We Are Cancelled: Exploring Victims' Experiences of Cancel Culture on Social Media in the Philippines

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Author/s	**Joseph Leonard A. Jusay[1], Jeremiah Armelin S. Lababit[2], Lemuel Oliver M. Moralina[3] & Jeffrey Rosario Ancheta[4]**
Affiliation	[1,2,3,4] Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines
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We Are Cancelled: Exploring Victims' Experiences of Cancel Culture on Social Media in the Philippines

Joseph Leonard A. Jusay[1], Jeremiah Armelin S. Lababit[2], Lemuel Oliver M. Moralina[3] & Jeffrey Rosario Ancheta[4]

[1]Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines. ORCID: 0000-0001-5770-0129. Email: josephleonard.jusay@yahoo.com

[2]Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines. ORCID: 0000-0001-8225-866X. Email: jeremiahlababit0000@gmail.com

[3]Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines. ORCID: 0000-0001-7065-5772. Email: rhyleemoralina26@gmail.com

[4]Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines. ORCID: 0000-0001-5831-8204. Email: jrancheta@pup.edu.ph

Abstract

The continuous advancement of modern technology enables its users to engage in various interactions in the online public sphere, including conversations about multiple ideas and perspectives. It has now played a significant role in our modern society, paving the door for several participatory cultures and social movements, such as the so-called cancel culture. Even if this movement aims to call out individuals or businesses, it has undoubtedly encouraged mob mentality and damaged civil dialogue, ultimately driving them out of the community. Thus, this study looked at the diverse experiences of victims of cancel culture on social media in the Philippines and how it influenced their social and personal lives. This study reveals that the victims suffered a backlash, public humiliation, and cyberbullying that harmed their mental health. This study has established that cancel culture is an example of online abuse and has become more commonplace in the online public realm, rendering social media sites less of a haven.

Keywords: *Cancel culture, social media, mental health, cyberbullying, public humiliation*

Introduction

The internet has genuinely transformed people's lives in various ways. Anyone may now access anything and communicate with anyone whenever and wherever they want. It links individuals worldwide and has changed multiple industries, including communication, research, education, and entertainment. It is a rapidly expanding form of media that an individual may use for various things, including socializing, business transactions, online marketing, entertainment, and academic purposes. It has now played a significant role in our daily lives and will continue to expand.

Social networking websites, or what we commonly refer to as social media, are one example of features on the internet. Users of this interactive medium can produce and disseminate any information to the public. In addition, it enables an unprecedented level of personal and casual conversation from anywhere in the world. For instance, social media today dramatically simplifies disseminating information with only a click or touch.

Murugesan (2007) claims that it entails a wide range of online knowledge sources produced, disseminated, and utilized by users to educate one another on anything. Everyone must adapt their thinking to improve communication and work with the rapidly evolving technology. These online communities prioritizing building relationships or social connections have suddenly taken off in our culture. People are so engrossed in social media that they have become too committed to or dependent on it. Instead, they use it as their primary source of news and information, entertainment, and even merely to stay updated on current events and trends.

With the advancement of technology, people may now interact online with others in the public realm and exchange ideas and perspectives. Today's world is dominated by social media, which has paved the way for several participatory cultures and social movements. However, it has also developed into a crowded forum for opposing views on a wide range of information, culture, and beliefs where people can criticize businesses or persons for their remarks and deviant behavior.

According to Clark (2020), the emergence of a new set of moral convictions and political beliefs that tend to undermine norms of free speech and tolerance of difference in favor of ideological conformity or what we know as social media call-outs have now developed into a toxic culture known as "cancel culture."

Cancel Culture in Social Media

Cancel culture is a form of public shaming initiated on social media to deprive someone of their customary influence or attention to spread out public debate and reduce the monopolization of it by those in positions of privilege. Additionally, McCorkel (2021) claimed that the cancel culture fosters a mob mentality that weakens constructive public conversation. This culture primarily targets people or brands whose opinions or behaviors are not regarded as appropriate by society. This behavior is a continuation of a more daring range of social processes that have emerged in the modern era and can be characterized as a form of expulsion.

This movement actively opposes having compassion for others by using social media as part of an offensive strategy (Klausner & Deller, 2021). Cancel culture is a phenomenon that involves pervasive discourse that frequently intimidates people, silencing them as a result. This specific form of hate speech has the effect of muting other discourse. According to Klausner and Deller (2021), the right to free speech is weakened when communication intimidates or alienates listeners.

Social media has been infiltrated by the toxic cancel culture, which has several negative impacts on those who are exposed to it. Therefore, this study is only essential for society to understand the diverse experiences of its victims, how it has impacted them in any manner, and how its victims managed the entire experience.

Mishan (2003) of The New York Times Style Magazine claims that there have been numerous studies about culture and that publicly humiliating those deemed to have violated morality has existed for a long time. However, its classification and existence were still being discussed in the online public space. Still, soon the focus shifted to those who were seen to have violated it, those who displayed moral failings that led to intimidation, harassment, and cyberbullying.

Social networking sites were first designed to allow users to communicate with others online in a variety of ways (Velasco, 2020). Social media opened the door for people to create their own cultures on the site, and now people are beginning to share their views and opinions. The line between everyone's perspectives and beliefs is eroding, and the internet is no longer a secure environment for social contact and idea exchange. Without question, cancellation culture has dominated social media and canceling someone or anything without considering the potential repercussions has evolved into a new type of bullying. By addressing the following issues, this study explores the experiences of victims of cancel culture and its aftermath.

Methodology

The researchers used qualitative research to understand how the participants were affected by the phenomenon of cancel culture. Williams (2007) asserts that the qualitative approach is based on observable characteristics that provide questions the researchers tried to address. Instead of using a deductive paradigm, this approach uses an inductive paradigm. This is the most accurate and clear-cut way to give the participants accurate information. This method allowed the researchers to delve further into their investigation.

The case study was also used as a tradition of inquiry to learn more about a challenging problem or subject in the real-world context. A person, organization, unit, or event is the subject of this in-depth research. The case study research approach is appropriate since this study's data come from the life experiences of the cancel culture victims on social media. The participants' tales during and after experiencing cancel culture helped illuminate the main concerns and repercussions of the phenomena, which is essential to understanding this study's focus.

The researchers employed one-on-one interviews as a data collection technique to elicit participants' individualized responses and in-depth narratives. According to Walter Fisher (Caldiero, 2017; Waggenspack et al., 2016), people are narrative beings who view and live their lives as a series of ongoing stories. He claimed that storytelling is the framework for all meaningful communication. An effective technique to learn more about the participants and have a deeper grasp of their experiences as cancel culture victims is to conduct interviews with them. The interview came to a close with a discussion of upcoming cultural shifts and the development of the internet society. The researchers first contacted the participants via phone, text, or email to inquire about their consent to participate in the study. Once the subjects consented to the request, the researchers followed up for confirmation and issued a letter of approval. All interviews were completed online because this study was carried out during a pandemic. The consent letter, interview schedule (day and time), names of the researchers, the interview line of questions, and the Zoom Meeting ID and link were all sent.

The study utilized the purposive sampling technique to select the participants. Using this technique, the researchers chose three participants who contributed to the narratives of the cancel culture phenomenon on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok in the Philippines. Specifically, the participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. They were exposed to cancel culture between January 2019 and the present.
2. The victims became an online trend.

3. The incident that occurred became popular on social media platforms.
4. They received criticism from social media users.

Before the interview, the researchers explained the purpose of the study and provided a consent letter to the participants. It includes information on the topic of discussion, consent to record the interview process, confidentiality, anonymity, and the option to leave the conversation whenever they feel uncomfortable. The researchers also informed the participants that the data would be used for academic purposes and that any information they shared would not be used without their permission. The researchers also ensured that there was a psychologist during the data collection process just in case the participants experienced mental and emotional harm.

Results and Discussion

The Experiences of Cancel Culture Victims

The victims recounted their encounters with the social media culture. Their accounts indicate that cancel culture attacks anything that pertains to or involves a specific individual. For example, when someone is fired, social media users will criticize them personally, their job, company, experiences in the past, and even their friends and family. Some people on social media make up new allegations solely to discredit the offender in front of the public. Instead, they stoked the fury of social media users by targeting their personal social media profiles, leaving derogatory and obscene comments on their postings, and sending hateful and threatening letters.

Depending on the circumstances and the victims, cancel culture can have a variety of outcomes. Not all transgressors experience cancellation equally (Saint-Louis, 2021). According to Laidlaw (2017), online shaming is a kind of social control that primarily relies on acts of vigilantism, bullying, gossiping, and intolerance. These behaviors may eventually give rise to the notion of cancellation, the driving force behind cancel culture.

Victim # 1

During the interview, the victim claimed that online rumors were circulating targeting her and her family, particularly her daughter. She was charged with drug addiction and having an affair with her friend and fellow vlogger's partner. She claimed that thousands of their supporters had made snap decisions on both sides without fully understanding the circumstances. The problem was exacerbated when individuals started their vlogs about it in which they would express their thoughts and frequently make up new tales about the victims, adding gasoline to the fire. The victim claimed that she experienced several adverse reactions both offline and on social media. She claimed that on occasion, someone in the crowd would call her out in front of a mob of shoppers inside a mall, calling her a drug addict and a homewrecker. She tried to dispel suspicions that she was a drug addict by filming a vlog while taking a drug test to disprove the claims. The

victim claimed that she made every effort to disprove the claims against her and defend herself to those individuals by demonstrating her false identity. However, others continued to have their doubts about her. The victim acknowledged during the interview that there was a moment when she was terrified to leave her house and that her self-confidence was at its lowest point. The victim's persistent problem led to her receiving a depression diagnosis, which made her suicidal. The victim claimed that there were times when she would find herself gazing aimlessly at a wall while the hours ticked away. The victim was all she had to lean on during the problem—her family, especially her daughter—for support and encouragement. According to the victim, her family was essential in helping her get through her lowest points and darkest periods.

Victim # 2

In his opening statement, the victim described the cancel culture he had come across in April 2021. That year, "Exposing your Rapist" became well-known on TikTok to promote National Rape Day and teach women about rape and sexual abuse. The song "I've had enough" by Melina KD, which includes a picture of a rapist and sexual abuser, serves as the music for the content. On the other hand, users of TikTok in the Philippines imitated this style and produced videos concerning rapists. An anonymous person on Tiktok posted this kind of content with pictures of the victim, accusing him of sexually assaulting an eight-year-old child. In that video, only his name and a screenshot of his Facebook profile were posted, along with pictures that were also obtained from his Facebook account. This information was quickly shared hundreds of thousands of times and made it to the TikTok "For You" page. His accounts claimed that he was ignorant of this post until he began to receive a flood of threatening and profane comments and private messages from others who had watched the video on social media. He was one of the names with the most searches on Facebook that day, and most of the individuals who messaged him were teenagers or Generation Z. The victim insisted that he had never been a party to any wrongdoing, conflict, or dispute. He was unaware of the identity or origin of the anonymous individual who posted the video. When his family and friends discovered what had transpired, they never questioned him. They believed him and knew he would not act in such a way. Due to his adverse comments, he was reluctant to use social media and leave the house after this occurrence. If they spotted him outside, those who viewed the video might unintentionally punch or hurt him. The victim promptly sent a comment to his Facebook account to defend himself from the attacks without pausing to think. The victim's loved ones defended him against Facebook users who left negative comments on his pages by reacting to the comments and sharing the victim's thoughts. Additionally, they visited the profile of the anonymous user and left comments on the video material to remove the post that contained false claims.

Victim # 3

The victim began to experience cancel culture after uploading a video to social media that went viral immediately. He mimicked or pretended to do what a K-pop idol would in this video concerning movement, attire, voice, and conduct. People were enraged by him, especially K-Pop lovers. They objected to the victim's imitation of their superstar and said he had no right to act in such a way because it contradicted his physical appearance. He faced much criticism, not just online but also from others in his community. His bad impersonation of their superstar infuriated K-pop fans to the point where they instantly began to condemn him, which decreased the victim's self-confidence. The victim claimed he was criticized for his appearance and other physical traits. Numerous individuals made memes, insulted his appearance, and hurled vicious insults. He only intended to create videos for his enjoyment and to amuse viewers, but he also wanted to do it to support his family. He even considered getting a facial procedure since he believed his appearance was the very reason why people rejected and despised his videos. However, he claimed that this choice made his life more challenging. This time, he could not stop the offensive comments about himself and his family; all he could do was absorb them.

Since cancel culture primarily exists in online forums, its victims are affected in other ways. In the end, the idea of online public shaming has the propensity to motivate social media users to take the issue offline. Public humiliation is not a novel idea; it has existed for millennia. Public humiliation has long been employed in countries to uphold order and enforce not only the law but also unwritten rules or social norms (Blackham, 2016).

Public humiliation may result in psychological harm to a person or, out of defensiveness, may lead to that person's opinions and habits becoming more ingrained. Never utilize this idea to criticize someone else's actions or reveal their weaknesses. It is important to remember that humiliating someone in public or on social media does nothing to stop or resolve the problem; instead, it only worsens things, especially for the victims.

From the participants' narratives, three themes emerged in the study that cancel culture victims faced on social media - backlash, fear of public shaming, and cyberbullying.

1. **Backlash.** People that engage in cancel culture encounter numerous negative comments from a large internet audience. These reactions are frequently extremely disrespectful to someone because of their color, religion, and ethnicity. For anything they were accused of or for something they did out of passion, every participant that the researchers have spoken to has received several criticisms and other unpleasant comments. Unfortunately, cancellers have gone too far because these backlashes were intended to hurt and demoralize their victims.

2. **Fear of Public Shaming.** Never use public shaming to reform conduct or call attention to the shortcomings of others. It can harm a person mentally and eventually result in several mental health issues, including high-stress levels, fear, worry, trauma, and despair. The victims claimed that there were times when they avoided social situations out of a persistent dread of being ridiculed or evaluated by the general public.

3. **Cyberbullying.** Bullying in the form of cancel culture is a new phenomenon that can incite hostility online. Cyberbullying, or sending threats and derogatory remarks on someone else's social media posts, is common today. Because of this, hatred on social media may quickly spread like wildfire. Anyone will inevitably fall victim to cancel culture sooner or later.

Unfortunately, cancel culture is so prevalent that social media users use it to justify their behavior, permitting them to shame people publicly. For example, it might be difficult to tell what is proper or incorrect when millions of social media users point fingers in all directions. People who, in most situations, have just made a mistake are bullied and tormented by cancel culture because of their mistakes (Juell, 2021, as cited in Jones, 2021).

Although the victims' experiences vary depending on the issues thrown at them, all the victims have experienced almost the exact effects of cancel culture in their lives. All three victims have experienced significant levels of stress, anxiety, trauma, and depression due to receiving numerous criticisms and hateful comments on social media. In addition, the victims claim that exposure to cancel culture has made them afraid to leave their neighborhoods and convinced them that social media is not a place to feel safe.

The cancellation is a harsh punishment, a source of public disgrace, and a chance to impart knowledge. When someone encounters a cancel culture, he might believe that after others apologize once, nobody will pay attention. Instead, the cancellers cut off all communication with him rather than having a conversation to explain how the offender's actions affect them, robbing the individual of the chance to improve and grow from his errors or sensitivities (Mintz, 2021). Even if they apologize for their mistakes, they are no longer supported by a cancel culture. Instead, the defense claims that they should have been aware before acting.

The Aftermath of Cancel Culture

The phrase "cancel culture" describes cancelling people due to unsubstantiated claims made online, leading to social exclusion and public humiliation. When organizations urge people to boycott and denounce those who transgress social mores, taboos, and customs in online public discourse on social media platforms, the phenomenon known as "cancellation" occurs.

The victims talked about what they did to clear their reputations in the issue and how their friends, family, and neighbors helped them defend themselves against online troll attacks. They asserted

that even when some of their problems were handled, the bad press they experienced continued. One of the victims claimed that after his experience, he started using social media more cautiously. Victims' experiences showed how cancel culture damaged the victims' mental health and altered their social interactions and perceptions of social media.

Victim # 1

The victim acknowledged that she has not gone past the problem; she said that anytime it is brought up, there are still flashbacks of the problem. The victim claimed that she is now in a decent frame of mind compared to before.

Victim # 2

With the help of his family, friends, and relatives, the victim could prove his innocence regarding the claim of sexual assault. Since the video contained false information, it was taken down, and the user's TikTok account was disabled. Because they could purge his identity, his life returned to normal, and he was free to leave the building. His friends and family are constantly there for him to express their support, and they are prepared to stand up for him if he is ever attacked in public. Instead, the victim and his family decided to look into who posted the video since defending him from the accusations came first. As soon as they viewed the post where the victim demonstrated his innocence, some social media users who had previously insulted him online apologized. Even though it happened suddenly and the issue was quickly resolved, the victim is still shaken by the dread he experienced throughout the entire incident. He monitored how people responded to such statements on social media, although sexual assault is against the law. However, what truly annoys him is that many people who criticized him on social media did not even check to verify if the data they saw was accurate. So he started to use social media with more caution. He has made his profile and images private and has stopped accepting pals he does not know directly.

Victim # 3

He continues to receive harassment from many people today, but despite all the challenges he encountered, he managed to follow his dreams. He also decided to turn to God and put his family first rather than acceding to their demands. Although most people disliked him, he used this experience to learn and grow, which did not deter him from achieving his life's purpose. Instead, the victim utilized the criticism of others as motivation to get better and continue living the life he had begun. He heard a lot of harsh comments, but he believed these words would alter him and show him what he was truly capable of.

Although cancel culture can be utilized as a powerful tool for spreading awareness and enabling social justice, it can take bullying and calling-outs to a different level. According to Toler (2022), like bullying, being canceled may make one feel ostracized, socially isolated, and lonely. It may feel as if everyone around the person has given up on him, slowly diminishing his chance to redeem himself from his mistakes. In the eyes of the victims, cancel culture is a punishment not only by online users but also by society. Depending on how such events have changed each victim of cancel culture as a person, the effects may differ.

Cancel culture can be an effective instrument for raising awareness and promoting social justice, but it can also elevate bullying and call people out to new levels. Like bullying, Toler (2022) claims that getting fired can make one feel rejected, lonely, and socially alienated. The likelihood that he will be able to learn from his mistakes may seem to have been abandoned by those close to him. In the eyes of the victims, cancel culture is a form of social punishment meted out by both internet users and the general public.

According to the data gathered, all the victims experienced significant stress and anxiety when dealing with the cancel culture. The idea of cancel culture is so pervasive nowadays that these social media platforms are not considered safe spaces. However, when it should never have been accepted in the first place, cancel culture appeared to have become a common practice among social media users.

The typical response to stressful circumstances is traumatic stress. Anyone can feel numbness or overwhelmed by a multitude of conflicting feelings, often all at once, as well as acute anguish, confusion, or terror. Not simply those who are at the event are affected by these emotions (Help Guide et al., 2021).

There is no denying that the victims experienced stress and agony due to the victims' descriptions of how cancel culture affected them. Nevertheless, they overcame it, restored emotional control, started over, and continued living. Their accounts indicate that they took various steps and methods to benefit from their experiences:

1. They used the cancel culture experience as a lesson or learning opportunity for personal growth and development.
2. They avoided devoting their energy and time to thinking about their traumatic events by concentrating on their regular activities, such as spending time with their families, being busy at work, and studying.
3. They never fail to turn to God and seek support to cope with their stress and anxiety.
4. One of the victims sought professional advice for mental health issues.

It is critical to recognize the positive aspects of cancel culture. A cultural boycott is what Lisa Nakamura, a University of Michigan professor specializing in how race, gender, and sexuality

intersect with digital media. She claims that it is an agreement not to amplify, boost the signal, or give money. In summary, people can effectively stop supporting themselves and their job when someone has said or done anything detrimental in the past or present (Bromwich, 2018).

There is a chance that cancel culture will be fatal. It has long-term consequences for those involved and can substantially undermine one's self-confidence, especially given the rate at which it occurs and the situations in which individuals make little attempt to comprehend both parties (Rivers, 2019). Even though this type of toxic culture has proven to be quite effective in eradicating racism, sexism, and other types of abuse or violence against others, it has also jeopardized and limited one's right to free expression.

All the victims have admitted that they still have not moved on from their experiences with cancel culture. One of the victims claimed that after the experience, he became more attentive when utilizing social media. Another victim mentioned that even though she was still having flashbacks of the incident, her situation was better than it had been. Moreover, the third victim stated that until today, he is still receiving backlash from social media users; however, he is trying his best to shrug them off and focus on what matters.

Cancel culture can seriously affect mental health, particularly for people who use social media frequently. Shaming has also increased in popularity because anyone can do it on social media. Today, it has gotten wider simultaneously, removing any beneficial or humanizing context and leaving a long paper trail of what might have been a simple mistake (Wilson, 2020).

Conclusion

Cancel culture is viewed by the victims as online abuse. They believed there was nowhere else they could turn for support after being involved if it led to the cancellation. The victims experienced harassment, threats, and attacks on social media in addition to the boycott or withdrawal. Similar to bullying, being canceled can make someone feel alone and lonely.

Social media users frequently interested in cancel culture circumstances tend to criticize the victim in more intimate, embarrassing, and demeaning ways. As a result, individuals have unwittingly joined the apparatus that powers the cancel culture phenomenon. As a result, cancellers often prevent victims from taking a stance by blocking all possibilities, thus denying them the chance to make amends.

However, the cancel culture may also impact other social media users. Other social media users are frequently so overcome with worry and panic due to the looming threat of being banned that they limit their online public behavior. The idea of cancel culture is so pervasive now that even social media platforms are no longer considered safe spaces. When it should have never been accepted in the first place, cancel culture has become a common practice among social media users.

On the other hand, cancel culture has the potential to be an effective tool for social justice. Based on the victims' experiences, the researchers discovered the power of social media in bringing significant and extensive change to our society by raising awareness of social injustices, inequities, and stereotypes. Moreover, it enables internet users, particularly those who are frequently muted, to express their opinions and beliefs regarding the wrongdoings of particular people or groups of people who should be expelled from society. It is also evident how individuals quickly criticize others on social media by posting materials like screenshots, videos, and other proof of an individual's or group's errors that could result in cancellation.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

No potential conflicts of interest.

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Joseph Leonard A. Jusay is a Bachelor of Arts in Broadcasting student at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines - Open University System. He completed his internship as a Social Media Content Manager at Storysmiths, Inc., and as a Graphic Designer, Social Media Manager, and Podcast Editor at Cut Print Podcast Network. Currently, he works as an Account Manager for Berkshire Pacific Outsourcing.

Jeremiah Armelin S. Lababit is taking up a Bachelor of Arts in Broadcasting at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines – Open University System. He completed his internship training at the Quezon City Public Affairs and Information Services Department and the Daily Tribune, a news publication company based in Metro Manila. Driven by his passion for serving the public and wanting to give back to the state, he is currently working under the Local Government Unit of Quezon City.

Lemuel Oliver M. Morlina is a Broadcasting Student at the Open University System, Polytechnic University of the Philippines. While studying, he discovered his skills and talent in producing and directing documentaries, video editing, and graphic designing. Currently, he works in the Banking and Finance Industry for Wells Fargo Bank.

Jeffrey Rosario Ancheta is a Faculty Researcher and an Assistant Professor at the College of Communication, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila. He is an active researcher in the Filipino language, culture, and media. Currently, he serves as the Research Management Coordinator for the Social Sciences and Communication Cluster under the PUP Research Management Office and the Editor in Chief of Talastásan: A Philippine Journal of Communication and Media Studies under the PUP College of Communication.