ provides a rethinking where ideology is considered not from *what* it does to affordances, but to how ideology can also be a *kind of* affordance. This paper takes such an approach, employing a Black feminist epistemological position which grapples with how imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1994) and misogynoir (Bailey 2010; 2021) is implicated in the shaping and experiences of platform affordances (e.g., on Twitter) (lasade-anderson 2022b).

A Black feminist conceptualisation of ideology as/of affordance offers a critical intervention examining the dynamics between ideology, digital culture, and relational experiences of autonomy. Such an analytical lens puts the concepts of “platform affordances” and “cancel culture” in dialogue in a productive way which deals with how both have been wielded and weaponised to infer that individuals have more agency and autonomy online than they typically do. Put differently, a Black feminist conceptualisation of such matters provides necessary analysis of “platform affordances”, alleged processes of “cancelling”, and the tempestuous relationship between them. In taking such an approach to critically analysing these issues, we lay bare how notions of “platform affordances” and “cancel culture” can function in ways that mask the extent to which platforms have power over people’s digital visibility.

Focusing on the fluctuating platform affordances of Twitter, while reflecting on the notion of affordances more broadly, we outline how the concept of ideology as/of affordance is a helpful intervention for illuminating the power relations which define both “cancel culture” and “platform affordances”. To achieve this, we draw on the vital work of Meredith D. Clark (2020) in “A brief etymology of so-called ‘cancel culture’”. Specifically, we examine how white supremacist ideological underpinnings shape platform affordances, which in turn shape who is supposedly “cancelled”, and associated ideas about what “cancelling” involves.

## Conceptualising Affordances

Within the field of internet studies, there is consensus on the biased nature of the internet (Benjamin 2019; Coleman 2019; Fuchs 2014; Noble 2018; Sengupta and Graham 2017; Vaidhyathan 2017). Legal scholar Lawrence Lessig wrote “In cyberspace we must understand how a different “code” regulates - how the software and hardware (i.e., the “code” of cyberspace) that make cyberspace what it is also regulate cyberspace as it is” (2006, 5). It is a specific element of coded regulation — affordances — which we argue can be seen as being ideological.

Existing analyses of social media consider how platforms’ networked nature influences user behaviour across community-building, political activism, and language and cultural practices (see for e.g. boyd 2010; van Dijck 2013; Graham and Smith 2016; Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2020; Kuo 2018; Marwick and boyd 2011). Amongst these, the focus has been on specific affordances related to the design features and UI of platforms, such as hashtags, rather than how affordances can operate theoretically, which is what this paper advances. ‘Affordances’ is broadly considered across a diverse range of scholarship; there lacks consensus on a single definition. A term coined by James J. Gibson, ‘affordances’ defines the relationship between animals and the environment. Affordances “are what the environment offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes” (2014, 56). While Gibson uses the term in the context of ecological psychology, in the field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI), Donald A. Norman’s (2013) definition is “the perceived and actual properties of the thing,” where the ‘thing’ are artefacts in design (2013, 9).

In media and communications studies, scholars interpret affordances as add-on feature sets (e.g., boyd 2010; Treem and Leonardi 2013) rather than being intrinsic to the technology (Sun and Hart-Davidson 2014). Nevertheless, where there *is* consensus is in the relationality of social network sites’ (SNS) technological functions and resulting user behaviour — the coconstitutive relationship between affordance and agentic human behaviour (Davis 2020; Hutchby 2001). For instance, providing an alternative definition are Ian Hutchby (2001) and Ann Majchrzak et al., (2013) who suggest that affordances are the result of the relationship between the potential actions allowed on SNS and the technological capabilities underpinning them. For these scholars, affordances are technological elements that provide or restrict, while simultaneously not entirely determining actors’ behaviour. Overall, then, affordances can be seen as engendering possibilities, and both constraining those possibilities. Our use of the term affordance follows scholars Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond (2018), who propose that “affordances are key to understanding and analysing SNS interfaces and relations between technology and users” (2018, 235). A relational view of affordances is important in our argument because it unveils the “social capabilities that certain communication technologies enable” (Sun and Hart-Davidson 2014, 3535). Therefore, the analysis that follows is shaped by an understanding of affordances as being a term that encompasses structural power relations which impact who is afforded what. Put briefly, we conceptualise affordances — platform-based and otherwise — as typically functioning in unequal ways in the context of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1984).

## Platform Affordances

Scholarship on platform affordances focuses on the dynamics, social interactions and communication practices that features on platforms allow (Bucher and Helmond 2018). This literature examines the materiality of SNS features, those composed of ‘properties of bits’ (boyd 2010); or they highlight the mediated dynamics enabled by affordances, which may give rise to different types of communicative practices or experiences, particularly for marginalised or minoritised people (Bailey 2021; Brock 2018; Graham and Smith 2016; Steele 2015). These two groupings of affordances, either abstract or feature-specific, (Bucher and Helmond 2018), —while useful for typologies of platforms— do not offer a theoretical framework that examines the dynamics between ideology, digital culture, and relational experiences of autonomy. Jenny Davis writes: “The social world is power laden, and so too

are technologies. Conceptual tools for the study of human-technology relations must therefore also assume and attend to political dynamics as they manifest in social and material forms” (2020, 33). An ideological analysis is a necessary one, given a key conceptual point in affordances research is that affordances “do not determine social practice” (boyd 2010, 46), but constrain and control it, much like ideology. In the information age, social media are essential infrastructure (Lovink 2016), and “It is precisely at this juncture of “becoming infrastructure” that we (re)open the ideology file” (2016, 10). Similarly, William Gaver makes the case that affordances are not only about the perceived utility of the environment, but that they are “*properties of the world defined with respect to people’s interaction with it* [emphasis added]” (Gaver 1991, p. 80 quoted in Bucher and Helmond 2018, 237). Gaver’s position encourages us to think about *which* kinds of societal perspectives affordances contain, and how they both reflect and impact people, places, and forms of power.

### **Ideology as/of Platform Affordance**

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2005) declares “software is a functional analog to ideology. In a *formal* sense, computers understood as comprising software and hardware are ideology machines” (2005, 18). To analyse how ideologies shape affordances and therefore platform behaviour such as ‘cancelling’, we are in conversation with extant literature that reads software as ideological. Ideologies are systems and beliefs, they “explain a given political order, legitimising existing hierarchies and power relations and preserving group identities” (Fairclough 2013, 257). Thus, conceptualising ideology as/of platform affordance is possible because they both have relational characteristics. Ideology *and* platform affordances are “ways of representing aspects of the world, which may be operationalised in ways of acting and interacting and in ‘ways of being’ or identities, that contribute to establishing or sustaining unequal relations of power” (2013, 8). Hence, we can see the connective tissue between software and ideology: operating systems, like affordances, constrain and enable possibilities. Chun contends:

the “choices” operating systems offer limit the visible and the invisible, the imaginable and the unimaginable. You are not, however, aware of software’s constant constriction and interpellation...unless you find yourself frustrated with its defaults (which are remarkably referred to as your preferences) (2005, 18).

The function of ideology is to serve power, and “technologies are often infused with the politics of the powerful” (Davis 2020, 11). Affordances’ traits of enabling and constraining underscore how they wield power (Sun and Hart-Davidson 2014). Social media companies treat users differently: whether through the ‘bending’ of their own platform policies for profit-bearing Creators (Baker-White 2020), or by disproportionately shadowbanning fat, Black and queer account holders (Are 2021; El-Wardany 2020), platforms categorise users into different class hierarchies. Consequently, the power and class differentials within social media, supports an ideology as/of affordance hermeneutic, “because ideologies are a significant element of processes through which relations of power are established, maintained, enacted and transformed” (Fairclough 2013, 26). At this juncture, we suggest that the dominant ideology on platforms, specifically Twitter, is a right-wing “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 1994, 26). Certainly, to advance a right-wing, white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal ideology, is to grant power and privilege to whiteness and maleness, and to extract wealth and resources from those disproportionately disadvantaged by such power and privilege. Antiblack “cancel culture” tactics and discourses of “cancelling” are emblematic of such right-wing ideologies on platforms. Here, we provide a Black feminist analysis of “cancel culture”, which we argue furthers the theorising of ideology as/of platform affordance.

## **Tweeting and Calling Out: A Black Feminist Lesson on “Cancel Culture”**

As journalist and media studies scholar Meredith D. Clark (2020) affirms in crucial work in the “Etymology of so-called ‘cancel culture’”: “The term ‘cancel culture’ has significant implications for defining discourses of digital and social media activism”, and it is a term that has been used to dismissively reframe “the evolution of digital accountability praxis as performed by Black Twitter” (2020, 1). Clark goes on to explain:

“Canceling” 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. The term has since devolved into journalistic shorthand wielded as a tool for silencing marginalized people who have adapted earlier resistance strategies for effectiveness in the digital space (2020, 1).

Cancelling then, is imbued with a Black feminist approach to accountability and analysis of power. Such work critically articulates dominant ideologies at work in society, while tackling the intersecting nature of oppression and its impacts (e.g., the nexus of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism). As an example, Black feminisms enable critical consideration of how Twitter’s tagline, “Here, your voice matters” (Twitter 2024), glosses over the reality that some voices may be responded to and/or silenced in ways shaped by ideological forces (e.g., imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) that yield any public critique of oppressive forces as “cancelling”. As Meredith D. Clark notes, “what it means to be “canceled” [requires] contextualizing the power relations that inform the assumption of an equitable public sphere” (2020, 2). Making use of the critical framework the matrix of domination (Collins 1991), Black feminist analysis of “cancel culture” illuminates both the agency of people and the force of structural power relations – all of which contours people’s capacity to freely express themselves publicly online. Therefore, a Black feminist analysis of “cancel culture” exemplifies how ideology as/of affordance operates, because such conceptualisations refuse the myth that anyone can “cancel” and/or be “cancelled”. Such work highlights that power regimes shape the extent to which someone can cultivate predominantly negative societal perceptions of another person and their perspectives, both online and offline. More than that, Black feminist approaches call into question the very notion of “cancel culture” and clarify that framing public critique of an individual as their “cancelling”, can have the effect of strategically positioning powerful people (e.g., white and wealthy public figures) as being somehow oppressed.

A Black feminist perspective on “cancel culture” helps to parse the ways that power is weaponised on platforms and in people’s experiences of them, by critically analysing how notions of “free speech” and “cancelling” are constructed and contended online. Such conceptualisations of these matters also highlight that contemporary discourse on “cancel culture” (e.g., who claims to be cancelled and who they claim to have been cancelled by) is imbued with dominant ideological positions (e.g., who feels entitled to speak and act with impunity, regardless of the harm they cause, and why they feel that sense of entitlement). In other words, a Black feminist analysis of “cancel culture” enables a nuanced understanding of the relationship between ideology and platform affordances, accounting for the relational nature of power and agency. For example, Black feminist theory addresses and explains how intersecting forms of oppression shape whether and how people can express themselves online (e.g., accounting for how the combined impact of ableist platform affordance designs and the normalisation of online misogynoir can obstruct the digital experiences of disabled Black women, and, in turn, their free speech).

Ultimately, a Black feminist analysis of “cancel culture” alongside the theorising of ideology

as/of affordance, challenges the notion that “cancelling” is a contemporary social process that simply involves negating someone and/or something. By critically accounting for pervasive and centurieslong power dynamics, Black feminist theoretical explications of “cancel culture” illuminate that the term is but one of many that is used to both describe and dismiss forms of critique and efforts to hold people accountable for their actions (Brock 2020).

### **Cancelling, “Cancel Culture”, Ideology, and Twitter**

People’s capacity to participate in conversations on Twitter can be constrained by the prospect of them being subjected to online abuse and harassment. For instance, extensive research on abuse and harassment faced by Black women on Twitter (Akiwowo 2022; Amnesty International 2018; Chatelain 2019; Glitch and End Violence Against Women Coalition 2020), illustrates that Twitter’s perceived affordance of ‘space to converse’, is one that is not equally accessible to all its account holders. On Twitter there are numerous examples illustrating how surrounding notions of “cancelling” nod to both the political and practical functions of social media sites: for claims of being “cancelled” include examples such as the suspension of Twitter accounts and accusations of being censored/silenced by the allegedly politically “woke” (Sobande 2024). We note that in this context, “cancelling” is constructed as oppositional to so-called free speech and, consequently, is framed as undermining Twitter as a platform where “Here, your voice matters” (Twitter 2024) – a notion that, arguably, is far from being ideologically neutral.

Distinguishing between the discourses entangled in what has become known as “cancel culture”, media, culture, and politics scholar Eve Ng “defines ‘cancel culture’ as comprising both cancel practices (cancelling) that involve actions against a cancel target, which may be an individual, brand, or company, and cancel discourses, which is commentary about cancelling” (2020, 1). Much of contemporary discourse on “cancel culture” on social media, is a by-product of the ideological positions of different platform owners and the culture embedded in their approach to content moderation and other forms of community management online (Harry 2021). While we acknowledge that Twitter is a site of many different political conversations and contestations (Sobande 2020), informed by studies of its right-wing leaning (Pérez Curiel 2020; Kreis 2017), we recognise the imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff 2015) of Twitter as including its propensity to promote rightwing ideologies.

For example, in response to a tweet including a video of Matt Taibbi and Joe Rogan discussing changes to Twitter under Musk’s leadership, Elon Musk replied: “RIP Cancel Culture, you won’t be missed” (@elonmusk 2023). Both Rogan and Taibbi have been embroiled in socio-political controversy. Taibbi, a journalist, has faced sexual harassment accusations and been described as a “red-pilled culture warrior chasing subscriptions” (Barkan 2021). Taibbi also published the ‘Twitter Files’, a sensational report made up from classified Twitter documents about content moderation. Taibbi argues the files reveal that Twitter “censored” tweets in support of Republican propaganda against the Democrats (Kwet 2023). Rogan, a podcaster, has faced public fallout about his controversial behaviours, including his liberal use of the N-word (which resulted in Spotify pulling several episodes from the platform ((Romano 2022). Rogan, Taibbi and Musk, have made public comments about the “wokeness” of the Left, “cancel culture” and so-called free-speech suppression (Kwet 2023). If, at the heart of “cancel culture” is the “withdrawal of any kind of support...for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable...generally from a social justice perspective” (Ng 2020, 623), then in his tweet, Musk signals that he, (including through Twitter), will call for its end: that is, will allow for all types of voice and speech, even if they are racist, homophobic or otherwise.

So, how does this relate to Twitter’s ideology as/of affordance? Firstly, it signals who is encouraged and allowed to use Twitter. One of Musk’s first changes as CEO was to reinstate previously “banned” right-wing accounts which were associated with the harassment of marginalised

people (Woodward 2022). In doing so, Musk conveys that the platform's facilitation of 'space to converse' is underpinned by and will be encouraged to be those opinions and perspectives that align with right-wing ideologies in the broader public sphere. Secondly, a right-wing, white supremacist capitalist ideology as/of affordance on Twitter, privileges the silencing of minoritised groups and individuals over dominant ones. We wonder: how can Black women consider Twitter as a space where "...real change starts with conversation" (Twitter 2024) if people and accounts which dehumanise their very existence are encouraged and welcome on the platform? In the context of 'conversation', the mediated dynamics affordances engender on Twitter are ideologically unsafe for Black women (Anderson 2016; Amnesty International 2018). Earlier, we noted how affordances scholarship centres on the communicative practices that affordances *allow*: affordances constrain and enable behaviours. Part and parcel of this 'allowance' is that affordances also *prohibit* conversation.

In 2014, Marcia Chatelain (2019), made use of Twitter for knowledge production and dissemination. In response to the murder of unarmed teenager Michael Brown by the police, Chatelain's #FergusonSyllabus campaign highlighted the socio-political circumstances leading to Brown's death. Chatelain explains that Twitter allowed for educators to organise and gather. However, she also notes that because of the virality of the hashtag, she was the target of racist trolls and harassment. Similarly, Tressie McMillan Cottom, explains how Twitter can provide visibility for racialised academics whose work would otherwise remain subjugated (Cottom 2017). On the other hand, Cottom, has also explained that *because* of increased visibility on Twitter, she receives racist harassment, and hateful emails (@tressiemcphd 2022).

In September 2022, Dr Uju Anya, a Black woman, tweeted about Queen Elizabeth and the violence of the British empire in an "offensive" way, as news about the Queen's deteriorating health spread around the globe (Flynn 2022). As a response, Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, quote-tweeted admonishing Dr Anya, resulting in increased visibility of her tweet from his 6.2M followers. Ultimately, Twitter deleted Anya's tweet—stating it violated their hate speech policy—(2022), while Anya faced criticism and backlash both on Twitter and news media. The above examples illustrate the encoded power and ideological imbalances Black women face on the platform. Twitter "...can foster ideological rigidity" (Ng 2020, 623); conversations by outspoken Black women result in threats of violence towards, silencing or self-censorship. Musk and his proponents re-narrativize "cancel culture" and "wokeness" as restricting free-speech and alternative views, but "cancelling" actually involves "previously silenced groups making a real if small dent on the power of those traditionally privileged by gender, [and] race" (Ng 2020, 623), by pushing back against the normalisation of racist, sexist, classist and homophobic attitudes (Clark 2020). As Chatelain's (2019) article asks: "Is Twitter any place for a Black [academic] lady?" These examples, and our analysis, would suggest no.

## Conclusion

Our article introduces the theorisation of ideology as/of affordance and offers a Black feminist analysis of platform affordances, "cancel culture", and their entanglements. Informed by pivotal research such as Clark's (2020) on the etymology of so-called "cancel culture", and Bailey's (2021) on misogynoir and Black women's digital experiences, our piece puts Black digital studies, critical race and internet studies, platform studies, and critical accounts of "cancel culture" in dialogue. We do so at a point in time when Twitter's affordances, content moderation (or lack thereof), and sociopolitical brand has shifted in ways tethered to the ideological views espoused by its owner, and the continued rise of populist right-wing politics. In the spirit of Black feminism's ability to create a world that is otherwise (Emejulu and Sobande 2019), here, we consider it necessary to take the opportunity to reflect on what platforms and their affordances could evolve to. What platform experiences might be possible if platforms embraced Black feminist principles from the point of design, and within a society where Black women and Black feminism flourished? Perhaps a platform that centres and was predominantly for Black people might exist, one that took community care and transformative justice

seriously (Bailey and Cole 2021). It would be one where Black women content creators, and activists like the recently departed Shafiqah Hudson (known on Twitter as @sassycrass), were properly attributed and compensated for their innovations and work in making platforms safer (Eordogh 2018). Future Black feminist digital platforms rooted in a focus on collective creation, ownership, care, and communal space to come as you are, would still be sites where perspectives diverge. However, such platforms and participation in them could avoid the trappings of notions of “cancel culture”, by fostering forms of mutual respect and accountability praxis of calling in (not out), which are free of the punitive logics that underlie common concepts of “cancelling”.

In the words of Black digital studies scholar André Brock, in Shamira Ibrahim’s (2022) article on “Can Black Twitter Ever *Really* Die?”: “The fact that somebody racist takes charge of a space that we inhabit, doesn’t necessarily mean that we’ll flee. We don’t do white flight”. Affirming and elaborating on Brock’s (2022) point, we consider our theorising of ideology as/of platform affordance and “cancel culture” as enabling an understanding of online platforms and digital experiences, which goes beyond conceptual binaries such as “individual” and “institution”. Indeed —we deem Musk as both an individual and an institution. Our Black feminist theorising of ideology as/of platform affordance and “cancel culture” can help to explore the complicated but potentially generative, and, even, pleasurable, space(s) between “staying” on or “fleeing” from Twitter. As such, future work might benefit from considering what it means to “stay” on Twitter, but approach use of the platform, and disengagement from it, in different ways than before Musk’s takeover of it. In this vein then, we could consider approaches that do not move fast and break things, but rather embrace forms of pausing, pacing, and privacy in a world that demands the visibility, and ideological safety, of Black women.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although Twitter is now known as X; due to historical accuracy, we refer to it as Twitter in the rest of the paper.