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# From Pedestal to Ostracism A Quantitative Social Media Analysis and Conceptual Framework on Historical Memory and Pedagogical Implications of Cancel Culture

## *1. Introduction and theoretical framework*

### *1.1. At the beginning of "Cancel Culture"*

Any reflection on what is widely referred to today as "cancel culture" cannot avoid a premise about its intrinsic meaning. However, as will be seen, this subject is inherently complex, and its meaning fragments into a series of interpretations that change depending on the perspective.

The language of "cancelling" first entered the virtual world through *Black Twitter* (an informal community on Twitter composed mostly of African American and queer users) via a meme (Clark, 2015; Shifman, 2013). Subsequently, the term was used, especially in journalism, to describe a practice of censorship and ostracism: politicians, opinion leaders, celebrities, academics, and ordinary people began narrating

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the experience of being "cancelled" as a "moral panic akin to real harm" (Clark, 2020).

The topic has gained prominence in political and cultural debates in recent years, emerging as a polemical tool to criticize social practices, political activism, and ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that defend the rights of minorities or marginalized groups such as racialized individuals, women, disabled people, and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Dei, 2021). It is closely linked to the concept of "political correctness," and both notions refer, according to their detractors, to behaviours that shift the fight against discrimination to the symbolic level, enforcing rigid conformity in language and relationships. They are accused of threatening the principle of freedom of speech and expression, functioning as a new form of censorship, and taking place in restricted intellectual environments perceived as closed and disconnected from society (especially in the Anglophone world, where these expressions originated and where the debate is particularly heated, especially on university campuses). Critics also claim that these behaviours "freeze" identities into categories that push individuals to see themselves as part of a victimized minority rather than as citizens (Dei, 2021).

On the other hand, the targets of these criticisms deny the existence of a cancel culture or any "dictatorship" of political correctness. They consider these notions to be artificial labels created by conservative right-wing factions to ridicule the struggle for rights, deny the existence of subaltern dynamics and discrimination, and perpetuate the supremacy of white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied males. This, they argue, legitimizes racism, sexism, heteronormativity, transphobia, and ableism—characteristics that allegedly define contemporary Western societies (Feldstein, 1997).

The issue of cancel culture gained particular relevance in 2020, stemming from the actions of the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement exploded following protests over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, during which statues of military figures, politicians, and historical figures involved in the slave trade—symbols of colonialism underpinning the racist and slaveholding memory of American society—were torn down, including statues of Christopher Columbus. Similarly, there were calls to revise street names and public spaces, as seen in the con-

troversies in Italy over streets named after Giorgio Almirante or squares named after Arnaldo Mussolini. It should be noted that in Italy, the phenomenon manifests itself quite differently compared to the Anglo-American world, as we lack university campuses or do not conceive of them in the same way. Here, cancel culture takes on a more aggressively populist connotation (Dei, 2021), although the debate became heated in June 2020 when activists defaced the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan with paint.

Cancel culture began to be discussed as early as 2017, in connection with the actions of the #MeToo movement, which fights against sexual abuse and violence against women through public denunciation campaigns and the boycott of public figures and powerful individuals accused of harassment or violence. A particularly famous case is that of J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter saga, who became the target of a "hate campaign" by trans activists due to her alignment with TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) feminism—a term used by trans activists to describe a branch of feminism that refuses to consider trans women as "real" women. The boycott strategy as will be seen later, is characterized by an intensive use of social media.

### *1.2. Conflicts and criticisms*

Thus, there is a clash of voices: those who use the label of cancel culture as a symbol of a new fundamentalism that denies freedom of expression, and those who argue that even coining the term "cancel culture" is equivalent to endorsing white supremacy (Dei, 2021). Only a perspective that prioritizes the stories and communicative practices of marginalized groups can interpret the use of this expression as a tool to delegitimize dissent originating from the margins (Clark, 2020). According to some scholars, the term "cancelling" represents the agency of individuals within marginalized groups who, by withdrawing attention, presence, time (and money) from someone or something whose values, actions, or rhetoric are deemed offensive, seek to implement resistance strategies to be more effective, at least in digital spaces. In this sense, the use of the expression "cancel culture," initially in journalism, would be nothing more than a way to silence these attempts (Clark, 2020).

Digital resistance practices among otherwise disempowered individuals force us to reflect on who defines the public sphere, who sets the rules of engagement, and what constitutes a "response" to dominant discourses (Clark, 2020).

Post-colonial studies have conveyed a premise that researchers find difficult to ignore: knowledge is never neutral but always shaped by power relations (Loomba *et al.*, 2020). For example, casting directors and producers have the power to deny access to the entertainment industry. Donors, university presidents, and officials have historically enjoyed similar privileges on American campuses. Ultimately, any examination of so-called "cancel culture" must involve an analysis of the complex power structures that define it.

Tearing down statues or renaming public spaces involves conflicts over cultural memory: in this sense, cancel culture is nothing new. Consider the *damnatio memoriae* of the Romans (Galgano, 2023) or the falsification of images by the Soviet regime to erase Trotsky (Dei, 2021). Other examples include earlier practices of "discursive accountability," such as *dragging* and *call-outs* (Oni *et al.*, 2023), which originated in the counter-discourse of Black communities absent from the American public imagination. Analogous predecessors of cancel culture also include boycotts and blacklists (Clark, 2020).

We can therefore say that symbolic conflicts have always shaped memory in diverse ways - by erasing, adding, inventing, and mythologizing (Dei, 2021). Cancel culture serves as a mean to spotlight social issues, revealing the gap between declared values, norms, and social practices. Functionally, it operates as a mechanism to adapt society and maintain social order. The innovative aspect of the cancel culture debate lies in its focus on political concepts centred on race, gender, sexual identity, and ableism. What remains pedagogically valuable is understanding how different societies in various historical periods construct notions of what is "wrong." These notions express social conflict, which emerges through unofficial discourse amplified by modern technologies (Dei, 2021). This raises questions for educators: how should these debates be mediated in classrooms, and how should controversial historical figures be taught?

## *2. Research questions*

Given this theoretical framework of reference, we decided to investigate certain specific aspects of cancellation phenomena concerning historical figures or those with educational and pedagogical implications. Specifically, we sought to understand what themes emerged in online debates, the tone in which they were discussed, and whether there were similarities or differences with controversies involving contemporary celebrities. Additionally, we investigated how such information could be applied to guide educators and teachers in addressing these figures in school settings.

To do this, five notable cancellation cases were selected based on their effects and scope. The first concerns Christopher Columbus, a figure whose celebration has been strongly criticized from a post-colonial perspective, leading to the toppling of statues depicting him in U.S. cities (The Guardian, 2020). The second involves Winston Churchill, whose public image has been reevaluated due to his racist statements: in this case too, statues were vandalized (Slotkin, 2020). The third case concerns writer J.K. Rowling, chosen not as a historical figure but as a children's author whose books have now entered school curricula (Driscoll, 2013). Rowling was accused of transphobia following certain statements and writings (Madani, 2020). The fourth involves Dr. Seuss, also a children's literature writer. Some of his books became the centre of controversy due to stereotypical racial representations (Pratt, 2021). Finally, we examined the case of Indro Montanelli, an Italian historian, criticized for his involvement in colonial practices and his marriage to an underage Eritrean girl (Tondo, 2020). In this case too, a statue of him was vandalized. His inclusion was considered to extend the investigation beyond the Anglophone geographical and cultural sphere, to evaluate the effects of cancel culture on a broader scale.

## *3. Methodology*

To conduct analyses on cancellation phenomena regarding the aforementioned cases, we first chose to consider the social network X, previously known as Twitter. The platform not only lends itself to computa-

tional analysis due to its structure favouring brief self-contained textual content, but has also historically been the primary venue where debates about cancel culture have taken place (Waani *et al.*, 2021). While choosing a single platform helps solidly grounding our statistical analysis in a determined context, it must be specified that X is not the only virtual space where cancellation discourse occurs. Furthermore, while people of a myriad of cultures participated in the debates we observed, our case studies concern the cancellation of European and American figures, which may limit the generalizability of our findings across different cultural contexts. Future research studies analyzing even more groups and environments are certainly encouraged.

To identify periods for analysis, we used Google Trends, based on the premise that when a cancellation event reaches a certain relevance, it gets reported by news outlets, consequently increasing the number of Google searches on the topic (Erker *et al.*, 2022). The periods thus obtained, of varying length, concentrate between 2020 and 2021.

Subsequently, specific search strings were created (for details on which, please refer to additional materials) to identify tweets mentioning the figures under study and certain key terms related to their cancellation. Replies were excluded from the extraction, as elements that often require considerable context to be categorized, in an attempt to reduce possible disturbance elements in the computational analysis. Tweets were extracted using Zeeschuimer (Peeters, 2023) and processed with 4CAT (Peeters - Hagen, 2022). The extraction is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather exemplary, and represents a section of the extensive debates that took place on Twitter. In total, 20,155 tweets were obtained about Columbus, 14,808 about Churchill, 37,187 about Rowling, 17,817 about Dr. Seuss, and 5,544 about Montanelli. After removing duplicates and non-English or non-Italian tweets, 95,432 tweets remained in total.

First, networks of co-occurrences of hashtags present in the posts were created. In each network, each hashtag represents a node, larger based on its recurrence, and each co-occurrence between two hashtags appearing in the same tweet represents an edge, thicker based on its frequency. For each node, Eigenvector Centrality was calculated, a value measuring the importance of a node in the network based on its connections to other

important nodes (Newman, 2008). A more intense color corresponds to greater centrality.

This was done to visualize and analyze the different thematic clusters around which cancellation debates revolve.

Subsequently, the tweets were analyzed using the TweetEval pre-trained text classification models (Barbieri *et al.*, 2020). Through these, it was possible to calculate a percentage score of emotions conveyed by tweets (anger, joy, sadness, optimism), presence of irony, presence of offensive language, presence of hate speech, and overall sentiment of tweets (positive, negative, or neutral). Italian language tweets underwent manual label verification. Additionally, we decided to train a new model to classify the stance regarding cancellation events according to three labels: favourable, unfavourable, and neutral. To achieve this, 20% of the tweet corpus, equally divided among reference figures, was annotated using the GPT-4o Large Language Model (Hurst *et al.*, 2024), adopting a workflow similar to that proposed by Tan and colleagues (2024). The data thus obtained served as a training dataset for fine-tuning the xlm-roberta-base model (Conneau, 2019), with a 70/15/15 split between training, validation, and test sets, again with the most equitable possible division between figures and labels. The new model achieved an accuracy of 0.774171, a Macro F1 score of 0.765934, a Weighted F1 score of 0.773198, precision of 0.769870, and recall of 0.763283.

To interpret relationships between different data, a correlation matrix was created, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Correlation matrix
Almost all correlations proved significant ($p<0.05$), as shown in Figure 2.

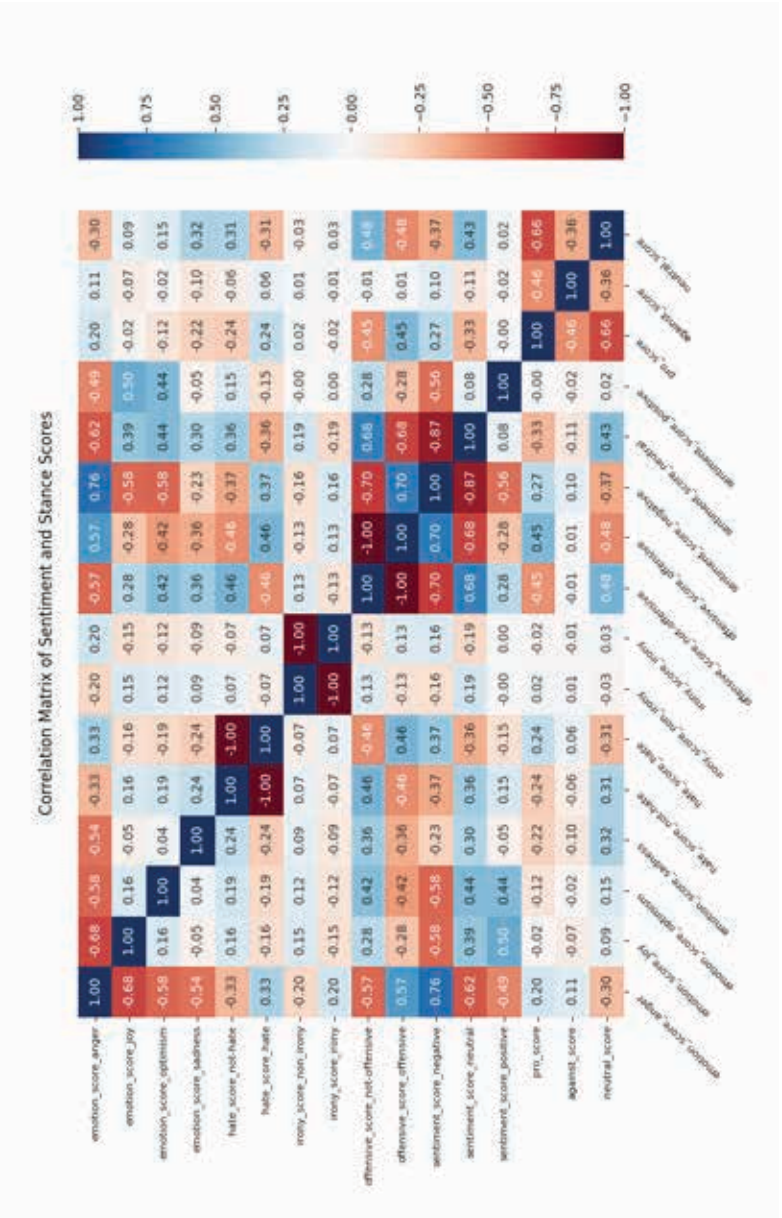
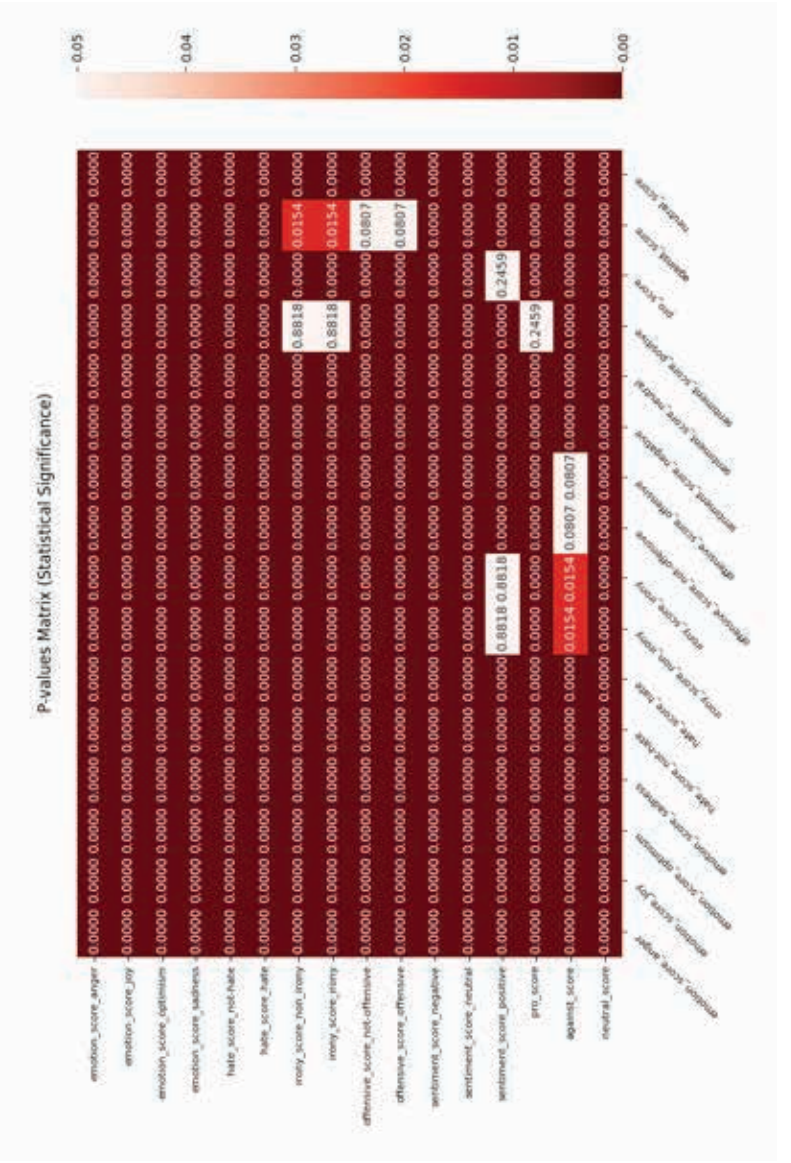


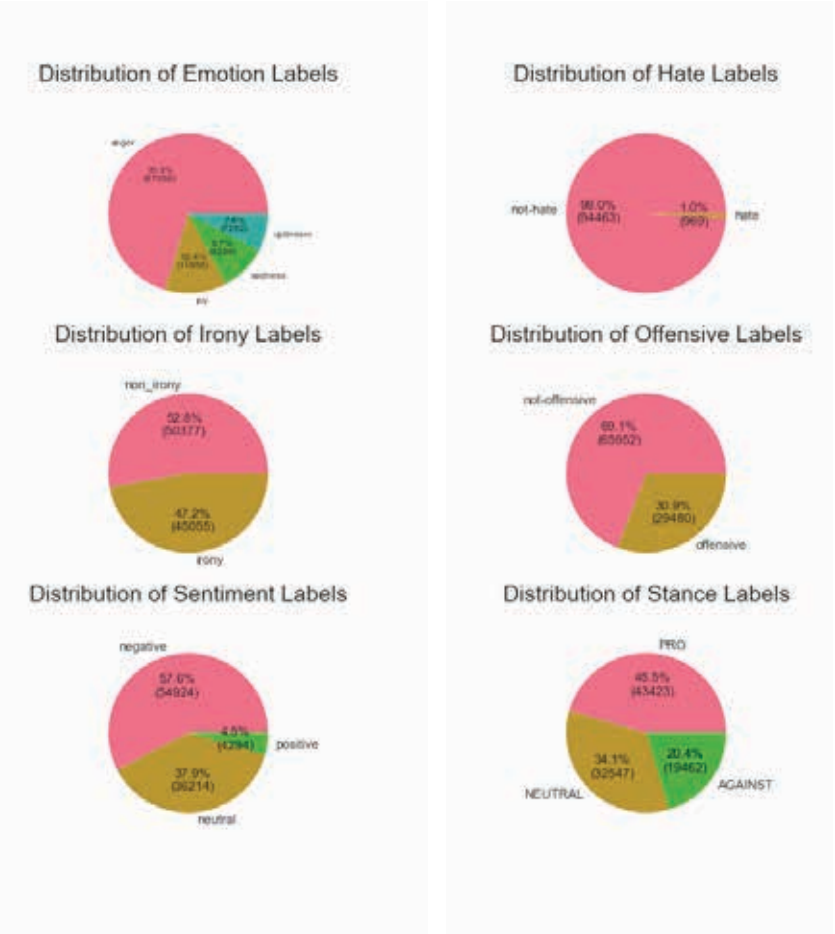
Figure 2 - Statistical significance matrix
Code, figures and data have been archived on Zenodo. (Ciletti, 2025b).
The fine-tuned model has been published on Hugging Face (Ciletti, 2025a).
Both sets of materials are freely accessible.



**Results**

Analysis of values attributed to emotions, offensive language and hate speech, general sentiment, and stance reveals certain trends. The statistical distribution of values is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - Label distribution



As expected, a marked general negativity emerges, with a prevalence of anger and negative general sentiment. The distribution of stances, however, is rather balanced, demonstrating that there is no predominant opinion between the two factions. Hate speech is practically non-existent, likely testifying to Twitter's good moderation practices in the years analyzed. The presence of offensive language, however, is considerable.

The distribution of labels in individual subgroups is visualized in Figures 4, 5, and 6.

Figure 4 - Distribution of emotion labels by group

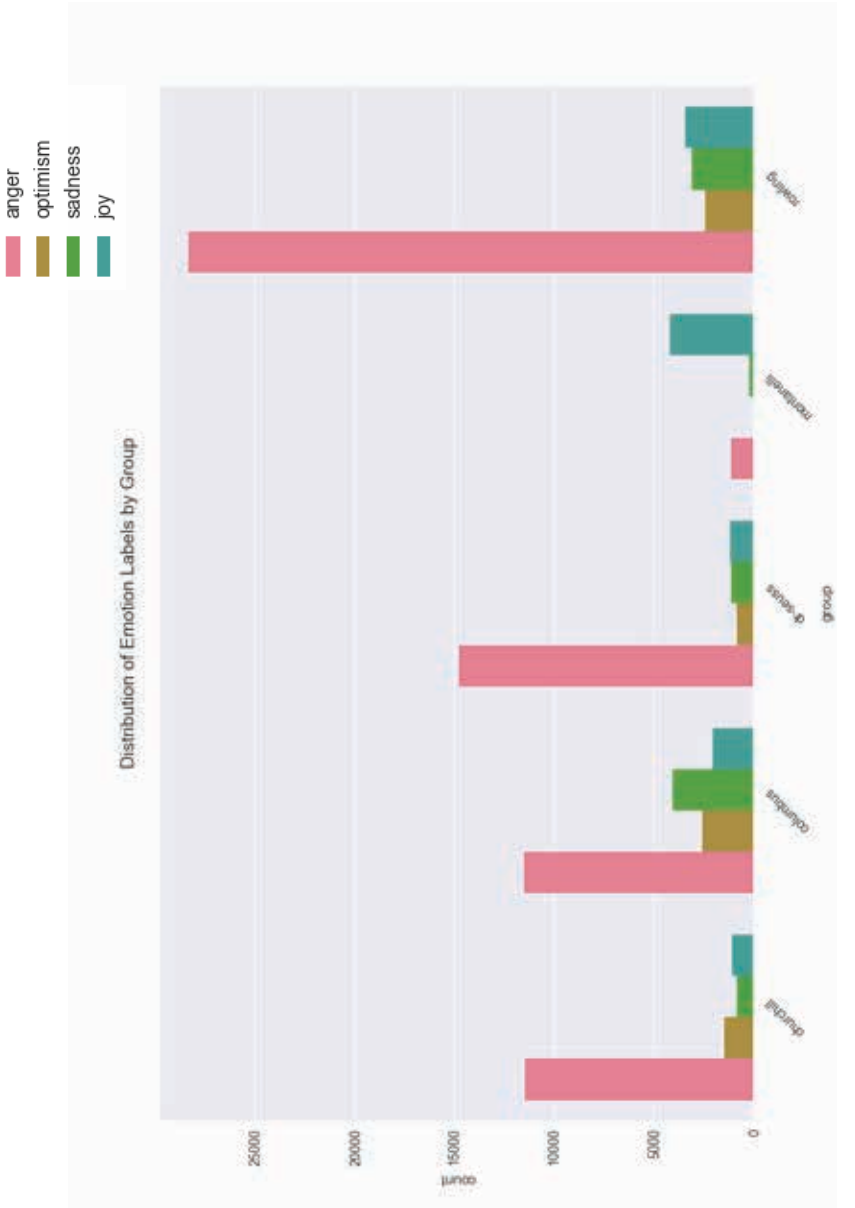


Figure 5 - Distribution of stance labels by group

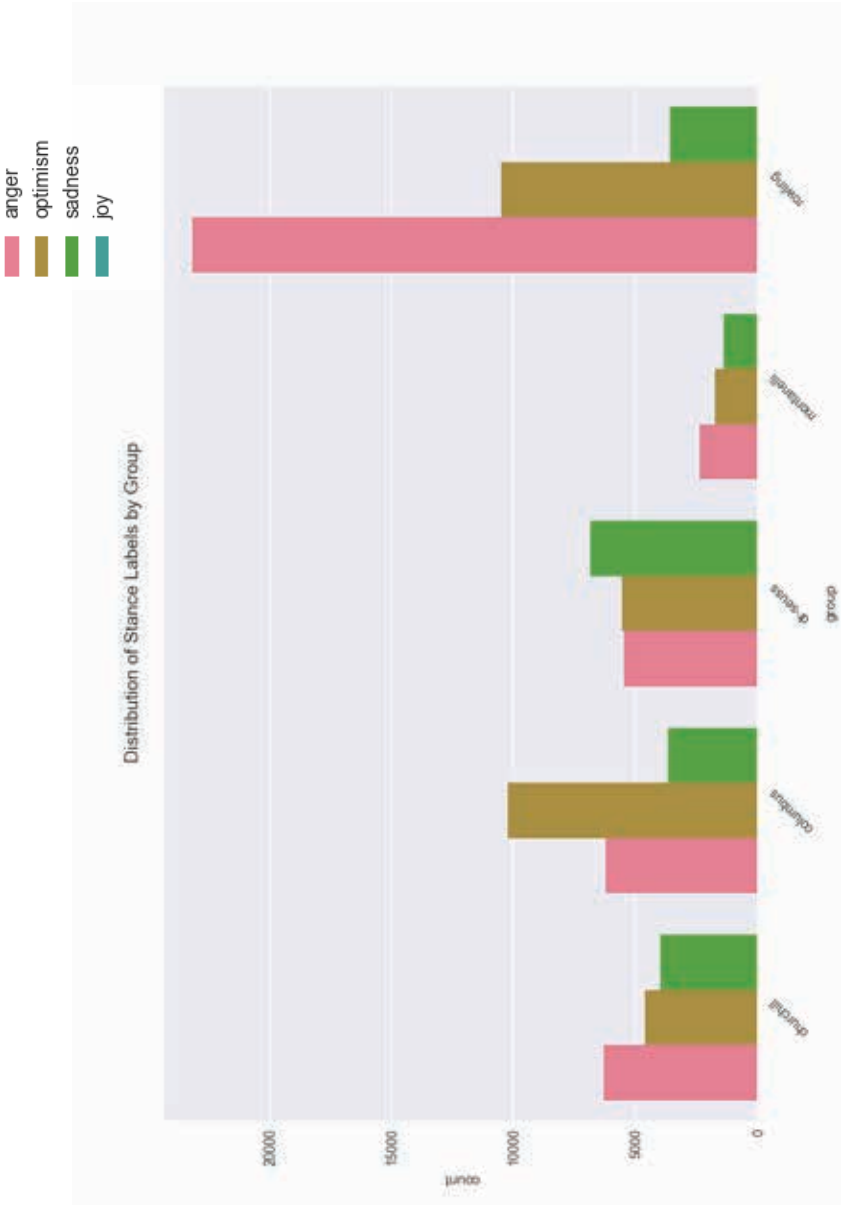
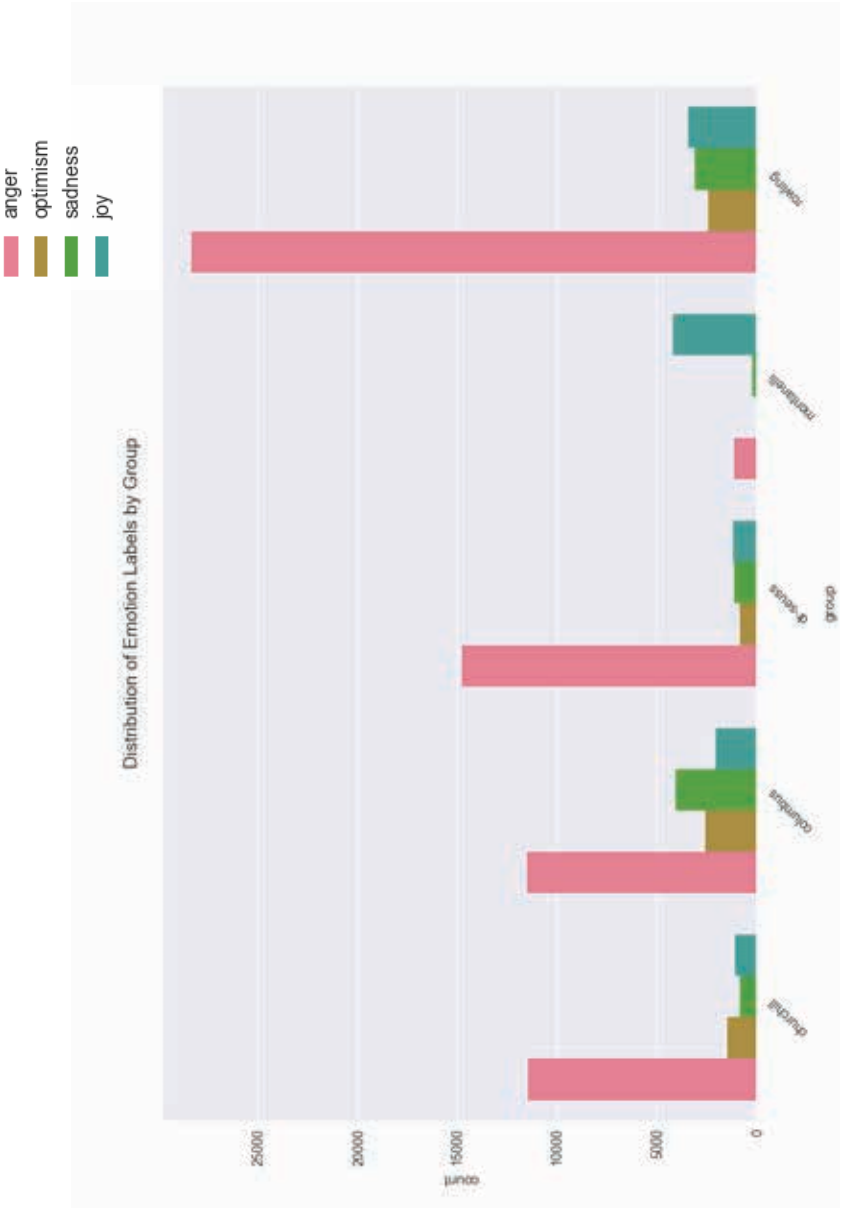


Figure 6 - Distribution of emotion labels by group

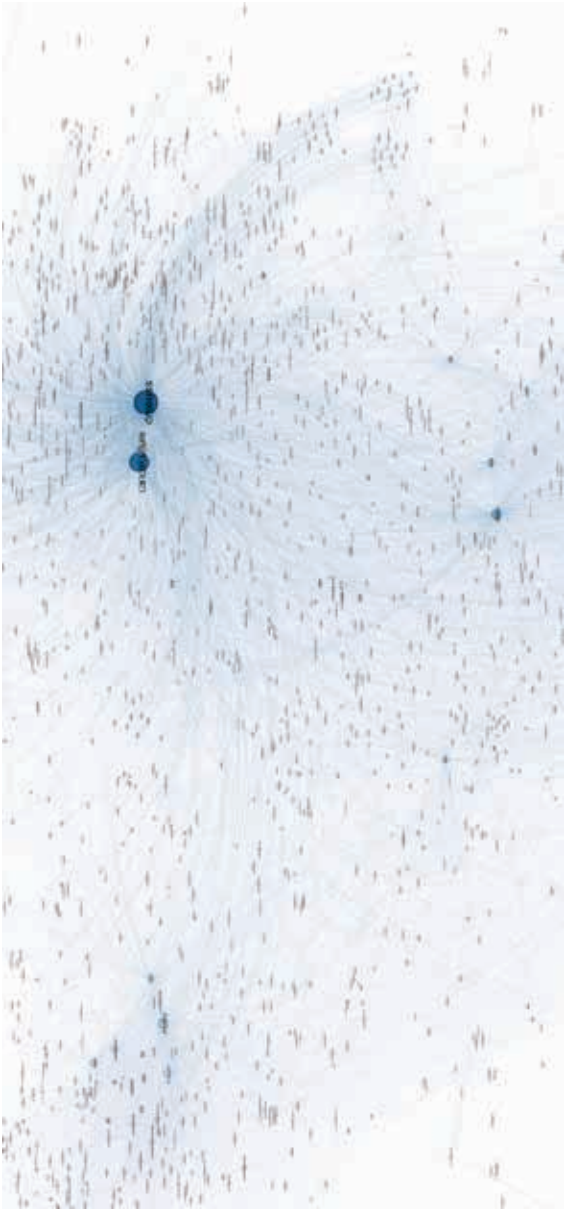


Some observable trends include the peculiarity of the "Montanelli" group, characterized by a considerable number of joyful tweets, mostly related to the vandalization event of the Milan statue depicting him, and with a rather neutral general sentiment, testifying to the prevalence of measured tones. In all other groups, anger is clearly the prevalent sentiment. Dr. Seuss is the only figure for whom more tweets opposed cancellation than favoured it, while Rowling presents an overwhelming majority favourable to cancellation. All cases remain substantially contested.

As reported in Figure 1, there is a somewhat concerning correlation between offensive language and pro-cancellation stance - partly undoubtedly due to criticisms directed at the figures themselves, but also to discussions between users. Tweets classified as neutral regarding cancellation present virtuous correlations with both expressed emotions and language offensiveness, demonstrating the effective and measured reporting that occurred on Twitter.

From network analysis, it is possible to obtain an overview of themes discussed during the studied cancellation events. The networks can also be consulted in the additional materials, given the difficulty of representing all details in a text document. The main cluster of the network of the entire corpus is visualized in Figure 7.

Figure 7 - The main cluster of the network of the entire corpus



Examining the figure, the interconnection between the five semantic nuclei clearly emerges first, confirming that they share common themes and characteristics attributable to cancel culture. Moreover, the high centrality of hashtags like #blacklivesmatter and #blm confirms what was stated in the introductory section, namely the historical origin of the phenomenon in the context of the summer 2020 uprisings. It's interesting, however, to observe how the presence of hashtags in multiple languages and the close connection with the thematic nucleus linked to Montanelli suggest a substantial spread of the phenomenon well beyond U.S. geographical and cultural boundaries.

A cluster strictly related to American politics, however, is observable and rather central, with key nodes like #america, #trump, and, interestingly, #covid19, signifying that discourses related to the pandemic, and consequently to lockdowns and effects of supposed "woke culture," entered the discussion. A cluster related to specific information sources (#foxnews, #cnn) can also be noticed. Analyzing these nodes from a bipartite perspective, that is, visualizing users who use the hashtags themselves as network members, one can notice that substantial groups of people cluster around information sources while remaining disconnected from most other hashtags, highlighting the influence of the sources themselves and the importance of the "echo chamber" phenomenon (Cinelli et al., 2021). For an in-depth look at bipartite visualizations, please refer to the additional materials.

The networks relating to the five individual cases are visualized in Figures 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Figure 8 - The main cluster of the Columbus network



Figure 9 - The main cluster of the Churchill network

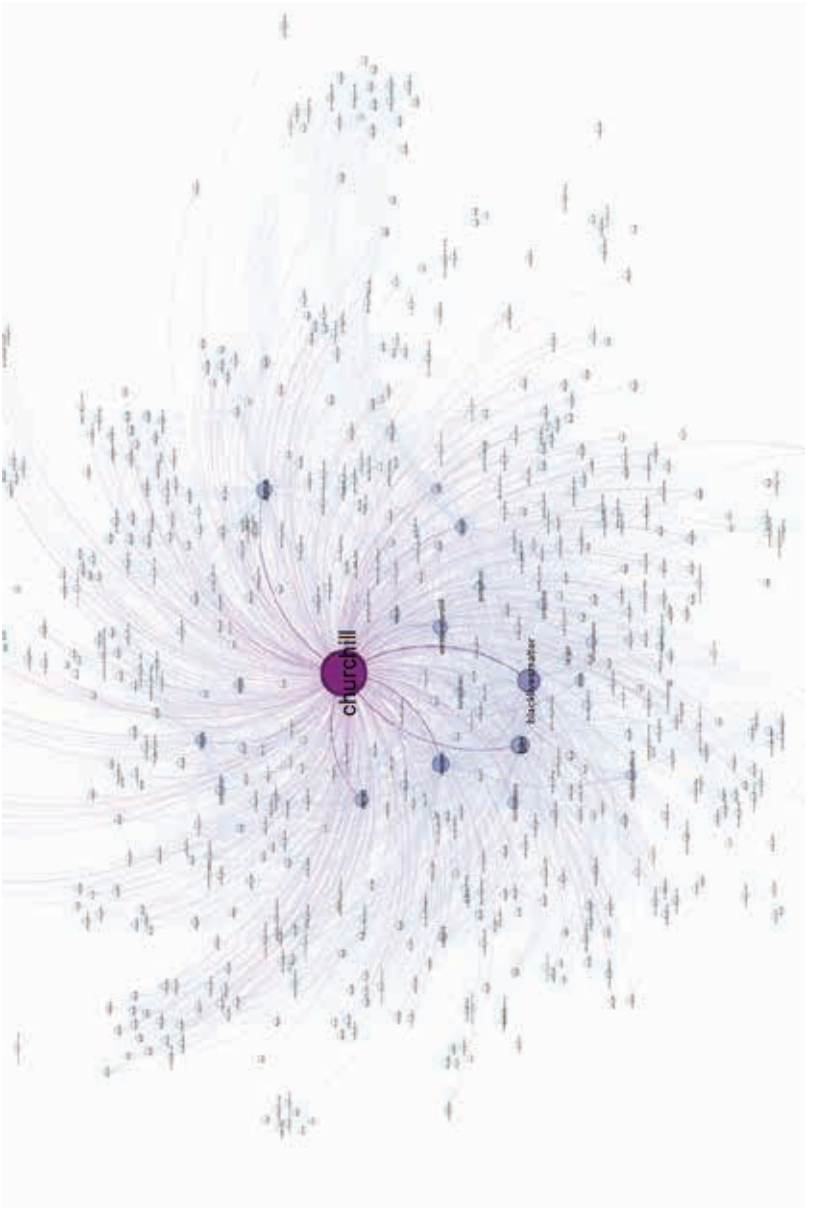


Figure 10 - The main cluster of the Rowling network

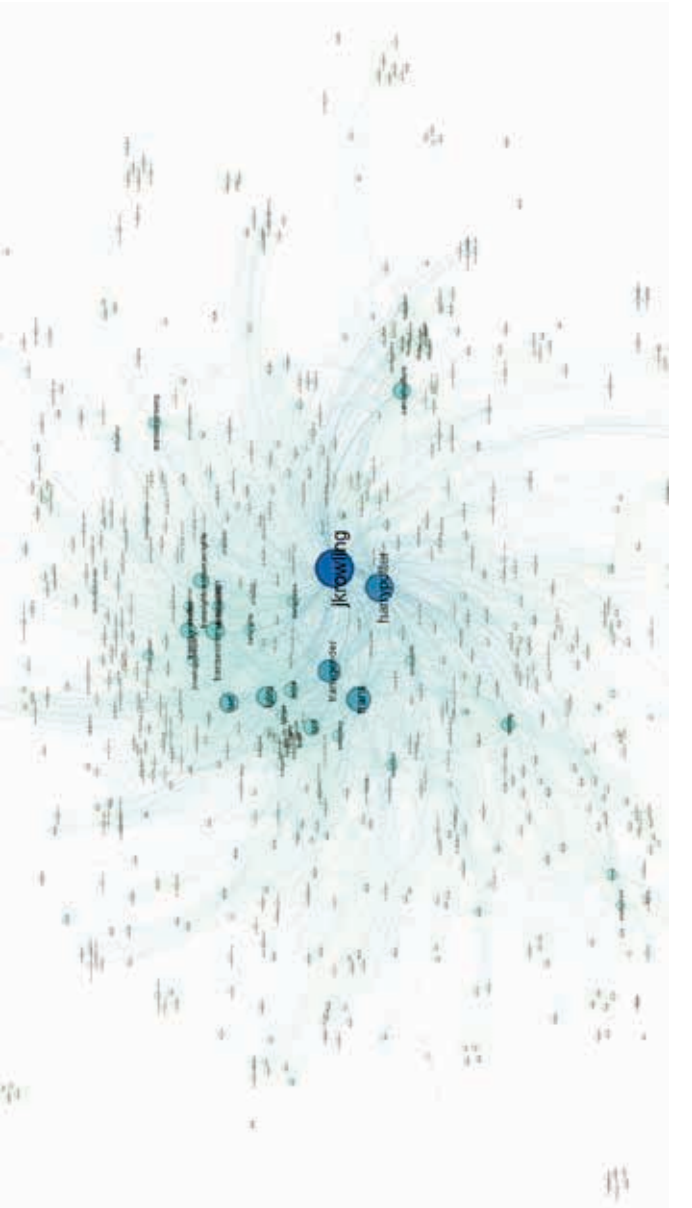
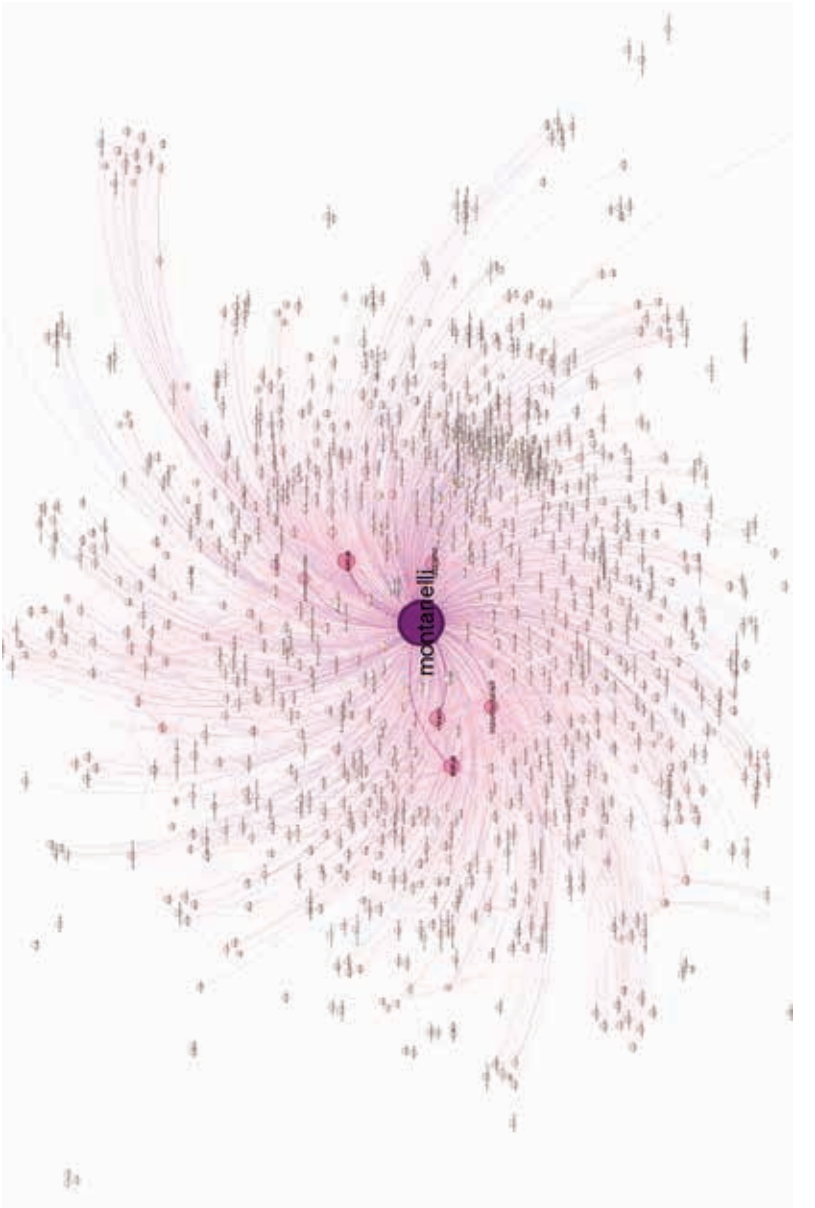


Figure 11 - The main cluster of the Dr. Seuss network



Figure 12 - The main cluster of the Montanelli network



In the network relating to Columbus, clusters linked to statue toppling and vandalization events in various U.S. cities (#chicago, #baltimore) are clear and central. References to race and colonialism are numerous, but it's peculiar that several hashtags highlight the use of identity politics also in support of Columbus: #antitalianism is central. Italian-Americans, in fact, were among the most assiduous online defenders of Columbus, considered a national hero and a source of identity and pride.

Similar patterns recur in the Churchill network, with racial themes clearly predominant and hashtags well representing both positions (#racist and #statuesmustfall on one side, #hero and #snowflakes on the other). Political references are numerous (#leftists, #johnson) and the centrality of #blacklivesmatteruk is interesting, highlighting the multinational aspect of the movement.

Regarding J. K. Rowling, one trend deserves particular attention: the hashtag #cancelculture - a term that, remember, is applicable to historical figures but originated referring to celebrities - is very frequent, but less central than might be expected and closely linked to hashtags like #bbcnews, #skynews, #itvnews, and #c4news. This suggests that the term was used far more by mainstream media documenting the cancellation phenomenon than by users themselves involved in online debates. Compared to previous networks, hashtags related to gender identity are central (#trans, #terf, #lgbtq, #pride, #transwomenarewomen). More isolated, but protagonist of a minor cluster is #istandwithjkrowling - as mentioned previously, defenders are clearly in the minority in this case.

In Dr. Seuss's case, the network is atypical compared to those analyzed previously: multiple minor hashtags gravitate around the most important, #drseuss, without forming minor clusters, with the only exception of #cancelculture, very central: the fact that the extracted tweets belong to a later period than the others, namely spring 2021, suggests that the term became increasingly used and common among Twitter users. There are certainly more medium-centrality hashtags opposing cancellation, such as #woke, #censorship, and #freespeech. Particularly interesting is the frequency and centrality of #pepelepew, a character that became a symbol and dog whistle for the alternative right. The hashtag, moreover, is closely connected to hashtags defending Dr. Seuss, like #cancelcancelculture. Again, there are

hashtags that frame the issue as a generational clash, albeit mostly one-sided: examples include #cancelgenz and #nohopeforhumanity.

Montanelli's case is peculiar: the smaller number of tweets means debates mainly concentrate on the vandalization of the Milan statue depicting him (#milano). Once again, references to #blacklivesmatter are present, further underlining how the movement spread well beyond U.S. borders. The political (#antifascista, #beppesala, who was Milan's mayor at the time) and historical-colonial (#colonialismo) themes are clear. Attacks on Montanelli himself (#stupratore, meaning rapist) are also present.

## *5. Pedagogical framework*

The results of the NLP analysis indicate that online discussions around historically controversial figures are marked by a high degree of emotional polarization, with anger and negative sentiments prevailing across multiple cases. This suggests that many students, teachers, and broader community members encounter these debates not as measured deliberations on historical complexity, but rather as volatile exchanges often laced with offensiveness. In formal education contexts, such findings emphasize the necessity for systematic pedagogical approaches capable of transforming combative online discourses into constructive and critically engaged classroom conversations. In other words, teachers need targeted strategies for helping students navigate emotionally charged issues, particularly when historical memory and cultural identity intersect.

One of the central challenges in addressing controversial historical figures is balancing the need for critical scrutiny of their legacies with recognition of the social currents that inform calls to "cancel" or decontextualize them. Rather than advocating for an uncritical acceptance of any pole, an effective pedagogical framework should promote multidimensional historical inquiry. In practice, this might mean including primary sources that reveal conflicting perspectives on a figure's context, as well as contemporary commentary—such as social media posts—that convey the visceral reactions people still harbor about them. For instance, when examining a figure like Indro Montanelli, students in an Italian context could analyze his colonial-era writings alongside contemporary activist cri-

tiques and social media reactions to the defacement of his statue, thereby grappling with the complexities of national memory and journalistic legacies within a non-Anglophone setting.

Furthermore, attention should be paid to the broader dynamics of power that shape what gets "canceled". Theoretical literature reminds us that certain groups have historically been marginalized, and cancel culture, in some instances, seeks to address past injustices by withdrawing symbolic or material support (Clark, 2020; Dei, 2021). Engaging students in critical discussions about these dynamics can foster deeper awareness of how historical memory is contested, shaped, and reshaped by evolving collective values.

In practice, educators can employ "critical historicity", an instructional approach that systematically explores the following dimensions:

- source contextualization: students should learn to assess primary and secondary sources, including tweets, speeches, and archival documents, in their sociocultural contexts. This is especially important for figures whose reputations or memorabilia (e.g., statues, literary works) have triggered heightened online contention. A practical activity could involve students comparing excerpts from Churchill's wartime speeches with his documented statements on race and empire, alongside an analysis of Twitter threads (drawing on the study's dataset) debating his legacy, thereby directly engaging with how different sources and contexts shape understanding.
- Reflective inquiry and dialogue: guided by open-ended questioning and reflective writing tasks, educators can invite learners to confront their own biases and emotional responses. By acknowledging the frustration or anger inherent in many social media debates, students can practice de-escalation and empathetic listening skills—foundations for respectful disagreement in both academic and civic life (Zembylas, 2023). For example, after reviewing the sentiment analysis data from this study showing high polarization in the J.K. Rowling case, students could participate in a structured classroom debate on the controversy, followed by a written reflection on their own emotional responses and how the discussion might have shifted their perspectives, or helped them understand opposing viewpoints even if they still disagree.

- Ethical evaluation: teachers might integrate frameworks like restorative justice or moral philosophy to examine not only the actions of controversial figures but also the ethics of "cancelling" itself. A robust inquiry includes questions such as: "Does removing a monument diminish our ability to learn from the past?" or "How might retaining a monument without appropriate contextualization perpetuate harmful ideologies?". As a possible activity, students could stage a mock "historical commission" to deliberate on the fate of a controversial local monument (if applicable) or a well-known international one like a Columbus statue, considering historical evidence, community impact, and ethical principles discussed in class, perhaps drawing on insights about identity politics observed in the Columbus network analysis (e.g., #antitalianism as a defense).
- Responsibility to multiple audiences: teachers should emphasize that how history is taught and commemorated affects diverse stakeholders—students, families, local communities, and marginalized groups. This means designing lessons that consider the experiences of those harmed by the legacies of the figure in question, as well as engaging students in dialogues about broader historical accountability.

Given the polarized nature of these issues, teacher training programs ought to emphasize impartial facilitation and critical thinking. Strategies like practice debates and collaborative research projects can prepare educators to handle loaded topics constructively. By referencing tangible data—such as sentiment or stance analyses—teachers can illustrate how social media reflects and molds the collective understanding of historical figures. In so doing, students develop the intellectual rigor and empathy required for grappling with contested memories, learning to balance accountability with a nuanced grasp of the past.

## *6. Conclusions*

The quantitative data confirm that online discussions often coalesce around polarized sentiments, revealing both fervent advocacy for erasing certain historical legacies and vehement defense of their continued prom-

inence. The empirical finding of prevalent anger and negative sentiment across multiple case studies, alongside balanced, albeit contested, stances, provides a clear data-driven picture of these online battlegrounds. Despite the prevalence of negative sentiment, hateful extremes remain relatively less frequent, suggesting that cancel culture debates, while heated, often revolve around broader ideological incompatibilities rather than explicit violence. The network analysis further revealed how specific events, like statue toppling for Columbus or the #blacklivesmatter movement's influence on the Churchill and Montanelli discussions, act as focal points, and how hashtags can signify distinct, sometimes insulated, community viewpoints (e.g., #istandwithjkrowling, #cancelcancelculture for Dr. Seuss).

For educators, the pedagogical implications are multifaceted. The observed emotional polarization and the clustering of discourse around specific hashtags empirically support the need for the proposed pedagogical framework. Contextualizing historically controversial figures requires a balanced framework that not only confronts moral failings or harmful ideologies but also creates a dialogical space wherein students can learn to analytically evaluate the past. Systematic approaches such as critical historicity, reflective inquiry, and comparative case analysis encourage pedagogical practice that meaningfully connects the controversies of historical memory to ongoing social justice debates. For example, the dimension of "source contextualization" directly addresses the need to deconstruct the often decontextualized and emotionally charged arguments found on social media by guiding students to examine primary evidence and diverse perspectives, such as analyzing the varied hashtag clusters identified in this study for a given figure. Similarly, "reflective inquiry and dialogue" becomes essential in classrooms when the data show high online emotionality; educators can use concrete examples, like the contrasting sentiments in the Montanelli case (joyful tweets about vandalization versus neutral general sentiment), to initiate discussions about differing public reactions and their underlying reasons, fostering more measured classroom interactions. In an era where "cancellation" can function as both a form of grassroots activism and a rhetorical weapon, formal education must strive for nuanced yet resolute engagement with figures who symbolize contentious or oppressive pasts. The pedagogical strategies proposed aim to

equip students with the tools to move beyond the often-binary nature of online debates, encouraging them to engage with concrete examples and diverse contexts, including non-Anglophone ones, to develop a more sophisticated understanding.

Rather than shying away from tensions that arise from "cancellation" debates, teachers can guide learners toward informed, critically aware stances—ultimately nurturing the civic and moral capacities necessary for a pluralistic, democratic society.

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