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Online public shaming: an empirical analysis of contemporary online shaming punishments

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Abstract

Online public shamings, popularly known as *cancel culture*, are a contemporary phenomenon in which someone, caught in wrongdoing, is exposed on social media platforms, going viral and attracting mass criticism; business partners and employers then might decide to cut ties with the culprit. Authors such as Taylor (2022), Trottier (2018) and Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021), study how shame is the main punishment instrument used in such cases, but do not engage in empirical research to demonstrate it. This article aims, then, to demonstrate the characterization of the phenomenon as shaming punishments by using empirical data of a single case study—Justine Sacco's (2013). The intention is to verify if cases like Sacco's are a form of shaming punishment, and to describe and analyze their specificities. By using Twitter data and network analysis, this article empirically demonstrates that Sacco's shaming is a punishes her by exposing her to the world as an essentially flawed person. Shame encompasses her whole person, who is placed outside the community of trustworthy individuals, in a simple moral world divided between "good and bad, allies and enemies, human and subhuman" (Tyson, 2022, p. 129), resulting in her being fired and subjected to world infamy.

Keywords: online public shaming, cancel culture, shaming punishment

1. Introduction

On December 20th, 2013, Justine Sacco, a public relations professional, was about to board a flight to South Africa when she tweeted: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!". As reported by Vingiano (2013), in the 12 hours Sacco spent flying, without internet connection, her Tweet was shared by journalist Sam Biddle, who commented: "Very funny/cool AIDS/Africa joke from IAC's [Sacco's employer] head of corporate communications, great work." Sacco's tweet, then, drew the attention of other journalists and Twitter users, going viral. Tens of thousands of outraged tweets were published about the case while the social media users waited for Sacco to land and react to the Twitter storm. A hashtag was created, #HasJustineLandedYet, and it started trending worldwide. Brands joined the conversation, advertising their products, and non-profit organizations took the opportunity to raise funds and give visibility to their cause. A Twitter user went to the airport to wait for Sacco and photographed her arriving. Soon after her landing, IAC fired Sacco.

Events such as this are commonly known as *cancel culture* or *cancellations.* These expressions are, nonetheless, currently used in various and imprecise ways.

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For sure, the terms have been used to refer to, for example, boycotts against Russia for the war in Ukraine (Friedman, 2022), political opposition to party leaders (Milbank, 2021), books censorship (CBC Kids News, 2021; Valente, 2022; Vick, 2022), art criticism (Diaz, 2022), allegations of domestic violence (Grater, 2021) and of sexual harassment and abuse (Jungjohann, 2021). On the other hand, for some people, cancel culture does not exist: it is simply a term used as a "boogeyman" to explain away bad behaviour, when what is actually being demanded is responsibility for one's actions – *consequence* culture (Schwartz, 2021). In this way, the expression cancel culture, for some, became a shorthand for progressive demands that conservatives do not like (Hobbes, 2022). In the academic literature, many authors also use the expression *cancel culture* to refer to cases such as Sacco's (Clark, 2020; Cook et al., 2021; Han, 2023; Ng, 2022; Phelan, 2023; Saint-Louis, 2021), while others prefer terms like *morally motivated networked harassment* (Marwick, 2021) and *online public shaming* (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021).

In relation to online public shaming, it is noticeable that both in the media (e.g., Ronson (2016), Mishan (2020), Kinos-Goodin (2018)) as in the academic literature (e.g., O'Neil (2022), Frye (2021), Goldman (2015)) it is common to compare the phenomena to pre-modern shaming punishments, such as the pillory and the scarlet letter, but *en passant* and without deeper analysis. On the other hand, authors such as Taylor (2022), Trottier (2018) and Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021), dismissing any historical comparisons, study how shame is the main punishment instrument used in cases like Sacco's. Nonetheless, despite these authors' critical theoretical analysis, which brings important insights into cancellations and the functioning of shame as punishment, they do not engage in empirical research to demonstrate how shame works in such cases.

In a previous work (Tavares, 2025), I have addressed the use of shame in the phenomenon, but briefly and without addressing the empirical issues related to it. This article aims, then, to deepen at a theoretical level and empirically demonstrate the characterization of such phenomena as shaming punishments by using a single case study—Justine Sacco's. The intention is to verify if cases like Sacco's are a form of shaming punishment, and to describe and analyze their specificities. I start by addressing the current literature that defines and nominates the phenomenon, and show how different authors have been focusing on different aspects and manifestations of the issue when considering the phenomenon. In this section, I argue that the best nomenclature in these cases is *online public shaming* (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021). Next, I present a discussion on what shame is and how it has been used as punishment. Then, after introducing my methodology, I empirically approach the righteous and shaming discourses directed at Sacco, and analyze how these discourses work as shaming punishments.

2. Nomenclature and Definitions

The phenomenon studied here is scarcely the object of scientific investigation and definition, and, still, hoards a varied nomenclature. Cook et al. (2021) call *cancel culture* an "umbrella term" that is used when "anger is directed toward removing collective support of someone or trying to make a group effort to diminish an individual" (p. 2). Clark (2020) uses a similar definition, of withdrawing attention from someone: "(…)'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" (p. 89). Ng (2022), in turn, defines cancel culture through its practices (or "cancelling") and discourses. The former involve "withdrawing public support from the cancel target" (p. 5), while the latter "are discussions and commentary about cancel practices and their aftermath" (p. 5).

It is important to notice that the terms "cancel culture", "cancellation" or "cancelling" are polarizing. As summarized by Day and Halborow (2021), "Cancel culture usually carries a negative connotation. Like its predecessor, political correctness, it is one of those terms used most by those who do not like it, and has become a shorthand for everything that conservatives dislike." (p. 29). Clark (2020) makes a similar observation, explaining that cancelling is one of the many accountability discursive practices of the Black American counterpublic, such as reading, dragging and calling out. Despite that, the term has been appropriated and used to amplify the white gaze, which now associates cancelling with harm and censure, while the phenomena should be understood as a cry for justice by marginalized people.

In this sense, Dyrberg (2024) points out that, for some, since the focus is on the responsibility of powerful people, the preferable term would be "consequence culture" or "accountability culture". Tyson (2022), on the other hand, also criticizes the expression "cancel culture" and its characterization as accountability: "What is decried as 'cancel culture' is sometimes just spirited criticism; what is endorsed as 'accountability' is sometimes gratuitous and cruel" (p. 122). The author also criticizes the characterization of the phenomenon as *public* since the platforms on which these cases happen are owned by private companies that profit from the humiliation of an individual. To the author, "What we have today is a *Theater of Shame*: participatory spectacles in which members of the audience are (virtually) hauled onstage and made to answer for their sins" (p. 126).

Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021) also highlight the importance of shame in the phenomenon, which they call *online public shaming*. They define public shaming as "(…) a communicative social practice in which people are framed publicly as being outside of the community of morally acceptable persons, however they feel about it" (p. 10). Differently from Tyson, they understand the phenomenon to be a public act, despite the fact that the platforms are private.

It is important to note that this act is public, both in the sense that it is open to public participation without presupposing any personal relationship with the target, and its aim is for society (in the sense of the public) to collectively impose the sanction on the target of exclusion from equal treatment in these relations: a collective public shunning, for having the moral character they do (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021, p. 8)

Trottier (2018), also placing shame as the central part of the phenomenon, states that "Mediated shaming can be understood as a seemingly user-led surveillance practice to render other social actors visible in a punitive and denunciatory light." (p. 171). Trottier explains that mediated shaming usually targets acts committed by the culprit, denouncing "blemishes of character"—"Yet online denunciations of asocial behaviour may be accompanied by categorical and body shaming**,** notably through racist, sexist, and other discriminatory comments" (pp. 171-172). Marwick (2021), in turn, prefers the expression *morally motivated networked harassment*. The author creates a model to understand the phenomenon as a form of rule enforcement through shame and humiliation. She explains that "the moral violations named in the accusation position the accused as deviant because their behavior violates group norms" (p. 3). In relation to the term *harassment*, the author points out that it can

encompass many meanings, "anything from a single instance of name-calling to persistent, serious abuse" (p. 2). The author, furthermore, believes that there is an advantage in using *harassment* because most of the literature that addresses the matter is feminist scholarship, since women and nonbinary people are the main targets of it. Marwick (2023) understands that using "harassment" has the advantage of making it clear who is the "good guy" (harassed) and who is "bad" (harassers) (p. 105).

In this work, I will be using the expression *online public shaming*. Firstly, I aim to avoid the problems with the expressions "cancel culture", "cancellation" and "cancelling". These are expressions associated with Black American discursive and cultural practices, and there are plenty of examples in which racism is a strong motivation for the online shaming. I find it would be insensitive and contradictory to use the denomination of a Black practice to nominate anti-Black practices and discourses. In this way, unlike Clark (2020), I neither assume online public shamings to be essentially progressive nor to be the product of a marginalized public. Thus, I prefer to dissociate the phenomenon from a nomenclature deeply linked to Black American counterpublics. Finally, the term "cancellation", in itself, does not adequately describe the phenomenon. Considering the common meaning of the word, of unsubscribing from a service, "cancellation" would make sense for authors such as Clark (2020), who define cancellations as withdrawing support and attention from someone. However, as Sacco's case will show, the phenomenon under study might involve the withdrawal of resources (most significantly, employment), but that is far from meaning a withdrawal of attention, on the contrary. During the online public shaming, the shamed person receives an *excess* of attention. The online audience's attention is turned towards the wrongdoer, who is the target of thousands of messages, attacks, memes, news' articles, fake online profiles, doxxing and threats.

In relation to *morally motivated networked harassment* (Marwick, 2021), it is possible to see, then, that such a definition is the opposite of Clark's (2020): for the latter, cancellations work as an accountability instrument used by marginalized groups against powerful actors to reach justice, while Marwick (2021, 2023) sees MMNH as a weapon aimed especially against marginalized people to affirm groups' identities based on prejudice, but justified on moral wrongdoing. It becomes visible, then, that the problem is the opposite of that of Clark (2020): Marwick (2021, 2023) ontologizes the phenomenon by assuming it to be essentially bad, an instrument of oppression operated under the façade of justice. That would mean that the wrongdoing in cases like Sacco's was also a mere justification for online harassment, that the groups involved are only interested in affirming their own identity – there is no real fight for justice. As I have objected Clark's positive characterization of the phenomenon as essentially an instrument of justice of marginalized groups against the powerful, here I am also opposing the characterization of the phenomenon as an essentially negative and hypocritical affirmation of identity. Moreover, as Wood and Hughes (1984) point out, it is a methodological option *not to* assume supposed objective reasons behind the shamers' actions, instead of considering their representations as serious and real reasons for their choices.

Furthermore, despite the fact that the phenomenon involves many different practices that could be under the umbrella of harassment, it is important to remember that *harassment* can have various intentions, but here, the specific objective is to *shame*. As I will show, the phenomenon punishes by withdrawing resources from the target, but it also does so by imposing shame: by exposing someone's flaws to the

entire world to see, portraying them as someone low, who deserves to be outside of society. Therefore, if there are many instruments to harass the culprit, these have the specific intention of shaming. In this way, the expression *shame*, for being so specific to the phenomenon, deserves a place in its nomenclature.

Shaming, nonetheless, is not a theatre as proposed by Tyson (2022). Even though the process assumes dramatic forms (R. Lewis & Christin, 2022; Thompson, 1993), it is closer to a party, to a carnival. In theatre, some act and the audience watches; in online public shamings, the audience acts, imposes the shame and rejoices in it – this is an essential feature of the phenomenon. Additionally, despite it taking place on private platforms, as criticized by Tyson (2022), I am using the expression *public*, for a few reasons. Firstly, as indicated by Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021), the phenomenon is *public* because it involves actors foreign to the initial context of the case or relationship with the shamed. In this way, public is used here in the dictionary meaning of "relating to or involving people in general, rather than being limited to a particular group of people" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Moreover, deeming an online shaming *public* highlights its connection to pre-modern punishments: in the former, as in the latter, it is essential to *publicize disgrace,* to *humiliate* the target in front of the community*,* to make them an *example* (Thompson, 1993). For all this to happen, it is necessary to expose the culprit and their wrongdoing to people other than the immediately involved or their close relations – to the public in general.

Online public shaming, therefore, is an expression able to convey the essentially (but not exclusively) virtual nature of the phenomenon; the participation of people in general (potentially the entire globe) in the issue, going beyond the initial context and making disgrace known by all; and its main objective of enforcing a rule by using shame: by making the culprit an *outsider*.

3. Shaming punishment

Nevertheless, what does it mean to impose shame on someone? When Foucault (1975) and Ignatieff (1978) explore the evolution of punishment into Modernity, they recognize how the public spectacle of the punishment intended to be a "…ceremonial of deterrence on the crowd's tacit support of the authority's sentence" (Ignatieff, 1978, p. 21) but that is how close they get from examining the role of shame in punishment. What being shamed means, why it matters to the punished person, and what is different about it as a means of deterrence remains unexplored. Furthermore, this seems to be a general tendency. As Nash and Kilday (2010) state, "In the genre of crime history, where we might expect to find a close and detailed analysis of shame due to its correlations with crime, deviance and the law, the subject received relatively little attention" (p. 9). What does being shamed mean, then?

Kollareth et al. (2019) explain that *shame* is a folk term that encompasses a variety of events and that the word has meant different things in different periods or even within the same time. My intention here, therefore, is not to search for a definitive and all-inclusive concept of shame. On the contrary, I will try to find an operational definition corresponding to shame being used as *punishment* by the public against an individual[1]. By punishment, I mean Becker's (1963) concept of

[1] In this way, I adopt the same position as Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021): "For our purposes, it is not the emotion but a related practice of shaming that matters. The presence of shame as an emotion is neither necessary nor sufficient for an activity to count as shaming. What matters, for our argument, is the manner in which some agents characterise a certain element of moral character as shameful, meaning that agents who have this trait are not worthy of the self-respect necessary to take part in public

deviance and rule enforcement. Indeed, the author talks about *punishment* when referring to consequences imposed upon someone for breaking a rule – independently of what the nature or content of the rule are. And, as Becker states, when the rule is broken and enforced, the status of *deviant* is imposed on the culprit, who is considered as being an untrustworthy *outsider:*

"When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group. He is regarded as an *outsider*." (p. 1—emphasis in the original).

In this section, therefore, I intend to demonstrate how a rule can be enforced – that is, how a punishment, a sanction can be imposed for the breaking of a rule – by shaming mechanisms, transforming the culprits into outsiders.

For the purposes here, shame is imposed as the failure to reach an ideal state or goals (Morrison, 1983; Piers, 1971). It is important to notice that, in this failure, shame involves the *whole* self, what a person *is* (H. B. Lewis, 1971): "With shame (…) one's very identity is supposedly at fault" (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021, p. 9). As summarized by Nussbaum (2004), shame is a "painful emotion responding to a sense of failure to attain some ideal state. Shame (…) pertains to the whole self, rather than to a specific act of the self" (p. 184).

Moreover, for Lewis (1971), shame works as a theatre played internally to the eyes of the other, present in reality or just in ideation. That is, shame is experienced as coming from outside, from an unfavourable evaluation from the other. Shame arises when one sees oneself from the point of view of others (Scheff, 1997). Therefore, it makes sense that the fear brought by shame is that of abandonment, expulsion, ostracism, and contempt—the "death by emotional starvation" (Piers, 1971, p. 29). That is why it also makes sense when Scheff (2000) says that shame involves "…the feeling of a threat to the social bond" (2000, p. 97). In this way, it is possible to understand Braithwaite's (1989) observation that shame deters people from behaving in a way that would mean loss of social approval.

A public shaming punishment is a public denunciation and construction of a lower moral status, as Becker's (1963) *outsiders*; a public shaming, therefore, "(…) is a communicative social practice in which people are framed publicly as being *outside* of the community of *morally acceptable* persons, however they feel about it" (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021, p. 10 - my emphasis). Imposing shame, in this way, has a double aspect: (1) publicly exposing that the person is, in essence, flawed and, because of that, (2) threatening their social bond, that is, threatening to set the person outside of the community.

Indeed, when investigating pre-modern public shaming practices, it is visible that *publicly exposing* someone's flaws was an important part of punishment. Referring to both formal and informal punishment, Thompson (1993) states that "Until the early nineteenth century, publicity was of the essence of punishment. It was intended, for lesser offences, to humiliate the offender before her or his neighbours, and in more serious offences to serve as example" (p. 480). *Public*, in this way, means the visibility of the wrongdoing (the publicization of disgrace) to the crowd on the street, serving as an example to the community. The visibility to the crowd and its participation are essential to a punishment that uses *shame* as its main tool.

discourse. Whilst shame as a feeling may ensue from such actions, it is the characterisation of a person as shameful, unworthy of public participation, and beyond the pale, that is the core of this practice. Whatever her emotions, publicly shamed individuals suffer a loss of control over their public identity due to others' perception of their character as fundamentally defective, rather than opprobrium being directed at their actions, which are within their control" (pp. 9-10).

This fact is well reported concerning official punishment by authors like Foucault (2014), Ignatieff (1978) and Gatrell (1996), who show how the crowd, the audience, was necessary for the punishment. Punishment was public, firstly, as a political ritual through which power is manifested (Foucault, 2014). The spectacle of punishment, nonetheless, also served as an educational moment of deterrence for the crowd "through brutalizing threats of violent retribution, to *exempla* of damnation" (Merback, 1999).

Shaming, in this way, is a specific type of punishment, of rule enforcement, of creating deviants in a certain society. It depends on publicly exposing the culprit's faults; it encompasses their whole self; its ultimate threat is the breaking of the social bond.

4. Methods

When selecting the single case for the present study, I considered the advice of Pires (2007), who explains that the selection of a single case can be based on several criteria, including «la pertinence théorique…; les caractéristiques et la qualité intrinsèque du cas ; la typicité ou l'exemplarité ; la possibilité d'apprendre avec le cas choisi ; son intérêt social ; son accessibilité à l'ênquete» (p. 46). Sacco's case qualified in all these criteria: firstly, it is one of the most exemplary cases of what online public shaming is. Indeed, Justine Sacco's case is a well-known example of the phenomenon in the academic literature (see, for example, Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021; Ott, 2017; Tyson, 2022). The case is, then, *typical* and *exemplary* of the subject at hand. In this way, it advances the delimitation of the phenomenon, including clarifying its actors, mechanisms and objectives. In relation to its social relevance, besides the considerable attention it has received, the case was intertwined with important racial disputes in the United States in 2013, as I have shown somewhere else (Tavares, 2025). Finally, the case had developed mostly via Twitter, whose contents are easily available to researchers.

With the case selected, I requested the online service TrackMyHashTag—which provides Twitter historical data according to a specified search query— to create a dataset with all tweets, retweets and replies containing the hashtag #HasJustineLanded yet, from December 20th 2013 to January 20th 2014. The online service delivered a dataset with 51,600 messages. To deal with this amount of data, based on Gruzd (2009) and Gruzd et al. (2017), I created a name network using Gephi. A *name network*, also known as *who-mentions-whom* network, for Twitter data, is a network that connects users who mention each other: "When applied to Twitter data the name network approach connects Twitter users if one mentions, retweets or replies another" (Gruzd et al., 2017, p. 521). Like this, I found a total of 30,442 users in the network. Using the metric of *in-degree* (that is, the number of mentions a user receives), the network showed that only 591 users (1.94%) are mentioned by at least 10 other users (in-degree $\geq$ 10). Paradoxically, this small portion of users is the destination of 33,311 edges, that is, 74.3% of all mentions in the network. At the same time, by observing out-degree (how many users one user mentions), it was visible that these 591 users are responsible for only 1,482 mentions in the network, or 3.3% of the total. In other words, even though these 591 users produce a small quantity of mentions, for some reason, they are the main destination of other users' mentions.

It is interesting, then, to investigate the users who lead other users to react. A cut can be made, therefore, to investigate only the users with a minimum of mentions

and the tweets that mention them—these were the users and messages that were able to make others react and interact with the hashtag. Initially, then, I filtered the network to only show users who are mentioned at least 10 times (in-degree ≥ 10). Nonetheless, considering the number of mentions these users received (33,311), solely restricting the number of users does not make the material manageable: it was also necessary to find a way to select these messages. Considering this, I verified each tweet, retweet, reply and manual retweet that mentions users with an in-degree equal to or higher than 10. If this message was identically replicated at least ten other times (also in all kinds of messages: tweets, retweets, replies and manual retweets), it would be selected for analysis.

It is important to understand that many of these tweets contained images, links, videos and other media that were no longer available on Twitter to be consulted, since some of the tweets or user accounts had been deleted and were inaccessible[2]. In other words, I had only access to the text of the tweets, with no media. In some cases, it was possible to access the lost content via the internet archive Wayback Machine, but not in all. Some of these tweets had in themselves an understandable message despite the missing information; in others, it was impossible to comprehend the meaning without the accompanying image or hyperlink. In the latter case, I have coded the tweet as "trash" and did not use it in the analysis.

After the selection of the main users and the most repeated tweets, the initial coding, made in NVivo, aimed at describing as close as possible what the user was saying, in all its aspects: if telling a joke, what the joke was about; if it cursed Sacco, what type of curse was it; if it gave any type of information about the case, what was this information; if the user demonstrated surprise with Sacco's tweet or with the case; if it encouraged charity; if it contained a meme, a print of the tweet or a link to a news article; if it accused Sacco of racism, etc. At this phase, the research took an inductive path, allowing the empirical material to dictate the extracted codes.

In a second moment, with the codes in hand, I proceeded to group them into families of meaning. For example, the many codes describing jokes (such as "parody", "rhyme", "irony") were grouped together under the larger code "Humour"; the codes describing information sharing (such as "Sacco is fired", "Sacco deleted her account") were grouped under the larger code "Information". This effort, nonetheless, was limited to joining codes with very similar meaning. To reduce the codes into even larger groups, I took a further step: I described what was present in the tweets within each code, trying, in this way, to create a description of the code itself. These descriptions were filled with examples of the tweets, demonstrating what was being seen in each code. Later, re-reading these descriptions, I was able to make stronger connections between the codes, finally arriving at four types of discourse: informative, righteous, entertaining and meta-discourse.

Once this material was well-understood and analyzed, I was able to return to the theoretical framework. I tabulated the theoretical categories and concepts and deductively started to compare them to the tweets and codes that the empirical material had.

[2] This seemed to get worse as the research moved on, specially after the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk, when thousands of users left the platform. After this change, tweets that I previously had access to disappeared.

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5. The Tweets about Justine Sacco

The analysis of the empirical material showed that the online public shaming contained several different *conversations*: users directed their speech not only to Sacco but to each other. That is, in these conversations among users, Sacco was just a theme, not an interlocutor. As a *theme*, Sacco led users to share information, discuss more purposeful responses to the case, ponder it and entertain themselves. Considering both the speeches directed at Sacco and among users, four main types of discourse showed up in the data: informative, righteous, entertaining and meta discourse. The division between types of discourse proposed here, thus, is only for descriptive purposes: I isolate each category to better approach it, but this does not mean that the discourses are, in themselves, separated. Furthermore, in this article, I will mostly focus on the righteous discourse, which is most related to the theme of shame[3].

5.1. Justine Is…

Needless to say, users characterized Sacco and her tweet in a myriad of depreciative ways. This characterization drew a picture of Sacco that encompassed all aspects of her life, including her past, her future, her family, her profession and even her apology. Her tweets (including the one about AIDS and past ones) were classified as *offensive* (users 79 and 371), *idiotic* (users 466 and 394), *stupid* (user 197), *stigmatizing* (@AIDSHealthcare), *tasteless* (users, 214, 215 and @TwitchyTeam), *alarming* (user 25), and an example of *white privilege* (user 197). Sacco herself was also accused of *white privilege* (user 423), besides being called *offensive* (user 142), *ignorant* (users 48, 154 and 162), a *piece of crap* (user 543), *cruel* (user 104), *with no brain cells* (user 47), an *idiot* (user 155), an *asshole* (@assholeofday), a *bigot* (user 157) and an *obnoxious and self-involved jerk* (user 158). Sacco is also characterized as someone who needs "to learn": users wish her to be sent to an AIDS organization in Africa to do groundwork (user 220); they celebrate the lesson she "(…) GON'LEARN TODAY!" from Twitter (user 199); or they state her need to evolve (user 219). Finally, of course, both Sacco and her tweet were called *racist* (users 204, 156, 129, 104, 13, 285, 211, 39, 205, 48, 54, 159, 540, @assholeofday, @BananaNewsline, @dailydot, @memeburn, @NetNewsBuzz, @OccupyLA, @OccupyWallStNYC, @Popdust, @SABreakingNews and @VibeMagazine). Besides the direct accusations of racism, users also related Sacco's tweet to other situations and actors related to racism. These tweets establish a connection between Sacco's specific act and a more general social situation in which racism is still present—Sacco is not isolated in time and place, but is part of a larger problem, as demonstrated in other cases. Like this, for example, Sacco's case is compared many times to Trayvon Martin's murder by George Zimmerman: "She's officially fired now but don't worry, the #teaparty has a special bank account for

[3]Before we begin the exploration of the tweets, two notes about the editing must be made. (1) By their informal and fast nature, tweets contain many errors, neologisms, slang and emojis. This unusual use of language is important for the full understanding of the messages. Therefore, the tweets directly quoted, in their large majority, were copied and pasted into the text without alterations. This means that any grammatical errors, unconventional language, neologisms, slangs and emojis are in the original source and will not be indicated by the Latim term "sic". (2) Tweets, in the original, are never in italics or bold font. Thus, all the italics in the direct citations in this text are mine.

people like u. Ask Zimmerman" (user 162); "Going to North America. Hope I don't get shot by George Zimmerman. Just kidding! I'm white" (user 163)[4].

This vilified image of Sacco is reinforced by other areas of her life, in which she is also seen as bad. Professionally, Sacco is a bad PR. Users are baffled by how someone with public relations knowledge could publish such a disastrous message: "This woman was in PR? At like an actual company? That paid her?" (user 32); "Irony: @JustineSacco's LinkedIn lists 'Crisis Communications' as an area of expertise" (user 186). Her lack of skill is heightened by the fact that this is a "PR nightmare" (user 34), that is, "The biggest PR disaster and social media moment of 2013" (user 256). Therefore, users classify her actions as "PR idiocy" (user 109) and a pr blunder (user 274).

Likewise, Sacco's family is also used to demeaning her. Here, it plays special importance the then-alleged fact that Sacco's father was a South African billionaire who made his money during the apartheid[5] (users 47, 423, 147 and 198). Users understood that Sacco's father being a billionaire "Explains a lot" (user 198), and it is an example of "White privilege at its finest… NOT" (user 423), as well as of the fact that "money does not buy u brain cells" (user 47). This supposed entitlement and privilege allowed users to dismiss any empathy towards Sacco: "#HasJustineLandedYet on her BILLIONAIRE daddy's pile of Apartheid-era mining money? LMAO [laugh my ass off] at concern trolling about Sacco's *ruined* life" (user 196).

Furthermore, Sacco's networks were also scrutinized by Twitter users, who showed her previous posts as proof of her failed character, such as "As I sit and eat a bagel with lox, i would like to send love to my jews who are all starving themselves right now. #hungryhungryhebrews" and "I had a sex dream about an autistic kid last night. #fml [fuck my life]" (jenvesp, 2013). The link with Sacco's offensive tweets was shared by users 143, 154, 156, 525 and 25.

Finally, even Sacco's apology is a confirmation of her low character—both the apology that the Twitter users expected and the one that was really issued. Judging a future apology, before Sacco even landed, user 14 predicted a "'sorry you were offended' non-apology". Similarly, when the fake profile @JustineSacco6 started apologizing on Twitter[6], that was also not good enough: user 521 criticized it as "Apologizing at the speed of white". And the same happened when the real apology was issued by the real Sacco: for user 222, her apology "(…) reaps of white privilege".

[4] There is insufficient space in this article to address the important issue of racialization of digital publics, which in this case is seen by the active participation of Black Twitter. As I have shown somewhere else (Tavares, 2025), Black Twitter is constituted by progressive Black-American counterpublics, who use the platform to share politics, culture and discursive practices. Authors such as Ng (2022), Jackson, Bailey and Welles (2020) and Florini (2019) understand that Black Twitter brings to the digital sphere long-standing discursive practices of Black counterpublics, such as dissing, reading and cancelling. That process transforms social networks into an space for Black counterpublics. Interestingly, the combined use of hashtags by Black users with the implementation of trending topics by Twitter allowed discussions that happened inside the Black digital counterpublic to gain visibility in the larger public sphere, popularizing its discourse and facilitating its activism.

[5] According to Ronson (2015b), Sacco's father is not a billionaire but a carpet salesman.

[6] During the development of the case, there was a multiplication of fake profiles for Sacco on Twitter, as well pointed out by user @AdFreak. One of these fake profiles was @JustineSacco6. This profile started apologizing as if it was Sacco herself, and some users believed it: "Justine Sacco is back @JustineSacco6 and crazy apologizing to every single person on Twitter" (user 408). The same happened to user 521, who ended up criticizing the fake apology from the fake Sacco profile.

Therefore, Sacco, through several aspects of her life and her actions, is lowered by Twitter users.

a. Charity and Self-Promotion

As I have shown elsewhere (Tavares, 2025), Sacco's case was also an opportunity for NGOs to promote their causes and gather funds. The most emblematic example is that of Aid for Africa. An unidentified person purchased the web domain <justinesacco.com> and redirected it to the NGO's donation page. The NGO, then, used the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet in several tweets to encourage people to visit the webpage and make a donation. The action had a righteous and humorous effect, with Twitter users classifying it as "savvy" (user 118), "genius" (user 119), and "well-played" (users 105, 106, 107, 108, 115, 116, 284, 407 and 541). The charitable move contrasted with Sacco's tweet: "PR brilliance rises from PR idiocy: @AidforAfrica buys [justinesacco.com] domain, redirects it to donation page" (user 109).

Twitter users, therefore, engage in conversations about the wrongness of Sacco's tweet; disparage her in all aspects of her life; call out her racism; mock the consequences imposed on her, potentializing some of them; naturalize the consequences and blame Sacco for them; try to give the case more impact, bringing awareness and resources to the AIDS cause, promoting the work of actors involved with it. The users, then, adhere to righteous discourse and attitudes towards Sacco's characterization and imposed consequences as well as towards the underlying cause.

b. Consequences

At the same time that Twitter users classified Sacco and her tweet as wrong and racist, they imposed, commented, joked about and celebrated the consequences suffered by her. Users tweeted mainly about the fact that she was fired, became (in)famous, and that this infamy was permanent. Users also made references to physical violence as a response to Sacco.

Her firing is positively seen by the users, who joke about it—at this point, the righteous speech of appreciating Sacco's dismissal overlaps with the humorous discourse of finding it funny. A few examples (among many): "That awkward moment when the rest of the world knows your career is over before you do" (user 442); "Looking forward to getting back to work after my vacation in Africa. Just kidding. I'm fired!" (user 52). Users also understood it as "Appropriate action by #IAC" (user 540). Additionally, this world fame also meant that it was useless for Sacco to delete the tweet—it was everywhere: "That awkward moment when you delete your tweet and soon find out its plastered all over the net and comes up in Google …" (user 169). The dissemination of Sacco's tweet, however, was not an automatic consequence of the shaming: it was due to users actively sharing it by links or print screens, which sometimes was done to share information but on other times it was purposely done to stop Sacco from trying to erase her wrongdoing. Indeed, many users shared a print of Sacco's tweet, as visible in the compilation below.

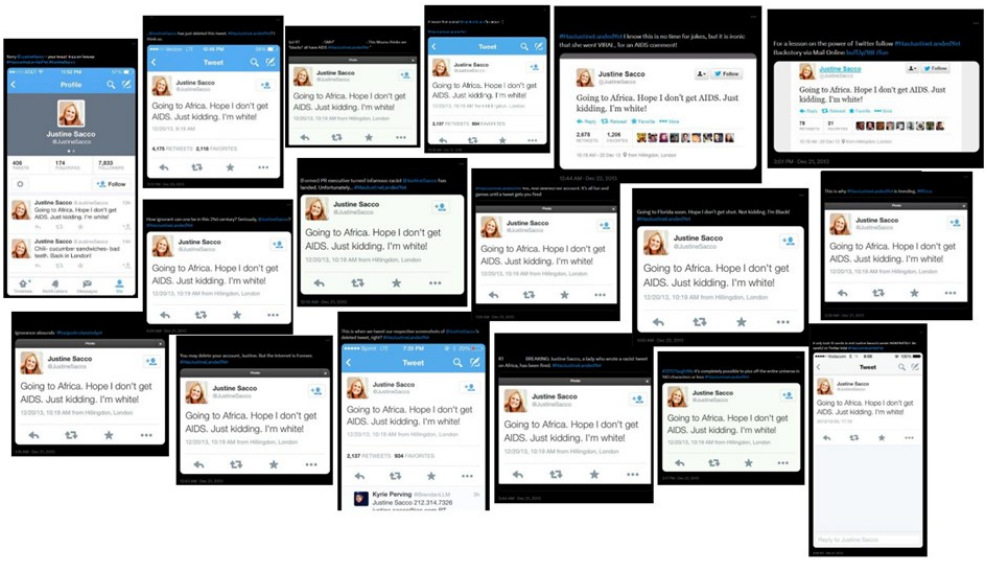

Figure 1: a compilation of tweets that share a print of Sacco's tweet.

Indeed, many of these tweets sharing Sacco's tweet are only a comment on the case using the print for contextualization. However, sometimes users recognize the permanent nature of these images, and comment on how ineffective was Sacco's decision to delete her tweet: "Deleting your twitter account is like throwing a huge blanket over the car you just wrecked. Nothing to see here" (user 212); "She deleted it but it's not going anywhere" (user 213). Yet, this characteristic of permanence is not only recognized but also *weaponized* by the users, who purposely share the print of Sacco's tweet with the intention of making it lasting and rendering useless the delete: "Sorry @JustineSacco - your tweet lives on forever" (posted by user 181, along with a print of the tweet); "You may delete your account, Justine. But the internet is Forever" (user 126, also posted along of a print of the tweet); "This is when we tweet our respective screenshots of @JustineSacco's deleted tweet, right?" (user 134, in a post also accompanied by a print of Sacco's tweet). That is, users deliberately share the problematic tweet, making the wrongdoing permanent and impossible to disappear.

It is important to notice that these consequences are imposed by the mass of social media users functioning independently from the state; moreover, this informal, extra-legal form of social control that punishes even small offences with big consequences, does not follow any form of due process, either in the definition of the rules or in their application. One could question, firstly, if it is proportional to submit Sacco to global infamy and for her livelihood to be taken away because of a tweet published for her less than 200 followers. Secondly, there is no trial or tribunal system that could give Sacco the chance to defend herself. From the very start—Biddle's whistle blowing -, Sacco was guilty, and she could not even know about the accusations against her, since she was still flying whilst her shaming was moving on. Sacco's lack of defense, nonetheless, goes beyond not giving her space and time to argue for herself: this possibility is precluded to anyone who does not agree with their condemnation: "Expose a racist and watch the RWNJs [right wing nut jobs] come out of the sewers to defend the rat. Happens every time" (user 178); "Reminder that Justine could just dig in and b like 'sorry, not sorry'and anonymous white ppl would fund her for life" (user 210); ""Q for Justine supporters: how many free racist tweets

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does a person get before they're asked to accept responsibility?" (user 211). Sacco's defenders are, thus, classified as crazy right-wingers, with a special fondness for racists. Eventual defenders, therefore, are also put within the simple good versus evil narrative, in which any form of alignment or criticism leads to conclusions not only about the arguments used but also about who the defenders are.

6. Analysis: a Simple and Exemplary Moral World

Shaming is essential in Sacco's case. As I have shown in the previous section, the users show disapproval of Sacco's tweet and Sacco herself, in a characterization that encompasses her entire self: her past, present and future are portrayed as flawed. Indeed, in online public shamings, the *person*, *not their acts*, is portrayed as "sullied and tainted", "beyond the pale, not to be trusted or engaged with" (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021, pp. 5-6). Sacco's wrongdoing (the tweet) is identified, and she is tainted not only as someone who said something racist, but as a racist—and she is shamed accordingly: she is name-called in a myriad of ways, from "idiot" (user 142), to "obnoxious, self-involved jerk" (user 158). Sacco is one of those untrustworthy outsiders referred by Becker (1963): she does not live by the group's rules—she needs to learn them (user 199). Indeed, user 219 says that "those that still believe that the darker your skin, the less intelligent you are *have quite some evolving to do"*. It is visible, by these tweets, that the online public shaming is not just about Sacco's specific wrongdoing—the tweet—but it spreads into a judgment of her as a person, as who she essentially is. And users, through name-calling and cursing, impose this shameful persona upon Sacco.

This characterization is confirmed and reinforced by the widely shared Buzzfeed (2013) community piece about the case, which revealed a series of older, but equally offensive tweets by Sacco. These tweets add up to the shaming construction of Sacco's persona since they prove that the AIDS tweet was not an exception but just an example of Sacco's behaviour—the behaviour of a person who lacks basic common sense and spreads prejudice: "This woman was in PR? At like an actual company? That paid her?" (user 32). Sacco is this idiotic racist person in her entirety—Sacco as a whole is flawed, not only her tweet. Even her future confirms it. Before she landed, as shown in the previous sections, users wagered that her apology would be equally racist. Therefore, the evaluation of her morally condemnable motivations is accurate. Any apologies or claims that the racist behaviour was out of character are considered inauthentic.

This characterization of Sacco as essentially flawed is made possible due to the lack of context on which her story is built. In the case, there is a meagre amount of information about her. In fact, the network's information about Sacco can be summarized as: (1) Sacco tweeted the AIDS tweet; (2) she works for IAC; (3) she is flying to South Africa; (4) her father is a South-African billionaire (which, as seen, is false); (5) she has published other problematic tweets. Not much more is known about Sacco, and part of what is known is either false or collected after her online public shaming started. This shows that Sacco's online public shaming works with a single, out-of-context offence. In this way, the online public shaming is led by actors who only know the shamed via the visible aspects of the wrongdoing and superficial facts about the shamed—which does not stop the shamers from evaluating and judging the shamed in the entirety of herself.

Since the shamers do not know Sacco on a deeper level, in other roles of her life and within the community, it is easier to make her into an unidimensional character

reduced to her tweet – she is typed, without any singularity or uniqueness. Sacco is typed as privileged, stupid, idiotic, ignorant, racist. As observed by Bouvier (2020) in relation to other online public shamings, the shamed "(…) is a *type* that they have come across before. The typology: 'aggressive, disrespectful, ignorant, bigoted' women" (p. 5, my emphasis). She is just one case among others in a racist society. With the lack of context and by being typed, Sacco is inserted in a simple narrative of good versus evil, in which she represents the opposite of the shamer's morality. Tyson (2022) classifies this process as a form of fictionalization, which divides people between "good and bad, allies and enemies, human and subhuman", creating "a simple moral world" (p. 129).

For sure, in this process of punishing Sacco, of transforming her into an outsider, she is typed as a racist, which is contrasted to a countertype: awareness and charity. Twitter users are invited to donate and "(…) turn a *hateful* tweet into *hopeful* action" (@DignitasIntl); they celebrate "(…) @AidforAfrica for turning a *bad* situation into a *positive* one" (user 207) when acquiring the justinesacco.com domain. The move is called "*brilliant*" while Sacco represents "*idiocy*" (user 109). Sacco is also called an "*idiot*", while the work of raising AIDS awareness is "*AMAZING*" (user 155). Thus, it is significant that in a tweet by @AIDSHealthcare, the choice between agreeing with Sacco and choosing to do charity is just rhetorical—the user knows what the right option is: "*If you disagree* with @justinesacco's *stigmatizing* words, take the pledge to #endHIVstigma NOW." Users, then, frame Sacco in this simple moral world of good versus bad, in which disagreement is seen as not only morally wrong but utterly stupid. In this way, as seen in the previous section, shamers also attack those who try to defend, minimize or simply contextualize her actions—any form of support is also seen as deviance.

For some users, the online public shaming has the effect of regulating general behaviour, teaching not only Sacco but the entire world that racism is wrong—the exemplar function of shame. For example, users discuss a "lesson" to be learned from the case: "And, to reiterate what [another user] said, the lesson here isn't, 'don't say racist things', but rather, 'don't be racist'" (user 159). Moreover, the online public shaming affects general behaviour not only by imposing a prohibition, but also by encouraging a positive behaviour among users, who must be aware and charitable towards the HIV/AIDS cause.

Finally, users reach important consequences towards Sacco, by both achieving her dismissal and making her world infamous. Users perceive the online public shaming as achieving its goal when IAC finally starts cutting ties with Sacco ("The deed is done. Name scrubbed from company website"—user 148), and they joyfully joke that she has been fired. Likewise, they celebrate and weaponize her worldwide and permanent infamy by plastering prints of her tweet all over the social network. In this sense, it is visible that shamers intend to make Sacco's shaming global and permanent—marking her identity in past, present and future. Her characterization as someone low, as someone to be avoided—as a *deviant outsider*—is made global and permanent. The online public shaming, therefore, gains new dimensions and lasting effects. In this sense, considering the achieved objective of making Sacco lose her livelihood, the intention to make the whole world aware of her deviance, and the hostility against anyone who tries to defend her, shaming effectively threatens Sacco's social bond.

7. Conclusion

This article has attempted to characterize the phenomenon popularly known as *cancel culture* as a contemporary form of shaming punishment. The empirical analysis shows that Sacco's online public shaming punishes her by not only exposing her flaws to the world to see, but also by exposing her as an essentially flawed person. Shame encompasses the whole person, who is placed outside the community of trustworthy individuals: their whole self—past, present and future—is seen as sullied and tainted. Sacco is submitted to what Tyson (2022) calls the fictionalization of shaming, that is, she is placed on the wrong side of a simple moral world divided between "good and bad, allies and enemies, human and subhuman" (p. 129). The users act under very little information, and despite their total lack of context of Sacco's life and intentions, making the simplification of her character even more extreme—she is her tweet. This moral dichotomy in which Sacco is typed is confirmed by comparing her to a contra-type, that of charity and awareness in relation to the HIV cause. The result is the users' entrepreneurship to get Sacco fired, excluded from any position of responsibility and prestige. Sacco's super exposition online aims to mark her globally in her new, lowered identity. Moreover, any defenders are equally classified as outsiders, as deviants and untrustworthy. By marking Sacco as a global outsider, showing hostility to anyone who tries to defend her, and making her lose her livelihood, shaming confirms its threats: to be publicly seen as at fault in the eyes of others, to be at risk of losing social ties. In this way, the observed users involved in the phenomenon punish by publicly imposing shame—shame that is weaponized by the social media users, without state intervention, due process or right to defence, and, nonetheless, imposing stark consequences.

8. Limits

Sacco's case has been chosen to be the main focus of this research mostly because of its exemplarity and typicity in relation to online public shamings. Nonetheless, before finishing this work, it is necessary to ask: *how typical is Sacco's case?*

A definitive answer to that question depends on further research, especially on other case studies that consider different variables such as gender, race, imagined communities involved, values at hand, social status and fame of the shamed person, etc. It is true that some aspects that are very specific to Sacco's case must be absent or at least subdued in other cases. For example, her global infamy is the type of incident that will rarely be repeated. For now, however, considering what the literature has already pointed out, other cases described in previous work (Xavier, Tavares & Chaves, 2023), and the exemplarity of Sacco's case, it is possible to say that this is a first good model with basic features for the study of other online shamings: the use of public online humiliation, which aims at establishing the culprit as an outsider to a larger public, aiming to sever at least part of their social ties—most especially the financial ones.

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