

Character Assassination: The Sociocultural Perspective

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This article offers a fresh view on character assassination as a strategic effort embedded in power and ideological struggles in society. The author uses structuration theory to explain character assassination as a means of both domination and subversion. In the latter, character assassination practices are integrated into modes of signification and legitimation and executed via subversion campaigns. Knowledgeable subversive actors consider character assassination a power resource to challenge cultural hegemony and traditional moral order via strategic and audience-centered protest campaigns. Social networking sites provide strategic actors with resources to realize subversive campaigns in both liberal democracies and authoritarian societies. Although social media allow more active audiences to challenge dominant conventions, the modes and aesthetics of social protest can be easily harnessed and appropriated by power structures for spin and information control. The author calls for more research inspired by the sociocultural view of character assassination to make sense of new social phenomena such as “cancel culture.”

Keywords

character assassination, domination, Giddens, legitimation, signification, sociocultural perspective, structuration, structuration theory, social change, subversion

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Character assassination (CA) is as a strategic effort to discredit an individual or group target via subversive communication (Samoilenko, 2021; Samoilenko et al., 2020; Shiraev et al., 2021). Subversive rhetoric is considered to be among the fundamental motivations for human interaction (Fisher, 1970), inherent in the way polemics are made in liberal democracies (Walton, 1999), and instrumental to achieving goals and winning contests in politicized and competitive contexts (Shiraev, 2014).

In the areas of strategic and political communication, there are three main perspectives on character assassination. These are embodied in the rhetorical (Benoit, 2020; Keohane, 2020), sociopsychological (Shiraev, 2014), and sociocultural traditions (Samoilenko, 2020; 2021), respectively.

Rhetoricians and argumentation scholars classify character attacks as a form of *ad hominem* argument that is perceived either as a logical fallacy (Copi, 1961) or a rhetorical strategy (van Eemeren, 2010). The distinction is that the latter perspective considers that there are certain contexts where it is both effective and appropriate to deploy such attacks. For example, Benoit (2017) considers a persuasive attack on character useful when it exposes wrongdoing, informs voters, or influences consumer decisions.

Political psychologists, meanwhile, generally assume that an attacker's actions are rational and goal-driven. Accordingly, their research studies the motivations of the so-called "pragmatic attacker" and the reasons why an attacker chooses certain strategies. They have found that character assassination can be an effective means of creating uncertainty among voters (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995) or swaying undecided voters during an election cycle (Sigelman & Shiraev, 2002). Psychological research also studies the ways in which audiences process information about targets and react to character attacks and scandals (Shiraev, 2014).

The above schools of thought see character assassination mainly as a means to an end—a hitjob performed by a powerful attacker. This functional view often disregards scenarios of mutual influence, where multiple actors engage simultaneously in attack and defense. Hence, it is not always able to capture the transactional complexity of character attacks and responses. In the same vein, Tajfel (1981) argues that people's capacity to be effective in their strategies according to the game theory matrix of gains and losses may be limited by the fact that other people also engage in strategies to obtain gains and prevent losses. In addition, the functional view tells us little about the history of relationships between attackers, targets, and their multiple audiences. Finally, it frequently fails to address issues and events in the context of intergroup or institutional logic.

The purpose of this paper is exploratory. It intends to generate new theory and conceptualize character assassination as a sociocultural communication phenomenon. In particular, it aims to encourage future research beyond the psychological and rhetorical frameworks, paving the way for a broader reconceptualization and applied research over time. The sociocultural approach has high heuristic value, allowing it to potentially spark interest across several disciplines and to stimulate new ways of thinking about theory and applications.

In this paper, I discuss character assassination through the prism of structuration theory (Lizardo, 2010; Giddens, 1984). I argue that character assassination plays a dual role in society: it serves as a means of structuration, helping to create social structures; and it plays a protective role, sustaining ideological, normative, and power relations. New cycles of structuration reappropriate character assassination as a power resource to subvert old structures and replace them with new meanings and interpretations. However, the forms and tools of resistance, protest, and social change are easily manipulated and reappropriated by another generation of knowledgeable actors, leading to the formation of new restrictive and potentially oppressive structures.

The Sociocultural Perspective

The sociocultural perspective is premised on several conceptual frameworks, including symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1967), and the theories of social structure (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). There are several building blocks that guide the sociocultural approach to character assassination.

First, the sociocultural perspective views character assassination as *a process of interaction* among various agents, including the attacker, the target, the media, and various active audiences. Any character attack has the potential to produce a public event (boycott, flash mob, scandal, etc.) that brings together motivated social actors and creates opportunities for new attacks. Hence, the process of character assassination is a complex transaction among interconnected individuals and groups.

Second, the sociocultural perspective studies the *relational nature* of interaction between various social actors. It seeks to understand how interdependent actors cocreate character assassination outcomes such as public outrage, reputational crises, political resignations, and so on.

Social interaction is possible when two basic requirements are met, namely the *interdependence* and *intersubjectivity* of social actors. Two or more people are interdependent when they share a mutual concern or compete for a goal or some sort

of reward. Personal and contextual factors determine whether relations between key actors will be based on cooperation or competition. People become *interdependent* when the actions of one person affect the actions of others. Many social interactions become conflict-driven when interdependent actors find that they have conflicting goals, aims, and/or values, and then come to perceive the other party as interfering with their own realization of these goals, aims, and/or values (Putnam & Poole, 1987, p. 552). This is especially true for social conflicts arising from moral or ideological differences based on incommensurate worldviews and opposing values (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

Intersubjectivity refers to the ability of social actors to develop understanding and communicate shared meaning with other members of society. Thus, an attack effort is more successful when it is jointly produced and supported by members of the same social group, who share similar beliefs, attitudes, or moral expectations. Hence, according to this perspective, character assassination is *cocreational*, or co-produced by various agents. This notion will be elaborated upon in another section of this paper.

Third, the sociocultural perspective views communication as *constitutive*. In other words, the symbolic means of language do not simply reflect, but also construct and shape, social reality (Craig, 1999). Moreover, our identities are also socially constructed. They are ascribed to us by the way others talk about us and are then legitimized via public opinion (Hecht, 1993). A character attack is communicative and persuasive to various audiences. We characterize others in a negative way by linking them to a demonized group or associating them with an evil cause. These characterizations may form further negative bias and stereotypes in the public mind, leading to additional stigmatization. Stigma can constitute one's social identity, declassify that identity's hierarchical position in society, and impose on it strict institutional boundaries (Neuberg et al., 1994; also see Smith and Eberly in this volume). This corresponds with Goffman's idea that a discredited attribute is not a thing in itself; it is constituted by a language of relationships (Goffman, 1963). Hence, character assassination is best conceived as the process of persuasion and social influence and the outcome of this communicative process.

Fourth, the sociocultural perspective studies the individual's *social identity*—or who we are as members of social communities—in the context of the groups, institutions, and networks that make up society. Many social groups are held together through common ethnic and ideological linkages (Commins & Lockwood, 1979). This means that individuals who do not share or support the same distinct values are perceived by ingroup members as radically different and less moral. *Intergroup favoritism*, or favoring ingroup members over outgroup members, often results in the

latter becoming the scapegoat for all sorts of misfortunes (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Taylor & Doria, 1981).

Group members act according to social rules. Social identity prescribes certain moral orders attached to group norms and group logic (Nisbett, 1966). In essence, character is a moral profile that the environment demands at present (Bruner, 1990). Reputation management is a critical element of *habitus*, a structuring mechanism that generates learned dispositions, stratagems and skills for survival, and struggles for social power (Bourdieu, 1984). The mechanism assures the collective belief in the rules of the social game (*illusio*), and prescribes that actors adhere to self-evident relations of order according to their place in a social hierarchy (*doxa*). To act according to one's social status, legitimate group members need to project the impression of high moral standing and maintain a positive public image (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1959). The habitus also allows social actors to generate strategies for social interactions and improve their power relations in interactions with others. Mastering life-saving stratagems also involves managing criticism, accusations, and *ad hominem* attacks.

Finally, the sociocultural perspective places a strong emphasis on *context* and *culture*. *Context* is the sum of all knowledge that provides people with guidelines for action in new situations (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). As mentioned above, interaction with other group members depends on practical knowledge of norms and contextual rules within a social environment. Character attacks thrive in adversarial and competitive contexts (Sande et al., 1989; Sherif et al., 1961). For example, negative campaigns and attack ads are common during election cycles, when they reinforce partisan attachments by strengthening attitudes and motivating the base in close elections (Matthes & Marquart, 2015; Perloff, 2018). Benoit, Brazeal, and Airne (2007) argue that “political campaign messages have three functions: acclaims, which praise the candidate; attacks, which attack the opponent; and defenses, which refute attacks” (p. 77). These strategies and tactics are in constant flux due to the fluid and dynamic contextual logic of the political field.

In turn, *culture* is a foundation for new contexts and further interaction. Patterns of social interaction can be explained by cultural traditions and conventions. Society is a comprehensive system that is produced and sustained through the repetition of social and cultural practices (Giddens, 1979). Liberal democracies involve a competitive party system that requires political candidates to persuade the public of their legitimacy while calling into question the reputation and good name of their rivals, thereby undermining their power to some degree (Thompson, 2000). In this political culture, the public display and defense of character are critical to electoral success.

In sum, the sociocultural perspective views character assassination as a process of social interaction and examines the interdependence of key actors and their ability to produce meanings across small social groups and large networks. The sociocultural analysis examines actors and their actions through the prism of interconnected social and cultural contexts. For example, an analysis of character attacks resulting from conspiracy theories reveals that alternative narratives proliferate and are weaponized during times of turmoil or uncertainty (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Scholars connect the strength of people's belief in conspiracy to threatening social conditions, including economic stress, social change, and deep partisan polarization (DiGrazia, 2017). For example, the notorious "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory that went viral during the 2016 United States presidential election cycle evolved in the context of an ideological confrontation between the supporters of two competing political parties within a deeply polarized society (Robb, 2017). The political climate was characterized by low trust in many traditional authorities, including political institutions. The conspiracy theory gained strength within an online networked community, motivated Clinton's adversaries, and resulted in a violent action in a public place in Washington, DC.

The sociocultural perspective offers the depth and heuristic potential required to understand character assassination as part of the micro-level social relations and processes taking place within larger social structures. Next, I will discuss the ways in which character assassination facilitates the modes of structuration to produce, reproduce, or transform social structures.

Structuration Theory

The construction and reconstruction of structural properties of social systems is called *structuration*. Giddens (1984) views structure as *rules and resources*. The rules and resources established by structures facilitate and reproduce social interaction. For example, the system of interaction is based on the structure of the language spoken.

The notion of *duality of structure* suggests that structures guide our actions by laying down rules that provide access to resources while simultaneously constraining our agency. The reproduction of rules and resources protects the status quo of an established social order in a given society. For example, political systems are produced and reproduced by constantly interacting political groups, parties, activists, etc., that create new power structures (decisions, laws, rules, political institutions). The relationships between active agents determine how power is distributed, allocated, and sustained in the political field.

The process of structuration involves three main modes: *signification*, *legitimation*, and *domination*. These are the building blocks that become routinized

and sustained as the main properties of a social system. According to Giddens (1979), the modes of structuration are not causally connected but merely interdependent (p. 107).

Signification provides every society with the necessary meanings and interpretative schemes for social interaction. The systems of signification constitute and reproduce symbolic orders and modes of public discourses. Through the process of structuration, some discourses become more prevalent, while others are neutralized by more dominant voices. Those interpretations that are promoted become reproduced in everyday discursive practices.

Legitimation produces a moral order by cultivating a sense of proper conduct in society. Norms, values, and moral standards are enacted through directions to follow, informal means, and sanctions for noncompliance. Morality regulates individual behavior, with the result that individuals act in line with community interests and sustain social norms (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014).

Domination assures *power* distribution and command over resources. All dominant social structures (states, institutions, corporations, etc.) are systems of authority that use rules and resources to exercise power over society and force others to comply. In state structures, the rules typically grant some members and groups more authority than others and give them access to a wider range of resources. If a group pursues a democratic style of decision-making, it utilizes the knowledge and expertise of all group members via open debate and makes rules by majority vote. Conversely, a group where decisions are made autocratically allows a handful of powerful voices to determine the rules of social order. The modes of structuration involve character assassination as an auxiliary mechanism of continuity and change. I will elaborate on this idea next.

Character Assassination as a Means of Continuity

Every state is a coercive institution based on a monopoly over the means of legitimate violence and the application of sanctions or inducements (Dahl, 1957; Weber, 1965). Power may be exerted through totalitarian control, force, or *hegemony*. The latter refers to the ability of the dominant group to exercise social and cultural leadership (Gramsci, 1971). Cultural hegemony allows dominant groups to exercise control over *ideology*: ideas, normative beliefs, and ethical ideals about reality.

Hegemony operates in a subtle way by integrating subordinate groups into the dominant culture. Importantly, the higher the signification and legitimation aspects in society, the lower the need for domination through coercion (Hussain & Cornelius, 2009). The frequent use of coercive measures often indicates a crisis of authority. It

may lead to alienation from mainstream ideologies and resistance to normative patterns (Deutsch, 1973; Canary & Lakey, 2013). Thus, systems of domination need to constantly produce new forms of knowledge to avoid resorting to force, coercion, and violence.

Elite groups achieve hegemonic status by legitimizing their discourse to the point that it comes to be perceived as everyday common sense (Gramsci, 1971). The power institutions create their structures of discourse via dominant/preferred meanings and promote these meanings as reference points in society (Hall et al., 1980). The official ideology is disseminated via propaganda. As interpellated subjects, individuals are trapped in narratives of the state (Althusser, 1971). This is especially true in authoritarian regimes, where state propaganda is often omnipotent. In democratic societies, some scholars consider the news to be part of an interdependent ideological apparatus that reproduces hegemonic structures and supports state-approved policies (Rachlin, 1988).

As part of *informal governance* (Ledeneva, 2018), character assassination enables political and corporate elites to preserve the status quo of power relations in society. Character attacks and other practices of social pressure can be used to delegitimize critics and exclude dissenting voices from the discussion of essential topics. Instruments of informal governance are used to avoid uncomfortable topics and treat alternative views as biased or marginal, making it possible to position the dominant interpretations as common sense.

An important role of propaganda is to cultivate reflexive hostile attitudes toward ideological opponents. Essentially, names and labels used in ideological campaigns are incorporated into public discourses as new means of signification. Gradually, they become ossified in language and culture as accepted symbolic means of social interaction. For example, in the Soviet Union, the terms “class enemy” and “mercenary of foreign imperialism” were integrated into everyday language along with other popular metaphors and propaganda clichés (Samoilenko & Karnysheva, 2020). Finally, these labels become embedded in cultural discourses and weaponized in various forms of symbolic and cultural violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Galtung, 1990; also see Rothbart in this special issue).

Moreover, character assassination can be used as a demonstrative means of domination and legitimation to enforce compliance and commitment to norms. Blaming and praising people for their conduct are key mechanisms for regulating sociocultural patterns (Cushman, 2013).

In many communist regimes, smear campaigns in the press often preceded public show trials during which the accused was publicly shamed and prosecuted. The

show trials were staged spectacles that often led to the physical annihilation of the victim (Klicperová-Baker, 2020; Samoilenko & Karnysheva, 2020). Character assassination practices abound in authoritative democracies, in which institutions of power openly rely on informal means of governance such as blackmailing political and business opponents with compromising materials (Ledeneva, 2018; Samoilenko, 2021).

In democratic societies, legitimation is achieved through more subtle instruments of concertive control in line with the modes of *governmentality* (Foucault, 1991). Among other things, *governmentality* cultivates a sense of self-governance and moral self-regulation. It is generally associated with ways in which group members learn to control their behavior through self-censorship and sanctions. Concertive control is based on normative premises where control is exercised through identification with institutional core values and is enforced by peers (Larson & Tompkins, 2005). The instruments of concertive control include peer pressure, shaming, teasing, ridicule used by group members to enforce discipline, conformity, and compliance with norms.

In liberal democracies, the imposition of moral standards can be outsourced to moral crusaders and entrepreneurs (Reeves & Ingraham, 2020; Zgoba, 2004). These agents of social control volunteer to regulate the moral order through public outcry and shaming campaigns. According to Schneider and Ingram (2005), moral entrepreneurs place the activities of a particular group on the public agenda and label certain actions as social problems through the creation of a dangerous class. They label a divergent behavior as a moral threat and subsequently shame any individual associated with this behavior. Reeves and Ingraham (2020) argue that moral policing is not itself the deployment of emotions such as shame but rather a political technology that seeks to manage others' conduct by marginalizing certain forms of behavior. They refer to the temperance movement in the 1800s as an example of moral vigilance becoming a crusade fought principally on legal and scientific grounds.

Character Assassination as a Means of Change

Structuration theory reconciles the relationship between agency and social structure by stating that social structures constitute the rules of the game, which preclude certain action, but also create conditions of possibility and facilitate other forms of interaction. For instance, when political actors apply rules in a predetermined way to gain access to resources, this allows them to negotiate and revise the power dynamics within a specific structure. Hence, the application of rules and resources to attain goals

may eventually lead to unpredictable consequences that limit agency in some contexts but create opportunities for social transformation and change in other situations.

Giddens (1979; 1984) argues that *knowledgeable actors* see power as *transformative capacity*. In other words, they have the knowledge and skills to reflect on the current state of affairs and apply authoritative resources (e.g., social position, expertise, reputation, etc.) to renegotiate the rules of the structure or transform it. Hence, structures are maintained, adapted, and transformed through the exercise of agency. Importantly, knowledgeable actors, who are perceived as legitimate within a certain moral framework, have flexibility in realizing their plans despite multiple structural limitations.

Social resistance and protest may emerge in response to inequalities, injustice, or any perceived moral illegitimacy of the authorities, which is typically associated with a search for alternatives to mainstream values (Willis, 1977). Even under-resourced and marginalized members of society can intervene in ongoing events and produce new social arrangements. Media and technological developments allow activists, competing ideological groups, or other motivated agents to adopt resources created by dominant structures—including character assassination strategies and tactics—and use them in subversive campaigns that seek to weaken or destroy an ideological order (Samoilenko, 2018; 2021). Importantly, these knowledgeable actors have enjoyed great capacity to realize subversive operations in both liberal democracies and authoritarian societies.

Despite improved technological capacities, subversive campaigns cannot initially exert domination to the extent that governments and corporations can. Hence, they rely primarily on the mechanisms of signification and legitimation. They may focus strategies and tactics to resist hegemony by appropriating mainstream materials and symbols and reorganizing their meaning to imbue them with a new social and cultural significance. For example, in the U.S. military, the symbol of the yellow ribbon is used in a popular marching song as a symbol of hope that loved ones will return home safely. During the first Gulf War, the meaning of the yellow ribbon began to shift to an association with the phrase “support our troops.” This control frame subtly implied that opponents of the invasion were unpatriotic because supporting the troops precluded criticizing the war. In response, creative activists attempted to reframe the original narrative by merging the yellow ribbon with the peace symbol to show that being anti-war is also pro-troops (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010).

Today’s various forms of remediation support the McLuhan’s notion of old media becoming the content of new media (1964/2015). Different techniques of social hacking—*subvertising*, *culture jamming*, etc.—allow subversive actors to break down

popular culture by rearranging and repackaging traditional meanings (Lievrouw, 2011; Samoilenko, 2018). Memes, which have become popular in internet culture, are another potent instrument of participative discourse (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, & Dobusch, 2018). Memes challenge and deconstruct dominant symbols by trivializing and adding alternative hues of meaning to them.

Moral protest is the key element of subversion campaigns based on legitimation strategies that aim to restructure the established moral order and replace the former moral consciousness with moral indignation and new moralism. According to Eder (1985), collective moral protest follows the logic of reversal of institutional action: “not to be centralized, but decentralized; not to be legal, but legitimate; not formal, but informal; not to act strategically, but expressively” (p. 879). In modern societies, moral protest is secularized and institutionalized in the form of various countercultures.

Moral crusade is the driving force of collective protest, which is mobilized to battle for a different and presumably better morality (Eder, 1985). Social media now mobilize larger vigilance campaigns that often invoke a tacit moral imperative (Reeves & Ingraham, 2020). Social media campaigns are often driven by the collective rage or anger released as the masses vent their emotions or seek revenge. In a study exploring online character attacks on the Minnesota dentist who shot a lion while on safari in Zimbabwe, Schmitt (2020) argues that collective character assassination deflects the attention of accuser and audience alike from their own potential faults while allowing them to demonstrate their purported morality and/or strength.

Today’s subversive campaigns are strategic and cocreational in the way they implement character assassination strategies and tactics. They are strategic because they strive for the common orientation of various publics toward mutual interest and understanding (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973; Newcomb, 1953). An effective attack message is intended to match the audience’s frame of reference and to create public events that resonate within various communities, resulting in a crisis of legitimacy for the target. Specifically, they seek to build relations with the members of different interpretive communities by emphasizing ingroupness, common beliefs, and similar moral values.

Special interest groups and activists conceive their outreach efforts within online communities of concern that emerge as bottom-up grassroots initiatives. This supports Botan’s (2018) co-creational view of strategic communication, which considers that public events are shaped by active audiences who voluntarily choose to witness or shape their course. Social media are responsible for the “symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical assembling of a highly dispersed and individualized constituency” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 5).

Importantly, the habitus of political attitudes and skills learned online may later translate into real-life street protests and social movements.

Many activist and protest campaigns attacking power elites follow similar patterns in both corporate and political contexts (Samoilenko, 2021). Campaigns targeting corporations either purposely attempt to damage an organization's reputation or seek to change organizational practices (Coombs & Holladay, 2020). For example, some special interest groups, known as "shouters," have a strong anti-corporate agenda devoted to agitating and exposing corporate wrongdoing (Griffin, 2014). The power of these groups and nonprofit organizations stems from their perceived status as "independent," which leads them to be considered more trustworthy than for-profit or government actors.

In line with the axioms of structuration theory, resistance and protest may not necessarily lead to social transformation and change. Instead, these actions may have the unintended consequence of establishing new conditions and limitations for all community members. Among other things, subversive efforts may result in the new modes of structuration reinforcing the properties of the social system and restricting an individual's capacity to challenge power relations. For example, the failure of 2019–20 Hong Kong protests stalled democratic developments, increasing the risk of civil liberties being infringed in the country.

In other scenarios, attempts to subvert the social order may lead to "hamster wheel" situations of unresolved social conflict and recurrent cycles of structural divergence in society (Nicotera & Mahon, 2013). Social conflicts are aggravated when moral issues become perplexed with political and economic factors (McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Most ideological conflicts based on contradictory premises are confrontational and result in a repetitive and escalating cycle of "reciprocated diatribe" (Cathcart, 1978; Pearce, Littlejohn, & Alexander, 1987). Groups with radically different conceptions of morality denounce individual group members and attribute their actions to the vices of the group as a whole. Because these groups argue from incompatible premises, they are unable to understand one another's positions within a common moral framework. Such situations often result in a search for scapegoats, deep polarization, and the exclusion of dissenting members. The frustration arising from this inability to address the pattern of moral conflicts often leads to character assassination and eventually the use of violence.

Implications and Future Research

This article argues for a paradigmatic shift toward the sociocultural view of character assassination. The sociocultural perspective offers a heuristic framework for

investigating character assassination according to group or institutional logic. That is a strategic effort that is socially constructed in interactions between interdependent actors and their audiences in various contexts. Public opinion plays the key role in reinterpreting the social value of one's moral character after the attack and deciding its new social standing.

On this view, character assassination is an essential process of communication and persuasion, as well as a force of major social processes. At a micro level, it often serves as a rhetorical device in competition- and conflict-driven situations. At a macro level, issues and crises created by attacks on public image and reputation trigger major changes affecting power relations, symbolic interpretations, and normative standards in society.

Structuration theory makes it possible to examine the role of character assassination as a means of structuration and structural properties of social systems defined by three major dimensions. Character assassination practices help reproduce and maintain narrative, ideological, and normative structures and preserve the status quo of power relations in society. At the same time, knowledgeable subversive actors consider character assassination a power resource to challenge cultural hegemony and traditional moral order via strategic and audience-centered protest campaigns.

Although social media allow more active audiences to challenge dominant conventions, governments and corporations continue to play a pivotal role as gatekeepers by legitimizing some narratives over others. That being said, the modes and aesthetics of social protest can be easily harnessed and appropriated by power structures for spin and information control. Scholars note the current trends of social networking sites becoming highly vulnerable to ideological and corporate propaganda and manipulations (Keller et al., 2020; Simons & Samoilenko, 2020).

Future research should specifically address the use of character attacks against political and ideological opponents in public campaigns disguised as grassroots initiatives in support of popular social causes. These astroturfing campaigns often mask the sponsors of a message and pretend to originate from the general public in the form of trolls, social bots, and paid pollsters.

Another important issue is the discussion of attacks on individuals who have been ostracized for articulating an unpopular opinion in the context of "cancel culture" debates. Many social movements are propelled to the top by high-profile bloggers and online communities that build a support base and awareness of the cause. Naturally, every successful campaign is a honeypot for camp followers and hashtag activists, including the #BringBackOurGirls and #CancelColbert online campaigns. Feel-good clicktivists eagerly sign petitions and offer opinions on controversial matters with the

main purpose of boosting their egos or unleashing jingoistic emotions. In addition, a successful campaign with massive online traction—such as #MeToo—is susceptible to hijacking attempts by parasites who see it as a free platform for advancing their personal agenda or attacking adversaries on the pretense of serving the cause.

“Cancel culture” is often manifested in the context of social conflict when it aims to replace traditional conventions and norms with new interpretations. For decades, “cancel culture” tactics, including public shaming and stigmatization, have been used by activists in boycotts and campaigns to eradicate traditional and patriarchic practices (Boyd, 2012). However, the role of character assassination within the modes of structuration caused by “cancel culture” has yet to be discussed. Future research should examine if character assassination accelerates adaptation to the new norms of morality promoted by “cancel culture,” which risk transforming into a restrictive legitimation system.

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