



Original article

Fictionalizing Digital Trauma: The Mediation of Trauma Through Cancel Culture in Yomi Adegoke's the List



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the fictionalization of cancel culture as a type of digital trauma in Yomi Adegoke's debut novel, *The List* (2023). This study examines how the use of media technology has created a form of digitally mediated trauma, most notably, cancel culture, defined as a form of public shaming started online to ostracize those who committed moral transgressions. This is a topic that is under-studied in recent literature. drawing on Anna Menyhért and Mykola Makhortykh's framework alongside Eve Ng's critical analysis of cancel culture. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on close reading and narratological analysis to examine Adegoke's novel. The primary finding is that Adegoke's narrative techniques and traumatic fictions elements echo the importance of conventional trauma to reinforce the instability produced by the digital world. This study contributes to the emerging discourse on digital trauma studies, literary analysis, and social fiction. The study concludes that Adegoke's fiction demonstrates the tenuous boundary between the virtual and physical worlds in the digital culture.

Keywords: Digital trauma, Cancel Culture, *The List*, Yomi Adegoke, contemporary trauma fiction.

تجسيد الصدمة الرقمية في العمل الأدبي : التعامل مع الصدمة من خلال مفهوم ثقافة الإلغاء في رواية «القائمة» ليومي أديغوك

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المُستخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة تجسيداً روائياً لثقافة الإلغاء كنوع من الصدمة الرقمية في رواية «القائمة» (2023)، وهي الرواية الأولى للكاتبة يومي أديغوك. تتناول هذه الدراسة مشكلة كيفية تسبب استخدام تكنولوجيا الوسائط في خلق شكل من أشكال الصدمة الرقمية، وأبرزها ثقافة الإلغاء، التي تُعرّف بأنها شكل من أشكال التشهير العلني الذي بدأ عبر الإنترنت لنيل أولئك الذين ارتكبوا تجاوزات أخلاقية. هذا موضوع لم يتم دراسته بشكل كافٍ في الأدبيات الحديثة. تطبق الدراسة أساليب القراءة المتأنية والتحليل السردى النوعي على رواية أديغوك. النتيجة الرئيسية هي أن تقنيات السرد وعناصر الخيال الصادمة في رواية أديغوك تعكس أهمية الصدمة التقليدية في تعزيز عدم الاستقرار الذي ينتجه العالم الرقمي. تساهم هذه الدراسة في الخطاب الناشئ حول دراسات الصدمة الرقمية والتحليل الأدبي والخيال الاجتماعي. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن رواية أديغوك تظهر الحدود الهشة بين العالمين الافتراضي والمادي في الثقافة الرقمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة الرقمية ، ثقافة الإلغاء، القائمة ، يومي أديغوك ، الأدب الروائي المعاصر عن الصدمة

1. Introduction

This study examines Yomi Adegoké's *The List* (2023) as a contemporary literary representation of digital trauma produced and mediated through the notion of cancel culture. In this context of a contemporary age shaped by digital technology advancement, social-media infrastructure and visibility, many pervasive forms like online accusation, public judgment, and rapid digital circulation became widely concerning. This mode of trauma is no longer confined to private memory or bodily experience; it is increasingly mediated, amplified, and sustained through networked platforms. Adegoké's novel offers a significant fictional case for exploring how anonymous accusation and collective spectatorship transform public controversy into psychological distress, relational rupture, and social withdrawal. By bringing digital trauma studies into dialogue with cancel-culture criticism, this research argues that *The List* represents cancellation not only as a delegitimizing phenomenon or reputational damage but as a structured traumatic process that moves through multiple stages like digital exposure, social escalation, interpersonal fracture, and psychological withdrawal. In doing so, the study situates Adegoké's fiction within contemporary trauma fiction and highlights how twenty-first-century narrative responds to the ethical and emotional pressures of platform culture.

1.1 The Statement of the Problem

This study addresses the issue of how trauma in the digital age has radically changed and shows how digital media have altered and restructured the conditions under which trauma is produced, circulated, and experienced. Within this context, cancel culture has emerged as a prominent mechanism of digitally mediated harm, in which anonymous and public accusations are amplified through social media platforms. While cancel culture has attracted considerable attention within sociology, media studies, and cultural commentary, its literary representation as a form of digital trauma remains a largely underexplored dimension of contemporary literary scholarship, so that Yomi Adegoke's *The List* (2023) offers a precisely structured fictional account of cancellation, yet no sustained academic study has examined the novel through the combined lens of digital trauma theory and cancel culture scholarship. This is an important gap because it limits academic knowledge of how narrative fiction renders the human experience of digital trauma visible and articulable. The current study addresses this gap through an examination of how Adegoke presents cancel culture as a particular kind of digital trauma, which draws on Menyhért and Makhortykh's model of digital trauma, as well as Ng's critique of cancel culture.

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to examine how Yomi Adegoke's *The List* (2023) fictionalizes cancel culture as a specific form of digital trauma, and how this novel portrays the marks of the digital world, such as online exposure, public shaming, accusation, and digital spectatorship, as traumatic forces that affect identity, social belonging, and psychological states within the narrative world. To achieve this aim, the study follows these objectives: This study will address and follow these objectives

- 1- To define digital trauma as a critical concept and literary concern in the context of contemporary fiction.
- 2- To define what cancel culture is and examine how it is portrayed as a form of digitally mediated trauma in *THE LIST* novel
- 3- To give a precise analysis of the consequences of digitally mediated harm on the characters' psychological and social states in relation to the stages through which cancellation develops in the novel
- 4- To analyse how Adegoke uses particular narrative strategies and tropes of traditional trauma fiction to portray the multifaceted consequences of digital trauma inside the fictional world.

1.3 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1- What is digital trauma, and how can it be theorized and understood as a critical concept and as a literary concern in contemporary fiction?
- 2-What is Cancel Culture? How can it be defined as a manifestation of digital trauma in fiction?
- 3- How do the consequences of digitally mediated harm affect the characters' psychological and social states in relation to the specific stages of the cancellation process depicted in the narrative?
- 4-How does Adegoke use certain narrative strategies and tropes of traditional trauma fiction to highlight the importance of anxieties of the digital age in the larger field of contemporary fiction?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for its attempt to connect digital trauma studies with the literary analysis of contemporary fiction. It adds a major contribution to trauma studies by extending attention from traditional tropes of trauma toward digital forms of trauma. It also demonstrates that contemporary fiction is a productive and formally sophisticated site for examining the psychological interior of digitally mediated harm. Moreover, the study contributes to contemporary English literary studies by showing how cancel culture is fictionalized as a process that narratively transforms digital accusation into psychological distress, relational rupture and social withdrawal. In addition to that, showing how fiction sheds light on aspects that are often overlooked in sociological and media studies approaches to cancel culture. The originality of this study lies not in redefining digital trauma or cancel culture separately, but in bringing them together through a close literary reading of Adegoke's *The List*.

1.5 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literary methodology based on close reading and narratological analysis. Its primary text is Yomi Adegoke's *The List* (2023), which is examined as a contemporary fictional representation of digital trauma mediated through cancel culture. The analysis draws on digital trauma studies, particularly the work of Menyhért and Makhortykh, alongside critical approaches to cancel culture developed by Ng, Janssens and Spreeuwenberg. The study traces cancellation in the novel through five interrelated stages: digital exposure, social escalation,

interpersonal rupture, and psychological trauma and withdrawal. This method is appropriate because the research focuses on literary representation, narrative technique, and the ethical implications of digitally mediated accusation within contemporary fiction.

2. Theoretical Framework: Digital trauma and Cancel Culture

The rise of modern technologies has introduced new forms of online harmful experiences, which may be called “digital trauma.” It is also further confirmed that the advancement of technology itself has paved the way for a new type of trauma referred to as “digital trauma,” linked to the widespread use of digital media platforms, especially in the context of online exploitation (Alassa et al., 2024). Initially, this concept of digital trauma arises as an extension of traditional trauma theory, not as a replacement, which originates from psychoanalysis, psychology, and cultural studies. More specifically, the digital age, which began around the 1980s, is characterized by the invention of the internet, personal computers, smartphones, and the global spread of digital communication, as well as all concepts and approaches related to digital culture. Thus, as Menyhért, a Hungarian scholar of trauma studies, states that “the years since 1999 have transformed the way trauma is experienced, transmitted, processed, shared, represented and remembered on digital media” (Menyhért, 2020, p.242).

Anna Menyhért and Mykola Makhortykh are prominent scholars in trauma studies who have established digital trauma studies as a distinctive interdisciplinary field. They present this approach as a framework especially for examining how technological innovation reshapes the representation, transmission, and processing of trauma within digital environments and space. Building on this foundation, the scholar Menyhért, who first developed this conception in her work “Trauma Studies in the Digital Age, she explores how digital media reconfigure the boundaries between personal, collective, and historical trauma. In this context, Menyhért (2020) posits that “trauma in the digital age is considered multifariously configured” (p. 244), implying that trauma has shifted from an individual psychological construct to a dynamic, shareable and transmissible phenomenon. Thus, trauma can play out through the ubiquity of digital media platforms like social media, videos, memorials, and digital storytelling. Further, Menyhért defines “digital trauma studies is the name of a novel interdisciplinary approach and an emerging research field that investigates the representation, transmission, and processing of trauma, individual, collective, historical, and intergenerational in the digital environment” (p. 448). In this sense, the discipline has moved from formulation to practice, as recent studies more heavily emphasise the need to

examine the importance of studying the interplay of the material and technological dimensions of digital media that actively shape and mediate experiences of trauma. Makhortykh's contribution complements this theoretical foundation by examining how digital platforms mediate the framing of political and historical memory, especially in Eastern Europe, in the context of exploring trauma-related content.

Together, Menyhért and Makhortykh reconceptualize and frame digital trauma, which represents a new interdisciplinary approach to trauma research which is primarily positioned at the intersection of digital memory studies, cultural trauma studies and media studies, "a global interdisciplinary network engaging in investigations of historical trauma, transgenerational traumatic legacies, and the novel ways of processing the painful past in the global digital age" (p.2). This emerging research field concentrates on the transmission and processing of individual, collective, and historical trauma within digital environments and platforms. examining how trauma is articulated through visual and verbal texts produced on digital platforms, as well as through participatory acts and gestures that characterize online interaction. Consequently, the significance of medium-specific technological design, such as affordances, communicative and interactional practices, are emphasized in shaping experiences of both personal and collective trauma. Collectively, this scholarship body explains and identifies not only the transformative function of digital technologies in shaping cultural memory but also draws attention to the ethical, methodological, and affective complexities that inherently accompany the digitization of trauma (Menyhért & Makhortykh, 2017).

In the field of contemporary literary discourse, the terms "digital trauma" and "cyber trauma" are often used interchangeably, for this conceptual framework refers to various forms of digital abuse incidents, trauma, and distress that occur in cyberspace, such as cyberbullying, online sexual assault, cyber harassment, maladaptive cyber relationships, and cyberstalking. These modes of abuse experienced in networked environments can trigger dissociative reactions and compromise mental health, hence highlighting the deep psychological impacts of technology-mediated abuse. In this sense, the inappropriate and misuse of digital communication and interaction are key sources of cyber trauma (Ozturk et al., 2025).

During the mid-2000s, the emergence and ongoing evolution of social media platforms significantly transformed and reconfigured the ways in which individuals and groups respond to traumatic experiences in digital environments. This new development leads to several ways in

which digital platforms mediate traumatic crises. Firstly, rapid sharing of postings enables multiple visual and textual representations of a single event to appear almost simultaneously, thereby contributing to a multidimensional representation of trauma that disrupts the power of any single version (Meek, 2018). Secondly, in situations where mainstream or government-controlled media are either constrained or prevented from reporting and covering events for political or ideological purposes, social media may function as a platform or a key platform for digital activism and social movements, which can also be recognised as a mode of collective trauma processing. Thirdly, these digital platforms enable individuals and societies to start processing the trauma as soon as it occurs, which is regarded as a form of process that may alleviate the long-term psychological and social consequences of trauma on both individual and collective levels (Menyhért, 2020).

Digital worlds, particularly online social media and support communities, have grown extensively across the globe and have influenced and transformed the Digital trauma architecture, offering a new perspective on its operations. In these digital environments, trauma is expressed and transformed through digital performance, interactive formats, and virtual traumascapes. Trauma is transferred in mediated forms through the internet, and it is collectively re-interpreted and re-visited through visual and performative media; as such, digital trauma studies explore how the virtual world changes and affects both the individual and cultural intelligibility of trauma. This approach challenges the classical model of trauma as a silent wound, isolated, confined to a certain time and space, instead reconfigures it as a fluid, networked phenomenon that is constantly mediated and renegotiated in online communities. This is in contrast to previous models of cultural trauma, developed in the 1990s, which were focused primarily on tropes of “silence, belatedness, and the limits of representation.” So, Thinkers such as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and others conceptualized trauma as a fixed rupture, a singular, devastating event dividing life and narrative into “before” and “after.” In these classical models, trauma was portrayed as an unspeakable, unrepresentable, unshareable, and profoundly isolating phenomenon that can defy expression and communication. However, such conceptual frameworks are no longer adequate in the digital age. Therefore, trauma in the digital age does not remain confined within those limits because it can circulate through digital media, it can appear in many forms and across many platforms, like mediated networked platforms, including social media, digital archives, and blogs, which facilitate immediate and networked forms of interactive engagement that reshape the way traumatic experience is expressed and shared virtually (Menyhért, 2020).

Digital trauma is basically characterized by constant mediation and circulation through digital technologies, in which trauma is not only experienced but also continuously reconstituted and restructured by technological systems. In this context, Menyhért (2020) who added that the constant circulation and uncontrollable flow and spread of distressing images and contents online which enable the transmission of trauma across time and generations through digital platforms that also allow century-old images and narratives to reappear virtually, reactivating unresolved pain and contributing to intergenerational re-traumatization among younger audiences in other words that the dissemination of digital technology has led to fundamental changes in trauma transmission and processing (Menyhért & Makhortykh, 2017).

The Silence has traditionally been regarded as trauma's defining feature since the trauma survivor's inability to articulate or express their traumatic suffering as well the surrounding community's incapacity or refusal to listen to the victim out of fear of being traumatized themselves and the deliberate silencing imposed by oppressive or authoritarian regimes who are enabling survivors to speak, to be heard and to engage in dialogue, this phenomenon was counteracted by digital media practices which could dismantle these layers of silence and helps overcome the barrier of silence surrounding the trauma through sharing traumatic experiences virtually (in blogs, social networking groups) and reacting to them in comments and chats (Menyhért, 2017, pp. 235 -238).

Menyhért & Makhortykh (2017) stated and observed that the emergence of digital trauma is closely correlated with digital media technology and environment, and that it has gained recognition across several academic disciplines, including psychology and media studies. Their work was echoed by another prominent scholar, Allen Meek (2018), who contends that the interrelationship between Digital trauma, collective memory, and media technologies is more dynamic and transformative. He emphasizes how changes in media technologies from centralized broadcast television to decentralized digital networks have fundamentally reshaped and influenced people's perception of trauma in the digital age. For instance, such traumatic images as the Holocaust or the attack of 9/11 were relayed through the mediating institutions of television that facilitated collective responses to the event and promoted collective identity. In contrast, digital media dismantle this central control. "Digital media allow a further proliferation of such images and narratives, permitting a greater multiplicity of competing interpretations and identification to be recorded and disseminated" (p.167). Consequently, digital media has fragmented unified emotional responses

into more plural, unpredictable, and politically volatile forms. However, Menyhért also emphasizes that digital media platforms do not transmit trauma only, but it also offers and provide potential ways to deal with traumatic experience “Social media are being used not only for representing and transmitting trauma but also for trauma processing” (p.245). Social media platforms offer potential spaces for coping with the traumatic experience through acts of sharing and commenting.

It was enlightening to see that social media not only transmit trauma but offer a novel way of dealing with it by creating a space in which acts and gestures that are characteristic of social media, such as sharing and commenting, can become a means of coping with and processing trauma, and building resilience and reconciliation in communities. (Menyhért, 2020, p. 241)

In this sense, digital media platforms operate as kind of paradoxical environments like sites of both trauma reproduction and therapeutic possibility (Menyhért, 2020, p. 245).

The condition and source of modern trauma can be initiated and emerge through the dynamic interaction between humans and the domain of digital technologies. This notion has been widely proposed by Patrick-Weber (2014) who emphasizes that human identities were traumatized by these digital devices technologies in two main ways firstly, these technologies were granted ontological power and value which is allowing them to shape human thought and existence rather than remaining neutral tools and secondly digital technologies dissolve the traditional boundaries of time and space, creating a world in which past and present are intertwined and blurred and the immediacy of digital life leaves no clear sense of ‘here’ or ‘now’ consequently, the result will be a sense of fragmentation and self- disruption where individuals might divide themselves into multiple online selves to adapt and survive within a digital world that blurs boundaries between the real and the virtual. For Patrick-Weber, this fragmentation is not a sign of loss but instead a form of resilience, a necessary response to the trauma of living in a digitized reality. (Patrick-Weber, 2014)

Digital trauma provides the broader conceptual framework for understanding how suffering is produced, mediated, and continuously circulated through digital technologies. Within this networked environment, cancel culture emerges as one of the most visible mechanisms through which such trauma is publicly enacted, amplified, and sustained through naming and shaming. Cancel culture can be regarded as a specific mediated trauma-based form and practice. In this sense, Cancel Culture can be defined and articulated as a phenomenon in which individuals who transgress norms are called out and ostracized on social media and other venues by members of

the public, leading to sanctions that affect their professional and personal lives (Saint-Louis, 2021). Additionally, the scholar Campbell (2024) defines cancel culture as a form of public shaming, also known as call-out culture, in which groups or individuals swiftly denounce and campaign against a target, often through social media. The target may be an individual, a company, or an institution. The act of cancelling someone, thus, is one of those spontaneous collective practices initiated by social media users, without consideration for its possible ramifications. Undeniably, the culture of cancellation has become part and parcel of the vernacular of digital culture, primarily targeted against public figures who break the loose norms of social acceptability (Velasco, 2020).

One of the significant scholars of trauma studies, who is called Eve Ng, an associate professor in the School of Media Arts and Studies and the Women's, Gender, at Ohio University, tackles the topic in her monograph, *Cancel Culture: A Critical Analysis*, published in March 2022. This is one of the first academic books to examine cancel culture from a scholarly perspective and also serves as a conceptual foundation for its investigation (Topadze, 2025). Eve Ng primarily defines cancel culture:

Cancel culture is “the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective, especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues”. (Ng, 2020, as cited in Janssens & Spreeuwenberg, 2022, p. 90)

Cancel culture has emerged as a significant concept in the twenty-first century, largely due to technological advancements that enable rapid sharing of perceived wrongdoing and prompt public reactions. This phenomenon gained prominence in the early 2000s, with the term "cancelling" becoming firmly established in the mid-2010s. This was influenced by the #MeToo movement and the role of Black Twitter, an informal network of Black individuals on Twitter highlighting social issues like the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and cultural appropriation, while also engaging in humour and discussions.

According to Santa Barbara Professor Anne H. Charity Hudley, an expert on African American culture and linguistics, two overlapping forms of cancel culture had developed by that time. One is a boycott, or a public refusal to support an entity (economically, socially, politically, etc.) that is meant to draw attention away from the target, and encourage others to participate as well. The

second, she said, is shutting someone down, silencing the target's voice and attempting to prevent the target from communicating (Campbell, 2024).

Ng (2022) contends that the most direct and formative origin roots of “cancelling” lie primarily in Black cultural and communicative practices and traditions, especially the Black vernacular “signifyin” practice of “reading” (and its later online form, “calling out”). She characterizes cancelling as a lineage of Black communicative practice through “reading”/calling-out, naming these as “discursive accountability practices” whose origins have been “unacknowledged by mainstream American culture” (p.48). cancelling becomes newly amplified through Black digital community formation and a site of digital activism on Twitter “Black Twitter”, and then is further normalized through the convergence of platform mechanisms (especially Twitter’s trending topics) and major hashtag movements. She emphasizes that this historically grounded genealogy gives “cancel culture” a more politically complex origin than popular dismissals admit, because it links cancelling to longstanding Black counter -public practices while also showing how social media infrastructures enable those practices to travel beyond their originating communities. Additionally, Ng emphasizes that the language of “cancellation” circulated through Black-associated popular media (music/film/television) alongside these practices, and that the mainstreaming of cancelling reflects both cultural diffusion and a shift in definitional power where broader publics adopt the term while detaching it from its original social and cultural specificities (Ng, 2022, p. 64)

Drawing on Eve Ng’s analytical fundamental perspectives, which have also been broadened and negotiated by academic scholars Janssens & Spreeuwenberg (2022), who examine Cancel culture as a whole, it cannot be viewed as either morally good or bad, because it consists of different kinds of cancelling with each their own moral implications. Thereby, cancel culture is used as an umbrella term for two different kinds of cancelling.

The first type, when cancelling, functions as an informal form of social punishment that is ethically suspect and frequently morally reprehensible. Drawing on Radzik’s framework, it argues that cancelling often involves social punishment is intentional, reprobative, reactive harming imposed or enacted outside legal authority and institutional hierarchy; unlike legal punishment and that this lack of structured authority produces recurrent injustices in online “naming and shaming”, and it is further heightened when driven by retributive or self-interested motives rather than any morally valuable aim; accordingly, after applying Radzik’s objections to social punishment to online call-out and naming-and-shaming practices, the authors state explicitly: “Using cancelling as a tool to

punish someone is morally reprehensible.” (p. 109). Subsequently, targets are frequently denied a fair chance to defend themselves, so sanctions are often disproportionate to the alleged wrongdoing, harm can escalate uncontrollably through cumulative online outrage, and the practice can generate chilling effects that restrict speech and impoverish moral discourse.

The second type of cancelling can be used “as a tool to remove privileged access to the public sphere,” so it is not understood as a tool for (social) punishment, but rather as a practice aimed at reducing a powerful figure’s “epistemic authority and to redistribute attention” that can “(re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives,” so that unlike punishment-oriented cancelling—this redistribution-oriented cancelling “might be less of a problem.” and on this basis they exemplify their central claim: Like Celebrities who used to have their voices heard more frequently or taken more seriously than other common people, or marginalized voices as well as they have a large audience and enjoy greater epistemic authority than the non-famous. Celebrities’ access to the public sphere is not limited to social media. The aim of cancelling is that these powerful figures should no longer be looked at as (epistemic) authorities, but as people with problematic views, and it is simply a form of redistribution of resources. One is aiming at equality instead of punishment (Janssens & Spreeuwenberg, 2022).

The main features of cancel culture are portrayed as a modern manifestation of public shaming, with its particular power derived from language communication. However, it can appear more extreme due to its lack of geographical constraints, enabling the mobilization of "large numbers of people" into what may become an "unrelenting personal attack," often accompanied by "unintended repercussions." Its scale and intensity are closely linked to the structure of social media, particularly Twitter (Luu, 2019). Furthermore, ‘Cancel culture’ can dismantle the lives of individuals at any moment. It can target a public figure who offends a minority group based on ethnicity, sexuality, or gender. Those who are ‘cancelled’ are often accused of behaviours such as bullying, sexism, racism, or homophobia (Mueller, 2021). In addition, cancel culture can be understood as a tactic of “trying to erase someone from public discourse – either through publicly shaming, deplatforming, or demanding that they be fired” (Beiner, 2020 as cited in Velasco, 2020).

3. The Narrative Construction of Cancel-Culture Trauma in Yomi Adegoke’s *The List*

Yomi Adegoke is a multi-award-winning British journalist, broadcaster, and internationally bestselling author. She was born on 25 September 1991 in Canning Town, East London (Wikipedia, 2026; Adegoke, 2023). Yomi Adegoke has emerged as a prominent figure in the

discourse on race, feminism, and popular digital culture, particularly in their intersections with class and politics. Adegoke has also published a series of successful books, including her debut novel, *The List* (2023), which represents a significant expansion of her literary contribution into fiction. The narrative explores how digital culture, cancel culture, and social media vigilantism fracture personal relationships, reputations, and professional identity. The book was nominated for multiple British Book Awards and was selected for book club recognition. It is also being adapted for television with HBO Max, BBC, and A24, and it has been translated into multiple languages, reflecting its cultural resonance (Wikipedia, 2026).

Adegoke's *The List* is a tense exploration of trust, betrayal, and the destructive power of anonymous online accusations in the #MeToo era. The story follows Ola Olajide and Michael Koranteng, a high-profile Black British "power couple" in the London media industry. Those couples whose lives are deeply shattered when Michael's name (Ola's fiancé) appears on an anonymous online *list*, accusing men of abusive behaviour that begins circulating virally before the public. Weeks before their wedding, thrusting them into public scrutiny, job loss, and fractured trust despite Ola's usual support for such call-outs. *The List* explores the impact of social media, cancel culture, and public judgment on private relationships. Ultimately, in *The List*, digital exposure is a disruptive force that converts intimacy into a public trial and renders personal identity and truth precarious.

The List, Yomi Adegoke's debut novel, is a sustained and structurally rigorous fictionalization of cancel culture and a compelling, contemporary anatomy of the "cancel culture" phenomenon, which is one of the most controversial social phenomena of the digital era. It is set in the modern British media, the novel fictionalizes digital public shaming through the construction of what happens when an anonymous crowdsourced spreadsheet of alleged perpetrators of abuse is circulated on Twitter, precipitating a reputational, relational, and personal crisis for the two protagonists, journalist Ola and her fiancé Michael. This phenomenon provides the novel's main structural framework, and its focus is on the loss of ontological security and the precarious nature of contemporary social contracts.

The following analysis examines the construction of the definition, typology, and psychological impact of "cancel culture" through the portrayal of the two main characters, arguing that *The List* represents cancellation as a narrative mechanism for turning public knowledge into private trauma. In *The List*, cancel culture unfolds through a sequence of five interrelated stages: Digital Exposure Act, Interactive Social Escalation, Interpersonal and Relational Disruption, Psychological Trauma

and Social Withdrawal. In the narrative, Michael's cancellation unfolds with several stages, first with a single digital naming act and then with a series of escalations. It begins on a typical Monday morning, the first day of his new role as a presenter at the media company CuRated. When the link was sent by someone named Ryan, it read simply: "Is this shit true?????" on his phone, while an anonymous list surfaced on Twitter. This document, a crowdsourced roll call of men in the media industry accused of various degrees of sexual misconduct and predatory behaviour, includes Michael's name on entry number 42 alongside high-profile offenders. Accusing him of "Harassment and threatening behaviour/Physical assault at office Christmas party", Cancellation enters his life as a strange and disbelieving encounter with a new textual object:

I can't believe this is happening to me, Michael thought..... He sat on the edge of his bed to steady himself, his fingers on his temples. They were throbbing. After some time had passed, he slowly got to his feet, feeling his knees buckle as he did. He took another deep breath and ran to the bathroom, where he was sick in the basin. (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, paras.19-20)

From that moment onward, Michael's identity undergoes an immediate and irreversible reclassification. That shift matters. The second stage takes the form of a social interactive process that relies on platform metrics, crowd commentary, the act of amplification, and the rapid withdrawal of support, all of which are complemented and intensified through the visible accumulation of public judgment and participation through retweets, likes, hashtags, DMs, and blocking. Michael notices that the tweet had "34 retweets, 203 likes, Posted at 6.30 a.m" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, para. 11). The public judgement consolidates through visible metrics and invisible spectatorship, while Michael has been watching the likes accumulate, translating a social media metric directly into the language of judicial condemnation, and the narration turns his podcast audience into a scale metaphor, where 217 likes become a room full of bodies imagining him guilty. Invisible spectatorship carries the weight of communal censure without the accountability of formal process. The novel then traces how public judgment becomes a material consequence.

He looked at the growing responses to the post, searching for names and faces he recognised among the likes the jurymen multiplying with each scroll. Each double tap felt to him like a conviction. There were now 217 likes; the last ever live show he'd done with the podcast had an audience of 210. (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, para.13)

What turns Michael's cancellation from a single tweet into a sustained, multidirectional social event is the dynamics of amplification that the novel tracks with careful quantitative attention.

Michael feels shamed, judged, and punished before he has any chance to defend himself. Michael is not only afraid of the accusation; rather, he fears that his world, career, reputation, and social acceptance are collapsing.

The third stage is Interpersonal and Relational Disruption, which is presented through the change of interrelationship dynamics and relational severance. It initiates conflict, reshapes Ola and Michael's relationship, affects work, friendships, and the wedding, and structures the novel's dramatic progression at the interpersonal level. The individual's response also reaches him through direct messages. Ryan's blunt "Is this shit true?????" signals that even weak acquaintances now feel licensed to interrogate him in openly accusatory terms before breakfast. When Michael messages Celie, Ola's best friend, to deny the allegations, "This is not true. I need to talk to Ola ASAP", she blocks Michael on WhatsApp and Instagram within hours of The List appearing, a decision she later explains simply as "I believe women". He began experiencing social shunning and destabilization in his intimate relationships. The most profound illustration of relational disintegration is particularly with Ola, feeling disoriented, disillusioned, and socially exposed. As a result, she began experiencing the traumatic burden of reputational ruin since her fiancée's name appeared on the list. Therefore, she is torn apart because she doesn't know how to navigate this ordeal: whether to remain with him and reject all the claims out of love, or to distrust him. Ola does not speak to Michael in the language of romance, but in the lexicon of investigation. Ola expressed her intense feelings of frustration and misery about what she knew about him. She intended to investigate how and why that happened to him:

Michael. I just want to know, honestly. Why is your name on there?'... 'Try and put yourself in my shoes,' 'I literally woke up this morning to see the man I'm meant to be marrying in less than four weeks named a potential predator alongside date rapists and domestic abusers.'.... 'Just tell me,' Ola said quietly. 'Who put you on there? Why?'. (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 5, paras. 5-13)

At the workplace level, uncertainty becomes institutional triage, where his gaze is avoided at the CuRated office. Later, CuRated platform places him on "temporary leave" while deciding "how to move forward". This is the social dimension of cancellation, whose capacity to sever ties not through argument or confrontation, but through the social withdrawal of access and recognition.

The last stage is Psychological Trauma and Social Withdrawal. Michael does not simply experience accusation as an external event; he begins to internalize it. Michael's psychological

state throughout this ordeal is portrayed as a descent into a distinctly modern form of trauma. Adegoke renders Michael's psychological state as progressively traumatized. His inner life under cancellation is rendered through a consistently embodied vocabulary, physical symptoms, intrusive cognition, and a slow deterioration that accumulates across the narrative. The initial moment of discovery is viscerally physical. After reading *The List* and attempting to contact Ola, Michael "sat on the edge of his bed to steady himself, his fingers on his temples. They were throbbing, before he ran to the bathroom where he is sick in the basin" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, para.20). Because the cancellation installs him in a prolonged temporality of personal, social threat, and disruptive anticipation, Michael feels overwhelmingly devastated, emotionally intensified, and he reacted with irritable panic when his name was explicitly exposed among other alleged sexual abusers. This incident made him feel paranoid and extremely apprehensive about his life and newly attained job: "I'm going to lose my job, was his first thought. I'm going to lose the first job I've wanted, before I even start it. With quivering hands" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, para.12).

The novel insists that the harm outlives the post. When *The List*'s Twitter account is deactivated, Michael and Ola briefly hope that "hopefully that's the end of it ...Now it's gone, maybe that's it?" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 5, para. 56). But the novel is careful to show that deletion does not equal erasure. Screenshots continue to circulate in group chats and Facebook groups; therefore, Michael is forced to live inside the accusation, to watch its meanings proliferate in public while his own sense of identity collapses into what the text later calls a "constant state of waiting" like a "terminal diagnosis":

'Getting named on The List felt like being held in a constant state of waiting. Like receiving a broad but terminal diagnosis — he had unknown weeks or months left to live but the fact that this condition would one day ravage him was irrefutable'. (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 7, para.11)

Michael's condition of cancellation provides precise illumination of the first type of cancel culture, as outlined by scholars Janssens & Spreeuwenberg (2022), who contend that this type is structured as "an informal form of social punishment" that operates outside legal authority because it punishes before it verifies. In Michael's case, the accusation does not reach him through any formal investigation. Rather, it comes in the form of a viral Twitter reveal, in which his naming starts with "a single act of digital public naming", followed by instantaneous amplification by retweets, likes, comments, and blocking. As a result, He felt collectively shamed and ostracised "before he had any chance to defend himself". Adegoke's novel stages the moral threat posed by online

punishment, identified in the framework as exceeding accountability when it is cumulative, unregulated, and uninformed by fair judgment. The case is all the more ethically serious because it turns out that Michael was not guilty, and his naming was motivated by Aaron's "vengeful resentment", which exposes how easily cancellation can be weaponized by private motivations.

Reading through Eve Ng's analysis of cancel culture, Adegoke fictionalizes cancelling with the idea of presenting calling-out as a morally serious act of public accountability practice that arises when official systems fail, *The List* states that it was formed because "official channels continue to fail survivors of abuse in the media and entertainment industries" and therefore "we have no choice but to do something ourselves" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, para.9). The novel also shows how that practice becomes viral and punitive with its digital circulation. It preserves the political seriousness of public calling-out rather than reducing it to mere online drama. At the same time, Adegoke shows exactly how accountability practices are intensified and distorted by mechanisms of social platform infrastructures like screenshots, follower counts, and timed visibility, which convert allegations into circulation, a process that parallels Ng's emphasis on how social media infrastructures amplify call-out practices beyond their initial context. Michael does not encounter the accusation through any formal process, but through Twitter metrics, where the post is measured in "34 retweets" and "203 likes". Black characters, whose private lives are violently converted into public, networked discourse through Twitter and other social platforms, which parallels an important part of Ng's argument that cancellation is amplified through digital networks. Adegoke extends this even further by showing how the mainstream circulation changes the meaning of cancelling by detaching it from its original ethical and political grounding.

Studies of literary trauma are increasingly focusing on the fact that trauma is not represented in any single fixed form, but it varies according to the social, cultural, and narrative circumstances in which it is mediated. However, trauma can be of various types depending on the cultural context (Mahmoud & Al-Gawahari, 2025, p. 1022). This view proves helpful to the current study since it extends this concern to digital trauma because Adegoke's *The List* moves this trauma to the cultural and technological space of platform culture in which online accusation, public exposure, and online spectatorship transform the personal suffering into a networked traumatic experience.

In the context of critical analysis, *The List* is a narrative of digital-age social commentary, more strikingly, categorized as a work of contemporary social Realism and digital trauma fiction with elements of social satire and thriller, because its central action is structured around public

accusation, media culture, online spectatorship, and the disruption of intimate life under networked scrutiny. Yomi Adegoke embeds the conventional features of trauma fiction directly into its narrative architecture. The novel's entire plot is anchored in the relationship between Ola and Michael, and the structure of the narrative's plot is organized in a rigid, countdown-style structure where each chapter is prefaced with a temporal marker: "27 days to the wedding," "26 days to the wedding," "25 days to the wedding", till to the wedding day. This countdown persists throughout the narrative; it serves as a narrative mechanism that turns the traditional anticipation of a marriage into an impending deadline, a looming threat of social and personal collapse.

Adegoke predominantly deploys a third-person limited point of view, with a dual focalization that alternates between the two primary protagonists, Ola and Michael, using this distance to represent the "interpersonal ethical crisis". In addition to that, Adegoke deploys free indirect discourse technique as a fusion of third-person narration with the characters' subjective experiences and speech, as a way of letting the narration slide into a character's inner idiom without fully switching into first-person narration to plunge the reader into the characters' fractured internal states. Michael's situation exemplifies this state more sharply. When *The List* appears, the narration moves through his panic in sentences such as "21 missed calls. 59 WhatsApp's. His stomach churned. Who had died?" "Was what 'shit' true?" "What did this have to do with him?" and later, "How on earth was he going to face his new colleagues?" and "Men like this. What did 'men like this' mean now his name was involved?" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, paras. 5, 8,14).

Adegoke consistently employs ellipses, em-dashes, interrupted and fragmented speech, and incomplete statements to render the psychic condition of traumatized characters through syntactic fracture and the disruption of language itself, particularly in the depiction of the digital medium and during intense emotional moments. When Ola confronts the reality of the eponymous *list*, her speech becomes fragmented, marked by ellipses and incomplete thoughts that signal a breakdown in her ability to process what is happening around her. she tells Michael, "I'm going to ... we're going to need some time" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 5, para.38). Adegoke's persistent use of "repeated words and phrases", function as linguistic markers of psychological obsession, and the breakdown of narrative coherence. This repetition is initially established in the novel's structural design through the chapter headings that act as a temporal refrain. Chapters 2 and 3 both carry the title (26 days to the wedding), this structural repetition mirrors the traumatic experience of time slowing down or becoming circular. For instance, when Ola first encounters the viral allegations, her

internal monologue is reduced to the "repeated and stuttered" exclamation: "Shit. Shit." This "repeated word" conveys a state of "muted shock". The same pattern persists when Ruth's text messages to Ola use repeated urgent phrasing, the same frantic question to transmit panic before Ola even knows what has happened: "EMERGENCY. PICK UP YOUR FUCKING PHONE! ... HAVE U SEEN IT??? HAVE U SEEN THE LIST?" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 2, paras. 25-27). The repetition represents the "atmospheric force" of social media as it invades the private sphere, forcing the protagonist into a state of "social exposure".

Adegoke consistently uses setting not as a backdrop but as an active participant in the intensification of traumatic experience. The bridal boutique, the Pret a Manger, the glass-walled office of Womxxxn, and "The CuRated office space was like the platform's online presence come to life. Sleek, near algorithmic Instagram-chic" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, paras. 22). Each environment is chosen and described in a way that amplifies the psychological states of the characters who move through it. Even Michael's living room is "shrouded in darkness", and the "lack of moonlight" makes his surroundings "all the more ominous". The novel thus collapses the distinction between digital and embodied experience.

The interior monologue is strategically deployed to represent the internal fragmentation, psychological shock, and instability that are characteristic of trauma fiction, caused by acute digital trauma. The clearest illustration of interior monologue in Michael's characterization is when he first sees his name on *the list*; the narration records his interior panic in formulations: "I'm going to lose my job, was his first thought," and later, "I can't believe this is happening to me, Michael thought" (Adegoke, 2023, chap. 3, paras.12-19). Yomi Adegoke also represents trauma through five interconnected themes, which are Digital public exposure and consuming spectacle, Shame and humiliation, the disintegration of trust and certainty, the disruption of the boundary between virtual and self-identities, and finally the psychological aftermath of trauma to reveal its social, emotional, and psychological consequences in the digital world.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Yomi Adegoke's *The List* as a contemporary fictional exploration of digital trauma mediated by the cancel culture phenomenon. This work draws on contemporary English literary studies, trauma studies, digital culture, media studies, and cancel-culture criticism to show how contemporary fiction presents trauma in digital networked environments. At its core, the paper examined how digitally mediated accusation, public shaming, online spectatorship, and

social withdrawal produce psychological and relational trauma in contemporary fiction. It has shown that Adegoke's narrative transforms online exposure into a sustained structure of trauma through platform metrics, screenshots, blocking, social withdrawal, and the persistence of accusation even after digital deletion.

It has shown that *The List* stages cancellation in five interrelated stages: digital exposure, social escalation, interpersonal rupture, Psychological Trauma, and Social Withdrawal that parallel the features of digital trauma theorized by Menyhért and Makhortykh. In Adegoke's use of narrative techniques that evoke trauma to intensify the trauma of characters, the novel dramatizes the ethical dilemmas inherent to cancel culture by retaining the political legitimacy of accountability practices while revealing the inequitable and uncontrollable effects of digital amplification on individuals. In this regard, the novel adds to contemporary studies of the English novel by charting the impact of digital culture on the tropes of trauma, intimacy, identity, and judgment in twenty-first-century fiction. Thus, Adegoke's novel is a major contribution to contemporary British social fiction by demonstrating how twenty-first-century fiction can critically represent the psychological and moral conditions of life in a digitally mediated environment.

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