

Investigating the Tension of Cancel Culture and its Impact on Freedom of Speech among Communication Students in University of Perpetual Help System Manila

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the complex tension between cancel culture and freedom of speech among Bachelor of Arts in Communication students at the University of Perpetual Help System Manila. Using the mixed methods of research, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and researcher-made questionnaires administered to 19 student-respondents. Grounded in Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence, and Goffman's Framing Theory, the research examined students' awareness of cancel culture and its influence on their willingness to engage in public discourse. The findings revealed that cancel culture is a highly visible phenomenon, primarily manifesting through social media backlash (WM = 4.05) and public calling-out behavior. Notably, self-censorship emerged as the most significant behavioral impact, with students reporting a high degree of caution when discussing sensitive topics (WM = 3.74) and a tendency to rethink their social media activity to avoid potential "cancellation". Despite this high visibility, statistical analysis using Pearson's r ($r = 0.262$) indicated no significant relationship between the frequency of cancel culture exposure and students' perceived level of freedom of speech. The study concluded that while cancel culture influences communication behavior by fostering a "conditional" sense of freedom, it does not act as a direct suppressor of freedom of speech.

Keywords: Cancel Culture, Freedom of Speech, Self-censorship, Public Discourse, Digital Communication

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital media and social networking platforms has significantly transformed how individuals express opinions and participate in public discourse. While these platforms promote accessibility, engagement, and social awareness, they have also intensified the emergence of cancel culture, a phenomenon characterized by public criticism, social backlash, and, in some cases, collective exclusion. In communication studies, where open dialogue and ethical discourse are essential for

developing critical thinking, cancel culture presents both opportunities and challenges. As digital interactions become more visible and permanent, students are increasingly pressured to regulate their expressions, particularly when discussing sensitive or controversial topics. This creates a complex environment in which the need for accountability coexists with the risk of social and reputational consequences.

Existing literature highlights the growing tension between cancel culture and freedom of speech. Brenner (2024) defines cancel culture as a form of public shaming or social ostracism directed at individuals or institutions due to perceived offensive actions, while Clark (2020) frames it as a digital accountability practice rooted in social justice movements. In the Philippine context, studies by Dela Cruz (2023) and Paredes (2022) emphasize how social media platforms amplify cancel culture through rapid dissemination of information, enabling both accountability and widespread condemnation. Empirical findings further show that manifestations such as public shaming, social media backlash, boycotts, and peer exclusion significantly influence communication behavior. Jusay et al. (2022) report that students who experience public shaming often suffer emotional distress and social anxiety, leading to cautious or withdrawn communication. Similarly, Bantugan et al. (2025) highlight how peer rejection reinforces conformity, while Reyes (2022) and Hodges (2021) identify self-censorship as a common response to the fear of being “canceled.” These findings are consistent with the Spiral of Silence Theory, which explains that individuals tend to suppress opinions perceived as unpopular due to fear of social isolation.

Further studies demonstrate that cancel culture is not an isolated or occasional experience but a recurring phenomenon in academic and digital environments. Exala et al. (2024) reveal that many students encounter cancel culture-related incidents multiple times, while Gonzales and Villanueva (2021) found that students who have experienced cancel culture report lower perceptions of freedom of speech compared to those who have not. This aligns with Strossen’s (2020) argument that cancel culture can create a “chilling effect” that discourages open dialogue and limits democratic exchange. At the same time, scholars such as Elliott and Holt (2020) emphasize its dual nature, noting that while cancel culture can promote accountability and amplify marginalized voices, it may also suppress dissenting perspectives and discourage meaningful discussion. In professional contexts, this tension is further reflected in journalism and media practice, where fear of backlash can lead to self-censorship and avoidance of sensitive topics, as discussed by Teixeira da Silva (2021) and Jaar and Herna (2024).

Despite these extensive discussions, there remains a significant gap in localized empirical research, particularly focusing on communication students in Philippine academic institutions. While existing studies explore the psychological, social, and political dimensions of cancel culture, limited research examines how communication students specifically experience and negotiate the tension between accountability and freedom of expression within their academic and professional preparation. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies that analyze the manifestations, frequency, and overall impact of cancel culture on students’ perceived freedom of speech in a localized setting such as University of Perpetual Help System Manila. Addressing this gap is essential, as communication students are future media practitioners who are expected to balance ethical responsibility with open and inclusive discourse. In response to this gap, the present study aims to examine the impact of cancel culture on the perceived freedom of speech among communication students at UPHSM. Specifically, it seeks to identify the common manifestations of cancel culture, determine the frequency of students’ experiences, assess their perceived level of freedom of expression, and analyze the relationship between exposure to cancel

culture and self-censorship. Additionally, the study aims to propose a media literacy training program to help students navigate the challenges posed by cancel culture while promoting ethical and responsible communication practices.

This study is anchored in key communication theories that explain the dynamics of public discourse and opinion formation. The Public Sphere Theory provides a framework for understanding how open and rational discourse contributes to the formation of public opinion, emphasizing inclusivity and accessibility in communication spaces. Complementing this, the Spiral of Silence Theory explains the tendency of individuals to withhold minority opinions due to fear of social isolation, which is highly relevant in the context of cancel culture. Additionally, Framing Theory highlights how the presentation of information influences interpretation and shapes public perception. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing how cancel culture affects communication students' willingness to express ideas, engage in discourse, and develop professionally in a media-driven environment.

Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions: What are the common manifestations of cancel culture experienced by communication students? How frequently do students encounter cancel culture-related incidents? What is the perceived level of freedom of speech among students who have and have not experienced cancel culture? Is there a significant relationship between cancel culture experiences and perceived freedom of speech? To what extent does exposure to cancel culture predict students' perceived freedom of speech? and what media literacy training program can be proposed to address these challenges?

RESULTAND DISCUSSION

This chapter analyzes and interprets the data collected in this study, focusing on the specific research problems related to the impact and tension of cancel culture and its impact on freedom of speech among communication students at PHCM.

Part II. COMMON MANIFESTATIONS OF CANCEL CULTURE

Table 1: Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture Experienced by Communication Students in Terms of Public Shaming (Online and Offline)

Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1.1 Public Shaming			
As a student, I...			
1.1.1 experience public shaming online or offline.	2.53	Disagree	4
1.1.2 feel public shaming affects my reputation.	3.21	Neutral	1
1.1.3 receive injustice, bullying and threats that lead to fear and isolation.	2.37	Disagree	5
1.1.4 makes me hesitant to express opinions.	2.95	Neutral	3
1.1.5 see that public shaming makes me hesitant to express opinions.	3.21	Neutral	1
Average Weighted Mean	2.85	Neutral	

Table 1 shows the common manifestations of cancel culture experienced by communication students in terms of public shaming (online and offline). Based on the findings, student-respondents acknowledged that public shaming affects reputation and creates hesitancy in expressing opinions, both ranking highest

with a weighted mean of 3.21. However, the overall average weighted mean of 2.85 is interpreted as Neutral, and students generally disagreed that they have personally experienced severe hostility, such as bullying or threats (WM = 2.37).

The results of the study aligned with the study conducted by Clark (2020) which found out that the anticipation of social backlash, including ridicule and criticism causes students to filter their statements.

Table 2: Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture Experienced by Communication Students in Terms of Social Media Backlash and Boycotts

Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1.2 Social Media backlash and boycotts			
As a student, I...			
1.2.1 witness social media backlash and boycotts.	4.05	Agree	2
1.2.2 experience intense online harassment, public humiliation, or threats.	2.37	Disagree	5
1.2.3 avoid posting certain things due to fear of backlash.	3.16	Neutral	4
1.2.4 observe that social media backlash happens frequently.	4.00	Agree	3
1.2.5 see how social media amplifies cancel culture reactions.	4.21	Strongly Agree	1
Average Weighted Mean	3.56	Agree	

Table 2 shows the common manifestations of cancel culture experienced by communication students in terms of social media backlash and boycotts. Based on the findings, cancel culture is highly visible online with an average weighted mean of 3.56 (Agree). Students strongly agreed that social media amplifies these reactions (WM = 4.21), though they reported a lack of frequent personal exposure to intense online harassment or public humiliation (WM = 2.37).

The results of the study were correlated with the study of Velasco (2020) and Paredes (2022) which stated that digital platforms have altered the dissemination of information, cultivating a culture of public condemnation, and that Philippine social media users are particularly active in using digital campaigns and hashtags to voice concerns and hold others accountable.

Table 3: Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture Experienced by Communication Students in Terms of Peer Rejection or Exclusion

Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1.3. Peer rejection or exclusion			
As a student, I...			
1.3.1 notice peers getting socially rejected due to cancel culture.	3.42	Agree	3
1.3.2 feel peer rejection affects academic collaboration.	3.58	Agree	1
1.3.3 fear social exclusion when expressing controversial views.	2.79	Neutral	5

1.3.4 feel peer rejection impacts self-esteem.	3.00	Neutral	4
1.3.5 observe students' change behavior to avoid peer rejection.	3.53	Agree	2
Average Weighted Mean	3.26	Neutral	

Table 3 shows the common manifestations of cancel culture experienced by communication students in terms of peer rejection or exclusion. The findings revealed that peer rejection significantly impacts academic collaboration, which received the highest rank in this category (WM = 3.58). While students observed peers adjusting their behavior to avoid social rejection (WM = 3.53), the general category average remained Neutral (3.26), suggesting these pressures are present but not dominant for most. The results of the study were supported by Bantugan et al. (2025) and Burmah (2021) which argued that the students may be ostracized within academic circles for dissenting views, leading to increased conformity, and that cancel culture limits students' willingness to question ideas and engage in reflective thinking within university spaces.

Table 4: Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture Experienced by Communication Students in Terms of Self-censorship (fear of expressing opinions)

Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1.4. Self-censorship (fear of expressing opinions)			
As a student, I...			
1.4.1 limit what I say to avoid being targeted by cancel culture.	3.47	Agree	4
1.4.2 feel cautious when expressing opinions on sensitive topics	3.74	Agree	2
1.4.3 believe self-censorship is common among students due to fear of backlash	3.89	Agree	1
1.4.4 think cancelling incidents causes students to rethink social media activity	3.63	Agree	3
1.4.5 hide or downplay real opinions because of cancel culture	3.16	Neutral	5
Average Weighted Mean	3.58	Agree	

Table 4 shows the common manifestations of cancel culture experienced by communication students in terms of self-censorship (fear of expressing opinions). Based on the findings, self-censorship confirmed as a primary manifestation of cancel culture, with an average weighted mean of 3.58 (Agree). Students most strongly agreed that self-censorship is common among their peers (WM = 3.89) and reported feeling notably cautious when sharing opinions on sensitive or controversial topics (WM = 3.74). The results of the study were supported by Reyes (2022) who found that the fear of being "canceled" causes many students to withhold true opinions on divisive topics.

PART III: FREQUENCY OF INCIDENTS RELATED TO CANCEL CULTURE EXPERIENCED BY COMMUNICATION STUDENTS

Table 5: Frequency of Cancel Culture Incidents Experienced by Communication Students Based on Identified Variables

	As a student, I...	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1	limit what I say to avoid cancel culture.	3.79	Often	5
2	feel cautious expressing opinions on sensitive topics.	3.63	Often	7
3	see individuals being publicly “called out” or “shamed” on social media.	4.26	Agree	3
4	change stated opinions or beliefs to align with popular sentiment and avoid potential “cancellation”.	3.16	Seldom	8
5	hide or downplay opinions because of cancel culture.	2.89	Seldom	9
6	observe organized boycotts against individuals due to perceived offenses.	3.74	Often	6
7	experience anxiety or stress when seeing peers get canceled online.	2.37	Rarely	10
8	notice that misinformation or incomplete context contributes to cancel culture incidents.	4.53	Agree	2
9	witness students being called out due to differing political or social views.	4.26	Agree	3
10	encounter heated discussions on trending issues.	4.47	Agree	1
	Average Weighted Mean	3.71	Often	

Table 5 shows the frequency of cancel culture incidents experienced by communication students based on identified variables. Based on the findings, the overall frequency of experiences interpreted as Often (AWM = 3.71). Students "Always" encountered heated discussions on trending issues (WM = 4.47) and frequently noticed that misinformation or incomplete context fuels cancellation incidents (WM = 4.53), making it a regular part of their communication landscape.

The results of the study were supported by Teixeira da Silva (2021) and Strossen (2020) who have related studies about the frequent observation of "calling out" and heated discussions. They stated that this climate diminishes open dialogue and democratic exchange.

PART IV: LEVEL OF PERCEIVED FREEDOM OF SPEECH AMONG COMMUNICATION STUDENTS

Table 6: Comparative Level of Perceived Freedom of Speech Among Communication Students by Experience with Cancel Culture

	Common Manifestations of Cancel Culture	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
	As a student, I...			
1	express opinions without fear of cancel culture.	3.68	Often	1
2	get cautious in sharing my views.	3.37	Seldom	3
3	limit the use of freedom of	3.42	Often	2

	speech in online discussions.			
4	participate in online discussions and provide timely feedback.	2.84	Seldom	7
5	express my opinions freely on campus.	3.32	Seldom	4
6	hesitant to discuss controversial issues in academic settings due to fear of backlash.	2.84	Seldom	7
7	struggle with online communication because of pressures from the group and majority opinions.	2.37	Rarely	10
8	feel that my social media posts are influenced by how others might judge or “cancel” them.	2.47	Rarely	9
9	avoid expressing unpopular viewpoints to prevent social exclusion.	3.00	Seldom	6
10	feel comfortable expressing my opinions in online forums or social media groups.	3.32	Seldom	4
	Average	3.06	Seldom	

Table 6 shows the comparative level of perceived freedom of speech among communication students by experience with cancel culture. Based on the findings, students reported a "conditional" sense of freedom, with an average interpretation of Sometimes (3.06). While many often felt confident expressing opinions (WM = 3.68), they simultaneously reported often limiting their speech in online discussions (WM = 3.42) where they perceive the risks of cancel culture to be more immediate.

The results of the study were supported by Bermas and Mabulay (2023) which reiterated that students are adopting "strategic communication techniques" to reconcile the tension between ethics and expression. Additionally, the results agreed with the study conducted by Gonzales and Villanueva (2021) which stated that students subjected to cancel culture report significantly lower perceptions of freedom of speech compared to those who have not.

Table 7: Significant Relationship Between the Frequency of Cancel Culture Experiences and the Perceived Level of Freedom of Speech Among Communication Students

X	Y	Measure of Correlation	r-value	p-value	Interpretation	Decision	Significance at 5%
Frequency of Cancel Culture Experiences	Perceived Level of Freedom of Speech Among Communication Students	Pearson r	0.262	0.465	Small Positive Relationship	Accept Null Hypothesis	Not Significant

Table 7 shows the significant relationship between the frequency of cancel culture experiences and the perceived level of freedom of speech among communication students. Based on the findings, statistical analysis using the Pearson r coefficient yielded a value of 0.262, revealing only a small positive relationship. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted, indicating there is no significant relationship between how often students encounter cancel culture and their perceived freedom of speech.

Table 8: Extent to Which Exposure to Cancel Culture Predicts Communication Students' Level of Perceived Freedom of Speech

Model Variable	B	β (Beta)	t-value	p-value	R ²	F-value	Interpretation
Constant	—	—	—	—	0.07	0.59	Weak model fit
Exposure to Cancel Culture	—	0.26	0.77	0.465	—	—	Not a significant predictor

Table 8 shows the extent to which exposure to cancel culture predicts communication students' level of perceived freedom of speech. Based on the findings, regression analysis showed that exposure to cancel culture is not a significant predictor of a student's perceived level of freedom of speech. The model revealed a weak fit, with exposure accounting for only 7% ($R^2 = 0.07$) of the variance in perceived freedom, suggesting other factors play a more vital role in shaping student perceptions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that cancel culture is a visible and recurring phenomenon among communication students at UPHSM, although it is more frequently observed than directly experienced. Manifestations such as public shaming, social media backlash, and peer exclusion influence students' communication behaviors, with self-censorship emerging as the most significant outcome, consistent with Reyes (2022) and Hodges (2021).

Students regulate their expression, particularly in online contexts, to avoid conflict and misinterpretation; however, they continue to report a moderate level of perceived freedom of speech, indicating that cancel culture shapes communicative strategies rather than fully restricting expression.

Furthermore, the results confirm that exposure to cancel culture does not significantly predict perceived freedom of speech, suggesting that students exhibit resilience and adaptability in navigating such environments.

This finding supports Gonzales and Villanueva (2021) and Strossen (2020), who identified a “chilling effect” that influences behavior without completely suppressing participation. These patterns are consistent with the Spiral of Silence Theory, as students tend to withhold potentially unpopular opinions, while also reflecting the dynamics of the Public Sphere Theory, where participation in discourse remains present but conditionally expressed.

Taken together, the findings highlight cancel culture as a complex socio-digital mechanism that simultaneously promotes accountability and constrains open dialogue, contributing to ongoing discussions in media ethics and communication studies within the Philippine higher education context.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that higher education institutions implement structured and measurable media literacy and digital citizenship programs, such as integrating a semester-based module on ethical communication and cancel culture into communication curricula, to enhance students’ critical thinking and responsible engagement.

Institutions should also establish clear, enforceable guidelines on online conduct that balance accountability with the right to expression, consistent with the 1987 Philippine Constitution, and develop classroom environments that actively promote open, respectful dialogue.

Students should participate in targeted training initiatives that strengthen resilience, ethical reasoning, and conflict management skills, while peer-led discussion spaces may be institutionalized to reduce fear of judgment and encourage diverse perspectives. Parental and community involvement may further reinforce responsible media practices beyond the academic setting.

Future research should expand the sample across multiple institutions and employ mixed or qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus group discussions, to examine the long-term psychological, academic, and professional implications of cancel culture, particularly its relationship with mental health, peer dynamics, and decision-making among future communication professionals.

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