



The Cultural Phenomenon of Cancellation as a Response to Legal Dysfunction: Between Social Control and Moral Destruction?

Mhd. Yaderafl Lubis^{*1}

¹Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, 20222, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: mhyaderaflubis@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the culture of cancellation as a sociocultural reaction to legal dysfunction in Indonesia. When legal institutions fail to uphold justice and lose public credibility, people turn to the digital space as an arena for enforcing moral norms through collective online action. Using a qualitative literature review and Durkheim's sociological framework of anomie and social order, this paper analyzes how cancel culture functions as an alternative mechanism of social control as well as a symptom of moral instability. The findings show that cancel culture contains a paradox: on the one hand, this culture reflects civic participation that seeks to fill the gaps left by weak law enforcement; on the other hand, this culture can develop into mass judgment, digital persecution, and symbolic violence driven by emotional impulses rather than ethical reasoning. This ambivalence highlights that the rise of cancel culture is not merely a call for justice, but also a sign of declining trust in formal institutions and weakening moral foundations in the digital age. Therefore, strengthening legal legitimacy, fostering digital ethics, and encouraging inclusive dialogue are essential to ensure that social control in the digital space remains constructive rather than destructive.

Keyword: Anomie, Cancel Culture, Social control, Legal dysfunction

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengeksplorasi *budaya batal* sebagai reaksi sosiokultural terhadap disfungsi hukum di Indonesia. Ketika lembaga hukum gagal menegakkan keadilan dan kehilangan kredibilitas publik, masyarakat beralih ke ruang digital sebagai arena penegakan norma moral melalui aksi kolektif daring. Menggunakan tinjauan pustaka kualitatif dan kerangka sosiologis Durkheim tentang anomie dan tatanan sosial, makalah ini menganalisis bagaimana *budaya batal* berfungsi sebagai mekanisme alternatif kontrol sosial sekaligus gejala ketidakstabilan moral. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa *budaya batal* mengandung sebuah paradoks: di satu sisi, budaya ini mencerminkan partisipasi sipil yang berupaya mengisi celah yang ditinggalkan oleh lemahnya penegakan hukum; di sisi lain, budaya ini dapat berkembang menjadi penghakiman massal, persepsi digital, dan kekerasan simbolik yang didorong oleh impuls emosional alih-alih penalaran etis. Ambivalensi ini menyoroti bahwa kebangkitan *budaya batal* bukan sekadar seruan untuk keadilan, tetapi juga tanda menurunnya kepercayaan terhadap lembaga formal dan melemahnya fondasi moral di era digital. Oleh karena itu, memperkuat legitimasi hukum, membina etika digital, dan mendorong dialog inklusif sangat penting untuk memastikan bahwa kontrol sosial di ruang digital tetap konstruktif daripada destruktif.

Keyword: Anomie, Pembatalan Budaya, Disfungsi Hukum, Kontrol Sosial



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1. Introduction

In Indonesia, law has a position as one of the mechanisms for controlling and maintaining social order in society. Law becomes an institutionalized norm accompanied by formal sanctions in its application.

Law also has a dual function, whereby it not only regulates the behavior of individuals and groups, but can also serve as a solution to conflicts and address various social problems that arise in community life. As part of the social system, law plays an important role in integrating various interests of society to create a stable and orderly state. Therefore, law is not merely a collection of written rules, but a social instrument used to achieve goals that are in harmony with legal values and interests. In addition, law can be said to be a tool of social control in society. According to A. Ross, as quoted by Soerjono Soekanto, "law encompasses all forces that create and maintain social bonds. A. Ross adheres to the imperative theory which views law, especially criminal law, as a tool that forces individuals to comply through the threat of sanctions". In this case, law not only functions normatively, but also as a social force that maintains order and cohesion in society (Orlando, 2022).

However, the law cannot always be applied and function effectively in society. Often, the law experiences dysfunction, where it does not work as it should to create justice. As a result, the law begins to lose its meaning as an instrument for upholding justice. The presence of the phenomenon of cancel culture marks a change in the mechanisms of social control in society, namely Cancel Culture. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, cancel culture is the tendency to rally the masses to take action in rejection as a form of disapproval and to exert social pressure. Meanwhile, the Cambridge Dictionary defines cancel culture as an attitude or action of rejection towards individuals or groups, especially on social media. The phenomenon of cancel culture is closely related to social media, which serves as a platform for expressing opinions and aspirations. Through social media, the digital community can fully control social control mechanisms by boycotting, unfollowing, or even encouraging the parties involved to explain the issues that trigger cancel culture itself (Altamira & Movimenti, 2023).

The emergence of *Cancel Culture* cannot be separated from public disappointment with a legal system that is perceived as failing to deliver justice. When formal law is considered slow, unresponsive, or biased toward those in power, the public takes over the function of social control informally through digital spaces. This phenomenon reflects legal dysfunction, which is a condition in which the legal system fails to perform its social role effectively (Parsons, 2013). It is this dysfunctional condition that triggers the emergence of the phenomenon of *Cancel Culture* in digital spaces, as an alternative response by the public in seeking justice and upholding norms. In such situations, the digital community (netizens) utilizes the power of virality to demand accountability. However, in this case, Emile Durkheim (1893) in his work, *The Division of Labor in Society*, explains that when shared norms are applied and institutions do not function, society will create its own social sanctions in order to maintain social cohesion. This is highly relevant to the practice of *Cancel Culture* carried out by the digital community as a form of reaction to violations of values or injustices that are allowed by the system.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the phenomenon of cancel culture as a response to legal dysfunction, highlighting the potential of cancel culture as a mechanism for enforcing norms as well as the risks that can cause moral damage. The main difference between this study and previous studies lies in its focus of analysis. Most previous studies have not specifically discussed cancel culture as a paradox that gives rise to a shift between procedural justice and mass judgment, which can ultimately lead to ethical and moral degradation. Thus, this study is relevant for further examination through a theoretical analysis from Durkheim's perspective, given that sociological studies of this phenomenon are still very limited.

2. Method

This study uses a literature review as the primary method to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between cancel culture and legal dysfunction. This method was chosen based on the objective of synthesizing various existing ideas, theories, and research findings, as well as identifying patterns of argumentation and relationships between the two concepts. This approach allows researchers to construct a strong conceptual framework without the need to collect empirical data directly in the field. In this context, a literature study is the most relevant method because the research focuses on conceptual exploration and theoretical analysis of emerging social phenomena, rather than on field data collection. The data collection process is carried out systematically through several stages, starting from the initial identification of various relevant literature, screening based on titles and abstracts, to reading the full text to evaluate its contribution and relevance to the research focus. From the selection results, only literature with high academic quality and theoretical relevance will be analyzed further.

The main data source for this study is secondary data obtained from various scientific literature, such as articles in national and international journals, academic books, and other publications relevant to the themes of cancel culture and legal dysfunction. To ensure comprehensive coverage, literature searches were conducted through academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus using keywords such as “cancel culture,” “cultural cancellation,” “legal dysfunction,” “legal distrust,” “social control,” and “moral panic.” Furthermore, this study applies critical theoretical analysis using Emile Durkheim's sociological perspective as the main framework. Durkheim's theory of anomie and the function of law in maintaining social order is used to interpret the phenomenon of cancel culture as a form of social response to legal dysfunction. This approach allows researchers to examine the extent to which cancel culture acts as an alternative social control mechanism when formal law loses its function. In addition, social control theory, legal legitimacy theory, and Durkheim's views on collective morality are also used to strengthen the conceptual analysis. Through this approach, the study seeks to critique how the existing literature discusses the issue, evaluate the assumptions underlying previous studies, and offer new interpretations based on Durkheim's perspective in examining the relationship between cancel culture and legal dysfunction.

3. Results and Discussion

The Relationship Between Legal Dysfunction and the Phenomenon of Cancellation Culture

In social reality, the law does not always function as it should within society. The existence of legal dysfunction is caused by problems within the judicial system and law enforcement, which become one of the driving factors leading to the emergence of a new mechanism of social control in society, namely the phenomenon of Cancel Culture. When the law, which ideally serves as a pillar of justice and order in society, experiences dysfunction in practice, the phenomenon of cancel culture thus reflects a shift in legal power from formal institutions such as the state or the judicial system toward civil society, which exercises its power through social media. The digital society (netizens) holds the highest authority in determining who deserves to be supported and who should be canceled. In the research of Wulandari et al. (2023), this condition is described as a symptom of the domination of new power within a “heterotopic” space, where public figures or formal authorities lose control over their own narratives (Wulandari et al., 2022).

This shift in power occurs because social media provides equal access for anyone to participate in the production and circulation of information, while simultaneously creating a mechanism of social sanctions that operates much faster and more massively than waiting for formal legal processes. In this regard, cancel culture is not merely an expression of society's moral stance, but also reflects a form of power repositioning that signifies a crisis of legitimacy toward official authority. The contradiction between the ideal function and the reality of legal implementation creates a gap that can be filled by the phenomenon of cancel culture. It can be concluded that “legal dysfunction refers to a condition in which the legal system fails to perform its role and function optimally.” This failure may manifest in various forms, ranging from weak law enforcement and unequal access to justice to the intervention of certain interests in legal processes. Thus, the law that was established to regulate society ultimately stands in opposition to the society itself.

In the findings of Sujana & Kandia (2024), it was discovered that the weakness of law enforcement in Indonesia is influenced by several indicators, namely:

- a) The high level of corruption within law enforcement institutions and the systemic damage to the formal legal system have created a legitimacy crisis in Indonesia's law enforcement. Corruption and discrimination within the legal system have led to the loss of legal credibility in the eyes of the public. When the authorities, who are supposed to be the guardians of justice, instead become perpetrators of violations, the law is no longer seen as a solution but rather as part of the problem itself.
- b) A weak judicial system and the existence of legal dysfunction create a vacuum in formal social control within society. When the state fails to enforce the law fairly, people tend to seek alternative forms of justice.
- c) Injustice in law enforcement and the loss of trust in legal institutions have triggered public judgment in the digital space, where the digital society takes over the function of judgment because law enforcement officers are perceived as either incapable or unwilling to act. This represents a manifestation of legal dysfunction in terms of trust and legitimacy.

- d) The lack of resources and legal education, as well as weak human resources in the legal sector, reinforce moral insensitivity among law enforcement officers. This makes it difficult for them to consider aspects of substantive justice, leading them to prioritize mechanical procedures over the sense of justice within society.

From these four indicators, such conditions can lead to the failure of the law's function within society. When the law fails to perform its primary role as an instrument to create justice and peace, the public will lose trust and perceive the law as part of the problem rather than the solution (Gede & Kandia, 2024).

The occurrence of legal dysfunction has created a void that not only worsens public trust in legal institutions but also fosters the growth of inequality and injustice in social life. When law enforcement officers become too rigid and enforce the law merely in a procedural manner without the moral courage to consider the sense of justice that lives within society, the law loses its social soul. This void is often filled by forms of informal social control, including cancel culture, where society takes over the function of law because the state is perceived to have failed in fulfilling it (Meutia et al., 2022).

The dysfunction that occurs can be observed in how the law is enforced with a sense of injustice, particularly in a rule-of-law state such as Indonesia. The findings of Meutia et al. (2022) indicate that the ineffectiveness of law enforcement in Indonesia today is caused by the following factors:

- a) There is an imbalance in law enforcement. The law in Indonesia tends to be sharp downward but blunt upward. This is evident in various theft cases committed by poor communities who face severe legal pressure, while serious violations such as corruption are often not dealt with firmly. This creates an image of injustice and increases public distrust in the quality of the law.
- b) A crisis of trust in the legal system, where the public experiences a loss of confidence because the law is perceived as not being fairly applied, but controlled by certain groups. As a result, the law is used as a tool of power and is not neutral in resolving social conflicts within society.
- c) Law enforcement that is too rigid and positivist, where law enforcement officers focus excessively on formal legal certainty while neglecting the dimensions of substantive justice and social utility.
- d) Neglecting humanitarian values and welfare, where law enforcement has not been directed to prioritize the welfare of society. However, in the context of a rule-of-law state, justice should not stop at procedural aspects but must also incorporate moral and humanitarian considerations.

The emergence of Cancel Culture can be observed from various cases occurring in society. In the study by Effendi & Febriana (2023), the authors note that Cancel Culture arises as a form of social control within the community against violations of social norms committed by public figures. This phenomenon is particularly evident when the legal system is perceived as failing to impose firm or appropriate sanctions. From this, it is clear that society takes over the role of oversight and delivers sanctions when formal law is unable to provide justice for the victims (Effendi & Febriana, 2023).

This finding reinforces the argument that cancel culture emerges as a response to legal dysfunction, especially when the law fails to provide a sense of justice for victims. In the context of the case involving Rizky Billar, the public viewed the legal system as being less capable of taking swift and transparent action against domestic violence. This created a vacuum in the enforcement of norms and justice, which was subsequently filled by collective action through social media. In a study conducted by Effendi & Febriana (2023), social media serves as an alternative space for the public to voice opinions and condemn behavior deemed deviant, particularly when state law is perceived as slow or biased against the victim (Effendi & Febriana, 2023). Cancel culture functions as an alternative social control mechanism that does not require formal institutions, but rather relies on public opinion and mass pressure. In the sociology of law, this reflects a shift in social authority from the state to an active civil society, where people reject passivity and choose to actively enforce norms, even if it means 'disciplining' through informal channels.

Cancel Culture as a mechanism of social control: is it effective, or does it instead lead to the moral decay of society?

Cancel Culture is a form of social control that develops within digital society, emerging as a collective response to norm violations. As an informal social control mechanism, Cancel Culture reflects the instability of values or norms within society. However, the emergence of Cancel Culture still generates a paradoxical phenomenon. While society begins to initiate new social movements in digital media to uphold social justice, on the other hand, it simultaneously creates new forms of social pressure that can lead to bullying or the exclusion of individuals. One concrete example of Cancel Culture in Indonesia is the case involving public figure Saiful Jamil. The form of Cancel Culture he experienced appeared through rejection movements using hashtags such as **#BoikotSaifulJamil** and **#CabutSaifulDariTv**, which spread widely on Twitter as a tangible form of collective public pressure in the digital sphere. In the study by Muharman et al. (2022), it is stated that Cancel Culture in this context operates in a more structured way and carries educational, corrective, and social sanction functions. This is because the public's strong response arises not merely out of hatred, but as a social mechanism to remind that morally deviant actions should be accompanied by reflection rather than being given a special platform in the public space (Muhrman et al., 2022). This is in line with Peter L. Berger's opinion, as quoted by Setiadi and Kolip (2011), that a strong form of social control capable of reaching primary groups stems from verbal violence and rumors on social media (Setiadi & Kolip, 2011).

The phenomenon of Cancel Culture experienced by Saiful Jamil illustrates how society uses digital media as a means of social control over behavior that violates social norms. The Cancel Culture movement is carried out with the aim of preventing the normalization of deviant behavior, especially when committed by public figures with significant influence in society. However, not all practices of Cancel Culture demonstrate effectiveness as a form of social control. Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that Cancel Culture holds power as a control mechanism within digital society. This phenomenon serves as a collective means of upholding social norms when individuals or groups violate societal values and norms. Under certain conditions, such practices can fill gaps in formal responses to norm violations. Through public pressure, they can encourage offenders to take responsibility for their actions. Cancel Culture can therefore be understood as a form of active public participation in maintaining social norms in the digital space. Nevertheless, behind the moral spirit it carries, this practice also gives rise to symptoms of moral decay that are increasingly evident in digital society. Rather than functioning as a constructive social mechanism, Cancel Culture often turns into an outlet for collective anger, unilateral judgment, and symbolic violence that lacks a foundation in justice.

This is reinforced by the study of Mayasari (2022), which found elements of deindividuation explaining that identity in the digital space can be manipulated. In such situations, social media users often feel no personal responsibility for their communicative actions because they feel protected by anonymity and distance in the virtual environment. As a result, the digital space becomes a platform for hate speech, personal attacks, and doxing, all carried out without fear of legal consequences. This not only indicates the weakening of ethical norms in online communication but also reflects the loss of social control applied in digital social interactions. In this context, Cancel Culture can develop into a form of symbolic violence within society, detached from norms and values of justice, and showing tendencies toward social disintegration. This phenomenon reflects the democratization of social power, where netizens who structurally lack formal authority use social media as a space for surveillance and resistance. As shown in Mayasari's (2022) research, such actions arise from public dissatisfaction with how institutions handle moral violations (Mayasari, 2022).

In Velasco's (2020) research, it becomes increasingly clear that cancel culture serves as an indicator of moral collapse. Velasco describes this phenomenon as a form of "ideological cleansing," a brutal practice of expelling individuals from the public sphere without clear ethical standards. In such conditions, digital society no longer upholds dialogue and diversity of perspectives but instead prefers to judge without first examining the context behind a problem. As a result, the moral order ideally grounded in justice and rationality is replaced by the euphoria of impulsive collective judgment. Cancel culture thus reflects the disintegration of social ethics, where truth is replaced by virality and justice is overshadowed by mass pressure (Velasco, 2020).

However, Cancel Culture does not always operate within a positive framework. In some of the cases mentioned, the phenomenon instead reveals the darker side of the uncontrollable power of the digital era an experience felt by YouTuber Lutfi Agizal. When social sanctions are applied not based on ethical and rational considerations but rather on emotional impulses and viral pressure, what emerges is no longer a form of social control but a new type of judgment leading to moral destruction. This raises a critical question: is Cancel Culture truly capable of replacing the role of law in maintaining social order, or does it instead create new dysfunctions in social relations within society?

This question becomes significant when we realize that the rise of cancel culture is not solely driven by growing ethical awareness among the public, but also by the absence of a functioning legal system capable of resolving violations fairly. In other words, cancel culture reflects society's sense of powerlessness toward a legal system perceived as failing to fulfill its role optimally. In this context, the phenomenon of cancel culture not only represents a spontaneous response to moral violations but also serves as an indicator of structural crisis, in which the legal system loses its legitimacy and public trust. Therefore, to understand this phenomenon more deeply, it is essential to trace the roots of this systemic disorder.

The Cultural Phenomenon of Cancellation as a Form of Anomie in Society

From Emile Durkheim's perspective, this phenomenon is in line with Durkheim's concept of anomie. Durkheim believed that when values and norms in society begin to disappear or weaken, society will instinctively create its own mechanisms to maintain order. And from the mechanisms created by society, without restrictions, the mechanisms created can be destructive. In the cancel culture that Lutfi Agizal encountered, there was a sentiment or emotion that colored the response of the digital community. The community felt that Lutfi Agizal was overly critical of the use of the word "anjay," which is popular among young people. However, Lutfi Agizal's goal was to prevent society from normalizing all forms of language that have negative connotations. Therefore, the phenomenon experienced by Lutfi Agizal indicates that cancel culture in the digital space is not always a positive control mechanism, but is still easily influenced by collective emotions. This shows that the control mechanisms that exist in the digital community cannot yet be categorized as mechanisms that have a positive impact, but rather a negative one. Instead of being a space for constructive discussion, the digital space has the potential to turn into an arena for emotional judgment that can trigger shifts in values and ethics in the patterns of interaction among people on social media.

From this phenomenon, it can be observed that society is still easily influenced by the manipulation of opinion that develops in the digital space. This shows the ambiguity in people's attitudes, where many individuals tend to follow popular opinion without first verifying its truth. As a result, there is a practice of judgmental behavior that often arises in digital society as a spontaneous reaction to viral issues. In Rianto's (2023) findings, it is mentioned that the digital community generally uses harsh and derogatory language towards individuals or groups who are the objects of judgment (Rianto et al., 2024). Based on this description, the public judgment experienced by Lutfi Agizal shows a tendency to use language that does not reflect ethics and morals in society. This phenomenon can be seen as a form of social dysfunction that has the potential to cause moral chaos in the digital space. Cancel Culture shows that legal values in society are beginning to weaken. Because the law is not functioning as it should, this phenomenon is born out of legal dysfunction. The large number of cases of legal dysfunction can give rise to a new symptom in the form of social ills in society. Society will focus more on judging without first analyzing the problems that occur.

The concept of Anomie Theory introduced by Durkheim explains a relevant framework for understanding the emptiness or invisibility of norms in society, thereby encouraging people to act or take complete social control without regard to applicable laws. The phenomenon of cancel culture in society has the potential to become a new social control mechanism as a social controller amid social chaos. However, upon closer inspection, the phenomenon of cancel culture is ambivalent and double-edged. On the one hand, this culture has emerged as a form of social control over moral violations. On the other hand, it often causes confusion in society about who deserves to be canceled and based on what standards. The blurred line between social criticism and public condemnation makes the practice of canceling risky, as it can exceed legal and ethical norms. As a result, cancel culture can develop into a form of symbolic violence or digital persecution that actually deepens social conflict rather than upholding justice.

In Fadhilah's (2024) writing, citing Henderson (2019), the reasons why someone engages in cancel culture can be explained through several aspects. First, cancel culture can be a means of increasing the social status of the perpetrator, because involvement in the cancellation movement is often considered a form of moral solidarity or alignment with certain values. Second, this practice also affects the social status of the victim, whose reputation or social image may decline as a result of public judgment. Third, cancel culture serves to strengthen social bonds among members of society who share similar views, thereby creating a sense of togetherness around believed social norms. Fourth, this phenomenon can force victims to speak up, provide clarification, or even reveal their identity in the public sphere. Finally, cancel culture can have a significant impact on the popularity of perpetrators, both in terms of increased social influence and exposure in digital media (Fadhilah, 2024). From the five reasons put forward by Henderson, a paradox of thought can be found in the emergence of this phenomenon in digital society. The interesting paradox is that cancel culture does not have a major effect in preventing public figures from falling in popularity. This is because many public figures actually experience an increase in popularity after undergoing this practice. This is in line with how public figures can maintain their popularity thanks to the support of their fans, whether they like or dislike the public figure.

Therefore, this phenomenon can be seen as an ambivalent phenomenon with two sides. On the one hand, it is a form of public participation in maintaining social values when formal law is weak, but on the other hand, it can become an anomaly in society if it is not restricted. Therefore, policies and regulations are needed to restore public trust in legal institutions through substantial reform and justice, not just procedural reform.

4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of cancel culture reflects society's response to legal dysfunction that fails to satisfy the sense of justice. This culture shows ambivalence: on the one hand, it functions as a form of public participation in enforcing social norms; on the other hand, it has the potential to become a form of mass judgment that weakens ethics and social cohesion. From Durkheim's perspective, this phenomenon signifies a state of anomie, in which the weakening of legal legitimacy encourages society to create its own moral sanctions in the digital space. Theoretically, this research contributes to the enrichment of legal sociology studies by positioning cancel culture as a new mechanism of social control in the digital age. The practical implications emphasize the importance of building ethical digital behavior through moral literacy, strengthening online communication ethics, and more responsive and transparent legal reforms. These efforts are necessary so that social control in the digital space does not shift into symbolic violence, but rather functions constructively for social justice and integration.

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