

The Double-Edged Sword: Cancel Culture and the Quest for Social Justice in the Digital Sphere

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ABSTRACT

The digital era has transformed the dynamics of social justice activism, with cancel culture emerging as a contentious form of public accountability. This study examines the ethical implications of cancel culture through a communication ethics perspective, focusing on the case of "A Business Proposal" (2025) in Indonesian entertainment. Through digital ethnography and communication analysis, the research investigates how social media discourse balances social justice advocacy with ethical communication principles. Data gathered from Google Trends and Twitter engagement metrics demonstrates the significant impact of digital mobilization, while raising questions about proportional response and dialogue ethics. The analysis reveals the complex interplay between public accountability and ethical communication, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. The findings contribute to understanding how digital activism shapes contemporary discourse, highlighting the need for balanced approaches that promote social justice while maintaining ethical communication standards in the digital sphere.

INTRODUCTION

Social media dynamics have created new phenomena in how society expresses disapproval and disappointment towards public figures' behavior. One manifestation of this phenomenon is "cancel culture," which has become a powerful yet controversial instrument of social control in the digital era (Barney et al., 2016). This phenomenon has strengthened in Indonesia, particularly when intersecting with the deeply rooted sensitivities of Korean popular culture fans.

A recent case that captured public attention involves actor Abidzar Al-Ghifari during the launch of the Indonesian version of "A Business Proposal" on February 6, 2025. As the lead actor in this remake, his statement indicating unfamiliarity with the source material - having watched only one episode of the original series - triggered strong reactions from the Korean drama fan community (K-Drama Lovers). The situation worsened due to his perceived arrogant attitude when stating he didn't need fanatic viewers, particularly Korean fans (Jasmine, 2025).

The Abidzar case demonstrates how social media communication ethics can influence careers and public image. This cancel culture phenomenon is particularly prevalent in entertainment, where influential individuals often become targets. The digital world wields significant power, where influential individuals or groups strive to maintain their positions by constructing narratives or monopolizing public opinion (Putri et al., 2024). In this context, social media communication ethics plays a crucial role in shaping public response to controversial actions or statements, ultimately contributing to society's decisions to support or condemn individuals or works (Norris, 2021).

Cancel culture has evolved into a phenomenon across social media platforms where individuals, organizations, or cultural works face collective punishment for actions or statements deemed inappropriate, insensitive, or contrary to social norms. This phenomenon, often occurring without adequate legal process or discussion, aims to demand moral and social accountability from parties deemed at fault (Farries et al., 2024)). However, cancel culture also presents controversies regarding ethics, justice, and freedom of speech, potentially causing further societal polarization. While serving as a tool for pursuing social justice and addressing inequalities, it can foster fear of criticism and restrict public discussion space (Ng, 2020).

The Abidzar case clearly illustrates how cancel culture operates in entertainment and can influence consumer decisions and public perceptions of individuals and works. This phenomenon reveals ethical dilemmas faced by society in the digital world (Jaafar & Herna, 2024). Is social media judgment fair and proportional? Are we truly giving individuals opportunities to explain or correct their mistakes, or are we trapped in quick, emotional reactions leading to social punishment without chances for improvement?

Power dynamics shifts in the entertainment industry have triggered cancel culture, where fans are no longer passive consumers but have transformed into interest groups capable of influencing

industry direction (Nugraha & Komsiah, 2023). In Abidzar's case, the Korean fan community's reaction demonstrates how expectations regarding actors' attitudes and professionalism in respecting source material have become non-negotiable standards.

Research on cancel culture, particularly in Southeast Asia, underscores that this phenomenon often manifests from broader dissatisfaction with attitudes perceived as dismissive or disrespectful towards original works (Nugraha and Komsiah 2023; Putri Febrianti et al.2023). In Indonesia, where South Korean culture has established a strong and loyal fan base, perceived disrespect can quickly trigger organized negative reactions.

Furthermore, this case opens discussions about public figures' ethical responsibilities in the digital era. In an era where every statement can be recorded and rapidly disseminated, public figures need heightened awareness about their statements' impact. Communication carelessness can quickly escalate into difficult-to-control reputation crises (Ng, 2020).

However, more profound ethical questions arise when considering the proportionality of public responses to this kind of miscommunication. Raises important questions about whether digital "undoing" is an appropriate and constructive response to miscommunication, or instead reflects an organized form of cyberbullying that can threaten the psychological well-being of the target.

In a broader context, the case of Abidzar Al-Ghifari and the Indonesian version of "A Business Proposal" is an interesting case study of how cancel culture can function as a social control mechanism while also posing an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, this phenomenon can encourage public figures to be more responsible and sensitive in their communications. On the other hand, there is a risk that this mechanism can be used disproportionately and harm not only the direct target but also other parties involved in the same project.

Although previous research has explored the phenomenon of cancel culture in Indonesia, particularly in the context of social media and entertainment, there are still important gaps that need further research. Mayasari (2022) has mapped the basics of cancel culture as a collective effort to boycott individuals who are perceived to violate social norms. Related research on manifestations on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram (Roseline et al. 2023; Jaafar and Herna 2024). There is no comprehensive research that uses a visual ethnography approach to analyze the impact of cancel culture on the box office performance of Indonesian remake films, especially in the context of Korean fans' sensitivity. Putri Febrianti et al. (2023)) have examined cancel culture in the K-pop community as a form of cyberbullying, but the study has not explored how this dynamic affects the adaptation of Korean content in the Indonesian entertainment industry.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by analyzing the case of Abidzar Al-Ghifari in the film *A Business Proposal* using a visual ethnography approach that integrates Google Trends analysis and social media conversation dynamics. An in-depth understanding of this phenomenon is important to

provide insights for the Indonesian film industry in managing fan sensitivity and anticipating the impact of cancel culture on future adaptation projects.

Based on the cancel culture phenomenon, this research aims to explore the impact of cancel culture in the context of entertainment, focusing on how communication ethics in social media affect public perception and consumer decisions. The case of Abidzar Al-Ghifari in the movie *A Business Proposal* is the starting point to analyze this phenomenon in more depth.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Communication ethics has become crucial in the era of rapid growth of digital platforms that bring new challenges. These challenges require individuals to consider more deeply how to communicate, send messages, and how they are received by audiences. Communication ethics involves not only questions about honesty and fairness in communication, but also about how technology and digital media affect behavior, social relationships, and their impact on individuals and groups. Therefore, understanding communication ethics in a digital context becomes very relevant, especially in an era where information can be spread quickly and widely.

Communication ethics is a field that studies how moral principles and ethical values are applied in communication between individuals and groups. The basic principles of communication ethics include truth, justice, respect for human rights, and social responsibility Bok (1978) in (Christiansen, 1979). These principles must be maintained in every interaction, be it in direct conversation, writing, or communication through digital platforms such as social media. Social media allows for the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, but also raises challenges related to the dissemination of inaccurate or even harmful information. In this case, communication ethics is not only about how we convey messages, but also how we keep them from spreading in the wrong way or harming others.

In addition, in the digital communication landscape, there are aspects to consider related to the responsibility of both individuals and platforms. Floridi (2013) emphasizes the importance of understanding communication ethics in the digital world as part of a larger responsibility to maintain trust, integrity and fairness in every interaction. Digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook provide opportunities for everyone to speak and have their say. However, with this freedom comes the responsibility to ensure that communications do not spread hatred, hoaxes, or mislead others. Digital platforms, in this case, must also bear the responsibility of maintaining the content they contain, whether it is in the form of images, writings, or videos, to remain in accordance with good ethical standards (Setiansah et al., 2024) .

A major challenge in communication ethics in the digital world is managing and organizing information in the right way. Information shared quickly online can influence many people, often without the opportunity for adequate truth checking. This is especially relevant in the context of a digital culture that is often very quick to react. This phenomenon is known as "cancel culture," where

individuals or groups, especially public figures, are socially judged and punished for their controversial words or actions. Ethics in this context is important because often in the practice of cancel culture, individuals faced with public criticism and condemnation are not given the opportunity to defend themselves or provide clarification, which can potentially violate the principles of justice and the individual's right to fair treatment (Saint-Louis, 2021).

According to Luhmann's theory of communication systems, the boundary between communication and non-communication is fluid in digital environments. The permeability of these boundaries means that ethical challenges such as misinformation, manipulation, and privacy violations are increasingly common (Niklas, 2000). These challenges arise because, in the digital world, individuals often face a lack of accountability for their actions, enabling them to spread unverified or harmful information with minimal repercussions. This lack of responsibility complicates the ethical decisions that both individuals and organizations must make.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a visual ethnography approach with qualitative methods to analyze the cancel culture phenomenon that occurs in the case of Abidzar Al-Ghifari in the film *A Business Proposal*. Visual ethnography was chosen because of its ability to analyze the visual aspects and digital culture that are an integral part of the cancel culture phenomenon (Pink, 2011). This method allows researchers to understand how visual representations and digital interactions shape the dynamics of cancel culture in the context of social media (Christine, 2015).

In the data collection process, this research applies a digital ethnography approach that focuses on systematic observation and documentation of conversations and interactions on platform X (Twitter), specifically through the @watchmenID account as one of the influential movie discussion accounts in Indonesia. Google Trends analysis was also used as a complementary method to understand search patterns and public interest in this controversy.

The visual aspect of this research includes visual content analysis in the form of interview documentation, press conferences, as well as memes and visual content circulating on social media. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the data triangulation method was applied by comparing findings from various data sources.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The Spread of Cancel Culture Narratives on Social Media

Digital ethnographic analysis of conversations on platform X (Twitter) through the WatchmenID account. WatchmenID accounts discussing the world of cinema and pop culture are of

interest to X account users with a total of 682 thousand followers. The Abidzar controversy that received cancel culture cannot be separated from the conversation on the X WatchmenID account. One of the interactions on this account shows a snippet of Abidzar's "Blunder" video. This post sparked an interaction of Abidzar's statement with a video featuring his controversial comments about "building your own character" and "not needing Korean fans". This post received public attention X reached 8.2 million views, with 1.2 thousand interactions and 6.7 thousand reposts.

Figure 1: Interaction on X about Abidzar's speech that triggered Cancel Culture



Then, Falcon Pictures' apology efforts as a production house faced resistance on social media. The apology post received 3,384 quotes with a total of 5.1 million impressions, with the dominance of negative sentiments. This phenomenon shows what Jenkins (2024) identifies as the "digital accountability paradox", where reconciliation efforts can actually strengthen the rejection narrative when public trust has already been damaged.

Figure 2: Apology from the Production House Effect of Cancel Culture Abidzar, Lead Actor of *A Business Proposal* Remake Movie



The impact of cancel culture on a movie's box office performance is evident from the movie theater occupancy data. On the premiere of February 6, 2025, out of 1,270 scheduled screenings, the film only achieved 4% occupancy. At its premiere, the film was only able to gross 6,900 viewers. As a result of the poor results, the number of cinema screens was cut from 1,270 screens to only 551 screens (Jasmine, 2025b). This case reflects what Castells (2023) calls "networked resistance", where digital mobilization is successfully translated into real impact in the entertainment industry (Castells, 2023).

Ethical Dilemma: The Body as an Arena of Identity Contestation

The view of the body in the context of gender communication explains that the body should be seen as an autonomous entity and free from excessive social control. This view emphasizes the freedom of individuals to express themselves without being limited by norms or expectations set by society, especially in terms of physical appearance (Gill, 2007). However, in the case involving Abidzar, we see a tension between this view of the autonomous body and the social reality that requires individuals to meet the standards of beauty or appearance desired by the public.

The body is considered the territory where individual identity is shaped and expressed. Judith Butler, a renowned gender theorist, argues that gender identity is not something that is essential or determined by biological factors alone, but rather something that is shaped through performative acts - including physical appearance. The concept of autonomous bodies here refers to the understanding that individuals have the right to define and control their own bodies, without being bound to external expectations that impose a certain identity or appearance (Jha, 2016).

This view contradicts what Abidzar experiences, who receives immense pressure from the public to meet the beauty standards promoted by Korean actors such as Ahn Hyo Seop. This phenomenon shows how individual bodies, in certain social contexts, are no longer considered as autonomous entities, but rather as objects of surveillance and judgment. When Abidzar did not conform to the appearance desired by some fans, he became the target of bullying and criticism.

Visual ethnographic analysis reveals an interesting phenomenon related to Abidzar's representation in social media. Memes and visual content in circulation tend to directly compare Abidzar's physical appearance with Ahn Hyo Seop, creating what Foucault calls a "digital panopticon" where actors' bodies become objects of public scrutiny and criticism (Rathbone, 2022).

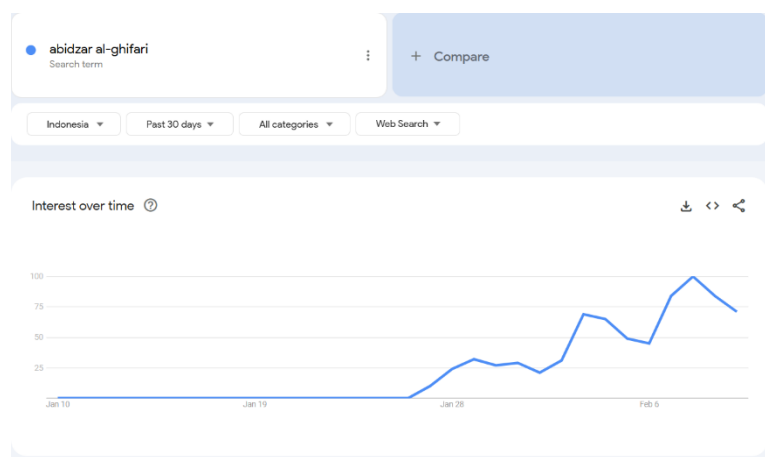
Ethical dilemmas arise when criticism of physical appearance transforms into systematic body shaming, reflecting moral problems in the practice of cancel culture. Butler in Jha (2016) asserts that the body should be an area where individual identity can be freely expressed, but in Abidzar's case, this freedom is challenged by public expectations that demand visual replication of the original actor. This tension raises ethical questions about the boundary between the right of fans to express

preferences and the right of individuals to the authenticity of their own bodies.

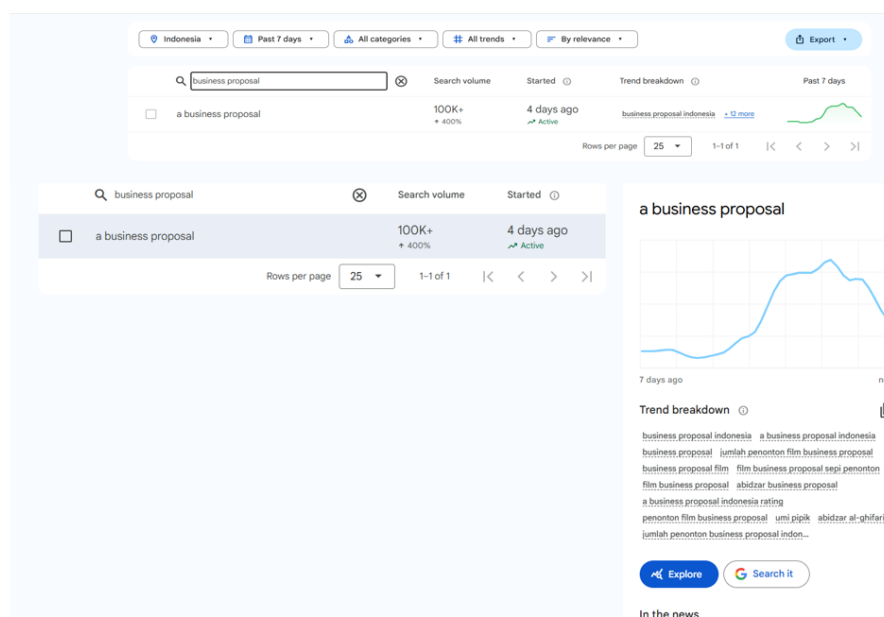
Authenticity vs Expectation: The Dilemma of Public Figure Identity in the Digital Age

Cancel culture towards Abidzar Al-Ghifari in the movie *A Business Proposal* raises fundamental questions about authenticity and public expectations in the digital age. Google Trends data shows a dramatic increase in searches for Abidzar's name between January and early February 2025, with search volume reaching over 100,000. The most searched keywords related to the name of the movie's lead actor, Abidzar Al-Ghifari, show the intensity of public attention to the controversy that occurred. The increase can be seen from the following search graph from Google trend <https://trends.google.co.id>.

Figure 3: Graph of searches for the name Abidzar before and after the Cancel Culture



*Figure 4: Graph of trending searches on google trends for the Indonesian region, one of which is the movie *A business Proposal* with other keywords related to Abidzar's name.*



This phenomenon shows what Foucault (2021) identifies as "docile bodies", where public

figures are forced to conform to dominant social expectations. Abidzar's apology can be analyzed through Habermas' (2022) concept of "communicative action", which describes efforts to achieve mutual understanding through rational dialogue. However, the "ideal speech situation" is difficult to achieve in the context of cancel culture, which is dominated by fans' "grand narrative" that demands total compliance (Wykes & Gunter, 2005) .

This situation is complicated by what Baudrillard calls "simulacra", where the identity of public figures becomes a constantly negotiated construct (Baudrillard, 2016) . McLuhan identified public apologies as "purification rituals" in new media. However, this reconciliation effort faces resistance, reflecting the "digital accountability paradox" where reconciliation efforts reinforce the narrative of rejection when public trust has been damaged.

CONCLUSIONS

Research on the cancel culture phenomenon in the case of Abidzar Al-Ghifari in the film *A Business Proposal* reveals the complexity of the interaction between identity, public expectations, and social media dynamics in the Indonesian entertainment industry. Digital ethnographic analysis shows how cancel culture operates as a powerful social control mechanism, able to influence not only an actor's public image but also the commercial performance of a film. Cinema occupancy data that only reached 4% of 1,270 screenings at the premiere reflects the real impact of digital mobilization on the entertainment industry.

This case also reveals ethical dilemmas in the practice of cancel culture, especially when it intersects with issues of body representation and cross-cultural standardization of beauty. The actor's body becomes an arena for identity contestation, where the demand to replicate the original actor's appearance clashes with the right to individual autonomy. The phenomenon of "digital panopticon" created through visual comparison and body shaming on social media shows how cancel culture can transform into a form of symbolic violence.

Google Trends search patterns and social media sentiment analysis reveal how attempts at reconciliation through apologies can actually reinforce a narrative of rejection when public trust has been damaged. This reflects a paradox in the dynamics of digital accountability, where public figures are caught in a constant negotiation between demands for authenticity and dominant social expectations.

This research makes an important contribution to understanding the ethical and social implications of cancel culture in the context of Indonesia's entertainment industry, while underscoring the importance of building a more constructive dialogue between public figures, the industry, and fans. The findings also highlight the need for a more comprehensive communication ethics framework in addressing the cancel culture phenomenon in the digital age.

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