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“CANCEL CULTURE” IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC SPACE: MEDIA SCANDALS AND SOCIETAL REACTIONS

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Abstract

In the present research, we will analyze the details surrounding two recent media scandals that resulted in a various array of unpleasant outcomes for the main protagonists, outcomes ranging from financial loss to loss of face and significant damage to their reputation. We will look at the background and context of each scandal, at the consequences of the statements made by the two public figures, and we will attempt to draw a parallel between the two situations, shedding light on the existing similarities. The first situation revolves around Viorica Vodă's allegations made at the Gopo Awards Gala (May 3, 2022), and the second, around the controversial statements regarding women made by George Buhnici (July 16, 2022), a famous Romanian influencer. We will look into these cases that both caused a stir in the media and we will aim to prove that, while they appear to be opposite in nature, they resulted in general societal reactions that can be deemed similar and hugely detrimental to the initiators.

Keywords: cancel culture; media scandal; emotional impact; societal reactions; #MeToo.

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1. Introductory remarks

The syntagm "cancel culture" was first heard in 2016⁴ and has been defined as the mass withdrawal of support from public figures or celebrities who have done things that aren't socially accepted today"⁵; it is a practice that has become increasingly more frequent and it occurs mostly on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.

"Cancelling" someone translates into that person either losing their career, or their reputation, or both; this is the reason standing behind the idea of "cancelling" someone because they have said or done something considered offensive to certain social categories; the societal reaction is generally fueled by journalists and other popular public figures in response.

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⁴ Although its origins can be traced back to 1991 (Aja Romano, 2020, *Why we can't stop fighting about cancel culture*, retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>, accessed on July 22, 2022).

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cancel%20culture>, accessed on July 22, 2022

Cancel culture is seen by many as a form of social justice, “a way of combatting, through collective action, some of the huge power imbalances that often exist between public figures with far-reaching platforms and audiences, and the people and communities their words and actions may harm”⁶. Virtual communities rise to defend the vulnerable, and when the culprit is held accountable and suffers real-life consequences such as loss of contracts, disciplinary action by an employer or a significant decrease in the number of followers, some people feel that they have got what they deserved and justice has been restored.

Cancelling someone usually involves boycotting them professionally, and it is not to be confused with call-out culture⁷. While the latter merely refers to calling out a problem, drawing the public’s attention to it, the former transcends the boundaries into actually asking for the head of the initiator; therefore, it would be safe to say that, although the two terms are confused by many, they are not identical: while *call-out culture* involves raising awareness of a problem that could potentially become societally dangerous, such as a form of discrimination, thus playing a preventative role, *cancel culture* involves taking restorative action against the initiator in a very concrete way, by hurting them financially; therefore, cancel culture has been said to pertain to the sphere of revenge more than to that of prevention.

Similarly, there are people who think that cancel culture has risen to unacceptable heights and has become a form of intimidation by the social media mob, thus infringing everyone’s fundamental right to express themselves freely, to exchange thoughts and ideas without having to fear repercussions of any kind. Amongst the most frequent accusations against this method of restoring justice, we find close connections to cyberbullying and public shaming and the fact that it “picks and chooses whom it targets without even a pretense of objective standards.” (Dershowitz, A., 2020: 35). Also, the process fails to differentiate between degrees of guilt (for instance, between doing something wrong or simply saying something objectionable), it sometimes may target innocent people, and most importantly, unlike in a court of law, where your guilt has to be proven, the accusation is the trial and it is you who have to prove your innocence.

To give a concrete example, “some ammunition for cancel culture is provided by the MeToo movement, which does much good in exposing real predators, but often fails to distinguish the guilty from the innocent, or to calibrate degrees of guilt, because it provides no process for disproving false or overstated accusations.” (Dershowitz, A., 2020: 18).

Overall, it would be fair to say that “cancel culture” represents a controversial concept whose long-term impact on society has yet to be fully revealed. In the following parts of our research, we will focus on two such situations that have occurred in Romania recently, attempting to shed light on the context whereby these cases emerged, the factors at play, the repercussions for the initiators and the conclusions that can be drawn as to what we can expect from the social media environment in the years ahead.

2. The Viorica Vodă case – The Gopo Awards Gala allegations

2.1. Background

One of the most striking situations when a public figure had to suffer severe consequences due to an allegedly objectionable outburst of sincerity was Viorica Vodă’s confession at the Gopo Awards Gala

⁶ Aja Romano, 2020, *Why we can’t stop fighting about cancel culture*, retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>, accessed on July 22, 2022.

⁷ Matei, Adrienne, 2019, *Call-out culture: how to get it right (and wrong)*, retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/01/call-out-culture-obama-social-media>, accessed on September 24, 2022.

(May 3rd, 2022), whereby the actress admitted to having been a victim of sexual harassment in the system.

To begin with, we must specify that Viorica Vodă is a well-known actress born in the Republic of Moldova, who built an acting career in Romania; when she was very young, she became famous starring in *Filantropica*, a well-acclaimed movie presenting the tragicomic story of a penniless high school teacher who enters into a ploy to scam people and make illegal money in order to impress a materialistic woman he had fallen for. In 2022, the cast reunited under the aegis of the Gopo Award Gala to celebrate the movie's 20 years of existence and its success.

When she was invited to take the floor, in an outburst of sincerity, the actress contended she had been in therapy for years because of the sexual harassment existent in the movie industry, as many theatre managers and film directors mistook her for the character she was playing (the materialistic woman who uses men for their money) and hit on her, as she had been very credible when playing that character⁸.

When we analyse the moment, there are several aspects that we find striking. Firstly, we have to consider the unexpected nature of the speech. The actress was there alongside other members of the cast to celebrate 20 years since the launch of *Filantropica*, one of the most iconic movies in Romanian cinematography. For the most part, such events are highly predictable, speeches including a series of clichéd statements like acknowledgements and other standard phrases that everyone expects and is familiar with; however, against this rather mundane background of expectations, a stretch of discourse like Viorica Vodă's undoubtedly shook the audience and was bound to generate powerful responses, both positive and negative in nature.

Not only was the discourse unexpected, it was also fraught with honesty and drama; everyone was taken by storm by the actress' heart-wrenching confession, expressed in a highly emotional way, delivered in a slow pace, aiming to be heard and spawn reactions. The speech violated the acceptable norms and unwritten rules of such events, where everyone is expected to only focus on positive aspects and never as much as hint that things may be different in reality from what they seem. While the actress started speaking in a standard, formal register, in the final part of her tirade she shifted towards a less formal one and finally ended of a note that was downright slang ("even to play a whore you need talent, what the hell"). We do not know if the actress had planned her tirade in advance, she subsequently denied having prepared it, but the words did not appear to have been rehearsed at all, they seemed to have come out of the blue, on the spur of the moment, an aspect that enhanced their powerful impact.

Another striking aspect pertains to the catty remarks that Viorica Vodă and Mara Nicolescu, another well-acclaimed actress, exchanged afterwards, remarks that, while they did not belong in a formal setting, amongst speeches that normally unfold in a predictable manner, undeniably spiced up the event and provided subsequent fodder to the press and to social media influencers for months. Thus, after Viorica Vodă's heart-wrenching and unexpected confession, we can hear Mara Nicolescu in the background, saying that "they did not mistake ME for the character"⁹. Moreover, after Vodă ends her speech, Nicolescu takes the floor and implicitly minimizes her colleague's statements, both by what she says and via gestures and body language. Thus, while pointing out that her experience with *Filantropica* was marvellous, that she had always said so and that in doing so, she was always truthful (thus implying that Vodă may be either lying or simply cut off from reality), she also laughs sarcastically and makes pauses in her speech, waiting for encouragement from the public. Also, she explicitly says, yet again and out loud, that SHE was not mistaken for the character she played. At this point, Viorica Vodă unexpectedly rushes to the microphone, grabs it and makes the following

⁸ The moment can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJciU5GZD28>, accessed on July 22, 2022.

⁹ In *Filantropica*, Viorica Vodă played an attractive, easy woman who the main character (Mircea Diaconu) falls in love with, while Mara Nicolescu played the less attractive woman he has to settle for.

controversial statement: "Yes, but you were Nae¹⁰'s girlfriend, and people thought I was you, which is why they approached me".

It is clear for everyone that Mara Nicolescu's purpose was to not support her colleague, if not to openly sabotage her. She attempted to shatter her colleague's credibility before the audience and to cast doubt on her words by providing a contradictory view of her experience with the same motion picture. However, what Viorica Vodă means by her retaliatory retort is not as clear. What exactly does she mean? Does she mean that Mara Nicolescu had been protected from sexual harassment BECAUSE she was the director's girlfriend, unlike herself, who was unattached and therefore, an easy target for predators? Does she mean that people (more specifically, men) mistook her for Mara Nicolescu and approached her because they were under the impression that the latter would accept their advances, thus implying that her coworker's morality was doubtful? Does she mean that people approached her in order to be on the director's good side? We do not know exactly, nor was this cleared in Viorica Voda's subsequent interviews. We can, however, grasp the latent conflict between the two women, as well as the implicit ways in which they attack each other, trying to undermine each other's credibility.

Perhaps most importantly, despite her claims to the contrary, Viorica Vodă's speech does capitalize on the implications of the MeToo worldwide movement. As is commonly known, the #MeToo movement is a powerful and impactful social trend aiming to raise awareness of and take action against all forms of sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape culture, and it originates in the work and battles carried out by activist Tarana Burke, herself a survivor of sexual assault. The trend first appeared in 2006, but it gained unprecedented momentum as of 2017, when a number of celebrities, starting with Alyssa Milano, popularised the #MeToo hashtag on social networks. Its powerful emotional impact has acquired more and more strength over the years, spawning an increasing number of confessions and empowering women to speak up in a previously male-dominated world.

The movement has as its main purpose the protection of the vulnerable (women, especially black women but not only them, children and people with low bargaining power in society and in the workplace). Well-respected celebrities, such as Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey, have suffered social and economic repercussions when allegations of their wrongdoing came to light.

The main emotional force behind the #MeToo hashtag has been described by its author as "empowerment through empathy", namely, "to not only show the world how widespread and pervasive sexual violence is, but also to let other survivors know they are not alone" (Burke, T, 2021: 8). The huge number of women who had been subjected to abuse or even rape have gradually come to see themselves as members of a worldwide community. Thus, the trend has both a *target* (abused women) and a *purpose* (radical community healing), the latter going hand in hand with widespread attempts to raise awareness of the phenomenon and to prevent such abuse from happening again, or at least from being accepted as a norm.

Hence, the inspirational value of the movement cannot be ignored, as more and more women have gained the courage to speak publicly about experiences that, up until that point, had made them feel stuck, ashamed, scared, isolated, ostracized, valueless and distraught. According to the initiator, the values needed to support them are vision, intention, tenacity, courage and most importantly, empathy (Burke, T, 2021: 12), as healing is obtained by spreading empathy for others.

We feel it would be safe to assume, therefore, that Viorica Vodă did not refer to the #MeToo movement by accident, nor did she really mean that her confession had nothing to do with it whatsoever. On the contrary, we tend to believe that the actress was well aware of the emotional impact of bringing it up and, since her speech was replete with emotional appeals (such as, for instance, bringing up her young and beautiful daughter, or the years she spent in therapy), alluding to

¹⁰ Nae Caranfil is a famous Romanian director and was also the director of *Filantropica*. At the time the movie was made, he had just married Mara Nicolescu, whom he divorced seven years later, in 2008.

the implications of #MeToo and putting forward a heartbreaking confession, she intended to enhance the power of her speech and generate a response, which she most certainly did. Both what happened at the Gala (with Mara Nicolescu implicitly attacking her right away and acclaimed actress Katia Pascariu, the evening's winner, defending her just minutes later in her speech), and the subsequent reactions that became visible in the media in the wake of the Gala, stand proof of the same outcome: that Viorica Voda's testimony did not go by unnoticed. One thing is certain: either good or bad, favourable or unfavourable, there was a reaction to her speech, a reaction that very few people connected to social media could have missed.

2.2. Consequences

Out of the reactions that followed Viorica Vodă's harangue at the Gopo Gala, in the present section of our research, we will look at three, that we find the most important and the most relevant for the way in which such deviations from accepted norms are received and responded to in the media. We find these three follow-ups that ensued to be particularly relevant and impactful, as they all come from people in the same line of work (actors), all well-respected, acclaimed, and generally considered beyond reproach, professionally speaking; moreover, two of these reactions come from women, and one comes from a man – we also feel that it is important to consider both genders' perspective on a speech about sexual harassment that will likely be remembered many years from now.

2.2.1. Female reactions

Firstly, we will analyse the reaction of Mara Nicolescu, who has been one of the most ardent opponents of her former co-star – not only did she take the floor immediately afterwards, minimizing and even ironizing her confession (a retort for which many criticized her, accusing her of lack of empathy¹¹), but she also wrote an article on her own blog, one month later, where she explicitly accused Viorica Vodă of lying¹². To mockingly and patronizingly mirror her former colleague's words, she dedicated the article to her own children. In the following, we will briefly highlight some ideas springing from this blog article, ideas whereby Mara Nicolescu both implicitly and explicitly accuses her former peer of lying and backs her claims by referring to interview extracts, some of which could be dubbed as somewhat controversial, to say the least.

For example, to prove that Viorica Vodă lied about the years she had spent in therapy to overcome the traumas produced by sexual harassment, she produces an extract from a TV show where the latter had been invited (footnote 1) and stated that she did as much therapy as she could afford. She does not, however, state that she was only in therapy for one day, as Mara Nicolescu claims – therefore, it would be safe to assume that the blog writer hoped her readers would simply believe what she said, without actually checking the sources provided. Viorica Vodă's answer to the TV show host may be ambiguous, but never, at any point, did she take back her initial and crucial allegations: that she had been sexually harassed.

The blog article is replete with allegations against Viorica Vodă, allegations presented in an aggressive way, aiming to generate a negative emotion in her readers, namely the emotion of *anger*. For instance, Mara Nicolescu blames Viorica Vodă for lying in front of her daughter, who allegedly knew she was lying, and accuses her of exposing a very young woman to such untruthful behaviour.

Moreover, Mara Nicolescu repeatedly claims that Viorica Vodă had lied about having been sexually harassed during the making of *Filantropica* and, to back her claim, she submits another extract from a show where the latter had been invited; however, if we do not take Nicolescu at her word and we

¹¹ Adriana, Popescu, 2022, *Actrița Mara Nicolescu, dezvăluiri incredibile: a spus tot adevărul după ce Viorica Vodă a dezvăluit că a fost hărțuită*, retrieved from <https://evz.ro/actrita-mara-nicolescu-dezvaluire-incredibile-a-spus-tot-adevarul-dupa-ce-viorica-voda-a-dezvaluit-ca-a-fost-hartuita.html>, accessed on August 14, 2022.

¹² Mara Nicolescu, 2022, *Concluzii necesare după Gala Gopo*, retrieved from <https://maranicolescu.substack.com/p/concluzii-necesare-dupa-gala-gopo>, accessed on August 14, 2022.

actually view that extract, we can see yet again that Viorica Vodă never denied her initial claims; she tried to approach the subject tactfully, possibly so as not to cause another stir, but she did say that the working atmosphere on the set had been "toxic" and that she had been subjected to "intimidation, manipulation and blackmail¹³". Although the word "sexual" was not mentioned explicitly, the actress said nothing that could be thought to contradict her initial allegations; in fact, throughout subsequent interviews, she further reinforced everything she had said at the Gala.

Given the limited size and scope of our present research, we shall not go into further details regarding Mara Nicolescu's blog article; it is enough to point out that, from beginning to end, it is highly accusatory against her former peer and undoubtedly sets out to discredit her, giving the lie to her allegations and attempting to ruin her public image. Both explicitly and implicitly, Mara Nicolescu accuses Viorica Vodă of not being a "real" victim of sexual harassment, accuses her of being cowardly, since she does not give any names, a fact which she contends would dissuade real victims from speaking out and thus putting an end to the phenomenon. Similarly, the author points out that there may be a fine and unclear line between courting and harassing someone, and also that harassment is not exclusively sexual, but also psychological, especially in the workplace, a fact which has very little relevance for the issue at stake.

Mara Nicolescu attempts to come across as a victim of Viorica Vodă's controversial remark (about herself being Nae Caranfil's girlfriend and people mistaking the two of them for that reason), while deliberately overlooking the fact that she had been the one to attack her co-worker first, albeit implicitly. She, too, taps into the emotional resources that spring from reference to one's children, as she repeatedly highlights the fact that the article is dedicated to her children, in response to the fact that Viorica Vodă had attacked her in their presence. In her opinion, Viorica Vodă is the perpetrator, not the victim of abuse.

To end the present section of our paper, two more aspects are worth mentioning. Firstly, that the article mentioned above was not the only instance where Mara Nicolescu attempted to give the lie to her former peer's allegations – there were other articles on the same topic written on her blog¹⁴; thus, given the fact that she repeatedly came forth with the same stance, it would be safe to assume that Nicolescu's reaction at the Gala was not just a faux pas, it clearly represented the way the actress feels about her coworker's allegations.

Secondly, we can see that one of the main arguments Nicolescu uses to annihilate Vodă's experience, is the fact that the latter is allegedly herself an abuser of other women, especially of other actresses, whom she has attacked verbally on a number of occasions. While it is beyond the scope of our research to determine whether this is true or not, we cannot help but notice that this is a standard cliché of abusers of all times: that the victim "deserves" being abused because, for one reason or another, she is not a perfect human being. This is a classic, by-the-book strategy employed to discredit testimonies we may not like: instead of focusing on the ideas conveyed, we trash the person's reputation. It is called the *argumentum ad hominem* technique and it is widely used in political communication and more recently, on social media; moreover, it constitutes a point that brings us to the next section of our research, Lia Bugnar's reaction.

While Mara Nicolescu represented the main voice against Viorica Vodă's confession, both at the Gala and in the following weeks, another significant reaction on social media came from another well-acclaimed actress, Lia Bugnar. We have to specify, however, that at the moment when we are writing our research, the actress has deleted all her Facebook posts referring to the incident we are about to describe.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIHPcUE27KQ>, accessed on November 26, 2022.

¹⁴ Nicolescu, Mara, 2022, *De ce*, retrieved from https://maranicolescu.substack.com/p/de-ce?s=w&fbclid=IwAR3mlhBqYESpHjSEqoOt_A6qhwDxtXxEjQ-jcMQI3yxb2LjnG9c3IDXBFDc, accessed on August 19, 2022.

In a nutshell, on the 28th of June 2022, on both her Facebook pages, Lia Bugnar recounted an incident about herself walking the dog that evening and being accosted out of the blue by Viorica Vodă, who just happened to be walking by. According to Bugnar, the latter verbally assaulted her, calling her barren, talentless, accusing her of sleeping with minors and also of having had sex with influential people in order to make a name for herself in the artistic domain. Viorica Vodă also allegedly said that Bugnar had “surrounded herself by a gang of lesbians” and is a bad script writer. To back her claims, Bugnar uploaded a short extract from a video that her companion had made of Viorica Vodă being verbally abusive. Her conclusion was that Viorica Vodă’s confession at the Gopo Gala was not given adequate attention because, she implies, the latter is not in her right mind.¹⁵

Aside from the original post describing the incident, the actress subsequently uploaded two more, in which she attempted to back her viewpoint yet again and to highlight the initial idea, that Viorica Vodă is herself an abuser, albeit of women, hence her claims of sexual harassment are either false, or the well-deserved fate of people like herself.

It is important to point out that Lia Bugnar received massive support in all her posts, she had hundreds of comments, many of which came from important names in the artistic industry. The main ideas expressed in these comments were that Viorica Vodă should make public the names of her abusers, that she should be committed to a mental institution, that everyone in the arts knows that Viorica Vodă is a serial abuser of women and that is why her claims were not taken seriously, and others along the same lines. To summarize, we can say that, while a few commentators did take Viorica Vodă’s side, either by invoking some alleged mental issues she might have, or in a more honest way, by contending that what Lia Bugnar herself was doing qualifies as public shaming and that she should have gone to the police instead of trashing the other woman on social media, the vast majority of commentators supported the initiator’s viewpoint, insulting, mocking, berating and humiliating Viorica Vodă for her behaviour, a gang attack that can easily be described as cyberbullying. One of the recurring ideas that surfaced predominantly in the comments of Bugnar’s supporters is that, should Viorica Vodă’s allegations be true, she only got what she deserves, an idea that, as has been said above, represents one of the standard clichés of abusers themselves and one of the pillars of *victim-blaming*, a thinking process that relies on the “just-world hypothesis” and pays tribute to the conception that the world is, above everything else, a place of justice¹⁶, and also, possibly, a coping mechanism whereby humans tend to hope that, if bad things are confirmed to have happened to someone they think is bad, they will be protected from such evil. “At its core, victim blaming could stem from a combination of failing to empathize with the victim and a fear reaction triggered by the human drive for self-preservation.¹⁷”

To conclude this section, we feel it is important to point out that, regardless of Viorica Vodă’s behaviour towards other women, and without in any way trying to dub it as acceptable, sexual harassment claims should never be dismissed on the grounds of the victim herself having a dubious character. It is well-known that unwanted sexual advances are rarely explicit and hardly ever easy to prove; thus, giving names in the absence of solid evidence only exposes the victim to libel suits and potentially devastating financial loss. Moreover, in the time frame mentioned by Viorica Vodă, back in 2002 when *Filantropica* was made, there was no legislation regulating such misconduct in Romania, nor was there the technology we have today, technology that makes it easier to record and prove at least explicit cases of sexual harassment. Finally, the fact that beautiful actresses are almost never spared of such situations is also well-known; for all the reasons mentioned above, we believe

¹⁵ In Romanian: “fata e caz” – a slang phrase used to contend someone is crazy.

¹⁶ Kayleigh, Roberts, 2016, *The Psychology of Victim Blaming*, retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/10/the-psychology-of-victim-blaming/502661/>, accessed on August 22, 2022.

¹⁷ Kayleigh, Roberts, 2016, *The Psychology of Victim Blaming*, retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/10/the-psychology-of-victim-blaming/502661/>, accessed on August 22, 2022.

that Viorica Vodă's confession was hugely relevant and impactful and will likely remain a landmark moment in the history of Romanian cinematography.

2.2.2. *Male reactions*

If the most prominent female reactions following Viorica Vodă's confession at the Gopo Gala can be said to follow victim blaming as their main pattern, things are not very different in the only male reaction we will look into, that of the well-acclaimed actor Mircea Diaconu. Four days after the Gala, on May 7th, 2022, the actor gave an interview for the specialized online magazine www.culturaladuba.ro¹⁸, where he was specifically asked about, and provided his own insights into the controversial incident.

Not in the slightest was his approach kinder than that of his female colleagues, Mara Nicolescu and Lia Bugnar; we believe it is safe to say that his perspective was neither different, nor more empathetic; moreover, he went to even further lengths than the two actresses in order to discredit Viorica Vodă and to convey the impression that her confession is not to be taken seriously.

To begin with, we must state that the actor was initially filmed¹⁹ and photographed during Viorica Vodă's confession, and his body language and facial gestures expressed shock and an open disdain for his colleague's statement, an attitude for which there was criticism in the media even at that point, criticism that only became more serious once the actor explicitly, verbally conveyed the same disdain in the mentioned interview. Several conclusions can be drawn from the actor's statements.

Firstly, we learn that "such things happen backstage and people move on", while this is not a newsworthy subject. He also disparagingly referred to love affairs in the industry as *philandering*²⁰, thus maybe inadvertently minimizing the crucial importance of *consent*, as it is consent, after all, that makes the difference between a relationship that is desired and pursued by both parties involved and one that is only wanted by one of them, thus qualifying as harassment or even bordering on rape. The actor denied that there is either sexual harassment or abuse of power in the industry, at the same time implying that, should there be such cases, it is the fault of the person accepting the situation and thus exonerating the abuser.

The actor minimized the importance of Viorica Vodă's allegations, expressing the thought that it is wrong for people to discuss this instead of focusing on other more important moments at the Gala; perhaps most importantly, he said that the reason behind the actress' frustration springs from the fact that, despite her age, she has no steady job, has been forced to make a living off of various acting gigs, and therefore has no right to a pension, while also pointing out that there are many people in the same situation, due to the abundance of actors existing on the market. The author of the article also highlights the fact that Diaconu was laughing while rendering his own, unusual spin on things, a fact that most certainly did not help his public image.

Another aspect worth mentioning also regards the idea of "philandering", as Diaconu stressed that some actresses actually slept their way up the professional ladder, thus owing their success to the very philandering they now try to incriminate – in the above, we can detect an implied accusation of hypocrisy.

Another thought, also conveyed while snickering, contends that competition amongst aspiring actresses was so high, that no director would have had to demean himself up to the point of sexually harassing one, since, Diaconu implies, they all would have slept with him willingly just to get on stage. Therefore, if we follow this train of thought, sexual harassment was inexistent not because it would have been immoral and / or illegal, but simply because it was not needed. Moreover, the actor

¹⁸ <https://culturaladuba.ro/mircea-diaconu-se-intampla-lucruri-din-astea-de-culise-si-lumea-merge-mai-departenu-e-un-subiect-de-pus-pe-masa-publica/>, interview by Adriana Tănăsescu, accessed on August 25, 2022.

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJciU5GZD28>, accessed on August 25, 2022, min. 1.09

²⁰ In Romanian: *amantlâc*, a disparaging term used to describe extramarital relationships.

also implies that in the processes mentioned, it was not the actresses who were the victims, but the directors.

In the following part, Diaconu points out that brief relationships that occur in the industry are all consensual, as no one is forcing other people to submit to unwanted sexual advances. It is not that the industry is without blemish, it is simply that consent exists each and every time.

As far as his personal interactions with Viorica Vodă are concerned, he contends that she came to the theatre whose manager he was (Nottara) and obtained a gig as an extra, alongside many others, and then she left because of some conflicts she got involved in. At this point, he does not miss out on the opportunity to reiterate that she was never able to get a steady job and had to rely only on temporary contracts – hence, two things can be inferred: one, that Viorica Vodă lacks talent, otherwise she would have landed a permanent contract, and two, that her frustration can be blamed on this professional failure rather than on having actually been sexually harassed by superiors. Though he does mention that there were many aspirants in the field and not enough job openings to cater for all, the implication that Viorica Vodă was unable to stand out convincingly enough to get hired cannot be overlooked. He also points out that her qualifications were different from the ones required, as she graduated from the puppet theatre section, thus minimizing her professional value yet again.

At the end of the interview, he reiterates the fact that philandering is known to occur, that it is rare, it makes way into the list of gossip subjects, but it is never serious enough to interfere with the activity itself.

In all fairness, when confronted by the interviewer, he does not completely exclude the possibility that one actress or another may have to accept unwanted sexual advances to obtain a part in a movie, but again, he points out that it would be an act of suicide by the given director, since there are so many good actresses to choose from.

At the very end, he yet again claims that Viorica Vodă blames society as a whole for her own personal failures and that, had her allegations been true, she should have shifted towards a new line of work, such as becoming a librarian – which is another way of implying that everything is her fault.

Sadly, if we are to draw a conclusion based on what Mircea Diaconu said in the mentioned interview, we can see that we are witnessing the same victim-blaming strategy that his female co-workers employed, only mastered in a subtler and more complex way. If, broadly speaking, Lia Bugnar and Mara Nicolescu focused on two main arguments, namely that Viorica Vodă is an abuser herself and that, in the absence of names and twenty years later, her allegations cannot be given credit, Mircea Diaconu is significantly shrewder in minimizing the accuser. In a nutshell, what he says, mostly implicitly, is that she was frustrated both professionally and financially because she has unable to land a steady job, that she was unable to land a steady job because she lacks talent, and that this is the main reason behind her false allegations. He also implies that any actress would willingly sleep with any director just to get a part in a cast, thus covertly insulting all his female coworkers, and that the few relationships that do occur are insignificant and are not likely to impact the high quality of the artistic act at all.

Since he was the manager of the Nottara Theatre at the time, we can understand his eagerness to deny any allegations of misconduct that may have been happening under his watch. As he was in charge, any case of sexual harassment confirmed would have placed not only the industry and the institution in a bad light, but it would also have reflected negatively on himself as the person running the respective institution.

However, while from a detached perspective, anyone would understand why Diaconu responded in this way, on the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the overwhelming misogyny that oozes from every word he says. To him, actresses are expendable, you can easily replace any of them with hundreds of others, many of them sleep their way up anyway then complain about it, Viorica Vodă

was unhappy because of her own personal frustrations and, perhaps most significantly, a woman's consent in a relationship is totally irrelevant.

In our view, as female academics and professionals who believe in meritocracy, in individual worth and in the rewards that must come with hard work, we find Mircea Diaconu's approach even more disturbing than that of his female co-workers since, while the latter attacked Viorica Voda individually, based on some alleged character flaws, the former minimizes actresses, talent, integrity and respect for the woman's body and choices altogether.

To conclude, it is important to say that, even if Viorica Voda's allegations had been false, which we strongly doubt, the eagerness and aggressiveness with which she was shunned by important personalities only goes to show one thing: that women and the challenges everyone knows they face are still minimized, overlooked and not taken seriously by society as a whole.

3. *The George Buhnici scandal*

3.1. Background

The other situation we will look into stands out for reasons that represent the exact opposite of those leading to the media attacks against Viorica Vodă, and we have opted to draw a parallel between these two media scandals because of this paradox: that, while they are exactly opposite in terms of their content, the reactions they generated are similar.

Thus, we will now analyse the controversial statements made by George Buhnici, a famous Romanian vlogger, podcaster and influencer, about the way women are supposed to look when they go to the beach. In an interview gone viral, the influencer stated that "we" (men) go to the seaside to see "skin", that the skin "we" see should be flawless (with no stretchmarks), that women should work out more and that, if they invested in the gym as much as they invest in tattoos, everyone would be better off. To add insult to injury, he then contended that he is extremely lucky to have a wife that looks like a minor, a statement that he reinforced by showing off his wife, who was at his side all along²¹.

As a wave of media indignation began to rise, in an attempt to make amends, Buhnici then issued a new series of statements that appeared on his own blog, statements that only aggravated the negative public reaction to his original blunders. Thus, he tried to put a new spin on things and avert allegations of misogyny, by claiming that all he meant was to point out that women like to be told they look younger than they really are, and also by claiming that his concerns about the way women look are health-oriented and not aimed to objectify them²². Perhaps most importantly, he emphasized the fact that he does not in any way encourage paedophilia, which he considers a crime – since his original remarks about Lorena, his wife, looking like a minor and therefore gorgeous had also triggered a wave of outraged reactions in this direction – namely, that by his comments, the influencer may lead to collective standards acknowledging underage women as an ideal of female beauty.

There is no denial that the influencer's initial affirmations are hugely misogynistic and that very few women would have a reason to feel flattered when hearing such an opinion (also expressed in an informal, disparaging manner). Even flawlessly beautiful women could feel offended, as these statements encourage the objectification of women, reducing them strictly to trophies who have the right to exist only for the aesthetic pleasure of men. And very few women, irrespective of how beautiful they may be, like to be assessed solely based on their looks and thus "cancelled" as human beings, with their feelings, emotions, intelligence or professional value totally disregarded. Therefore, this is not the point where we would like to dwell. We will, instead, analyse some of the reactions

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3jOtINPPL8>, accessed on September 8, 2022.

²² <https://buhnici.ro/pedofilia-este-o-crima-obezitatea-o-problema-de-sanatate-publica/>, accessed on September 8, 2022.

triggered by the vlogger’s unfortunate comments as well as the main outcomes that ensued shortly thereafter.

3.2. Reactions

George Buhnici’s remarks were immediately followed by a wave of public outrage. “Cancel culture employs the power of public opinion, social media, threats of economic boycotts, and other constitutionally protected forms of private action. This power is magnified by the pervasiveness and speed of the internet and social media, which are the weapons of choice deployed by cancel culture.” (Dershowitz, A., 2020: 17)

Indeed, one of the most important characteristics of the phenomenon whereby a personality is “cancelled” by public opinion is that, unlike in a court of law, there is no fair trial. There is no opportunity to prove your innocence, you find yourself pilloried overnight and you do not even know by whom. It is social media who is the judge and jury of your behaviour and / or opinion, you do not get to face most of your accusers, instead you come face to face with the consequences of the pressure they put on you or even on public or private institutions to take measures against you. Most of the accusers may be anonymous or even fake, there is no way you can control the thousands of social media accounts that crucify you; still, the consequences are as real as can be. The person “cancelled” may lose everything, while their accusers are often invisible, anonymous, or not accountable (Dershowitz, A, 2020: 19).

Naturally, we cannot analyse all the reactions that occurred in the aftermath of Buhnici’s uninspired statements; we will, however, in the present section, shed light on some articles that appeared and on the points they make, as we feel these articles are relevant in showing how public opinion worked in this particular case.

It is important to point out that these reactions appeared across the board, from the most elitist levels of society to blogs responding to “popular culture” expectations – this comprehensiveness is relevant, as it shows the magnitude of the impact the blogger’s statements had on what can be described as “public opinion” overall.

At the high end of the social spectrum, in the academic world, in an interview for a well-known Romanian newspaper²³, a university professor explained that the patriarchal approach and the stereotypes against women are so common in our society, that many voices are needed to uproot them. She felt that the influencer’s remarks are highly toxic and offensive towards women, that they negatively affect women’s dignity and their rights, and also that they represent an appeal to hatred and discrimination against them. She contended that Buhnici’s discourse reinforced sexist, patriarchal and traditionalist stereotypes against women, stereotypes that ought to be combated by the press, the civil society, as well as the academic and the educational world, while gender equality policies ought to be adequately implemented.

In the professor’s opinion, the vlogger’s objectionable behaviour pertains to a larger trend aiming to discriminate against women and infringe upon their rights, alongside attitudes such as, for instance, the public debates on abortion that started in the USA and reverberated worldwide. The roots of these unacceptable views go back to traditionally gendered roles for males and females, roles that rely on hierarchy and domination of the former over the latter and are passed on to the new generations in families, schools and through the media – a widespread phenomenon that should be stopped. To conclude, she firmly believes that the statements discussed, labelled as an attack against democracy and women’s rights, an instance of offensive behaviour bordering on harassment, should definitely be sanctioned.

²³ Alexandra Șerban, 2022, *Un profesor universitar explică de ce cazul Buhnici e important*, retrieved from <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/profesor-universitar-cazul-buhnici-tacerea-si-ignorarea-nu-sunt-solutii-4215963>, accessed on September 13, 2022.

Ionela Băluță is not the only visible member of the Romanian academic community that expressed strong disapproval towards George Buhnici. In an interview given to the same newspaper²⁴, another professor, Mihaela Miroiu, conveyed views similar to her colleague's.

Thus, she contended that she deemed the public reaction worthy of a civilized society, as the influencer's remarks had not been a mere faux pas, but the free expression of ideas that make misogynistic men and women alike feel powerful if they humiliate women. In her opinion, misogynistic reactions are not innate, they have been acquired throughout centuries of patriarchal regimes, where people have been taught that women are physically and mentally inferior to men.

The professor also complained that, in Romania, the more obnoxious you are, the more influential you become, she asserted that women should be treated with dignity and given chances equal to men's, and that respect should be taught to children inside the family, through an education without violence and insults, thus shifting the discussion towards a more general direction. In her opinion, the strong public reaction that followed what Buhnici said proves that the feminist movement is strong, succeeding in correcting sexist slippages. Also, since the influencer did not acknowledge his mistake right away, on the contrary, he persisted in his views and insisted that his only concern was women's health, as he pointed out on his blog, Miroiu believes that "the law should be enforced", thus urging the NCCD to respond, an aspect which we will comment on in the following section of our research.

In an approach that backed his colleague's, another intellectual, Radu Umbreș, stated in the same article that Buhnici explicitly said what many people only think, but cannot spread due to a lack of influence and visibility. He believes that public figures could fall into a trap of over-confidence, of excessive trust in their own opinions, thus bordering on arrogance. The sociologist contended that, when sexist remarks occur in the public space, there exists an imminent risk that people should think such norms are acceptable, until a critical reaction ensues. In his view, even if an influencer merely expresses what many others may think, the minute he does so, he bestows upon their statements a legitimacy they did not have before and thus discriminatory ideas may spread more rapidly. Civilization, he feels, translates into separating what is in your mind from your behaviour in society.

Moreover, the sociologist believes that people are not likely to change simply because they have been criticized, nor are they likely to genuinely repent. To combat such attitudes, he thinks that a new "social etiquette contract" is needed, along with an open debate with other members of society. He also expressed his belief that Buhnici will probably continue to have supporters, followers and admirers who stand by his side, minimize his mistakes and attack his opponents.

The reactions against the statements made by George Buhnici were not confined to the academic world, as a significant number of celebrities expressed strong disapproval for what he had said. Out of those celebrities that reacted strongly, we will only mention a few.

Andreea Raicu, a former TV presenter renowned for her beauty, sarcastically commented that she had not been aware that certain beauty standards must be met in order to go the beach – she posted those remarks on her Instagram account²⁵ and she also devoted a blog entry²⁶ to the same subject. She explained in detail that cellulite and stretchmarks are not medically connected to obesity and can appear even if one leads a healthy lifestyle; she also approached the subject from a psychological viewpoint, highlighting that the blogger's remarks can be dangerous for young, impressionable

²⁴ Alexandra Șerban, 2022, *De ce ne-a deranjat atât de tare cazul Buhnici*, retrieved from <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/de-ce-ne-a-deranjat-atat-de-tare-cazul-buhnici-4217244>, accessed on September 14, 2022.

²⁵ Cătălina Matei, 2022, *Declarațiile lui George Buhnici stârnesc alte reacții din partea vedetelor*, retrieved from <https://www.tvmania.ro/george-buhnici-reactie-andreea-raicu-365060>, accessed on September 19, 2022.

²⁶ Andreea Raicu, 2022, *Mă numesc Andreea Raicu și am celulită și vergeturi*, retrieved from <https://www.andreearaicu.ro/blog/ma-numesc-andreea-raicu-si-am-celulita-si-vergeturi/>, accessed on September 19, 2022.

women who live their lives seeking acceptance and validation from others and suffer immensely because they do not measure up to certain unattainable physical standards. To conclude, Raicu accused Buhnici of misogyny and advised women to not let such views bring them down, as their value as human beings goes beyond objectionable male opinions.

The Filia Center, an NGO specializing in fighting for women's rights and combating discrimination against women, also came forward with a social media post contending that the influencer's remarks contribute to a toxic, misogynistic and dangerous environment for women and young girls alike²⁷. The Center's representatives stated that it is not normal to objectify women, that women have the right to choose their own lifestyles and that their value is not given by the extent to which they meet men's aesthetic expectations. In their view, such statements represent harassment and, it is implied, there is a connection between this approach to womanhood and the high number of rapes or abuse of underage women and, therefore, violence against women.

Reactions towards Buhnici also came from men, such as the TV presenter Dan Capatos²⁸, who adamantly condemned the blogger and said that their TV crew had given him seven days to realize how wrong his perspective was and to apologize before actually airing the interview, or rap singer Connect-R who, in a more ambiguous viewpoint, contended that everyone should abandon their ego and realize that they represent much more than their body and mind²⁹.

We will conclude the current subchapter by pointing out that these are but a few reactions out of the huge number that ensued, that the vlogger's statements caused quite a stir in the Romanian public space, in the press and on social media, and that the consequences also transcended a mere loss of face, as we will show in the following section of our research.

3.3. Outcomes

As we are writing the present research, three main outcomes resulted from the famous influencer's controversial statements.

The first and most immediate outcome was that, days after the viral statements, on July 20, BCR (The Romanian Commercial Bank, the second most important player on the Romanian financial market³⁰), first issued a statement on their Facebook page³¹ whereby they dissociated themselves from the vlogger's views, which they labelled as a "slippage³²", as they believed conveyed an attitude of sexism and discrimination in public language. The Bank's representatives also pointed out that they had waited for the influencer to express his reaction to the public outcry (here, we can infer that apologies were expected), and also to get involved in a campaign aiming to raise awareness of discrimination and sexism. As the response they received did not match their expectations, BCR announced that they would end their partnership with Buhnici, something they did shortly thereafter³³.

²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/centrul.filia>, accessed on September 19, 2022.

²⁸ Cristina Pleșoianu, 2022, *Dan Capatos îi dă replica lui George Buhnici în scandalul declarațiilor pentru care a fost amendat*, retrieved from <https://spynews.ro/monden/emisiuni-tv/dan-capatos-ii-da-replica-lui-george-buhnici-in-scandalul-declaratiilor-pentru-care-a-fost-amendat-acest-balet-absolut-penibil-video-287905.html>, accessed on September 19, 2022.

²⁹ Diana Stamen, 2022, *Connect-R a reacționat după derapajul lui George Buhnici*, retrieved from <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/connect-r-a-reactionat-dupa-derapajul-lui-george-buhnici-4217448>, accessed on September 19, 2022.

³⁰ Claudia Medrega, 2021, *Topul băncilor din România în anul 2020*, retrieved from <https://www.zf.ro/banci-si-asigurari/topul-bancilor-din-romania-in-anul-2020-banca-transilvania-liderul-20161548>, accessed on September 11, 2022.

³¹ <https://www.facebook.com/BCR.Romania>, accessed on September 11, 2022

³² In Romanian: "derapaj".

³³ <https://observatornews.ro/eveniment/bcr-a-rupt-parteneriatul-cu-george-buhnici-am-crezut-in-a-doua-sansadar-am-primit-un-raspuns-din-care-este-evident-ca-vedem-diferit-lucrurile-480142.html>, accessed on September 11, 2022.

The Bank's social media post concluded on a general note, saying that sexism, discrimination and the sexual objectification of women are unacceptable in all forms and nuances, explicit or implicit.

BCR's reaction undoubtedly represents an extreme form of cancel culture, whereby it is not only a person's reputation that is destroyed, but they also suffer financially and their career is impacted in a concrete way. What is perhaps most striking is that the punishment does not seem to match the crime, since the only thing the influencer did was express an objectionable opinion (Dershowitz, A, 2020:16); still, apparently, the opinion was so objectionable that it had to result in a boycott of his work and in funding for his projects being withdrawn. In fact, the second significant outcome we have identified only goes to show that Buhnici folded under public and financial pressure and finally issued an apology. Naturally, one can wonder about how sincere such an apology is, since the immense pressure he was under practically did not leave him any other tack – while we tend to believe that, for an apology to be sincere and heartfelt, it has to be voluntary rather than forcibly extracted out of the person guilty of a transgression.

Indeed, ten days after the initial blunder, Buhnici publicly apologized for his previous affirmations. In a new video gone viral³⁴, he admitted to having spoken like a lout³⁵, like an uncivilized little neighbourhood boy with no regard for others and no life experience, who had hurt several categories of people with his rudeness and lack of consideration. He said he had not been under the influence of any substances that may alter judgement, but only, maybe, slightly euphoric, and possibly affected by the prolonged isolation³⁶, that his remarks had aimed to be humorous but had instead turned out to be shallow and lacking in empathy. He said that the public reactions that ensued came as a shock to both himself and his family, and he apologized to everyone, but especially to women, who he had aggressed by his use of language, his lack of judgement, of consideration and his uncouth behaviour.

The third significant outcome was that, on August 31, Buhnici was fined by NCCD (National Council for Combating Discrimination³⁷), and the amount he was required to pay was enormous: 20 000 lei, the current equivalent of 4000 euro. The Council considered that the influencer's remarks represent discrimination and infringe the human right to dignity, and the vote to sanction him was unanimous. Thus, yet again, in this case, the consequences for speaking freely went beyond just loss of face and abundant cyberbullying – the vlogger had to face significant financial consequences and professional setbacks.

4. Concluding remarks

In the present research, we have looked into the concept of “cancel culture” and we have attempted to shed light on how it works in specific situations. We have analysed two recent media scandals in Romania, one involving a female actress who openly made allegations of sexual harassment at an important celebratory event, and one involving an influencer who made misogynistic statements in an interview gone viral. We have shown that, although the two situations were different in that, while the former protagonist can be said to be in line with #MeToo specificities, finding herself on the “good” side of societal ethics, while the latter appears to have violated unspoken norms of acceptable thinking and behaviour, the reactions that ensued were similar in nature, and the two central characters had to suffer repercussions ranging from public shaming and cyberbullying to financial loss.

The research is limited in that, for the present scope of our paper, we have focused mainly on the negative reactions. It is important to state, however, that in both cases, there were also voices supporting the protagonists and their right to free speech. In both cases, the allegedly objectionable

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBw2HDyY52k>, accessed on September 9, 2022.

³⁵ “Mârlan” in Romanian.

³⁶ Implied: due to Covid 19 restrictions

³⁷ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/george-buhnici-a-fost-amendat-cu-20-000-de-lei-de-cncc-pentru-scandalul-vergeturilor-2066343>, accessed on September 11, 2022.

behaviour was restricted to speech – neither of the two protagonists *did* anything wrong, they just happened to say the wrong things.

To conclude, we cannot say whether “cancel culture” is good or bad, if it is about justice or revenge. What we can say, however, is that free speech these days appears to be a risky undertaking. One never knows where it can lead, nor can we give recommendations on acceptable behaviour in the public space. We cannot entertain behaviour that leads to unsupported allegations against innocent people, nor can we back misogynistic, discriminatory thinking that objectifies women. Similarly, we do not feel that restricting freedom of expression for fear of being “cancelled” is acceptable in the 21st century society. The only thing we can firmly state in the end of our research is that the public space is a double-edged sword that can come back to haunt you, and that it is advisable to think twice before you decide to speak out while you are in the limelight.

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