

Collective Emotion Narratives Behind Cancel Culture (The Social Media Boycott of Jule and Users' Communication Practices)

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Abstract

The fast growth of social media has clearly changed the way people communicate, react, and judge public issues, especially when a topic suddenly becomes viral and leads to cancel culture. This study looks at how shared emotions appear, develop, and are expressed by social media users involved in cancel culture situations. One case used in this research is the viral infidelity scandal involving a public figure named Jule, where a private relationship issue quickly turned into a public moral debate and triggered massive online reactions. Using a qualitative interpretative approach, this study involved six informants who were active social media users aged between 18 and 35 and had previous experience participating in cancel culture discussions. Data were collected through interviews and observation of online interactions. Narrative analysis was used to explore how users made sense of events, expressed emotions, and told stories about their experiences. The findings show that cancel culture is strongly driven by collective emotions such as anger, disappointment, and moral judgment, which grow stronger through digital interaction and viral circulation. In this way, cancel culture appears as a shared emotional performance shaped by communication practices in online spaces.

Keywords: Cancel culture; Collective emotions; Moral outrage; Social media boycott; Digital interaction

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of social media has deeply shift how people communicate, react, and give response inside digital environment, making public opinion move faster and more emotional. One common phenomenon rising from this change is cancel culture, understood as collective action where users remove moral, social, or even economic support from persons, groups, or institutions seen as breaking shared norms in online public space (Durdevic et al., 2025).

In today digital era, cancel culture stand as a strong symbol of online collective action. Social media allow actions against individuals, organizations, or brands to be formed and spread very fast (Salisah et al., 2025). Usually, the process start from exposure of certain act or statement, then followed by public reactions that judge, demand responsibility, call for boycott, or encourage exclusion from digital space. Because of this, cancel culture should not be seen only from the original mistake, but also from how collective

emotions are built, shared, and fixed inside public narratives that guide mass condemnation (Dedi et al., 2025).

The development of platform algorithms, the technical architecture of attention distribution and the characteristics of affordances such as retweets, likes, shares, comments and recommendation features accelerate the transformation of individual incidents into large scale public events. Empirical evidence shows that not all viral posts generate long term impacts on the accounts or organizations that own the content. Nevertheless, certain forms of virality trigger sharp surges of attention and foster intense collective emotional responses, which then shape dominant public about : “who is right” and “who is wrong”. Quantitative studies of news content and social media posts indicate that many viral events produce only temporary spikes in attention, however, two distinct types of viral effects ac be identified : (1) rapid, short-lived attention spikes that quickly subside, and (2) attention surges that activate more sustained mechanisms of collective attention when supported by coherent emotional narratives. We conclude that looking only at numbers like likes, shares, or views is not enough, because emotional storytelling and feeling narratives play much bigger role in explaining how cancel culture actually works (Cheselle Jan L. Roldan, Ardvin Kester S. Ong, 2024).

Theory of collective emotion explain how feelings that start from individuals can spread, reinforce each other, and slowly turn into shared emotional state when they move through social networks. In digital platforms, emotional contagion, sharing behavior, and narrative framing become very important. Content that trigger anger, disgust, or empathy usually receive more attention and interaction. Research that read emotion data from social media already show one clear thing: what people feel online is not random noise. Anger, sadness, or outrage that appear in posts and comments often mirror wider social mood. Because of this, viral posts cannot be understood only as popular content. The emotional stories behind them must be read. Without looking at emotion narratives, it is hard to explain why cancel culture start, and why some cases stop as talk, while others turn into real collective action (Ümit Kennedy, 2025).

Many studies from different regions, including Indonesia, point to two repeating patterns. First, cancel culture often appear when people feel that courts, government, or formal authority do not respond fast or fair enough. Online action then become alternative control. Second, the consequences are not always positive. Cyberbullying, mental stress, and social division often follow. Indonesian viral cases show how online outrage can lead to boycott, insults, and long-term damage to someone’s private life and career. These cases show that cancel culture cannot be separated from local moral values, social norms, and cultural sensitivity that shape how emotions move online (Dean Charles Hugh Wilkie, 2025).

Recent online trends also show that Gen Z is highly involved in cancel culture. Their participation is often linked with strong moral feeling, justice awareness, and sense of online solidarity. In developing societies, where institutions are weak or mistrusted, online cancellation sometimes look like replacement for legal justice. However, scholars also warn about the risk. Without fact checking, responsibility, and pause, cancel culture can easily turn into wrong accusation, fast judgement, and deep psychological harm. Because of that, this study put strong attention on emotional narratives, especially the moment when private feeling slowly change into public communication and finally end in cancellation (Ümit Kennedy, 2025)

The Jule case shows that cancel culture is never about the factual constitution of an incident, but about the collective emotions constructed online. Platform affordances like reposts, comments, and algorithmic recommendations have amplified emotionally arousing content so that shared feelings could scale up and solidify into dominant narratives. By doing so, the individual emotional reactions came together as collective outrage and transformed personal sentiment into coordinated social action.

In the context of this discussion, the study focuses on three questions: how users notice and name emotional stories in cancel culture cases; how shared emotions grow and connect during digital interaction; and how user communication takes form when viral content appears. This is not only to explain cancel culture, but to understand how emotion, story, and collective action are tied together in social media, and how this understanding can support more ethical and sustainable platform governance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Collective Emotion Theory

Collective emotions mean feelings that are no longer owned by one person only. They spread, mix, and become shared emotional pattern at group level. Shared emotion can appear in many different moment of social life. It may rise during street protest, religious activity, music performance, national tragedy, or even a single viral post online. In these situations, people move not only because of idea, but because they feel something together. This emotional sharing help individuals feel inside a group and sometimes become force that push collective action and social change (Scheve & Ismer, 2011).

Theory explain collective emotions not as single process, but as combination of mechanisms. Emotional contagion happen when feeling move from one person to another through expression, image, or digital sign. Emotional convergence appear when many people interpret the same event in similar way and end with similar emotion, even without talking to each other. Identity and norms also matter, because groups decide which emotion is

allowed, proper, or expected. In real life, these processes rarely stand alone; they overlap and support each other (Scheve & Ismer, 2011).

Sometimes, people feel emotionally connected without planning it. Durkheim discussed this long ago using idea of collective effervescence. It describe moments when people feel lifted together, emotionally charged, and morally bonded at same time. Today, this idea is not treated as mystical experience. It is closer to feeling “emotionally aligned” with others. Physical meeting is not required for emotional togetherness. People may never meet or talk directly, but still feel similar anger, excitement, or moral tension. This emotional unity can be traced from personal stories, online reactions, comment tone, or even body response. Importantly, shared emotion is not born only from joyful moment. Moral shock, feeling offended, or seeing norm violation often create stronger emotional bond than celebration itself (Kronsted, 2025).

Social media completely rearrange how this emotional alignment happen. Same place and same time are no longer necessary. Through short text, video clip, emoji, and reaction button, emotions jump very fast between users. Platform algorithms also select which emotion become louder by pushing emotional content to the top. As result, online emotions often rise suddenly, feel very intense, but also disappear very quickly. Many studies show that digital emotions are unstable, exaggerated, and easy to shift when compared with offline emotional experience. This condition shape how public feeling rapidly rise and fall during viral moments (Ou et al., 2025).

Shared emotion never work in only one direction. In some cases, it unite people, such as when they join boycott, protest, or mass calling-out together. In other cases, it function to guard group identity and moral boundary, creating feeling of “we stand together”. However, the same emotional force also carry danger. Strong collective feeling may divide society, justify harsh action, and help false stories spread rapidly. In digital space, this often appear as public shaming or cancel actions that move far beyond fair judgement. Because of these risks, recent discussions no longer see collective emotions as neutral, but question who benefits from them and who get harmed in political and ethical sense (Pizarro, 2022).

Digital Communication & Virality

Digital communication is how people connect and exchange meaning by using digital tools. It happen through internet space, social media apps, and mobile technology, without people need to meet face to face. Messages can appear anytime, jump across places, and stay online. In this system, users are not just audience. They write, reply, react, remix, and even change the meaning of message while it is still moving (Kurniawati et al., 2024).

Inside this digital communication, there is one important condition called virality. Virality is when a message suddenly travel very fast and reach many users in short moment. This situation is not random. Content become viral because it touch emotions, follow platform logic, and fit user desire to speak, judge, or join public talk. In the end, this whole process does not run by people alone, or technology alone. Machines and human feelings move together, pushing emotion, story, and action at the same time (Armila et al., 2025).

Online message travel in very different way compared to old word-of-mouth. In digital space, information do not need to move step by step between people. One post can suddenly reach thousands or millions in few seconds. What people finally see on screen is mostly not random. Algorithms of platforms decide on visibility by counting reactions that include likes, comments, and shares. Due to this system, certain messages are heavily and repeatedly promoted while many others disappear without notice. In this structure, virality is shaped more by platform design than by the actual quality or accuracy of the message.

Emotion sits at the heart of this circulation process. Content that trigger strong feeling, either laughter, anger, fear, or emotional touch, tend to travel wider and faster. Emotional reaction make users stop scrolling, react, comment, or argue. When content lack emotional energy, it usually stop moving very quickly. This is why emotion become the main engine that keep digital messages alive.

The impact of virality on society is broad and not simple. Viral content may raise awareness, support social movement, or influence how people understand certain issue. At the same time, the same speed also create serious risk, especially when misleading or harmful information spread without control. False information, misunderstanding, and conflict can spread just as fast. When message move fast, error also move fast. Because of this condition, digital literacy and critical thinking are no longer extra skills, but basic need in online society (Armila et al., 2025).

Cancel Culture

Cancel culture grow inside this fast digital environment. It refer to situation where a person, group, or institution lose support after online users judge their words or actions as morally wrong. Since opinions move very quickly online, cancellation often happen suddenly, without long process. In many cases, cancel culture act like informal punishment, especially when legal systems or official institutions are seen as slow, distant, or ineffective (Nganjuk, 2024).

During cancel culture moments, users rarely act individually. Instead, they tend to move together. Actions such as unfollowing, reporting, calling out,

or withdrawing support often happen almost at the same time. Social media platforms play a big role in strengthening this process by amplifying content that is emotional and already popular. As judgments spread very fast, cancel culture shows its double nature. On one side, it can push accountability and moral awareness. On the other side, it carries the risk of unfair punishment, strong social pressure, and silencing opinions that differ from the dominant view (Salisah et al., 2025).

Emotion function as main fuel in cancel culture dynamic. Posts filled with anger, disappointment, or moral outrage are easier to circulate than calm and balanced explanation. Because of this, cancel culture is closely tied to virality logic. It show how online communities collectively shape reputation, norms, and public meaning through shared emotional reaction rather than slow rational discussion (Djamzuri, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses an interpretative qualitative method to deeply understand the meanings and experiences of the participants (Dedi et al., 2025). This study use qualitative interpretative approach to explore how individuals personally understand and give meaning to their cancel culture experiences on social media. The researcher is not separated from the research process, but act as the main instrument in collecting, reading, and interpreting data.

Six informants were selected using purposive sampling. They are active social media users between 18 and 35 years old and had been involved in cancel culture discussions. The informants in this study came from different social media environments, mainly Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, which allowed the research to capture varied platform dynamics.

Data for this research were gathered through online semi-structured interviews and digital ethnographic observation. The observation focused on public posts, comment sections, and interaction patterns that appeared during cancel culture events across different platforms.

The data analysis followed a narrative approach that included transcription, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. Rather than only focusing on what happened, the analysis paid attention to how informants emotionally organized their experiences and turned them into meaningful stories.

Table 1. Informants

No	Name	Age	Platform	Involvement
1.	T.P	18	Tiktok	Commented on cancel culture cases
2.	D.P	20	Tiktok	Joined cancel culture discussions
3.	M.Z.F	20	Tiktok	Responded through video content
4.	A.K	25	Tiktok	Engaged in public debates
5.	F.N	21	Tiktok	Shared opinions on viral posts
6.	A.A	23	Tiktok	Created response content

Source: Researcher's Data, 2025

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents the main findings of the study and summarizes the key dynamics of cancel culture as seen in the social media-driven boycott of Jule. The analysis indicates that cancel culture is not a sudden or isolated reaction. Instead, it is a cumulative process formed through the interaction of shared emotional formation, algorithm-driven virality, and the application of social sanctions. Together, these processes created serious professional and social consequences for the public figure involved.

Table 2. Elements of Analysis

Element	Research Findings
Formation of collective emotion (moral outrage)	Social media users on TikTok and Instagram expressed widespread condemnation, framing Jule's actions as a moral violation and a betrayal of family values.
Rapid dissemination through social media	Photos and videos allegedly depicting the infidelity circulated widely, triggering public reactions within hours or days.
Social sanctions (contract termination and boycott)	Several brands (including hijab, cosmetics, and Muslim fashion brands) terminated their collaborations with Jule shortly after the issue went viral.
Public pressure and digital isolation	Online harassment, negative comments, and boycott calls intensified across social media platforms, leading Jule to temporarily withdraw from social media.
Professional and social consequences	Jule's reputation deteriorated, endorsement income declined, and tangible professional impacts were experienced by the public figure.

Finding show that cancel culture in Jule case was mainly driven by strong collective moral outrage, especially on TikTok and Instagram. Both

interview data and observation digital reveal that user framed alleged infidelity not as private issue, but as public moral violation related to family and marriage value. This framing turn individual opinion into shared emotional position that justify online shaming and coordinated action.

Spreading fast in video and image through feature algorithmic such as Page For You, reposting, and sharing cross-platform make situation even more intense. Exposure early to content charged emotionally play role major in shaping perception audience, often before user check fact or understand context full. In sense this, virality did not only distribute information, but also help construct meaning that strengthen interpretation negative and alignment emotional.

Virality therefore work as process meaning-making. Exposure repeated to narrative emotional same push user toward judgment and reaction similar, even when information is incomplete or unclear.

Result this support theory emotion collective, which explain how emotion circulate and grow stronger through interaction in environment networked. Platform media social speed up process this by increasing visibility and repetition of expression emotional, turning judgment personal into movement collective. In way this, cancel culture blur line between behavior private and accountability public.

Emotional Diffusion and Intensification through Digital Interaction

Emotion main seen in Jule case, such as anger, disappointment, and urge to leave comment harsh, was not simply feeling individual. They was emotion formed socially that shape how user participate in cancel culture. Emotion this become stronger through comment judgmental, language moral dramatic, and content reaction from influencer that guided how audience interpret situation. This align with study previous showing that emotion moral online are produced socially and amplified through interaction (Brady et al., 2021; Crockett, 2023).

Cancel culture in case this develop not only through post viral initial, but also through interaction continuous among user. Comment emotional highly receive more like and was pushed more by algorithm, creating loop that keep strengthening anger and outrage moral. This support research on amplification algorithmic, which show that platform tend to prioritize content moral charged emotionally because it attract attention and engagement (Brady et al., 2021; Rathje et al., 2023).

Participation user in cancel culture was driven by policing moral, pressure group, solidarity with victim perceived, and search for validation social. Informant admit that understanding their of case was shaped more by exposure emotional repeated than by fact-checking careful. This reflect finding in identity social and research signaling moral, which suggest that expression

moral online often function as performance of identity group rather than reasoning careful (Bloom, 2023; Brady et al., 2021).

One finding important of study this is how emotion collective turn into punishment social real. In Jule case, cancel culture go beyond criticism symbolic and result in consequence concrete, such as termination contract from brand in hijab, cosmetic, and fashion Muslim industry, as well as boycott organized. This support view of cancel culture as form of regulation moral digital where community online apply sanction informal but powerful (Ng, 2020; Clark, 2020).

Attack online constant lead to isolation digital, with Jule temporarily withdrawing from media social. Damage to reputation, loss of income endorsement, and impact professional long-term show how strong cancel culture can be as system regulatory informal. Dynamic this blur boundary between punishment symbolic and harm structural real, especially when platform continuously circulate narrative negative.

Exposure repeated to content emotional create sense of urgency that speed up formation opinion public. Interaction digital intensify emotion that often come before judgment moral, even when information was incomplete. This support research showing that content charged emotionally spread faster and shape perception earlier than information corrective (Brady et al., 2021; Crockett, 2023).

Interestingly, when looking back, many informant describe moment of awareness delayed. After wave viral pass, they realize reaction their was excessive and admit that they had follow crowd because of influence emotional. Only after intensity emotional decrease did reasoning critical begin. This support discussion recent of judgment moral online by pointing to temporality of mismatch between affect and cognition in dynamic cancel culture, in which feeling precede reflection (Bloom, 2023).

Observation of discourse online further reveal narrative emotional of punishment, deterrence, and boundary-making moral. Call for cancellation, boycott, and labeling moral are evidence of attempt collective to describe what is behavior acceptable and to reconfirm value shared. Labeling moral and legitimation group happen hand in hand, creating sense of justice collective more rooted in consensus emotional than evaluation based-fact. In respect this, cancel culture is site of meaning-making moral collective but also always run risk of judgment disproportionate and punishment excessive (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020).

Theoretically, paper this contribute to scholarship recent on cancel culture by integrating theory emotion collective, outrage moral, and amplification algorithmic within framework analytical single. This suggest that cancel culture should be understood not only as shaming online, but as process regulation moral driven-emotion embedded in system platform. By introducing idea of rationality delayed, study this add to research morality digital by showing how contagion emotional and visibility algorithmic temporarily reduce thinking critical.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings support collective emotion theory, which sees emotion as socially created and stabilized through interaction. In digital spaces, algorithms act as non-human agents that amplify certain emotions, especially anger and moral outrage. The Jule case shows that emotional narratives often matter more than objective facts in shaping collective action. Cancel culture is therefore best understood as a digital communication practice where emotion, technology, and group dynamics are tightly connected.

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