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Victim Narratives and Cancel Culture: A Victimological Analysis in the Era of Digital Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the construction and contestation of victimhood within the context of cancel culture in Indonesia, employing a critical victimology framework and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing on five high-profile digital controversies between 2020 and 2024, the study analyzes how narratives of harm, blame, and accountability are discursively produced and mediated via social media platforms. Findings indicate that victim status in digital spaces is fluid, strategically constructed, and often influenced by power asymmetries, emotional appeal, and algorithmic amplification. Influencers and viral content play a pivotal role in legitimizing or delegitimizing claims of victimization, frequently bypassing formal legal procedures and contributing to reputational damage, social exclusion, and digital re-victimization. Gendered norms further complicate the credibility and reception of such narratives. The research underscores the need for enhanced digital literacy, ethical communication practices, and regulatory frameworks that uphold due process and protect human rights. By situating cancel culture as a form of informal digital justice, the study contributes to broader debates on digital governance, narrative politics, and victimological theory in the age of social media.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of cancel culture has become a significant aspect of the digital social justice landscape. At its core, this culture represents a form of collective resistance against individuals or institutions perceived to have violated certain social norms (K. R. Ayu & Sutikna, 2024; Picarella, 2024). In practice, it manifests through social boycotts, withdrawal of support, and public exclusion via social media platforms (Hanna et al., 2016; Hitchcock, 2016). While ostensibly aimed at promoting justice, this practice raises complex victimological questions: who is truly the victim, and who is the perpetrator in such contexts?

Social media, as an open and fast-paced digital interaction space, accelerates the labeling process. An individual's identity can drastically shift within hours, depending on the prevailing narratives and which actors manage to dominate the discourse (Cover, 2015). Here, critical victimology plays a vital role by offering a lens that transcends binary perspectives, taking into account power relations, ideological frameworks, and broader social structures (MacLeod, 2019).

This study is grounded in Critical Victimology, a theoretical orientation that seeks to move beyond the traditional, positivist portrayal of victims as passive and apolitical subjects within the framework of the criminal justice system. While classical victimology has played an important role in bringing attention to victims' rights, it has often done so within a legalistic and individualistic paradigm focusing on risk factors, victim typologies, and patterns of victim-offender relationships (Fattah, 2016). This approach, often called positivist victimology (Sebba, 2019), tends to examine victimization as a measurable and apolitical event, rather than a socially constructed and politically mediated status.

In contrast, Critical Victimology emerging in the 1980s and championed by scholars such as Friedrichs (1983) and Miers (1989) emphasizes the role of power, ideology, and structural inequality in defining victimhood. Christie (1986) seminal concept of the "ideal victim" someone who is weak, innocent, and not responsible for their victimization demonstrates that victimhood is not an objective status but a socially conferred identity, often shaped by media representation, public discourse, and institutional recognition.

Christie (1986) argues that society grants victim status selectively, often favoring individuals who fit certain stereotypes of innocence and passivity while denying others who are seen as "complicit," "problematic," or ideologically inconvenient. This political economy of victimhood is central to understanding contemporary forms of digital justice, such as cancel culture, where individuals are rapidly categorized as "victims" or "perpetrators" based on narrative control rather than formal adjudication (Borges et al., 2024).

Within this framework, victimization is not merely about suffering harm, but also about the ability to claim and sustain legitimacy in the public sphere—a process deeply influenced by social power structures, institutional narratives, and cultural scripts. Friedrichs (1983) notes that victim status often reflects broader hegemonic values, reinforcing dominant ideologies while marginalizing dissenting or ambiguous claims to harm.

Cancel culture, defined here as a decentralized, largely online phenomenon of public shaming, boycotting, and moral condemnation, exemplifies the conditions in which critical victimological analysis becomes essential. In cancel culture, the assignment of victimhood is decoupled from formal legal processes and is instead shaped by real-time digital discourse. Public opinion, influencer amplification, and algorithmic visibility

determine whose stories are heard, whose suffering is validated, and whose reputation is dismantled (Pearson, 2021).

From a critical victimology perspective, cancel culture represents an informal system of digital justice that both mirrors and reproduces institutional exclusions. Victim status is often awarded based on adherence to dominant norms (e.g., gendered expectations, perceived authenticity, emotional affect), while those who do not conform are dismissed or reframed as perpetrators, regardless of factual complexity. The concept of "secondary victimization," typically used to describe the harm inflicted by institutions, must be expanded in this context to include digital re-victimization: the process by which individuals face additional harm through online shaming, doxxing, or narrative reversals in public discourse (Fattah, 2016).

This study also integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as conceptualized by Norman Fairclough (2023) to explore how narratives of harm and culpability are constructed, circulated, and contested within digital platforms. CDA provides a methodological and theoretical tool to examine the relationship between language, power, and ideology, making it especially suited for studying how social media posts, hashtags, influencer commentary, and visual media function as instruments of symbolic judgment.

Through Fairclough's three-dimensional model textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice the study deciphers the linguistic strategies, framing techniques, and representational choices that influence how digital audiences recognize or reject victim claims. In this way, CDA complements critical victimology by making visible the discursive power structures that underpin cancel culture.

Moreover, this theoretical approach is enriched by post-structuralist theories of identity, which challenge the idea of stable and coherent subject positions. Scholars like McKinlay (2010) emphasize that identity claims especially those rooted in pain, grievance, or marginality are often politically strategic, shaped by the performative and contingent nature of discourse. In the context of cancel culture, this insight is vital: claims of victimhood are not only personal expressions but also symbolic acts, often used to mobilize support, gain visibility, or reclaim moral authority.

The performative nature of digital justice aligns with Erving Goffman's in O'Boyle (2022), dramaturgical perspective, wherein public personas are strategically curated for impression management. In social media settings, the victim identity may be commodified, instrumentalized, or contested based on how well it fits collective expectations and platform dynamics. Victims and perpetrators thus become discursively produced roles in a participatory spectacle of moral judgment.

In sum, the theoretical framework of this study synthesizes critical victimology, critical discourse analysis, and post-structuralist identity theory to analyze how cancel culture functions as a digital arena for constructing and often weaponizing narratives of harm, justice, and punishment. It operationalizes critical victimology not simply as a critique of legal omissions, but as a lens to understand the politicization, commodification, and fragility of victim identities in a digitally mediated society. This multidimensional framework provides a robust foundation for interpreting how justice is imagined, enacted, and often distorted in the era of algorithmic outrage and moral hypervisibility.

This article aims to explore how narratives of victimhood and culpability are constructed within the context of cancel culture in Indonesia. Through case studies of several viral events on social media, it examines how digital spaces function as contested

arenas for the construction of victim identities and how this influences the pursuit of justice and the protection of individual rights.

Critical victimology challenges the conventional view of victims as merely passive and powerless subjects. It emphasizes that victim labels are socially constructed, often shaped by power dynamics and dominant narratives. In digital contexts, this process becomes even more complex, as identities of both victims and perpetrators can be manipulated, reconfigured, or commodified within the attention economy.

Cancel culture, in essence, represents a form of public participation in justice processes, albeit outside formal legal mechanisms. This creates a fluid and volatile terrain. In some cases, individuals initially perceived as victims may later be reframed as perpetrators due to emerging counter-narratives. This phenomenon illustrates that victim status is heavily contingent on the social legitimacy established through digital rhetoric.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its principal method, following the framework developed by Norman Fairclough (2023). CDA was chosen for its capacity to interrogate the relationships between discourse, power, and ideology, especially within digital public spheres. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how cancel culture operates through language, symbols, and representations that circulate on social media platforms.

The study focuses on five high-profile cases of cancel culture in Indonesia that occurred between 2020 and 2024. These cases were purposively selected based on three main criteria:

Virality – measured through metrics such as trending hashtags, view counts, or media coverage; Public engagement – the extent of reactions (comments, shares, and reposts) from various netizens and stakeholders; Prominence of individuals involved – including celebrities, influencers, or political figures whose social visibility amplified the discourse.

This limited sample allows for a focused and manageable scope, while still providing sufficient variation for comparative analysis. The temporal range (2020–2024) was selected to capture recent developments in Indonesia's evolving digital culture, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a significant rise in online activism and cancel-related controversies.

Data were collected from publicly available social media content, including posts, threads, and comment sections on platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok, as well as online news articles and editorial pieces. In total, approximately 300 digital artifacts were compiled, including screenshots, video transcripts, and user-generated responses.

The analysis was conducted using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which includes: Textual analysis – examining vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical strategies used;

Discursive practice – analyzing how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed within digital spaces; Social practice – interpreting the broader socio-cultural and political implications of the discourse.

Data were manually coded using thematic coding techniques, supported by NVivo software to assist in organizing emergent themes and actor categories (e.g., 'perpetrator,'

'victim,' 'bystander,' 'supporter'). Codes were refined through iterative rounds of coding and peer debriefing to enhance reliability.

To ensure analytic rigor, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing social media data with journalistic sources and academic publications. Validity was strengthened through peer debriefing, iterative coding, and an audit trail documenting research decisions. Ethical considerations were upheld by anonymizing sensitive data and avoiding potentially retraumatizing descriptions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 From Narrative to Influence: Mapping the Mechanisms of Victim Construction in Cancel Culture

The construction of victimhood in digital spaces is a complex and dynamic process shaped by discourse, emotion, and power (Chouliaraki, 2021). Within the context of cancel culture, victim identities are not determined through formal legal adjudication but rather through narrative strategies, social media amplification, and audience reception. The digital arena becomes a highly contested field in which various actors alleged victims, influencers, institutions, and online communities compete to shape public perception and moral judgment (Hitchcock, 2016).

In such an environment, the boundaries between victim and perpetrator are fluid, and these roles are often reversed or redefined in response to new information, counter-narratives, or shifting public sentiments. Critical victimology provides a valuable framework to interrogate these dynamics, emphasizing that victimhood is not merely a reflection of harm suffered but a socially and symbolically constructed status. This construction is deeply mediated by discursive power, affective engagement, and digital visibility (Aarten et al., 2018).

To empirically explore these processes, this study examines five prominent cases of cancel culture in Indonesia between 2020 and 2024. These cases were selected for their viral nature, the prominence of the individuals involved, and the presence of discernible narrative shifts across social media platforms. Each case highlights how the status of "victim" was initially framed, how it evolved through public discourse, and what consequences followed both for those claiming harm and for those accused.

The following table summarizes the core elements of each case, illustrating the mechanisms through which victimhood was constructed, amplified, and contested within Indonesia's digital ecosystem.

Table 1. Key Cancel Culture Cases in Indonesia (2020–2022)

Case	Year	Platform	Key Actors	Issue	Public Response	Outcome
G.V. vs Film Director	2021	Twitter, TikTok	Actress G.V., director, netizens	Alleged verbal abuse and exploitation	#JusticeForGV trended; 48k likes on key tweet	Narrative reversal after video evidence; G.V. faced backlash
A.H. vs Lecturer	2022	Instagram	A.H. (student), lecturer, university admin	Academic discrimination claim	200k+ story shares; university trended	Claims discredited; A.H. deleted accounts

@iamjustarief Case	2022	TikTok	Influencer Arief, anonymous victim, accused boss	Workplace harassment	1.4M likes; story went viral	Boss cleared internally; reputational damage occurred
H.C. vs Male Co-star	2020	Twitter (X)	Actress H.C., co-actor, feminist communities	On-set sexual misconduct claim	#BelieveWomen; 370k tweets	WhatsApp leaks contradicted claims; backlash followed
D.K. vs Female Lecturer	2022	Reddit, Instagram	D.K. (male student), lecturer	Sexual harassment by female lecturer	Low engagement; skepticism online	Case dismissed; D.K. faced ridicule and

Source: Analysis of social media, 2025

3.1.1. Constructing Victim Narratives in the Digital Arena

The emergence of cancel culture has brought new dynamics to how victimhood is constructed, circulated, and contested in public discourse. In various viral cases, victim status is no longer determined solely by legal validation but by emotionally charged narratives, often disseminated through social media (Hitchcock, 2016; O'Boyle, 2022). These narratives—frequently supported by compelling visuals and affective language—allow individuals to gain rapid sympathy and support.

Importantly, victims in this digital context are not merely passive entities but become active narrators of their own experiences. They strategically present their stories to appeal to public sentiment. However, the same mechanisms that enable visibility also create fragility. Counter-narratives can emerge swiftly, reversing public opinion and challenging the authenticity of the original claims. This fluidity reveals how victimhood in digital culture is deeply embedded in a socio-discursive system that favors immediacy over verification.

While such narratives can be empowering and mobilize solidarity, they also pose the risk of over-simplification and polarization. Emotional storytelling may bypass nuanced understanding, creating sharp divisions between "believers" and "skeptics." As a result, digital victimhood becomes a space of symbolic contestation rather than purely juridical concern.

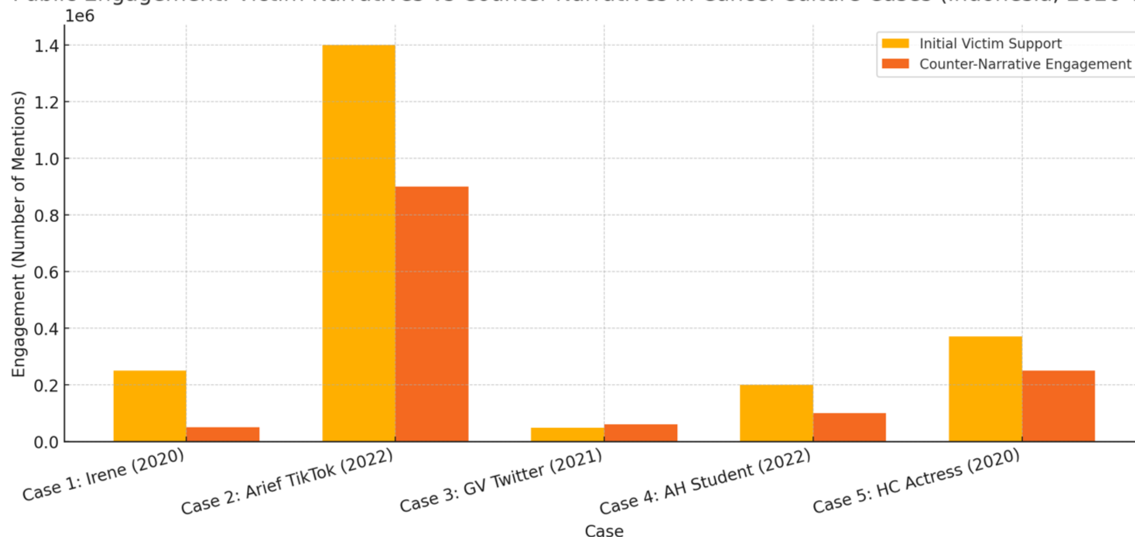

Figure 1. Public engagement

Source: Here is a graph illustrating the comparison of public engagement between the initial victim narratives and the engagement with counter-narratives in five viral cancel culture cases in Indonesia (2020–2024).

Graph Interpretation:

1. The yellow bars represent the initial level of support for the victim narrative through hashtags and early engagement.
2. The orange bars indicate responses to the counter-narratives that emerged later.
3. Four out of the five cases demonstrate a reversal from victim identity to that of the accused, as reflected in the high engagement with counter-narratives.

Only Case 1 (Irene) did not experience a significant shift in identity.

3.1.2. The Amplification Effect: Influencers and the Politics of Narrative Authority

Understanding how victim narratives are shaped would be incomplete without examining the key actors who amplify or distort them. Among these, influencers play a pivotal role in mediating public sentiment and framing digital reputations. Influencers and public figures wield substantial power in steering public opinion and shaping the labeling of individuals as either victims or perpetrators (Haase & Worthington, 2023). With their extensive follower base, they can amplify specific narratives, thereby generating public pressure against the accused. In many cases, this pressure leads to serious consequences, including termination of employment, boycotts, and social exclusion. Their role, therefore, extends beyond mere information dissemination; they are central actors in the digital construction of social realities.

A striking example occurred in the 2020 controversy involving Korean pop star Irene of Red Velvet. After a stylist accused her of verbal abuse via Instagram, the hashtag #IreneApologize trended globally, with over 250,000 tweets within 48 hours. Popular influencers and K-pop fan accounts with millions of followers posted strongly worded condemnations, such as: "No more excuses for toxic idols. Abuse is abuse. Hold them accountable." As a result, Irene issued a public apology and withdrew temporarily from promotional activities, despite no formal investigation having taken place (Xu, 2022). This incident underscores the ability of influencers and viral content to pre-empt legal or institutional due process.

Similarly, in Indonesia, TikTok influencer @iamjustarief with 3.2 million followers posted a viral video in 2022 commenting on a case of alleged workplace harassment. His caption, "This boss deserves to be canceled—no more silence!" garnered over 1.4 million likes. However, follow-up reports showed inconsistencies in the original accuser's story, and eventually, the accused was reinstated by the company after an internal inquiry cleared them. Yet by that time, the individual had already faced intense cyberbullying and reputational damage. This reflects what scholars such as Stanley Cohen would describe as a "digital moral panic," fueled by emotionally framed influencer narratives.

The influence exerted by these figures is not always grounded in comprehensive facts or the outcomes of objective investigations. More often, it is based on perception, intuition, or even personal and commercial interests. According to a 2023 Pew Research in Faza (2024) study, 68% of viral hashtag campaigns on social media lack confirmed factual basis at the time of posting, yet still generate widespread engagement. In such an environment, narratives frequently circulate without verification, enabling biased or inaccurate stories to dominate. This dynamic fosters a domino effect, where public opinion solidifies prematurely and puts overwhelming pressure on targeted individuals.

These narratives can prompt real-world consequences. A 2022 report from Amnesty International Indonesia highlighted three cases where influencers' public posts directly contributed to individuals losing employment or facing criminal threats, even before cases were legally reviewed. One HR manager interviewed for the report stated: "Once influencers started tagging us and our CEO, we had no choice but to suspend the employee. We couldn't handle the online backlash."

Furthermore, the role of influencers in shaping public discourse entails significant moral and social responsibility. They do not merely address their followers but also reflect the prevailing values and norms of the digital society. However, not all influencers acknowledge or adhere to this responsibility. A 2021 survey conducted by the Indonesian Digital Ethics Forum found that only 27% of influencers surveyed had ever received training in ethical communication or digital responsibility.

There is also an emerging trend of influencers monetizing outrage, using polarizing topics to drive engagement and ad revenue. A 2023 investigation by Wired Magazine found that influencers who posted cancel-culture-related content experienced a 45% spike in engagement rates, incentivizing continued participation in narrative escalation, regardless of veracity.

Therefore, it is imperative that influencers cultivate critical awareness and digital ethics in managing public narratives. Digital literacy education and ethical communication training should become integral components of their capacity-building. Additionally, social media platforms must enforce stricter accountability standards to prevent the spread of unfounded and harmful narratives. By doing so, influencers can be repositioned not only as opinion leaders but also as responsible agents of change in the pursuit of digital social justice.

3.1.3. The Reversal of Identity: From Victim to Perpetrator

The role of Influencers raises a deeper question: what happens when the digital roles of "victim" and "perpetrator" begin to blur or even reverse? The volatility of social media narratives often causes these identities to shift unexpectedly, with serious personal consequences.

Numerous individuals who initially received widespread support as victims have later been reclassified as perpetrators following the emergence of counter-narratives. This phenomenon underscores the volatility of digital identity and highlights, from a victimological perspective, the urgent need for careful validation before assigning the labels of "victim" or "perpetrator."

A prominent example is the 2021 case involving Indonesian celebrity G.V., (anonymized) who went viral on Twitter for alleging verbal abuse and professional exploitation by a well-known filmmaker. Using hashtags like #JusticeForGV, the story quickly garnered public sympathy. One viral tweet with over 48,000 likes read, "We believe victims. Thank you for your courage, GV." However, within days, several colleagues and backstage footage were released contradicting the timeline and tone of G.V.'s claims. As one TikTok user commented, "This is looking more like clout-chasing than actual abuse." The shift in public sentiment was swift, transforming G.V. from a perceived victim into a suspected manipulator. The episode reflects how digital audiences often operate based on first impressions and emotional storytelling rather than verified facts.

This transition from victim to perpetrator exemplifies the complex and unstable nature of identity in digital culture. At the outset, individuals may receive overwhelming support, especially when their narratives are compelling and shareable. Emotional

storytelling—often using visual cues, intimate language, and hashtags—can quickly construct a narrative of harm that resonates with digital publics. Yet, when opposing narratives or new evidence surfaces, that support can collapse just as quickly.

A second case involves the 2022 online controversy around a student, A.H., who accused a lecturer of academic discrimination in a viral Instagram story. The student wrote: "I was silenced and punished for speaking truth to power." This statement was reposted over 200,000 times. However, screenshots of internal university communication later emerged showing that A.H. had fabricated parts of the story. As a result, public perception reversed, with multiple users tweeting, "She weaponized victimhood to destroy someone's career." A.H.'s case illustrates how digital narratives can become tools of reputational damage even when they lack factual foundation.

From a victimological standpoint, these identity reversals reveal the critical dangers of premature public judgment without rigorous mechanisms of verification. The status of "victim" or "perpetrator" should not be dictated solely by public discourse but ought to be validated through formal legal and institutional inquiry. The absence of such protocols can result in profound injustice—both to those falsely accused and to those whose victimhood becomes discredited.

Moreover, such cases often reflect how digital platforms become arenas of symbolic power struggles. Opposing parties deploy strategic framing and media manipulation to influence public opinion. In the case of G.V., the release of "behind-the-scenes" footage was a calculated move to reclaim control of the narrative. This strategy mirrors what Fairclough (2023) describes as the ideological function of discourse—where language and representation are wielded to gain dominance.

The psychological consequences of identity reversal are also severe. Both G.V. and A.H. reported on their social media that they experienced panic attacks, online bullying, and threats to their safety. A.H. deleted all social media accounts, and G.V. announced a hiatus due to "severe anxiety and burnout." These cases confirm that digital labeling has real-world psychological impacts, further reinforcing the need for ethical responsibility in digital engagement.

In sum, this phenomenon demands a collective awareness of the importance of the presumption of innocence and critical digital literacy. While social media can amplify marginalized voices and facilitate calls for justice, it also risks becoming a space for reputational lynching when used irresponsibly. It is imperative to foster public discourse that values restraint, verification, and the humane treatment of all individuals—whether alleged victims or accused parties. Without these principles, the digital pursuit of justice may paradoxically produce new forms of harm and injustice.

3.1.4. Gender and Power Dynamics in Narrative Construction

While the mechanisms of narrative construction and reversal are complex, they are not neutral. Gender norms profoundly shape who is believed, who is doubted, and how credibility is granted. A deeper look at gendered dynamics reveals how digital cancel culture reproduces offline inequalities.

Gender plays a central role in shaping how victim and perpetrator narratives are constructed, perceived, and disseminated in digital spaces. Numerous studies and viral case examples reveal that gendered expectations significantly affect both public empathy and skepticism. While women tend to receive heightened sympathy in cases of gender-based violence, they are also at increased risk of backlash and delegitimization when their claims are contested. Men, by contrast, often face entrenched stigma and disbelief when attempting to establish their own victimhood, particularly in relation to harassment or

abuse. This imbalance reflects the ongoing influence of patriarchal norms on digital storytelling, justice-seeking, and social credibility.

One example is the 2020 viral case of Indonesian actress H.C., who accused a fellow actor of non-consensual behavior during a film shoot. The hashtag #BelieveWomen trended on X (formerly Twitter), generating over 370,000 posts in three days. Influential feminist accounts such as @perempustories posted, "We stand with H.C. This is the daily reality of working women." However, within a week, leaked WhatsApp messages emerged casting doubt on the initial timeline. The public response rapidly shifted, and many users accused her of "destroying a man's career over a misunderstanding." This demonstrates the precariousness of digital empathy: women may be celebrated for their courage one day and vilified as manipulators the next.

Conversely, male figures face significant structural barriers when asserting their own experiences as victims. In a 2021 survey by Lembaga Kajian Gender dan Media, only 12% of male respondents who experienced sexual harassment said they felt safe disclosing their story online due to fear of ridicule, emasculation, or not being believed. A notable example is the 2022 case of a male university student known only as "D.K." who publicly alleged harassment by a female lecturer. Despite providing screenshots and a written complaint, his story received minimal media traction and was met with skepticism in online forums such as Kaskus and Reddit Indonesia. Comments like, "Men can't be victims of women—it must be the other way around," reflect dominant gendered scripts that discredit male victimhood.

These examples illustrate the dual burden imposed by patriarchal digital culture: women are often scrutinized for being "too emotional" or "attention-seeking," while men are dismissed as "too weak" or "unbelievable" when recounting experiences of abuse. Both dynamics operate within a discursive economy where gendered power relations determine whose narratives are granted legitimacy and visibility.

Academic research supports these observations. A 2023 study by Universitas Indonesia's Center for Digital Sociology analyzed 800,000 tweets involving gendered allegations from 2019–2022 and found that women's claims were 2.4 times more likely to be retweeted if they aligned with popular feminist narratives, yet also 1.8 times more likely to receive backlash if those narratives were later disputed. Meanwhile, men's victim claims showed consistently low engagement across platforms.

The formation of solidarity networks is also gendered. Female survivors often benefit from robust online support, with communities rallying under hashtags like #MeToo or #WomenSpeakUp. However, this solidarity can inadvertently suppress alternative accounts or preclude reconciliation by framing all dissent as betrayal. For male victims, the lack of comparable networks leads to digital isolation and silence, often deepening the trauma. In the case of D.K., multiple men came forward after his story gained minor traction, but few received institutional backing or media amplification.

In sum, incorporating a gender-sensitive lens is essential in understanding how narratives of victimhood and culpability function in cancel culture. Without critical attention to these dynamics, digital justice risks replicating and even amplifying offline inequalities. Ethical engagement must prioritize inclusivity, validation through due process, and protection from gender-based biases—both for women asserting harm and for men seeking recognition as victims.

3.2 Comparative Perspectives

While the primary focus of this study is on cancel culture within the Indonesian context, it is essential to situate the phenomenon within a broader global landscape to understand both its unique characteristics and universal dimensions. Cancel culture is not exclusive to Indonesia; it is a transnational digital phenomenon that manifests differently across cultural, legal, and political systems (Pearson, 2021). A comparative perspective allows us to evaluate how local socio-cultural values, institutional frameworks, and media ecologies shape the dynamics of victim-perpetrator narratives in digital spaces.

In Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, cancel culture has often been framed through the lens of free speech, political correctness, and identity politics (Neuwirth, 2023). Prominent cases frequently involve accusations of racism, sexism, or ideological transgressions often triggering intense public debates about the boundaries of expression, accountability, and “woke” culture. The legal environment in these countries tends to provide stronger safeguards for freedom of speech, which can both enable and constrain cancel culture’s reach. For instance, despite massive online backlash, individuals may retain institutional protection due to constitutional rights or legal remedies for defamation.

In contrast, Indonesia’s cancel culture is shaped by communal values, moral norms, and religious sensitivities, often rooted in collectivist social structures. Public outrage tends to be framed not just as a response to injustice, but as a defense of cultural and moral order. As such, cancel campaigns in Indonesia may be more likely to invoke religious, traditional, or nationalistic sentiments, with strong emotional resonance that amplifies digital punishment (Nurfitria, 2024). Moreover, Indonesia’s legal system lacks robust digital defamation laws or institutional mechanisms that can adequately address or regulate online vigilantism, leaving individuals more vulnerable to reputational damage without legal recourse (H. Ayu, 2025).

Comparatively, countries like South Korea provide a compelling middle ground. Similar to Indonesia, Korea exhibits strong collectivist tendencies and has witnessed several high-profile cancel cases, especially involving celebrities. However, South Korea has increasingly institutionalized mechanisms such as cyber defamation laws and media ethics councils to mediate the excesses of public shaming. This suggests that while cancel culture may be globally prevalent, its expression and management vary significantly depending on legal infrastructure, media governance, and cultural norms.

Furthermore, the comparative perspective highlights the role of digital literacy and civic education in moderating cancel culture. In countries where media literacy is systematically taught, such as Finland or Canada, public discourse tends to exhibit greater nuance and critical engagement. Conversely, in regions where misinformation and emotional virality dominate digital ecosystems, cancel culture becomes a potent but often unchecked form of digital vigilantism.

In summary, comparing the Indonesian experience with other national contexts reveals that cancel culture is simultaneously a global and local phenomenon, shaped by distinctive societal logics. While the core mechanics—digital outrage, narrative framing, and reputational damage—are shared, the ethical standards, legal protections, and cultural rationales for public shaming differ substantially. These comparative insights not only broaden our understanding of victimological dynamics in digital spaces but also underscore the necessity of context-specific responses to ensure both justice and accountability.

3.3 Implications for the Legal System and Human Rights

Cancel culture, heavily driven by public sentiment, poses a significant threat to fundamental legal principles such as the presumption of innocence. It may also lead to human rights violations, particularly when individuals are socially punished without due process or legitimate accountability mechanisms (K. R. Ayu & Sutikna, 2024; Pearson, 2021). Without intervention, this phenomenon risks eroding public trust in formal legal institutions.

Cancel culture often functions outside the boundaries of the formal justice system, undermining core legal principles—especially the presumption of innocence. Individuals frequently face social penalties (e.g., job loss, reputational harm, ostracization) before any legal adjudication occurs (Picarella, 2024). This signals a critical need for concrete legal safeguards to ensure that the enforcement of justice is rooted in due process rather than digital public opinion.

To address these challenges, the following practical measures are proposed:

3.3.1. Regulatory Framework for Digital Defamation and Trial by Social Media

Governments, in collaboration with digital platforms, should develop and implement specific legislation addressing digital vigilantism and cancel culture.

3.3.2. Presumption of Innocence Clause in Platform Policies

Social media companies must integrate the principle of presumption of innocence into their community guidelines and moderation policies. This means flagging or temporarily limiting viral accusatory content until a minimum threshold of verified evidence is presented or an investigation is ongoing.

3.3.3. Mandatory Digital Literacy and Human Rights Education

National curriculums and corporate training programs should include modules on digital ethics, human rights, and responsible online engagement. Specific campaigns should be launched, e.g., “Think Before You Cancel” or “Justice Needs Due Process”, to promote critical thinking and empathy.

3.3.4. State and Private Sector Collaboration for Legal Remedies

Collaborate with tech companies, civil society organizations, and human rights institutions to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for responding to cancel culture cases that involve labor rights, gender claims, or freedom of expression. This includes emergency legal aid hotlines for individuals facing online defamation or social boycotts before trial processes are completed.

4. CONCLUSION

Cancel culture is a highly complex phenomenon that cannot be understood simply within a black-and-white framework of victims and perpetrators. In the fast-paced digital culture characterized by a flood of emotional information, the status of victim or perpetrator is often determined by one’s ability to control the narrative in the public sphere. Therefore, victimological analysis in the digital era must be more nuanced and critical in capturing the social complexities involved, rather than merely relying on labels formed by majority opinion.

This phenomenon reveals how fragile one’s digital identity is when narratives and public opinion become weapons capable of instantly shaping or destroying reputations. This process frequently disregards formal legal mechanisms that should serve as the foundation of justice enforcement. Thus, the existence of cancel culture reminds us that

legal protection mechanisms must be continuously strengthened to safeguard human rights and prevent the proliferation of illegitimate social justice practices.

Furthermore, protection for individuals who become victims of digital violence is urgently needed. This includes the development of relevant and adaptive legal regulations to meet digital challenges, as well as the provision of transparent and fair reporting systems. Without such protections, digital spaces risk becoming battlegrounds rife with injustice, where vulnerable individuals may experience repeated revictimization through uncontrolled dissemination of information.

Beyond legal aspects, digital education and literacy for the wider public play a key role. Society must be equipped with critical thinking skills, the ability to discern information, and respect for individual rights in online interactions. Strong digital literacy will help reduce reactive impulses and public pressure that can culminate in the formation of destructive cancel culture.

Ultimately, digital spaces must be regulated not to silence constructive social criticism but to create a healthy and just environment. True justice will be achieved when individual rights are respected, legal mechanisms are upheld, and public participation is directed toward productive and responsible dialogue. In this way, digital justice can become a tangible realization of social justice in the modern era.

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