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To Cancel or Not to Cancel. That Is the Question. The Role of Quest for Significance and Significance Loss in Cancel Culture

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: The phenomenon of *cancellation* is gaining in social impact and significance in the last decade. There is significant research from political science about this topic, but little is yet known from a psychological perspective. The aim of the present research was to analyze how significance loss and personality traits might influence people's attitudes in supporting or rejecting cancel culture attitudes and behaviors.

METHOD: In an experimental study with 122 Portuguese people (70.5% women, mean age: 28.59 years), significance levels were manipulated to test their impact on cancel culture support, controlling the influence of personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeability, neuroticism), and political orientation.

RESULTS: Analyses showed that those identifying themselves are more left-wing oriented (β = -0.43; $p < 0.001$) and who experienced a higher quest for significance ($\beta = 0.19$; $p = 0.017$) were those more prone to support cancel culture attitudes and behaviors ($R^2_{adjusted} = 0.313$; $p = 0.005$). Personality traits showed no significant impact on cancel culture, and neuroticism showed a significant one when considered alone ($\beta = 0.18$; $p = 0.049$; $R^2_{adjusted} = 0.024$; $p = 0.049$).

CONCLUSION: These findings provide an initial conceptualization of cancel culture from a psychological perspective, opening the door to socio-clinical intervention and prevention programs.

1 | Introduction

Paraphrasing the famous quote that marks the beginning of one of the most remarkable soliloquies in literature, spoken by the Bard through the voice of Prince Hamlet: *To cancel or not to cancel. That is the question* (Shakespeare 2016). Today, it seems this question torments many in the same way as the Danish king was tormented by the weight of his own existence.

The origin of the term "cancel culture" is traced by some experts to a 1991 American film, in which a character, breaking up with his girlfriend, expressed wanting to "cancel" her (Tandoc et al. 2022). After the term was used in songs and cable TV shows, it gained popularity among African American Twitter users in 2015 (Romano 2020). Despite initially being used mainly as a joke, the term began to be invoked in more serious contexts, such as calling out, hating, and shaming individuals for racist and sexist

remarks (Bouvier and Machin 2021; Clark 2020). Thus, cancelling also has roots in activism, originally intending to highlight the wrongdoings of those in power and to combat social injustice (Romano 2020). Due to its social impact in recent years, the academic field has begun to pay attention to this phenomenon. Conducting bibliographic research on the APA PsycInfo, APA PsycTherapy, PSICODOC, and MEDLINE databases with the term "cancel culture" in the title/abstract, 33 works were obtained (two of which were thesis dissertations), between 2020 and (December) 2023. Nonetheless, as can be observed, there is still little scientific psychological research on this topic, despite its social influence.

Therefore, finding a standardized definition of the term, "cancel culture" is an important challenge. According to The Cambridge Dictionary, it is defined as "a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, where it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Harvard University Professor Pippa Norris (2020) describes "cancel culture" as "attempts to ostracize someone for violating social norms". According to Traversa et al. (2023), cancel culture involves the highly visible calling for and enacting of boycotts, condemnation, and social exiling of a person or group whose harmful behaviors or attitudes have been deemed unacceptable, offensive, or inappropriate. Similarly, Clark (2020, 88) describes cancel culture as "an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone whose values, (in)action or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with presence, time, and money".

The phenomenon of cancel culture has received attention from the political science arena. Results from research in this area are non-consistent. On the one hand, there are studies indicating that, contrary perhaps to general perception, right-wing or conservative individuals are equally prone to cancel as liberal people (Cook et al. 2021), or that cancel culture is a propaganda tool of right-wing media and politicians (Phelan 2023). Nonetheless, other studies have proposed that left-wing and more liberal individuals are those who tend to show higher support for cancel culture measures (Fahey et al. 2023). For the Pew Research Center, cancel culture is usually perceived as "censorship" and "punishment" by right-wing people, while it is felt as a way of making people accountable by left-wing supporters (Pew 2021). Quite enlightening is Norris (2023) analysis, stating that who mainly engages in cancel culture would depend on who you ask, this being another example of the old "us versus them" framing. One thing that, however, is clear, is the fact that, from the psychological point of view, there is so little research hitherto in this regard.

From a psychological perspective, this behavior (cancelation) may have very different impacts on both the person (or group) being canceled and the one doing the canceling. In a study conducted in the Philippines, Jusay et al. (2022) reflect on the experiences shared by victims of cancelation and how they were affected by it. The authors note that, due to the backlash, public humiliation, or cyberbullying experienced by those cancelled, their mental health was harmed. On the other hand, Traversa et al. (2023) explore the implications of cancel culture from a group perspective. In their experimental study, they found that engaging in cancel behaviors seems to have a validating and restorative effect for those who have previously been discriminated against. In other words, an episode of cancel culture might provide conditions for the harmed group to experience feelings of collective validation.

Nonetheless, there is still little research in the field of psychology on this topic. So far, cancel culture has primarily been studied from a socio-political perspective. As such, some researchers suggest that cancelling may be seen as a positive trend, as it often gives a voice to oppressed minorities, holds individuals accountable for their misconduct, educates the public about issues such as racism, sexism, or homophobia, and calls for socio-political reforms (Tandoc et al. 2022).

Albeit the voices that highlight the psychological benefits of cancel culture behaviors (both at the individual and social levels), it has also been argued that cancelling may inadvertently shift focus away from broader societal issues, misrepresent them, and ultimately maintain the very social problems it targets (Bouvier and Machin 2021). Additionally, questions are being raised about whether cancel culture has become too extreme and borders on bullying (Felaco et al. 2022; Ng 2020; Tandoc et al. 2022) or even "moral terrorism" (Heffer 2020). In an article addressing the cruelty of cancel culture, Brooks (January 14th, 2019) commented on the zeal for ideological purity and the loss of a reasonable scale of transgression within cancel culture (Ng 2020). For example, the same treatment may be given out to someone who made a single problematic post years ago as to someone with an established pattern of sexual harassment (Ng 2020). In this sense, when people adopt a binary tribal mentality— us versus them, victim versus abuser— they depersonalize everything and reduce complex human beings to a simplistic "good versus evil" paradigm (Brooks, January 14th, 2019).

Felaco et al. (2022) consider cancel culture a radicalization of political correctness and a form of censorship, as it actively seeks to avoid offense by monitoring language and actions in the pursuit of social justice. The authors conclude that political correctness encompasses two contrasting visions of freedom of expression: on one hand, it grants respect and rights to everyone; on the other hand, it serves as a tool for limiting or even censoring individuals (Felaco et al. 2022). In addition to being criticized for limiting freedom of expression (Felaco et al. 2022), cancel culture, like political correctness, has also been framed as a form of intolerance against opposing views (Velasco 2020). As such, the pervasiveness of cancel culture restrains open debate and is viewed as a form of destructive criticism (Velasco 2020).

Taking all this research into consideration, we might argue that cancel culture recently reflects an extremist phenomenon or even a radicalization of certain ideologies, as suggested by some authors (Dyrberg 2024; Kaufmann 2022). Klein and Kruglanski (2013) consider two disparate definitions of extremism: extremist beliefs as zeal or profound convictions, and extremist behaviors as reactions that deviate from social norms. They propose that extremism is an expression of *goal commitment*, with zeal being a *direct expression* of that commitment. The authors examined the psychological mechanisms linking uncertainty and extremism, concluding that an aversively high degree of uncertainty aug-

ments commitment to the goal of uncertainty reduction, thereby increasing the appeal of extreme expressions.

The Government of Great Britain, in their Counter Extremism Strategy (2015), defines extremism as "the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and respect and tolerance for different faiths and beliefs." Along the same line, Kruglanski et al. (2017) characterize extremism as a conscious choice to deviate from the behavioral norms that most individuals in a society would follow in a similar situation. In this sense, extremist political ideologies would be those that oppose the fundamental values of society by advocating racial, political, social, and religious supremacy (Trip et al. 2019). Naturally, extremism defined in this manner depends on a comparison to the majority, which is used to derive a standard of what is normal and what is extreme (Klein and Kruglanski 2013).

Attempting to define some of the most archetypal characteristics of extremist beliefs is also important. According to Ozer and Bertelsen (2018), extremist belief systems are intolerant and refuse to respect opinions that differ from one's own. There is a strong dichotomy between the in-group and out-group, with a psychological detachment from out-group members that can legitimize violence. This can create an "us versus them" mentality, where one believes that the success of "us" is inseparable from hostile acts against "them" (Berger 2018).

We must emphasize that holding extreme beliefs does not necessarily lead to violence, as the majority of those who subscribe to extremist ideologies do not commit violent acts (Horgan 2008). As Da Silva et al. (2023) highlight in their metanalysis on the 3N model and the Significance Quest, for extremist beliefs to translate to violent action, a narrative is required— that is, a rhetoric that justifies and legitimizes the use of violence to achieve specific goals. In this context, it is interesting to note the FBI definition of violent extremism as "encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals" (Williford 2019, 939).

Before concluding this brief description of extremism and its main characteristics, to avoid potential confusion, it is important to distinguish extremism from a related concept that often accompanies it: radicalization. As previously stated, extremism would represent the outcome— a system of beliefs (Klein and Krugalnski 2013). On the other hand, radicalization would refer to the process by which an individual adopts an extremist belief system, including (but not reduced to) the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change (Bott et al. 2009). Given these two definitions, we could argue that cancel culture aligns more closely with extremism than radicalization, since it is more a result than a process.

The two main topics previously discussed— cancel culture and extremism— share several similarities. The following parallels between them have been identified: (1) seek of a societal change (for example, cancel culture advocates for shifts in power dynamics and increased cultural sensitivity); (2) assertion of moral superiority, displaying intolerance and limited flexibility towards opposing viewpoints (cancel culture often presents its values as absolute and indisputable); (3) challenge to social norms (since freedom of expression is a social norm, banishing someone for their statements, as cancel culture may do, could be seen as acting against the norm); (4) operation on an "in-group versus out-group" dynamic (in cancel culture, the victims constitute the in-group, while the "abusers", "bullies", "racists", or those being cancelled represent the out-group); and (5) delegitimization and dehumanization of the out-group members (cancel culture may offend and ostracize individuals, although such actions are often perceived as justified by those who identify with a victimized group).

Studies analyzing and explaining extremist behaviors and beliefs often associate them with the "Significance Quest Theory" (SQT; Kruglanski et al. 2009). Therefore, it is essential to briefly delve into what this theory entails and consider its potential relevance to the propensity to join cancel culture.

The need for significance is defined as the need to be someone, to matter, and to have social worth— typically satisfied by a sense of attaining the values one shares with significant others (Kruglanski et al. 2022). According to the SQT, while the need for significance is universal, the means of satisfying this need depend on the sociocultural context or reference group in which one's values are embedded (Kruglanski et al. 2022). When individuals experience a loss of significance, face the threat of such a loss, or encounter opportunities to gain significance, they are motivated to seek ways to restore it (i.e., their social worth) through a motivational state referred to as the 'significance quest' (Kruglanski et al., 2022). The loss of significance is assumed to arise from various negative experiences, such as perceived discrimination, humiliation, personal loss, or intergroup conflict (Da Silva et al. 2023). Consequently, the quest for significance may build over time, driven by the gradual accumulation of realizations that a person, or their group, has been subjected to systemic discrimination and abuse.

Further development of the SQT originated the 3N model (Kruglanski et al. 2018; Kruglanski et al. 2022), which proposes three variables influencing violent extremism: need, narrative, and network. Da Silva et al. (2023) demonstrated that these three elements are linked to violent extremism intentions (i.e., violent and deviant behavior). The *need for personal significance* is the dominant need that underlies violent extremism (Kruglanski et al. 2018); the *narrative* component refers to the ideology, which provides a sense of confidence, allows one to understand the surrounding world, and defines the goals to pursue in the quest for significance (Kruglanski et al. 2018); the *network* component refers to the group of individuals who subscribe to the narrative, typically significant others— such as family members, close friends, or comrades— who serve as an epistemic authority (Kruglanski et al. 2005), leading individuals to perceive the violence-justifying narrative as morally acceptable (Kruglanski et al. 2018).

In parallel, it might be proposed that cancel culture operates through its own need, narrative, and network. Individuals engaging in cancel culture may similarly be driven by a need for personal significance. Their narrative is centered on the belief that certain individuals have committed acts that are deemed unacceptable, unforgivable, and shameful. Additionally, there is

a network of people, mainly online, supporting each other and legitimizing cancelling actions through sharing, commenting, and liking posts. This network of people subscribes to a shared ideology, which entails the belief that someone who engages in harmful, offensive, or unethical behavior deserves discredit and exclusion.

When the need for significance is heightened, individuals become particularly sensitive to ideologies that promise a sense of meaning and purpose (Kruglanski et al. 2018). For those who feel powerless or meaningless, violence may be an efficient way of reclaiming their significance (Kruglanski et al. 2018). This is because violence is often viewed as the "great equalizer", capable of reversing power asymmetries and turning venerated figures into victims (Kruglanski et al. 2017). Similarly, it could be that individuals who have lost significance are those who join cancel culture. Considering this, we believe it's pertinent to consider cancel culture as an ensemble of behaviors motivated by the loss of significance and attempting to restore it. Thus far, to the best of our knowledge, no other investigation has explored this issue.

In addition to the significance of quest and loss, it is surprising the lack of research on other traditional psychological variables in their relation to cancel culture. Empirical research on the psychological factors that might be related to cancel culture is still scarce. For instance, when the authors of the current work searched on the PUBMED data base (January 2025) for "cancel culture" and "psychology" on the title/abstract, only one result was obtained—and that result was focused on *free expression* and not directly on cancel culture (Menzner and Traunmüller 2023). Personality has been one of these few researched factors, although there is little scientific literature yet. Doré (2023) found in her research that people who scored high in neuroticism tended also to be more prone to "censorship" behaviors. In a recent doctoral dissertation, Tegrarian (2025) proposes the existence of the so called "Accountability/Cancel Culture Personality Typology" (ACCPT), which he defines as a "novel theoretical personality typology of individuals who support or engage in accountability/cancel culture" (p. 29). He indicates that the ACCPT would be positively related to neuroticism, extraversion and openness traits, and negatively related to agreeableness and conscientiousness ones (Tegrarian 2025). Nonetheless, this is hitherto just a theoretical proposal, with no empirical support behind it. Other than these two studies, authors have not been able to find any other proposal that link personality traits with cancel culture. However, as stated, in the present research, cancel culture is understood as an example of extremist behavior. Following this parallelism, it is interesting to briefly highlight how personality traits have been linked to other forms of extremism previously. As so, in a recent systematic review, Altungy et al. (2025) have found that low openness to experience and high conscientiousness are the two personality traits that might increase susceptibility to extremist beliefs. Previously, Corner et al. (2021) identified in another systematic review focused on extremism and personality that the neuroticism trait was the one that showed the highest level of empirical evidence for that relationship. This is nonetheless a systematic review focused on violent extremism (including terrorism), so the translation of these findings to the cancel culture process should be taken with the utmost caution.

As so, this is the starting point and aim of the current research: to test whether the psychological aspects of cancel culture can be better understood from the quest for significance perspective, particularly, within the 3N model of extremism. In addition, one novelty of this research is that the role of personality traits (openness, agreeability, conscientiousness, and extraversion) in the support for cancel culture attitudes and behaviors was taken into consideration. Therefore, the hypotheses to be tested in the present research are as follows:

1. Significance loss (state) will be positively related to support for cancel culture attitudes and behaviors, once the influence of political orientation, personality traits, and quest for significance is controlled.
2. Quest for significance (trait) will be positively related to support for cancel culture attitudes and behaviors, once the influence of political orientation, personality traits, and significance loss is controlled.
3. Cancel culture attitudes and behaviors will show a higher relationship with significance loss than with significance quest.

2 | Method

2.1 | Study Design

The current research followed an experimental design, with one experimental variable: significance loss versus non-significance loss.

2.2 | Participants

A priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the minimum sample size required for a linear multiple regression analysis with four predictors. With an alpha level of 0.05, a desired power of 0.95, and a small effect size ($F^2 = 0.09$), the analysis indicated that a minimum total sample size of 122 participants.

To carry out this study, a sample of 180 participants (70.5% women) was recruited using the snowball procedure among the Portuguese general population between January and September 2024. The inclusion criteria were to be over 18 and having Portuguese nationality. Exclusion criteria from the study were to reject the consent form and to answer less than 95% of the questions (58 responses were removed for these reasons).

The mean age of the participants was 28.59 years ($SD = 9.82$). Table 1 presents all the detailed sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

2.3 | Instruments

For testing the hypothesis considered in the present research, the following instruments were used:

TABLE 1 | Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

Variables		Values*
N		122
Mean age (*S.D.*)		28.59 (9.82)
Gender (% women)		70.5
Civil status	Single	76.2
	Living with partner	12.3
	Married	8.2
	Divorced/Separated	3.3
Studies	Primary or secondary	15.6
	Professional formation	1.6
	Bachelor's degree	49.2
	Master or PhD	33.6
Working status	Salaried	30.3
	Self-employed	11.5
	Unemployed	4.1
	Student & Working	15.6
	Student	27.9
	Retired	4.1
	Other	6.5
Political orientation—Mean (*S.D.*)**		4.11 (1.93)

Note. * All values are percentages if there is no further indication. **Lower values of the scale represented more left-wing orientation, while higher ones represented a more right-wing one.

- *Quest for Significance Questionnaire* (QFS; Molinario et al. 2021): Instrument designed to measure an individual's trait quest for significance. It consists of five items related to the individual's need to feel important, respected, and valued. Participants rate their agreement or disagreement with each item on a Likert scale from 0 (do not agree at all) to 6 (very strongly agree). Examples of those items are "I wish I could be more respected" or "I wish I meant more to other people". In the present study, internal consistency for this measure was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).
- *Ten-Item Personality Inventory* (TIPI; Gosling et al. 2003): This instrument assesses the Big Five traits. It consists of 10 items, with each item representing one pole of the five Five-Factor Model traits (therefore, there are two items per trait). Participants rate their agreement or disagreement with each item on a Likert scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (very strongly agree). Cronbach's α for the five traits were .78 for neuroticism; .29 for agreeability; .70 for extroversion; .58 for conscientiousness; .41 for openness. This indicates that the internal reliability of the scale is quite limited for agreeability, conscientiousness, and openness traits, the reason why they will be excluded from the statistical analyses.
- *Significance Loss Questionnaire* (Kruglanski et al. 2022) is an instrument designed to measure general feelings of significance loss. It consists of six items, and participants have to respond on a Likert scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (very strongly agree). Examples of those items are "I feel humiliated" and "I feel insignificant". In the present study, internal consistency for this measure was perfect (Cronbach's $\alpha = 1.00$)—the analysis was run three times given the alpha value found, with the same result.
- Cancel culture support was assessed using an ad hoc scale composed of 5 situations, and five questions per situation (except for situation 2, which had four questions). Therefore, a total of 24 items measured participant's support for prototypical cancel culture behaviors. (see Annex I). Participants, using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (certainly not) to 5 (certainly yes), had to indicate their degree of support towards these examples of cancellation. Internal consistency for this ad hoc scale was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$).
- Political orientation was assessed using an ad hoc question ("please, indicate in the scale below your political orientation"), in which participants had to indicate where they would place themselves in the political spectrum, using a Likert scale from 0 (far-left) to 10 (far-right).

2.4 | Procedure

The current study followed a cross-sectional experimental design, with two conditions (experimental/significance loss versus control/non-significance loss). All data was collected using

the Qualtrics survey platform, and the survey was distributed among the Portuguese general population using the snowball procedure. Initially, participants were presented with a consent form (Annex I) in which they were explained that the goal of the study was to analyze how different psychological variables could be related to how people feel while using social media apps. In the consent form, participants were informed of their rights and the type of questionnaires they would have to complete.

Then, the survey started with the QFS and the TIPI questionnaires. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two study conditions: experimental (*significance loss*) and control. In the "*Significance Loss*" condition, participants were asked to read a significance loss-inducing scenario. This consisted of a hypothetical situation where someone acted in a disrespectful or insulting way towards the participant. There were three different scenarios (Contu et al. 2025; Pastore 1952): being woken up in the middle of the night by a kid's prank; going to pick up an object from a repair workshop, only to find out the technician didn't repair it because he prioritized another customer; and being ignored by the bus driver and not being able to catch the bus while you're in a rush. Each participant read only one scenario.

In the "non-significance loss" condition, participants were asked to read a similar scenario but without someone acting in an insulting or disrespectful way. The scenarios were the following (Contu et al. 2025; Pastore 1952): being woken up in the middle of the night by a friend in an emergency; going to pick up an object from a repair workshop, only to find out the technician didn't repair it because a family member passed away; while you're in a rush waiting for the bus, the bus passes by and you notice it says "Out of Service". After the manipulation task, participants filled in the Significance Loss Questionnaire.

Finally, participants were shown five scenarios in which the main character was susceptible to being cancelled due to the expressed potential controversial behavior or ideas (i.e., "Miguel is a businessman and manages the company you work for. When announcing a new job opening, the HR team presents a candidate named André, a highly qualified Afro-descendant engineer. To everyone's surprise, Miguel refuses to hire André without giving any explanations. Later, in a company meeting, Miguel explains that he did not hire André because he did not want to put the company's image at risk"). Participants had to state their support for specific cancel culture actions (i.e., "Would you publish something about this situation on your social media, criticizing it?") using the already described ad hoc scale for this purpose.

The last part of the survey was comprised of sociodemographic questions (age, gender, level of education, marital status, occupation, and nationality). Finally, participants were asked to indicate their political orientation, using the described ad hoc question.

2.5 | Data Analyses

All analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Version 28 (SPSS-28). Initially, frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted for studying the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, and for checking the normality assumption of all data.

The next step consisted of performing a t-test to check whether the two experimental tasks (significance loss inducing scenarios and cancel culture statements) were effective.

Subsequently, a Pearson's correlation analysis was run to preliminary analyze the presence of correlations between the key variables of the study. We expected to find statistically significant correlations between the study IV's (significance loss, quest for significance, personality, experimental condition—cancel culture priming— political orientation) and the DV (support for cancel culture attitudes).

Lastly, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted, including as predictors the IV's that showed a statistically significant correlation with the support for cancel culture attitudes, and this last variable as the criteria. Gender and age were included in the regression analyses as control variables.

3 | Results

The first data to be analyzed were those related with the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, displayed on table 1. In addition, skewness and asymmetry analyses parameters were also analyzed to test whether data were normally distributed (a requirement for regression analyses). For all the key variables in the research, both parameters were between ±1, proving a normal distribution of the data (the only exception was for the asymmetry value of the total score of the Significance Loss scale, which was 1.085, just slightly above the ±1 parameter).

Subsequently, a t-test was run to check whether the manipulation task for inducing differential levels of significance loss had been effective. 59 participants were randomly assigned to the non-significance loss condition, while 62 were assigned to the experimental condition (significance loss). Results indicated that the manipulation task was not effective for eliciting different levels of significance loss among participants ($t = 1.42$; $df = 115.34$; $p = 0.079$). However, this would not hinder the possibility of finding a significant effect of the significance loss variable on the acceptance of cancel culture, tested subsequently.

The next step consisted of analyzing the possible existing correlations between the key variables of the present research. As the total score of all the measurement instruments of the study variables followed a normal distribution, correlation analysis was based on Pearson's *r*. Results indicated that support for cancel culture behaviors was significantly correlated to quest for significance ($r = 0.22$; $p = 0.016$), neuroticism ($r = 0.18$; $p = 0.049$), political orientation ($r = -0.48$; $p < 0.001$) and age ($r = -0.37$; $p < 0.001$). However, cancel culture support was not significantly correlated to significance loss ($r = -0.04$; $p = 0.693$), extraversion ($r = -0.16$; $p = 0.079$) nor gender ($r = 0.09$; $p = 0.319$). The complete correlation analysis result can be consulted in table 2.

The last set of statistical analyses consisted of the creation of a multiple linear hierarchical regression model for testing the research hypotheses. The criteria variable in the regression model was the total score on the *Cancel Culture Support* scale, being the predictors included step by step in the following order: (1) quest

TABLE 2 | Correlation analysis results.

	M (*S.D.*)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Cancel culture support (1)	58.96 (14.11)	—							
Quest for significance (2)	24.31 (5.99)	0.217*	—						
Significance loss (3)	13.87 (7.68)	−0.036	0.128	—					
Neuroticism (4)	8.03 (3.04)	0.179*	0.250**	−0.184*	—				
Extraversion (5)	8.22 (2.99)	−0.160	0.013	−0.077	−0.032	—			
Political orientation (6)	4.11 (1.93)	−0.479***	−0.003	0.075	−0.145	0.007	—		
Age (7)	28.59 (9.28)	−0.336***	−0.107	−0.106	−0.191*	0.057	0.146	—	
Gender (8)	—	0.091	−0.110	−0.050	−0.132	−0.185*	−0.072	−0.073	—

Note: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

TABLE 3 | Study multiple linear hierarchical regression models.

	Predictors	Standardized β	$r_{partial}$	p	Tolerance	IFV
Model 1	QfS	0.217	—	0.016	1.000	1.000
			$R^2_{adjusted} = 0.039$; $F = 5.94$; $p = 0.016$			
Model 2	QfS	0.184	0.181	0.047	0.937	1.067
	Neuroticism	0.133	0.132	0.149		
			$R^2_{adjusted} = 0.048$; $F = 2.11$; $p = 0.149$			
Model 3	QfS	0.201	0.223	0.014	0.936	1.068
	Neuroticism	0.060	0.068	0.460	0.917	1.091
	Political orientation	−0.469	−0.479	< 0.001	0.978	1.023
			$R^2_{adjusted} = 0.261$; $F = 35.21$; $p < 0.001$			
Model 4	QfS	0.190	0.219	0.017	0.926	1.080
	Neuroticism	0.31	0.36	0.698	0.879	1.137
	Political orientation	−0.433	−0.463	< 0.001	0.957	1.045
	Age	−0.242	−0.277	0.002	0.936	1.068
	Gender	0.067	0.081	0.383	0.959	1.042
			$R^2_{adjusted} = 0.313$; $F = 5.52$; $p = 0.005$			

for significance, (2) neuroticism, (3) political orientation, and (4) age and gender.

The results indicated that models one, three, and four were statistically significant (table 3). The last model, which included the five predictors, explained 31.5% of the score variance in the support for cancel culture behaviors and attitudes ($R^2_{adjusted}$ = 0.313; $F = 5.52$; $p = 0.005$), being the value of the Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.051 (≈ 2), which indicates an almost perfect absence of autocorrelation. Within this model, political orientation was the most important variable (β = -0.43; $r_{partial}$ = -0.46; $p < 0.001$), followed by the participants' age (β = -0.24; $r_{partial}$ = -0.28; p = 0.002) and their levels of quest for significance ($\beta = 0.19$; $r_{partial}$ = 0.22; $p = 0.017$). When considered alone, political orientation explained 22.3% of cancel culture variance ($R^2 = 0.223$; $F = 35.647$; $p < 0.001$), being its explanatory power just a little higher than when considered with the previously stated variables (β = -0.48; p = < 0.001). On the other hand, neuroticism was not included as a relevant variable in the model, even though, when considered alone, it showed a significant relationship with cancel culture support ($\beta = 0.18$; $p = 0.049$), explaining 2.4% of the cancel culture support scores variance ($R^2_{adjusted} = 0.024$; $F = 3.97$; $p = 0.049$).

Given these results, it was decided to run an additional exploratory regression analysis segmenting the sample by political orientation: those participants scoring 0 to 4 were included

TABLE 4 | *Study multiple linear hierarchical regression models (segmented by political orientation).*

		Predictors	Standardized β	$r_{partial}$	p	Tolerance	IFV
Left-wing group (n = 69)	Model 1	QfS	0.307	—	0.012	1.000	1.000
			$R^2_{adjusted} = 0.080$; $F = 6.76$; $p = 0.012$				
	Model 2	QfS	0.263	0.264	0.035	0.907	1.103
		Neuroticism	0.126	0.130	0.307	0.904	1.106
		Age	−0.183	−0.193	0.127	0.959	1.043
		Gender	0.121	0.129	0.310	0.971	1.030
			$R^2_{adjusted} = 0.112$; $F = 1.771$; $p = 0.162$				
Right-wing group (n = 30)	Model 1	QfS	0.171	—	0.366	1.000	1.000
			$R^2_{adjusted} = -0.005$; $F = 0.845$; $p = 0.366$				
	Model 2	QfS	0.211	0.197	0.324	0.796	1.257
		Neuroticism	−0.188	−0.162	0.394	0.744	1.344
		Age	−0.260	−0.260	0.190	0.937	1.067
		Gender	0.087	0.089	0.661	0.910	1.099
			$R^2_{adjusted} = -0.016$; $F = 0.903$; $p = 0.454$				

in the "left-wing" group (n = 67), while those scoring 6 to 10 were included in the "right-wing" group (n = 30). Those who scored "5" in the political orientation question (n = 25) were excluded from the analysis, as they would be situated in the center. This analysis was run acknowledging the power problems given the small sizes of both groups, but it was considered interesting, from an exploratory perspective for future analysis, to check what the results might be. In this extra regression analysis, the criteria was again support towards cancel culture, being the predictors included this time in only two steps: (1) significance quest and (2) political orientation, neuroticism, age, and gender. Results indicated that, when classified by political orientation, for those participants in the "left-wing" group significance quest accounted for 8.00% of the cancel culture support variance ($R^2 = 0.080$; $F = 6.745$; $p = 0.012$) when considered independently ($\beta = 0.31$; $p = 0.012$). For those in the "right-wing" group, no significant results were found in the model. The complete results of this additional regression analyses can be consulted in table 4.

Overall, these results indicate that those people who identify themselves as more left-wing, who are younger and have a more activated pursue of personal significance are those who would be more eager to support cancel culture behaviors and attitudes, which could be regarded as the previous step towards engaging in these actual "extreme" behaviors.

4 | Conclusions

The aim of the current research was to study the phenomenon of "cancel culture" from the perspective of it being a manifestation of the pursuit of personal significance and which, given its defining characteristics, could be understood as an example of "extremism" (Felaco et al. 2022; Velasco 2020). Particularly, we aimed to explore whether the significance quest and loss were associated with support for cancel culture attitudes, and what role personality traits might play in that relationship, given the lack of scientific research in this regard.

More specifically, the current study aimed to test the possible validity of the 3N model of radicalization (Kruglanski et al. 2018, 2022) for explaining cancel culture. Particularly, the study focused on the *activation need* component (significance quest and significance loss), understanding the *network* and *narrative* aspects within the cancel culture characterization, while controlling aspects such as personality traits and political orientation.

Considering the results obtained, the resulting picture regarding cancel culture support portrays a young left-wing person who feels he/she deserves more personal significance, cancel culture attitudes and behaviors, being a valid means for attaining it. Now, let's examine this picture in more detail.

The most significant result is the confirmations of the main relevance of political orientation in explaining the possible support for cancel culture attitudes and behaviors. This variable accounted for almost half of the explanatory capacity of the regression model, which explained 31.3% of the variance of cancel culture support (meaning that almost 15% of that variance is explained by participants' political orientation). These results are in line with the findings of Fahey et al. 2023) and Mueller (2021), and seem to support the idea reflected by Pew (2021), that for those who identify themselves as left-wing, cancel culture attitudes and behaviors would represent something positive (as, for instance, an appropriate way of holding people accountable). However, these findings are opposite to those reported by Cook et al. 2021), who reported that cancel culture was more prevalent among right-wing people. This may be explained by the different contexts represented in the scenarios used in their research (portraying both typically conservative and liberal values) versus the more liberal framing of the scenarios used in the current research for assessing cancel culture. Therefore, more exhaustive empirical research ought to be done in this regard. The proposal of a widely

accepted definition of what is understood by "cancel culture" is fundamental, along with the use of scenarios that represent both conservative and liberal values to ensure adequate ecological validity.

Next, age, but not gender, was the second most important variable in the model for explaining support for cancel culture. These results are in line with the most recent scientific literature, indicating that young people are more likely to view cancel culture attitudes and behaviors favorably. In this regard, individuals belonging to "Generation Z" (those born between 1997 and 2012) are the ones who tend to express higher support to cancel culture (Roldan et al. 2024). This is contrary to Mueller's (2021) results, where gender was reported as a non-significant variable in relation to cancel culture. This might be due to the different ways in which gender was measured in the present study (through a simple sociodemographic question where participants only had to indicate the gender they identified with) and in Mueller's one (via a more "complex" scale where participants rated their *feminine-masculine* gender traits on a 10-point Likert scale).

The lack of significant results regarding the relevance of gender in supporting cancel culture contrasts with previous proposals suggesting that women tend to view cancel culture more positively, while men usually regard it as a form of unfair social punishment (Merkin 2024). It is also contrary to the findings of Mueller (2021), whose study reported small gender differences in cancel culture support. This might be explained by differences in the sample size and country of origin (U.S.A. versus Portugal), which might account for cultural differences in age groups. In this regard, even though political polarization is being a trend throughout all Western countries (Scholtz 2024), scientific literature seems to indicate this is a trend more acute in the U.S.A. (Oprea et al. 2024). Specifically, when considering gender, Inguanzo et al. (2023) found that sexist beliefs were very low in Spain (a country with very close socio-cultural similarities with Portugal), in comparison to UK, Germany, and U.S.A. samples, which might reduce the gender differences in political/ideological activism initiatives (such as cancel culture). In addition to this, it is relevant to take into consideration that it has not been until this May 2025 elections that the populist far-right has achieved a significant representation in Portugal (Jones, 2025)—while right-wing populism has been clearly represented in the U.S.A. since 2016 (Morris and Morris 2022)—something that could also explain the lower attitudinal motivation towards engaging in cancel culture in Portuguese women, who might not have felt that threatened hitherto by the rise of right-wing populism.

Regarding the, perhaps, most novel variables included in the study, quest for significance (trait), but not significance loss (state), was the third most important variable in the model for explaining support for cancel culture. Participants who, in general terms, perceive they deserve more recognition and validation are those who seem to regard cancel culture attitudes and behaviors as an adequate means for restoring/increasing their personal significance. As this is the first study, to the authors' knowledge, that has analyzed the possible role of quest for significance in relation to cancel culture, there is no prior scientific literature for comparing the results. Nonetheless, the reported findings align with previous scientific research that has highlighted how some extreme/radical attitudes or behaviors might be perceived as useful means for restoring/increasing personal significance (Kruglanski et al. 2018; 2022). Contrary to our initial hypothesis, significance loss (state) did not seem to be significant in understanding cancel culture support (not even when considered independently from the possible influence of quest for significance, as correlation analysis showed a lack of relation from the beginning). This might be explained by two main reasons:

(1) Support for cancel culture attitudes and behaviors might require some time to process and adopt, as it could be understood as a reflective process (Norris, 2023). Therefore, transient psychological states would not be as relevant in the consolidation of a set of beliefs that are established over time.
(2) The manipulation task used in the present study was not effective for eliciting different levels of significance loss. This might have influenced the lack of relation between significance loss and support for cancel culture found in the results.

Despite the bittersweet results regarding the hypothesis one and three of the present study, results seem to point towards the validity of the 3N radicalization model (Kruglanski et al. 2018; 2022) as a conceptual paradigm for framing cancel culture, especially with regard to its *need activation* component. Nonetheless, the influence of significance quest on cancel culture was rather small, especially in comparison with a more social variable like political orientation. The initial explanation is that scenarios used for assessing support towards cancel culture might have been biased towards progressive ideology (the problematics depicted in them are usually a reason for concern and rejection for those who identify themselves as progressive). This, considered along with the fact that ideology was the most relevant variable, could reflect that support to cancel culture is mainly motivated by people´s ideology (when that ideology is parallel to the problem reported and the means for "fighting" it). Nonetheless, the fact that, in spite of this, significance quest was still included in the regression model as a significant variable reveals its importance. This explanation was supported by the additional analyses presented once the sample was segregated by political orientation. As indicated, results then proved that cancel culture support was only significant among those who were part of the "left-wing" group and whose significance was more activated. In this case, the explanatory influence of significance quest increased by 4.1 points, from 3.9 to 8 (see tables 3 and 4).

An additional explanation for these results can be provided by addressing the 3N model. Here, cancel culture has been understood as part of the *network* and *narrative* components. However, for them to play a significant role, the *need* must be activated, surpassing a significant threshold. Given the results, it might be that this threshold, even though activated, did not reach a greatly significant level, which might explain the rather small effect found of this variable. However, these results seem to point towards the relevance of significance in explaining adhesion to cancel culture, which might indicate that those who

engage in it might restore their quest for significance, following a similar pattern to that found in the *inceldom* movement, who restore their significance via its adhesion to this group (many times, via online platforms) (Ellenberg et al., 2023). This should make us think, as a society, if we are able to provide healthy, pro-social opportunities for attaining/restoring personal significance or, contrary to this, we are leaving the gates open to extremist/radical groups to fill this gap. In addition to this, the small influence of significance can also be explained for the potential role that other social variables might be playing underneath. In this regard, it might be that participants in the sample were not very active on networks that support cancel culture, which would provoke an absence of initial clearly defined attitudes towards cancellation, and a lack of strength in them. In addition, the scenarios proposed for measuring cancel culture (Annex II), even if they showed excellent internal reliability, they could lack enough social relevance to participants. Also, this low influence of significance quest seems to be in line with Di Cicco et al. (2025) findings in their research on conspiracy beliefs and radicalism/activism. They found that significance quest had a significant positive effect on violent radicalism, but not on activism (being cancel culture related to the later conceptually).

Lastly, personality played no significant role in relation to support for cancel culture. Even though the neuroticism trait showed a significant correlation with the measure of cancel culture support, its effect was non-significant in the regression model when considering the previously explained variables. These results are contrary to those reported by Doré (2023), although her research was focused on *censorship* and not specifically cancel culture, and to the findings reported by Altungy et al. (2025) and Corner et al. (2021) in their systematic reviews. This research was also exploratory regarding the effect of personality traits on cancel culture support, given the lack of prior scientific research on this topic. Nonetheless, future research should employ more appropriate personality assessment instruments that might ensure the generalizability of the results.

The current research has some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. The first and most important is the sample size, as well as the fact that it was a convenience sample. Indeed, 122 participants is a relatively small number for drawing conclusive and potentially generalizable results. Nonetheless, given the innovative and exploratory aim of the study, it represents a humble but solid beginning for this line of research—with all the limitations that this entails. Another limitation is the lack of psychometrically validated measures for cancel culture. This led to the creation of an ad hoc measure, which may lack the psychometric validity desirable for any empirical research. In addition, the scenarios portrayed in the measure of cancel culture may have reflected more left-wing progressive values, which could explain the observed results regarding political orientation. Therefore, as previously indicated, future research ought to include scenarios that also reflect more conservative values (Baro and Jenssen 2025). In addition to these alternative scenarios, it would be interesting to include alternative measures of cancel culture that might be more appealing for people with conservative values (Schäfer 2022). Nonetheless, internal consistency of the cancel culture support measure was high (.922), which allows for considering it an adequate measure for the purpose of the research.

Despite the limitations, the study has some major strengths that are important to highlight. Firstly, to the knowledge of the authors, there is no other empirical research that has tried to analyze the possible relationship between personal significance and cancel culture support. This represents an important step, as many of the theoretical proposals for explaining cancel culture address, in some way or another, aspects related to personal significance (Tandoc et al. 2022; Traversa et al. 2023). Secondly, the present study also tried to analyze the role that personality traits may have in relation to cancel culture support. As indicated at the beginning of the paper, only two previous studies had considered personality factors (Doré 2023; Menzner and Traunmüller 2023) in the analysis of cancel culture, although, in both cases, these were referred to indirect aspects (censorship and perception of freedom). Thirdly, this is the first empirical study that has attempted to combine psychological and political variables in analyzing cancel culture support. It is true that this was done in a significantly exploratory manner, but it is a good solid start for future research in the area.

As such, and taking into consideration the results and lessons learned from this research, future studies on the psychological variables related to cancel culture support should aim to work with a larger, randomly collected sample (that is, not a convenience sample). In addition, replicating the study to achieve a successful manipulation of the significance loss might shed new light on the potential relevance of this variable. This will likely be achieved with a bigger sample, as the manipulation task used in the present research has been validated in other studies (Contu et al., 2023). It would also be recommended to include aspects more closely related to conservative perspectives in the scenarios used to assess support for cancel culture. Last but not least, the inclusion of a manipulation task regarding the support for cancel culture attitudes and behaviors would be highly recommended. In addition, analyzing the potential role of honor culture in the support/rejection of cancel culture could amplify the impact of future research.

Overall, these results open a new line of research on the importance of psychological aspects in understanding the cancel culture phenomena, another example perhaps of our increasingly polarized societies where debate and attempts at mutual understanding are progressively being substituted by partisan biased views and in-group versus out-group dynamics. This is especially relevant considering the influence (even though small) that significance quest has proved to have in explaining cancel culture support. As shown in the introduction of this work, this variable has been empirically related to violent extremism and radicalization, being a core aspect of these processes. When our quest for significance is activated, we seek to belong to a group that might help us recover that significance. However, the more polarized a society is, the higher the probabilities that groups adopt a discriminatory narrative towards those outside them, which, in the long-term, will increase precisely this polarization: you cancel me, I cancel you. In light of these results, engaging in cancel culture attitudes, and behaviors seems to be an adequate way of gaining significance for those who identify themselves as more left-wing ideologically. However, this is likely to expand to all the ideological spectrums. With more cancellation only more social distance and mutual suspicion can arise, undermining our cohesion, and threatening our pacific coexistence.

Nonetheless, by knowing the psychological mechanisms that fuel these divisions, solutions can also be put into practice. Therefore, the more inclusive spaces we create as a society for feeling significant, the more we will be able to avoid this seemingly unstoppable road towards polarization. Only through open conversation and mutual respect social coexistence is possible.

Author Contributions

Pedro Altungy: conceptualisation, resources, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, supervision. **Margarida Ribeiro**: resources, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. **Sara Liébana, Ashley Navarro-McCarthy**: data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft. **Luis Carlos Jaume, Marcelo Agustin Roca**: writing – review and editing.

Data Availability Statement

Currently, the raw data are not publicly available in an institutional repository. Nonetheless, the authors are open to share the data with researchers interested in replicating the results found in this paper.

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